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"In speech both loose and knitted up":
William Morris's Prose-Poetic Romances

by

Larry Leonard Steinbrenner

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

CALGARY, ALBERTA

AUGUST, 1993

ISBN   0-315-88634-X

Canada

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Modern 0291
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General 0401
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Comparative 0295
Medieval 0297
Modern 0298
African 0316
American 0591
Asian 0305
Canadian (English) 0352
Canadian (French) 0355
English 0593
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Latin American 0312
Middle Eastern 0315
Romance 0313
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General 0318
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Agricultural 0503
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Finance 0508
History 0509
Labor 0510
Theory 0511
Folklore 0358
Geography 0366
Gerontology 0351
History
General 0578

Ancient 0579
Medieval 0581
Modern 0582
Black 0328
African 0331
Asia, Australia and Oceania 0332
Canadian 0334
European 0335
Latin American 0336
Middle Eastern 0333
United States 0337
History of Science 0585
Law 0398
Political Science
General 0615
International Law and
Relations 0616
Public Administration 0617
Recreation 0814
Social Work 0452
Sociology
General 0626
Criminology and Penology ... 0627
Demography 0938
Ethnic and Racial Studies 0631
Individual and Family
Studies 0628
Industrial and Labor
Relations 0629
Public and Social Welfare ... 0630
Social Structure and
Development 0700
Theory and Methods 0344
Transportation 0709
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Technology 0359
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Plant Pathology 0480
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General 0306
Anatomy 0287
Biostatistics 0308
Botany 0309
Cell 0379
Ecology 0329
Entomology 0353
Genetics 0369
Limnology 0793
Microbiology 0410
Molecular 0307
Neuroscience 0317
Oceanography 0416
Physiology 0433
Radiation 0821
Veterinary Science 0778
Zoology 0472
Biophysics
General 0786
Medical 0760

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Geodesy 0370
Geology 0372
Geophysics 0373
Hydrology 0388
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Paleontology 0418
Paleozoology 0985
Palynology 0427
Physical Geography 0368
Physical Oceanography 0415

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Audiology 0300
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Mental Health 0347
Nursing 0569
Nutrition 0570
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Therapy 0354
Ophthalmology 0381
Pathology 0571
Pharmacology 0419
Pharmacy 0572
Physical Therapy 0382
Public Health 0573
Radiology 0574
Recreation 0575

Speech Pathology 0460
Toxicology 0383
Home Economics 0386

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Pure Sciences
Chemistry
General 0485
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Biochemistry 0487
Inorganic 0488
Nuclear 0738
Organic 0490
Pharmaceutical 0491
Physical 0494
Polymer 0495
Radiation 0754
Mathematics 0405
Physics
General 0605
Acoustics 0986
Astronomy and
Astrophysics 0606
Atmospheric Science 0608
Atomic 0748
Electronics and Electricity 0607
Elementary Particles and
High Energy 0798
Fluid and Plasma 0759
Molecular 0609
Nuclear 0610
Optics 0752
Radiation 0756
Solid State 0611
Statistics 0463

Applied Sciences
Applied Mechanics 0346
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Engineering
General 0537
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Agricultural 0539
Automotive 0540
Biomedical 0541
Chemical 0542
Civil 0543
Electronics and Electrical 0544
Heat and Thermodynamics ... 0348
Hydraulic 0545
Industrial 0546
Marine 0547
Materials Science 0794
Mechanical 0548
Metallurgy 0743
Mining 0551
Nuclear 0552
Packaging 0549
Petroleum 0765
Sanitary and Municipal 0554
System Science 0790
Geotechnology 0428
Operations Research 0796
Plastics Technology 0795
Textile Technology 0994

PSYCHOLOGY
General 0621
Behavioral 0384
Clinical 0622
Developmental 0620
Experimental 0623
Industrial 0624
Personality 0625
Physiological 0989
Psychobiology 0349
Psychometrics 0632
Social 0451
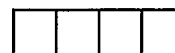
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Enseignement secondaire 0533
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Enseignement supérieur 0745
Évaluation 0288
Finances 0277
Formation des enseignants 0530
Histoire de l'éducation 0520
Langues et littérature 0279

Lecture 0535
Mathématiques 0280
Musique 0522
Orientation et consultation 0519
Philosophie de l'éducation 0998
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Sciences sociales 0534
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Technologie 0710

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Langues
  Généralités 0679
  Anciennes 0289
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  Modernes 0291
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  Généralités 0401
  Anciennes 0294
  Comparée 0295
  Médiévale 0297
  Moderne 0298
  Africaine 0316
  Américaine 0591
  Anglaise 0593
  Asiatique 0305
  Canadienne (Anglaise) 0352
  Canadienne (Française) 0355
  Germanique 0311
  Latino-américaine 0312
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  Slave et est-européenne 0314

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Philosophie 0422
Religion
  Généralités 0318
  Clergé 0319
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  Histoire des religions 0320
  Philosophie de la religion 0322
Théologie 0469

SCIENCES SOCIALES
Anthropologie
  Archéologie 0324
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Droit 0398
Économie
  Généralités 0501
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  Finances 0508
  Histoire 0509
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  Généralités 0310
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  Histoire générale 0578

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Africaine 0331
Canadienne 0334
États-Unis 0337
Européenne 0335
Moyen-orientale 0333
Latino-américaine 0336
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Histoire des sciences 0585
Loisirs 0814
Planification urbaine et
  régionale 0999
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  Généralités 0615
  Administration publique 0617
  Droit et relations
    internationales 0616
Sociologie
  Généralités 0626
  Aide et bien-âtre social 0630
  Criminologie et
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    pénitentiaires 0627
  Démographie 0938
  Études de l'individu et
    de la famille 0628
  Études des relations
    interethniques et
    des relations raciales 0631
  Structure et développement
    social 0700
  Théorie et méthodes. 0344
  Travail et relations
    industrielles 0629
Transports 0709
Travail social 0452

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  Généralités 0473
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  Alimentation et technologie
    alimentaire 0359
  Culture 0479
  Élevage et alimentation 0475
  Exploitation des péturages 0777
  Pathologie animale 0476
  Pathologie végétale 0480
  Physiologie végétale 0817
  Sylviculture et faune 0478
  Technologie du bois 0746
Biologie
  Généralités 0306
  Anatomie 0287
  Biologie (Statistiques) 0308
  Biologie moléculaire 0307
  Botanique 0309
  Cellule 0379
  Écologie 0329
  Entomologie 0353
  Génétique 0369
  Limnologie 0793
  Microbiologie 0410
  Neurologie 0317
  Océanographie 0416
  Physiologie 0433
  Radiation 0821
  Science vétérinaire 0778
  Zoologie 0472
Biophysique
  Généralités 0786
  Medicale 0760

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Biogéochimie 0425
Géochimie 0996
Géodésie 0370
Géographie physique 0368

Géologie 0372
Géophysique 0373
Hydrologie 0388
Minéralogie 0411
Océanographie physique 0415
Paléobotanique 0345
Paléoécologie 0426
Paléontologie 0418
Paléozoologie 0985
Palynologie 0427

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Économie domestique 0386
Sciences de l'environnement 0768
Sciences de la santé
  Généralités 0566
  Administration des hìpitaux .. 0769
  Alimentation et nutrition 0570
  Audiologie 0300
  Chimiothérapie 0992
  Dentisterie 0567
  Développement humain 0758
  Enseignement 0350
  Immunologie 0982
  Loisirs 0575
  Médecine du travail et
    thérapie 0354
  Médecine et chirurgie 0564
  Obstétrique et gynécologie ... 0380
  Ophtalmologie 0381
  Orthophonie 0460
  Pathologie 0571
  Pharmacie 0572
  Pharmacologie 0419
  Physiothérapie 0382
  Radiologie 0574
  Santé mentale 0347
  Santé publique 0573
  Soins infirmiers 0569
  Toxicologie 0383

SCIENCES PHYSIQUES
Sciences Pures
Chimie
  Généralités 0485
  Biochimie 487
  Chimie agricole 0749
  Chimie analytique 0486
  Chimie minérale 0488
  Chimie nucléaire 0738
  Chimie organique 0490
  Chimie pharmaceutique 0491
  Physique 0494
  PolymÇres 0495
  Radiation 0754
Mathématiques 0405
Physique
  Généralités 0605
  Acoustique 0986
  Astronomie et
    astrophysique 0606
  Electronique et électricité 0607
  Fluides et plasma 0759
  Météorologie 0608
  Optique 0752
  Particules (Physique
    nucléaire) 0798
  Physique atomique 0748
  Physique de l'état solide 0611
  Physique moléculaire 0609
  Physique nucléaire 0610
  Radiation 0756
Statistiques 0463

Sciences Appliqués Et Technologie
Informatique 0984
Ingénierie
  Généralités 0537
  Agricole 0539
  Automobile 0540

Biomédicale 0541
Chaleur et ther
  modynamique 0348
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  (Emballage) 0549
Génie aérospatial 0538
Génie chimique 0542
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Génie électronique et
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Génie mécanique 0548
Génie nucléaire 0552
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Mécanique navale 0547
Métallurgie 0743
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Technique minière 0551
Techniques sanitaires et
  municipales 0554
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Géotechnologie 0428
Matières plastiques
  (Technologie) 0795
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Textiles et tissus (Technologie) .. 0794
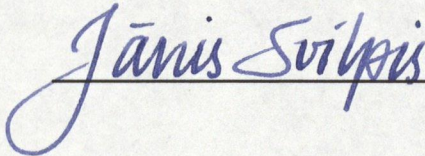
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Psychologie du comportement 0384
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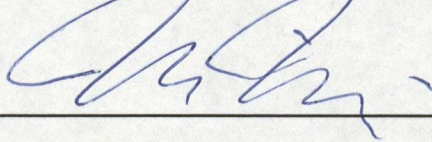Psychométrie 0632

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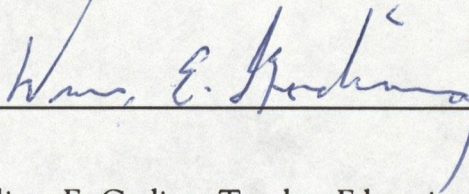
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "'In speech both loose and knitted up': William Morris's Prose-Poetic Romances" submitted by Larry Leonard Steinbrenner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Murray McGillivray, Department of English

William E. Goding, Teacher Education and Supervision

August 30, 1993

Abstract

William Morris's concern with the problem of individuation in the socialist society, combined with an interest in the aesthetic use of language, led him to attempt to found a new literary tradition for the socialist future. This tradition would provide models both for acceptable individual behaviour in a socialist context as well as for "beautiful expression"—perceived by Morris as an ability to converse freely in both prose and verse in everyday speech. Medieval romance became the model for this tradition because Morris saw in it the nearest literary equivalent to pre-literate oral traditions, which functioned (in proto-socialist societies like those depicted in *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, the prose-poetic romances that are the focus of the thesis) in a manner similar to his projected literate tradition, encouraging both beautiful expression and a desirable identification between individual and collective interests.

Table of Contents

"Many saw that he was singing,
but heard not the words of his mouth,
for great was the noise and clamour."
(*The Roots of the Mountains* 349)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Once upon a time, as the tale telleth, William Morris made the unfortunate mistake of referring to himself depreciatingly, in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), as "[t]he idle singer of an empty day" (Mackail 1: 211). I call this a "mistake" because Morris was perhaps the least idle man alive in the nineteenth century. His literary endeavours alone are proof of his energy: *The Collected Works* span twenty-three volumes, and include some of the longest original poems ever published in English, several long romances, translations of *The Odyssey*, *The Æneids*, *Beowulf*, Icelandic sagas and Medieval French romances, and a considerable number of lectures on socialism. And nearly all of this was done in his spare time! Morris's daily life was consumed by the activities of William Morris & Company (which made substantial contributions to the Arts and Crafts Movement) and (later in life) the Kelmscott Press. Morris taught himself and mastered crafts as diverse as cloth dying, stained glass making, furniture design, and various arts related to book printing. In middle age, he became extremely active in politics and socialism: he helped to found the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877), joined the Social Democratic Federation (1883), led the breakaway Socialist League (1885), and, finally, formed the Hammersmith Socialist Society (1890) upon his retirement from activism. As a socialist, he was a tireless soldier for the cause, lecturing extensively on street corners (damaging his health in the process) and at party gatherings, being arrested in 1885 during demonstrations, and editing as well as funding socialist journals like *Justice* and *Commonweal*. When he died at the relatively early age of sixty-two, a physician, commenting on the cause of his death, provided the following diagnosis: "I consider the case is this: the disease is simply being William Morris, and having done more works than most ten men" (unknown source quoted in Mackail 2: 336).

While Morris's claim to being an idle singer should rightly be taken for what it is, little more than a humble affectation, it has unfortunately been overemphasized by critics. As one of the few "key" statements that we have about the craft of the writer

from the man himself, it has taken on a disproportionate value and has contributed towards the conception of Morris as a truly "idle" singer—a superficial and insubstantial writer best suited for weaving idyllic tales whose appeal lies in their "remoteness from the primary concerns of the age," as Faulkner notes with regard to *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), a work originally envisioned as part of *The Earthly Paradise* (44). Faulkner goes on to note that "[t]he popularity of *The Earthly Paradise* was due largely to its providing an inoffensive pleasure to its middle-class readers, and the opportunity to turn away from current problems into a simpler world" (58). However accurate such observations may be with regard to his earlier and most popular work, this view unfortunately coloured interpretations of Morris's more substantial works of nearly twenty years later, such as the prose-poetic romances, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), which will be my specific area of focus in this study. Dismissing the effects that almost a decade of radical socialist activity might have had on the writer and his work, Morris's contemporaries (and many years later, some of his most influential critics) persisted in perceived the writer of these romances as the same man who had given them *The Earthly Paradise*; they "saw that he was singing," to quote the epigraph at the beginning of this thesis, "but heard not the words of his mouth"—which is to say, they did not really understand what the romances were about.

The epigraph, of course, does not refer directly to Morris himself, but rather to Face-of-god, the hero of *The Roots of the Mountains*. But the song that Face-of-god sings as he goes into battle is in many ways Morris's own (as I will show in chapter 4), so the analogy is apt. Morris himself battled in the twin causes of art and socialism, and his own song is an expression of his socialist ideology and his concern with the artistic use of language. It is not without irony that Morris, through Face-of-god, acknowledges that his own efforts may go unheard and unheeded—eclipsed by the "noise and clamour" of an unsympathetic age in which his own literary works, though also the product of "the primary concerns of the age," represented a tremendous deviation from the main current, the nineteenth century "realistic" novel. And indeed this has happened; in our own time Morris is perhaps the most obscure of the great Victorians, and his rarely printed

later romances—Frederick Kirchhoff calls them "the least understood body of major Victorian fiction" (Introduction 11)—are passed over in favour of more digestible chunks of his work from his youth (usually from *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* [1858]), chunks that have little or nothing to do with Morris's socialist ideology. But the song has been sung, and now demands to be heard; this thesis therefore represents an effort to "listen" to what Morris was "singing about" in his prose-poetic romances.

Morris's own song takes the guise of a literary form based in medieval romance and Icelandic saga (I should note at this point that throughout this study I have rather loosely and perhaps somewhat inaccurately classed the later type of medieval literature under the blanket category of the former; for the purposes of this study, however, the distinctions between the two forms are less important than one of their common characteristics—specifically, the way in which they both seem to echo oral traditions). For reasons that will be explained near the end of this chapter, I call Morris's own "song" the "prose-poetic romance." The creation of this type of romance was characterized by the same vigour and originality that marked Morris's efforts to establish or reestablish traditions in various other decaying arts—printing, interior design, and all the other crafts that were handled by Morris & Co. A new form was needed because Morris required the latitude to work with two of his major concerns as an artist and a socialist, and the prose-poetic romance allowed him to incorporate his concern with the "proper" or "artistic" (for Morris, in this context, the terms are synonymous) use of language and his concern with the problem of the individual in the socialist society into a single literary form.

The artistic use of language was an important issue for Morris, for reasons that were partially social as well as aesthetic. He was particularly interested not only in the problem of revitalizing literature (and, beyond that, the problem of making everyday speech and writing more artistic) but also in the role of language in the society. Why he believed that the English language needed to be revitalized in the first place is indicated in the following often-cited quotation from a letter to Fred Henderson on

November 6, 1885, which probably stands as the best single insight into Morris's concern with language that we have from the man himself:

> Things have very much changed since the early days of language: once everybody who could express himself at all did so beautifully, was a poet for that occasion, because all language was beautiful. But now language is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself; before he can even begin his story he must elevate his means of expression from the daily jabber to which centuries of degradation have reduced it. And this is given to few to be able to do, since amongst other things it implies an enthusiastic appreciation of mere language, which I think few people feel now-a-days. (*Collected Letters* 2 Pt. B: 483).

Beyond such statements as this, however, it is difficult to reconstruct Morris's theory about language, mostly because he had so little to say about the subject, in writing at any rate. Linda Gallasch notes that Morris "seldom addressed himself to the singular problem of language" (35), and his daughter May elucidates: "My father hated letter-writing and was incapable of sitting down in leisure mood to write carefully-rounded observations on books, on the world and its ways, or on things of the inner life. His letters . . . have not what one may call a scholarly or literary interest. . ." (*Artist* 1: 639). We have therefore only a handful of observations taken from a few letters to friends and from indirect references in literary works, lectures, and so forth. Still, as Gallasch notes, "[t]he few utterances on the subject [including the excerpt quoted above] do indicate, however, that the author had developed a unified theory," though these statements about language may reflect conscious preferences rather than actual practice (35). So, if we wish to inquire into Morris's interest in the artistic use of language and its potential as an instrument of social change, we must look at both these "conscious preferences" and "actual practices," subjects that will form the focus of chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis.

As I have noted, Morris's other motive in creating the prose-poetic romance was to create a literary form in which he could explore socialist issues, and in particular the following question: what is the position of the individual within the socialist society? Morris, as the chronology above suggests, was winding down his socialist activities during the period 1889-90, around the time when *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the*

Mountains were published. Though he was still lecturing for the cause, he was "deposed" by anarchistic radicals from the editorship of the *Commonweal* in 1889 (the same year that *Roots* was published), and began his period of "passive socialism" (which would last until his death) in 1890 with the foundation of the Hammersmith Socialist Society after the Socialist League was taken over by Anarchists (Mackail 2: 230). Yet it would be presumptuous to assume that Morris could have quickly "turned off" the socialist ideology that he had been moving toward all his life and which had been his creed for the past decade, and to assume that he was no longer interested in socialism and political and ideological questions at the time of writing these romances. The evidence in the romances indicates otherwise, and in particular suggests that he was interested in the problem of individualism; *Wolfings*, he once indicated, dealt with the theme of "the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes" (*Collected Letters* 2 Pt. B: 836). I will return to this topic in the second chapter, and again in the fourth chapter, which deals specifically with *Wolfings* and *Roots*.

Just as an examination of Morris's theories of language presents a problem for the critic, so does the task of determining Morris's socio-political intent in the romances. Morris is as reticent in print about the politics of his romances (and, for that matter, on the subject of these romances in general) as he is regarding literature. As Florence Boos notes, "Morris wrote little else about the political intentions or 'literary matter' of the German romances" (by "German" she means the two romances to be discussed in this thesis) other than the comment on *Wolfings* quoted above and his note to his daughter that *Roots* took place in a later period than *Wolfings* (323). One thing that is a matter of record, however, is Morris's opposition to readings of his romances as socio-political allegories. The following excerpt from a letter by Morris to *The Spectator* protesting an allegorical interpretation by a critic of one of his last romances, *The Wood Beyond the World* (1895), might be said to represent his official stance with regard to all of the later romances, with the exceptions of the overtly political *Pilgrims of Hope* (1885), *A Dream of John Ball* (1886), and *News from Nowhere* (1890), all of which were published in some form or another in the *Commonweal*: ". . . it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with

nothing didactic about it. . . . I should consider it bad art in anyone writing an allegory not to make it clear from the first that this was his intention. . ." (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 499). As Carole Silver wryly commented with regard to the above, "Since the 1890s scholars and critics have been trying to prove that Morris did not mean what he said. . . . Instead, critics suggest that Morris's romances are parabolic, or romances of types, or, at the least, obliquely symbolic" ("Socialism Internalized" 117). Fortunately, it is not necessary in the context of this thesis to prove that Morris did not mean what he said, since it is not necessary to view *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* as allegories to see them as romances of socialism, romances that espouse the cause and which are intended to appeal to socialist readers—"romances that Nowherians would enjoy," as Silver calls them ("Socialism Internalized" 121), referring to the residents of Nowhere, the ideal future socialist society proposed by Morris in *News from Nowhere*. And there is therefore no reason to believe that the author himself would have denied the socialism that is "implicit as an assimilated system of values" (Silver "Socialism Internalized" 117-8) in the romances.

Presuming that Morris was attempting to reestablish the artistic use of language and demonstrate the role of the individual within a socialist society, it would seem that he saw a single solution for the two separate problems. This entailed the foundation of what was in effect a new socialist literary tradition, founded on a modernized form of the medieval romance. This new tradition would not only provide a model for beautiful expression in the English language, but also function as an alternate cultural-historical base for the socialist society of the future, a base that would provide models of behaviour in the form of proper "socialist" heroes to make up for the modern world's current dearth of them.

It cannot be stressed enough that this new tradition was never intended to be simply an imitation of medieval romance. Although commonly perceived as being one (especially by his contemporaries), Morris was not a medievalist—at least, not in the negative sense of being one of the fashionable many who affected or expressed a longing for the "good old days"—and held in contempt those who were simply imitators of

medieval styles, no matter what the art. His own practice, "in literature as well as in the manual arts," was to "take up and continue the dropped threads of the mediæval tradition" (Mackail 2: 341), using it as the inspiration for entirely new forms. As this practice might suggest, Morris was in fact more concerned about the future than the past, and in his later life he was actively working, in his writing as well as in his daily political activities, towards the realization of his dream of a socialist state. Towards this end, his knowledge of the Middle Ages was possibly his most effective tool; as an anonymous reviewer in the August 8, 1912 *Times Literary Supplement* noted, Morris "was always concerned with the future even when he seemed most absorbed in the past. He turned to it, not to lose himself in it, but to find what was best worth having and doing now" (qtd. in Boos 321). Morris himself specified that his interest in history was "essentially with mediaeval or artistic times and with the present or revolutionary times out of which one hopes to draw more art in the future" (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 678).

The value of integrating the past into the present for the benefit of the future is expressed in Morris's own definition of "romance," taken from a period contemporary with the composition of the prose-poetic romances (i.e., an address to the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings on July 3, 1889):

> As for romance, what does romance mean? I have heard people miscalled for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present. I think that is a very important part of the pleasure in the exercise of the intellectual faculties of mankind which makes the most undeniable part of happiness. (M. Morris *Artist* 1: 148)

That Morris has an unconventional perception of history is suggested by his calling the tales of Froissart and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* "[u]ncritical or traditional history" in a list of favourite books prepared for the *Pall Mall Gazette* (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 656). While Morris himself recognized the particular value of more conventional "factual" approaches to history (see my later note on Ellen's relevant comments from *News from Nowhere*, quoted on page 16), he refused to accept such approaches as the only valid means of historical interpretation. His "true conception of history" is a pleasurable imaginative conception that blurs traditional distinctions between fact and fiction. As

E. P. Thompson, Morris's great socialist biographer, notes, Morris believed an imaginative approach to the past (which allowed him "to respond instantaneously to every evidence of the aspirations and sorrows of the men of past ages" and which might take the form of a romance such as *Wolfings* or *Roots*) would reveal truths—socialist truths—that more scientific approaches would overlook (28; Thompson himself, it should be noted, seems to lack Morris's faith in the value of this concept). The process of revealing these truths essentially involves "[e]liminating concepts antithetical to socialism, ridding romance of bourgeois realist conventions" and choosing instead to emphasize "the drama of the class struggle and the triumph of such values as work, love and fellowship" (Silver "Socialism Internalized" 124). Morris, as John Goode notes, "is attempting to define the basis of historical change of consciousness" by showing that "the aspirations of his own socialist comrades are linked with aspirations which lie deep in the inherited past" (248).

The object of this "education of the present through its dialogue with the past" (Goode 255) is to make the past more "real" for the present: ". . . Morris makes the silent speak to us, and their voices are real and the story of their lives credible and reasonable, even when woven with magic. . . ." (M. Morris *Artist* 1: 513). In Morris's view, this act of translating the spirit of the past into the spirit of the present (much as a literary translation from one language to another attempts to catch the "feel" of the original work) thereby makes the past more capable of actually affecting the present. Understanding this, the assumption that Morris attempted to use the romance-as-history to change the future begins to seem more substantiated, and we begin to see how Morris's romance writing is apparently as much the result of his concern with the future as it is of his interest in the past. The "true conception of history," as Goode notes, "becomes a power for seeing the future in the present" (239).

Given the importance of the role Morris himself assigns to the romance form, it is difficult to understand interpretations of the late romances as literary "dead ends" that have no relationship to his socialism. Yet this is a common view: Paul Thompson calls the romances "gothic fantasies of his old age, created for his own pleasure" that

"exaggerate to absurdity tendencies which are present in most of Morris's writing" (159).
E. P. Thompson (the more important Thompson in Morris criticism), who as a Marxist
critic might be expected to pay particularly close attention to the late romances,
similarly, though not as severely, writes them off: "we are already aware in *The Roots of
the Mountains* of the motive for writing which becomes dominant in the other late
romances—that of pure self-indulgence in pleasurable reverie or dream, in which neither
Morris's intellect nor his deeper feelings are seriously engaged" (678). While to be fair
it must be admitted that Thompson seems to acknowledge here that Morris's "intellect"
and "deep feelings" might be half-heartedly "engaged" in *Roots*, his summation of the
work as being primarily "self-indulgence" is, as this thesis will attempt to demonstrate,
unacceptable.

Fortunately, this sort of negative view of the late romances is no longer dominant
in Morris criticism, and many critics have learned to see the romances in their proper
historical role with regard to the future. Bono notes that Morris confronted in his prose
fictions the problem of "compressing his view of natural and historical process . . . into
a vision which would release in modern man some deep-repressed desire for perfection"
(45) and calls the romances "historically inspired foreshadowings of a future socialist
ideal" (51), while Boos includes *Wolfings* and *Roots* in "a series of . . . narrative 'novae'"
designed as "accounts of historical prototypes for social revolution" that also includes the
more obviously political *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *A Dream of John Ball*, and *News from
Nowhere* (Boos 321). Frederick Kirchhoff recognizes the place of the romances as the
cornerstones in a new literary tradition when he notes that they are "rooted in literary
and folk tradition," a tradition from which Morris "sought to create a body of literature
that was the expression not of one man but of the English people—not as they were but
as they might become" (*William Morris* 169).

Because there is no documentary evidence that the creation of a new literary-
historical tradition for the socialist future was exactly what Morris had in mind, it could
of course be debated whether his attempt to singlehandedly create such a tradition,
which would function as the cultural foundation for an entirely new society, was

conscious or not. Such debate would likely be pointless, however, and is at any rate tangential to the discussion at hand: whether planned or not, an embryonic literary tradition (albeit, a near-stillborn one) is exactly what Morris's efforts amounted to, and we must therefore approach the romances accordingly. But while the question of Morris's motives may be academic, his interest in the future was not, and to suggest that he really was writing the romances for no other purpose than his own amusement after all, as E. P. Thompson suggests, truly calls for some serious misreading.

As Silver argues, Morris wrote for a socialist future that is, in essence, much like that depicted in *News from Nowhere*, a future that shares his "fascination with the Middle Ages and his view of history as romance" (Kirchhoff *William Morris* 132). The stories Morris is creating in his romances are complements to the fairy tales from Grimm, the "beautiful stories" that (to the astonishment of Morris's alter-ego Guest in *Nowhere*) are a vital part of adult as well as infant literature in Nowhere (85). Yet it is important to recognize that there is no reason to think that Morris believed that the socialist future would take the *exact* form he described in *News from Nowhere*. As he himself noted in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (co-written with Ernest Belfort Bax and published in 1893):

> Although it has often been attempted, it is impossible to build up a scheme for the society of the future, for no man can really think himself out of his own days; his palace of days to come can only be constructed from the aspirations forced upon him by his present surroundings, and from his dreams of the life of the past, which themselves cannot fail to be more or less unsubstantial [sic] imaginings. (17-18)

His daughter May comments:

> As there were dozens of Utopian paper constitutions and economic schemes in the market, all unreadable and repulsive, and not one credible and attractive picture of what life might be under Communism, there was no reason to reproach Morris for supplying exactly what was needed instead of wasting his time in building political castles in the air. (*Artist* 1: 504)

Morris, as his daughter implies, was more interested in providing a vision of hope rather than a blueprint for a new society, a vision that could effectively deal with the problem of making socialism attractive. Goode (273) and Norman Talbot concur, and Talbot

suggests that Morris "distinguished between prophetic vision, which is true in its own terms, and prediction, true in external terms" ("Guest" 40). In his conception of the future, Morris follows the principle expressed in his "true conception of history," and imaginatively constructs "a picture of experience ineluctably true," as C. S. Lewis calls it (54).

No matter what form the socialist future would eventually take, the establishment of an appropriate literary-historical tradition would play an important role in determining its success. There are compelling reasons for believing that Morris's understanding of this role was based in part on his understanding of the similar functions performed by activities like story-telling and singing in oral cultures and in literate cultures dominated or heavily influenced by oral traditions, such as the "high barbaric" and medieval European societies that were idealized by Morris and which he saw as prototypical "socialist" societies. Certainly, that *The House of the Wolfings* itself tells a tale of a culture in a state of "primary orality" (Ong 11) suggests the necessity of making a brief foray into orality and literacy theory, especially since many of the most striking characteristics of that work indicate that Morris possessed a remarkably modern understanding of oral-based thought.

The Romantic Movement initiated a general interest in oral traditions, as Harry Levin notes in his preface to Albert B. Lord's landmark work on oral poetry, *The Singer of Tales* (x), and the interest for Morris went hand-in-glove with his interest in all things medieval. His background in the fields of folk literature, cultural anthropology, scientific mythology, and so forth suggests that he would have been familiar with contemporary research into orality, and the brief list that Silver provides of books and writers that Morris was familiar with includes the standard nineteenth century works in these fields. It includes Max Müller (who used a "philological and etymological method" in his study of "prehistoric Indo-European peoples and their *common culture and language*" [my emphasis]), the Brothers Grimm, Lewis H. Morgan (who used the term "high barbarism" to describe pre-literate Germanic cultures and whose *Ancient Society* was the foundation of Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State [1884]*, also

known to Morris), E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, and George Frazer's *Totemism* and *The Golden Bough* (Silver "Myth and Ritual" 117-120). Naturally, Morris also had "hands-on" experience with oral epic forms as the translator of *The Odyssey*, *The Æneids*, and *Beowulf*, as well as numerous Icelandic works, and the likely influence of oral tradition on his own writing is noted by Lord in his study of oral poets (131). E. P. Thompson suggests that Morris's "craftsman-like" approach to writing was at least in part based on his "picture of the folk-poet, the scald, the bard who could in earlier societies entertain the company . . . almost impromptu with an epic tale," and believes that Morris was hampered by the fact that he was unable to draw "upon the collected traditions of past singers" (189).

While this indicates that Morris likely had as good an understanding of the oral mind as was possible for an educated Englishman of his time, it is still necessary for the purposes of this thesis to briefly summarize some of the characteristics of the oral noetic world and to take a look at how literacy alters thought, and for this reason I will now summarize some relevant points in modern orality and literacy theory. It is a credit to Morris's perception, intuition and understanding of social structures that his own insights into orality and literacy seem quite modern, as I noted above, and as the parallels in this summary should demonstrate.

As Walter Ong tells us, in a culture in a state of primary orality "not only the poet's but the entire oral noetic world or thought world relie[s] upon the formulaic constitution of thought" (Ong 23-4). Ong sums up the distinctive characteristics of this kind of thought:

> In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings . . . in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax. . . . (Ong 34)

These distinctive characteristics of oral thought—its "heavily rhythmic" nature, its "balanced patterns," "repetitions or antitheses," "alliterations and assonances," and various other formulaic and mnemonic devices—suggests that the language of an oral culture, like the culture of the Wolfings, is likely to have a tremendous potential to use verse forms of expression as well as prose. As Lord's research into oral poets indicates, the "specialized poetic grammar" that the oral poet learns to use is basically only another form of language, a language superimposed on the grammar of the original language which uses "formulas" as its phrases, clauses, and sentences (35). These formulas are rhythmic expressions of "the ideas most common in the poetry" that have been developed over many generations (22), and are echoed in our modern literate culture by "the peculiar formulas still found in the English used for fairy tales" (Ong 23). Once this poetic grammar is mastered, the speaker "does not move any more mechanically within it than we do in ordinary speech" (Lord 35). Supposing that such a poetic grammar became widespread within a culture—a hardly inconceivable notion—the result would likely be a society truly capable of the "beautiful expression" Morris attributes to some better, vanished time.

In verse and prose, oral thought and expression tends to be "[a]dditive rather than subordinative," favouring simple compound rather than complex sentence structures; "[a]ggregative rather than analytic," referring to the commonplace clustering of terms that "is closely tied to formulas to implement memory" (e.g., "beautiful princess" rather than "princess"); "redundant"; and "[c]onservative or traditionalist" (Ong 37, 38, 41). Interestingly, this list of characteristics might be mistaken for a catalogue of the common elements in Morris's own syntax that have been noted by numerous critics (e.g., Faulkner 166; Talbot "Whilom" 20, etc.); Kirchhoff, though he does not seem to see the possible influence of oral tradition on Morris, does seem to recognize that Morris's syntax is indicative of "a way of thought . . . markedly different from that of other nineteenth-century fiction. . ." ("Anti-Books" 97).

Oral tradition tends to be conservative. While writing itself can of course be conservative (the act of "putting it in writing," for example, fixes an agreement in time and space and precludes the possibility of changing it), it can also free the mind for "new speculation" by taking the conservative tasks of the mind (that is, "memory work") on itself (Ong 41). But while primary orality might therefore not promote the kind of speculative thinking common to the literate mind, it does promote the sharing of ideas and communication. It is essentially impossible, as Ong notes, for there to be sustained thought in an oral culture without communication, since without an interlocutor it is difficult to assemble anything like a lengthy analytic solution to a problem (Ong 34).

This sharing of ideas is one of the most effective ways in which the oral culture promotes an identification between the individual and the social group; Ong notes that "[p]rimary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates. Oral communication unites people in groups," in contrast to writing and reading, "solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself" (69). Songs and story-telling—common enough elements in Morrisean romances—are means of communication that reflect the value of the group, enabling individuals "to be absorbed back into the communal mind" and become part of the "countless audiences who have heard the story before us" (Kellogg 127). Raymond Williams comments, with regard to the effect of the oral performance on the audience:

> It is impossible to overestimate the significance which is then felt and shared. The hearing of certain traditional arrangements of words; the recognition and activation of certain rhythms; the perception, often through already shared themes, of certain basic flows and relations . . . all of these are parts of some of our most profound cultural experiences. . . . It is clear that these more recognizable sharings of form are at the more collective end of any social continuum. (188)

Given such "socializing" effects of primary orality, then, it is not surprising that Morris, along with Bax, Engels and other socialists (Boos 322), found the historical models for a socialist state that they were looking for in the preliterate cultures of ancient Germany,

cultures that had not yet undergone the social upheavals associated with the acquisition of literacy.

Literacy has a dramatic and permanent effect on the consciousness of the individual that stands in contrast to the socializing effects of primary orality. Writing "makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set" (Ong 105). Ong adds that writing's "reflectiveness . . . enforced by the slowness of the writing process as compared to oral delivery as well as by the isolation of the writer as compared to the oral performer—encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconsciousness" (150). As *solo* activities, writing and reading require a kind of "strenuous, interiorized, individualized thought" that is beyond the capacity of oral folk: the result is *division* and *alienation* (Ong 153, 179). Such individualized thought has devastating effects on the verbal art of the oral tradition: it introduces the possibility of breaking away from the strict and formulaic ways of doing things that are essential to the survival of the oral tradition. "The oral singer," as Lord notes, "thinks in terms of these formulas and formula patterns. He must do so in order to compose. But when writing enters, the 'must' is eliminated" (130). With literacy the "unique voice" of the poet begins to rise above the tradition.

Literate culture does not place as great a value on the use of language itself as oral culture; Ong observes that cultures that "depend significantly more on effective use of words, and thus on human interaction. . . . are likely to strike technological man as making all too much of speech itself, as overvaluing and certainly overpracticing rhetoric" (68). Part of the reason for this "overvaluing" of speech is that oral peoples tend to believe in the "magical potency" of words, which is "clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven" (Ong 32). Words, and names in particular, are perceived as "conveying power over things" (Ong 33), and this perhaps explains why, to the pre-literate individual, "[w]riting is often regarded at first as an instrument of secret and magic

power. . . . dangerous to the unwary reader . . ." (Ong 93). Lord observed that the oral poets he studied tended to overvalue literacy and attribute powers to the literate person that he or she in truth does not possess—the power to reproduce an extended oral performance on paper after hearing it once, for example, a mnemonic feat that is outside the ability of any literate individual (28).

This belief of the preliterate individual in the potency of the written language doubtless accounts for another type of alienation that becomes more prevalent with the acquisition of literacy—specifically, the oral individual's sense of alienation from literate culture. The "secret and magic power" of language enables communication between literates that, in a primarily oral culture, is unintelligible to those who do not know the written language. Conflict is inevitable: Samuel R. Delany, whom I might suggest we think of as a more modern romancer dealing with similar questions about language through the medium of his Nevèrÿon tales (which he himself playfully refers to as "a Child's Garden of Semiotics" [357]), suggests a possible preliterate attitude towards writing in the following passage in *Flight from Nevèrÿon*:

> The smuggler blurted, "I hate it [writing]! The students, they use it all the time. They started all that scratch and scrawl. When I first saw it, I used to think they were putting up messages to each other—putting them right out there on the walls, too, just because the rest of us wouldn't know what they meant! Because they can pass them out in the open like that, they think they're better than we are. I *hate* students, and I hate their writing!" (115)

It is not unlikely that analogous exclamations were common in the "real" world, up until the relatively recent phenomenon of mass literacy; certainly, there are signs of such suspicions in the prose-poetic romances, as I shall show in chapter 4.

It is particularly important to recognize that, despite all of these potential negative effects of literacy, literacy actually can have a positive effect upon the group; while it may introduce alienation, it may also promote what Ong calls "a higher unity" by intensifying the sense of self and raising one's consciousness of others (179). Paradoxically, literacy also makes it possible to "reconstruct for ourselves the pristine human consciousness which was not literate at all" (Ong 15), and therefore makes it

possible to recapture communal and externalized ways of thinking once these have been eroded by literacy, as Morris attempts to do in *Wolfings*. And literacy can counteract the "homeostatic nature of oral tradition," its capacity for living in the present and sloughing off the past (Ong 46)—a capacity that Morris believes can be dangerous, as the following passage from Ellen to William Guest in *News from Nowhere* demonstrates:

> 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. (167-8)

For Morris, a knowledge of the past was essential to the security of the future.

Orality and literacy theory is quite clearly relevant to Morris's work; Morris seems to have grasped the fundamentals of how orality structures thought in a way that is especially compatible with socialism, and of how literacy makes the task of socializing the individual much more challenging. Morris's understanding of the oral noetic world also suggests that he comprehended the value of story-telling and the entire oral tradition in reinforcing communal behaviour, while also realizing the limitations of the purely oral tradition, especially with regard to maintaining a true conception of history. Despite its limitations, however, the potential appeal of the oral tradition to Morris is obvious, given his concern with the problem of individualism and the mixed feelings regarding literacy and its effects evident in much of his work (a topic I will return to in later chapters). Additionally, the potential the oral tradition offers for "beautiful expression," and in particular the opportunities it allows for even non-artists to work with verse as well as prose forms, would have especially appealed to Morris, given his concerns with regard to language. If Morris therefore was aware of such social and artistic functions of the oral tradition in early societies, it is reasonable to assume that his own literary tradition for the socialist future would have been, as I suggested earlier, at least in part based on this awareness, as was the subject milieu of this new tradition—that is, high barbaric and early medieval cultures that were themselves largely shaped, respectively, by the waxing and

waning power of oral traditions. The tradition he is establishing might be seen as a modern, literate substitute for the oral tradition; this interpretation will be the focus of my second chapter, in which I will also take a closer look at Morris's perceptions of the cultures that he used as models for his romances and at why the genre of romance was chosen as the foundation for the literate tradition in the first place.

I specified earlier that the two romances that I am dealing with here might more properly be termed "prose-poetic" romances, and should take this opportunity to explain myself. While my term may seem somewhat redundant (romance, after all, being a form that has traditionally allowed for the intermingling of prose and verse—"speech both loose and knitted up," as Morris termed it in one of his Icelandic translations/collaborations with Eiríkr Magnússon [Gallasch 31-2]), I feel that it is more useful than the most common terms used in scholarship—"German" and "prose" romance—neither of which is suggestive of the mixture of prose and verse that is the single most distinctive feature of the romances.

While the second chapter will particularly focus on how the choice of romance for the foundation of the literary tradition of the future reflects Morris's socialism, chapter 3 will concentrate more on how the choice of romance was also determined by the author's opinions regarding language and its potential, and how these led him in turn to "make a new tongue for himself" and "elevate his means of expression" by creating his own version of English. Chapter 4 will deal specifically with the primary texts *Wolfings* and *Roots*, examining the characters' use of "speech both loose and knitted up" and how the use of language reflects social maturity. As I shall attempt to demonstrate, the different "weighting" of verse and prose (that is, the extensive use of verse in *Wolfings* and its lesser use—though not lesser importance—in *Roots*) reveals Morris's understanding of the oral noetic world and represents his conscious effort to reflect, as effectively as possible, the different traditions (oral and literate) that characterize the social groups represented in the respective romances. This theory, that the primary reason that Morris deemphasized verse in *Roots* was that it was inappropriate in a romance dealing with a literate culture and *not* because he was dissatisfied with what was essentially a failed

literary experiment, contrasts with a widely held view regarding these two works (E. P. Thompson, for example, notes that "*The House of the Wolfings* is marred by the unsuccessful combination of prose and verse. . ." [677]). As chapter 4 will illustrate, the potential offered by the prose-poetic romance to combine verse and prose makes it particularly appropriate for portrayals of a society immersed in or substantially influenced by an oral tradition.

Chapter 2: Socialism and the Stream of Song

"I by nature turn to Romance rather than classicalism," Morris once wrote to a student inquiring about his influences (Mackail 1: 197), and his work bears definite witness to the truth of his statement. As a writer, Morris was particularly interested in romance in many of its different incarnations: most of his literary output (with the obvious exception of lectures, addresses, correspondence and so forth) can be and has been considered as being "romantic" in some form or another. When reference is made to Morris's "romances," however, it is usually to those original works which are written primarily in prose and are divisible into three groups: the early stories from Morris's Oxford days (e.g., "The Hollow Land," "Golden Wings," and "The Story of the Unknown Church"), the later "political" romances (*A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*) and the even later works that are commonly known as either "late prose romances" or (following May Morris - *Introductions* 2: 474) "fairy romances," written in the years prior to Morris's death and somewhat later than the political romances. The prose-poetic romances, contemporary with the political romances and the immediate predecessors of the fairy romances, tend to be grouped with either the former or the latter according to the critic's own field of interest.

Morris's interest in romance was a natural extension of his lifelong fascination with the Middle Ages and its literature; as Amanda Hodgson suggests, "it would seem that he turned to romance because it was the kind of writing he himself liked to read" (10). Mackail notes that the young Morris fed his passion for the thirteenth century by reading medieval chronicles and romances, and mentions Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* as being an early source of his interest in Scandinavian Epic (1: 38). Morris himself commented: "I may say that I am fairly steeped in mediævalism generally; but the Icelandic Sagas, our own Border Ballads, and Froissart (through Berners' translation of about 1520) have had as much influence over me as (or more than) anything else" (Mackail 1: 198). Chaucer and Malory were also especially important influences; Morris regarded Chaucer as his "special master," though he doubted that he had had much real

influence on his style (1: 61). On the topic of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which Morris included in the list of favourite books prepared for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and from which in his youth he took the subjects for many of the poems in *The Defence of Guenevere*, Morris wrote: "I know this is an ill-digested collection of fragments, but some of the best of the books it is made from . . . are so long and so cumbered with unnecessary matter that one is thankful to Mallory [sic] after all" (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 657).

Morris's formidable knowledge of medieval literature made the prose-poetic romance a natural choice for his attempt to create a new literary tradition that could reflect both his concern with language (a point to which I will return in the next chapter) and his socialist ideology. Morris, interestingly enough, was not alone amongst socialists in his interest in romance; as Silver notes, Morris's socialist mentors—Engels, Marx and Peter Kropotkin, among others—did not espouse the opposing trend towards realism that was the dominant force in literature in the nineteenth century, but rather had tastes similar to Morris's; Marx "loved folk ballads and tales," Engels shared Morris's interest in medieval German societies, and Kropotkin, "Morris's closest colleague among the theorists of 'scientific socialism' . . . was actively antagonistic to the realist and naturalist literary movements of the time" ("Socialism Internalized" 118). As a group, the socialists repudiated the modern novel as the product of "bourgeois aesthetics," though they occasionally admired individual authors like Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë as "revealers of social and political truths" ("Socialism Internalized" 118). Morris himself remarked that contemporary fiction "despised 'everybody who *could* use his hands'" and especially despised what Silver calls the "bourgeois nature of conventional realism" ("Socialism Internalized" 119). His opinion of this "conventional realism" is quite apparent in the following quotation from Old Hammond in *News from Nowhere*:

> "It is true that in the nineteenth century, when there was so little art and so much talk about it, there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so; for, if there was any pretence of it, the author always took care . . . to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealise, and in some way or another make it strange; so that, for all the verisimilitude there was, he might just as well have dealt with the times of the Pharaohs." (86-7)

Silver sums up Morris's views on the novel nicely: "[t]o Morris, the core of the realist novel is unsound" ("Socialism Internalized" 119). Romance, on the other hand, was seen by the fathers of socialism as being potentially much more valuable to the socialist movement than realism and naturalism. For Morris himself, as I will show in this chapter, the prose-poetic romance's particular value lay in its ability to serve as the foundation of the literary tradition of the socialist future.

Whatever their individual tastes, it is likely that Marx, Engels and Kropotkin were instinctively attracted to romance for a reason similar to that which apparently attracted Morris as a writer to the form—its potential to make socialism attractive, to "illustrate the good," as Lewis suggests:

> The great use of the idyllic in literature is to find and illustrate the good—to give a real value to the x about which political algebra can then work. The tribal communities which Morris paints in *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains* are such attempts, perhaps the most successful attempts ever made, to give x a value. (49)

If the formulators of scientific socialism dealt with the "political algebra," then Morris's own greatest contribution to the cause was his ability to make their equations intelligible to the common man by providing a value for their variables, an explication of the x. The prose-poetic romances are particularly effective in dealing with the problem of the individual in the socialist society, an especially important x in Morris's socialism.

Morris's "romantic socialism," as Lewis notes (though questioning whether it is "romantic" at all), "is at the opposite pole from the individualism of Shelley or Tom Payne [sic]. He immerses the individual completely in the society" (48). In his own response to "the outcry sometimes raised against Socialism for proposing to interfere with the liberty of the individual," Morris suggests that this liberty "would be, in fact, only limited by the natural and inevitable restrictions of individual will incident to all societies whatever" (*Socialism* 290). While this talk of "the natural and inevitable restrictions of individual will" is somewhat vague, it is clear that Morris's conception of individual freedom is not to be confused with the kind of individualism Lewis mentions above (Kirchhoff *William Morris* 126). Though Morris suggests that the natural

restrictions of the individual will are "incident to all societies," the artificial restrictions imposed by the "direct coercion" of civilization—that is, through the civil and criminal law which socialism would do away with (*Socialism* 289-90)—mean that the natural restrictions are really only identifiable within a "natural" context, which for Morris means an essentially socialist context, a "society founded on general equality of condition" (*Socialism* 276).

Morris comments on the rise of the individualism that displaced the original individual freedom:

> . . . with the development of material civilisation from the domination of things by persons to that of persons by things, and the falling asunder of society into two classes, a possessing and dominating class, and a non-possessing and dominated one, there arose a condition of life which gave leisure for observation and reflection to the former, that is, the privileged class. Out of this reflection arose, the distinction of man as a conscious being apart from the rest of nature. (*Socialism* 293)

. . . and, naturally, the distinction of man as a conscious being apart from his fellows. (This same development contributed as well to the tendency to distinguish between "art" and everyday craftsmanship, a subject that will be taken up again in the next chapter.) Literacy, as I noted in chapter 1, necessarily played an important part in the "observation and reflection" of the privileged class that led to the rise in individualism; its association with this and with the devaluation of craftsmanship doubtless accounts for at least some of Morris's mixed feelings towards literacy.

For Morris, true individual freedom, unlike the individualism which leads to the alienation of the individual from society, necessarily depends on a recognition of the value of the group and of the individual's role within the group—the immersion into the society that Lewis mentions above. Morris believed that in the socialist future "the identification of individual with social interests will be so complete that any divorce between the two will be inconceivable to the average man," and called this "future form of the moral consciousness" "in a sense a return on a higher level to the ethics of the older world, with the difference that the limitation of scope to the kinship group in its narrower sense, which was one of the causes of dissolution of ancient society, will

disappear" (*Socialism* 298). (This belief would seem to find its origins in Lewis Morgan's work—see his comment that the future "will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient gentes" [qtd. in Engels 217—and significantly italicized as the very conclusion to this work—and Brantlinger 164]).

Invariably, when Morris refers in his writing to "ancient society" he means "ancient *Germanic* society" in the stages of "upper barbarism." As understood by Lewis Morgan and Engels, society historically progressed through three stages of savagery and three stages of barbarism before reaching a state of "civilization"; upper barbarism, the last stage of barbarism (represented in Morris's work by the culture of the Wolfings), was the "era of the heroic peoples," and the mode which Morris equated with "ideal communism" (Silver "Myth and Ritual" 122).

Morris, as Patrick Brantlinger notes, consistently attempted to draw an analogy between "barbarism and the industrial proletariat" (150). The cultural theory implicit in his statement on the future form of the moral consciousness, like all critical theories of mass culture that "suggest that there is a superior type of culture" definable "in terms of some historical model," is an example of what Brantlinger terms "positive classicism" (17). Such positive classicism was as common in the nineteenth century as it remains in the twentieth, and Morris was not alone, as Boos notes, in appealing to the golden age of "Germanic tribal values" (22). It was in fact something of an English tradition, and a practice not confined to socialists like Morris, but rather adopted by historians and writers of all political stripes to serve their own ideological agendas. Boos mentions Montesquieu's claim that England's political constitution had been "'invented first in the woods [of Germany]'" (Boos's brackets) and David Hume's praise of Saxons (322), while Hodgson names several works by late eighteenth and nineteenth century historians, including Gilbert Stuart's *An Historical Dissertation Concerning the Antiquity of the English Constitution* (1768), Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* (1799-1805), John Kemble's *The Saxons in England* (1849), William Stubb's *The Constitutional History of England in its Origin and Development* (1874-8), and John Richard Green's *A Short History of the English People* (1874) (134-5).

Morris's own vision of "ancient society" was naturally coloured by contemporary perceptions that were the outgrowths of this tradition: Mackail (who we should not forget was also a contemporary), writing on the prose-poetic romances, notes that the life of the second or third century Germanic tribes was "sufficiently known to allow of copious and detailed description," though also "sufficiently undetermined to give full scope to a romantic imagination" (2: 213). While Morris was adequately prepared to supply the imaginative element required for a true conception of German prehistory, the details came from other sources, the most important of which was likely Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88), read by Morris in both youth and middle age (Boos 322).

It is perhaps ironic that Gibbon seems to have been Morris's most useful source, in that Gibbon, "an ardent believer in modern enlightenment and progress" who "saw little danger of Europe's being plunged into a new Dark Age" (Brantlinger 24-5), interpreted history from an ideological perspective very different from that of Morris. Boos marks close parallels in details between Morris and Gibbon, especially with regard to social organization, but notes that Morris's interpretations of Gibbon more closely parallel the socialist vision (put forth by Bax, Engels, and Kropotkin among others) "that small 'medieval' societies at least adumbrated the realization of communitarian ideals" (322). Morris's interpretation of ancient German society was also apparently influenced by his knowledge of Morgan's *Ancient Society* and Edward Freeman's *Comparative Politics* (1874), works which he may have discussed with Engels, who used them for his own *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, a treatise which also associates egalitarian and communist ideals with "upper barbaric" Germanic tribes, but which, curiously, seems to have had little direct influence on Morris's romances (Boos 330-1).

In keeping with his philosophy of imaginatively reconstructing history along socialist lines, Morris "ascribed to the Germans traits of sophistication and kindness which Gibbon had denied them and contrasted their traits favourably with those of Roman civilization," rather than negatively, as Gibbon had done (Boos 325). For Gibbon, barbarism was a negative force that has nothing positive to contribute to

civilization, whether ancient or modern. Morris's positive classicism, on the other hand, led him to characterize barbaric culture by its "hatred of lies, scorn of riches, contempt of death, faith in the fair fame won by steadfast endurance, honourable love of women . . ."—in short, to portray it as morally and culturally superior to civilization ("Art & Socialism" 635). Boos suggests that Morris is in effect more convincing as a "historian" "when he departs from Gibbon altogether, to create idealized precedents of deep mutual solidarity, loyalty, and daily enjoyment of life" (340). His efforts are part of his "alert responsibility to the socialist vision of history," which requires "the purification of phenomena so that the potentialities of a situation emerge from the actualities" (Goode 256).

An excellent example of the way in which Morris "purifies" his material can be found in his reevaluation of the concept of heroism in a socialist context. Despite the importance of the principle of equality in socialism, Morris recognized that "unequal" historical heroes could have a profound inspirational effect on the individual members of a society, and that such heroes who epitomized socialist values could fulfil symbolic roles equivalent to those played by similar heroes of other ideologies. He once commented: "[t]hink of the joy we have in praising great men," "and how we turn their stories over and over, and fashion their lives for our joy" (Mackail 1: 334).

As it turned out, the relative lack of "genuine" socialist historical heroes (the supposedly proto-socialist Germanic societies having left no true legacy of heroes behind) meant that Morris quite literally did need to "fashion the lives" of great men for the socialist cause. His method involved either recasting actual historical figures in his own socialist mould (as he did with John Ball, "already a major figure in socialist mythology" [Goode 248]) or creating fictional heroes from scratch. Some of these heroes he was able to place within the context of "real" socialist history, such as John Ball's peasants' revolt and the tragedy of the Paris Commune, the subject of "Pilgrims of Hope"; others, like Thiodolf in *Wolfings*, were placed in imaginative proto-socialist historical settings.

Thiodolf is perhaps the prime example of the Morrisean socialist hero: a man who sacrifices his own personal safety and life for the good of the tribe and thereby achieves

immortality. It is interesting to note that Morris's fascination with individuals capable of such self-sacrifice actually predates his conversion to socialism; Mackail notes that in his early fascination with the fall of Troy Morris followed medieval romancers in his sympathy for the Trojans and Hector, who was also sacrificed for the good of his people (1: 168). Self-sacrifice may not be a quality unique to socialist heroes—indeed, it is difficult to recall, at the spur of the moment, a cultural hero of any ideology renowned primarily for selfishness—but for Morris it is *the* most important characteristic of the socialist hero.

Gibbon's version of history was founded on an incredibly slight "documentary base," as Boos notes, commenting on "[t]he confident willingness of eighteenth and nineteenth century ethnologists to base elaborate speculation on highly derivative sources" (324-5). In this respect, it might be said to have *demanded* such "purification" as Morris provided. Morris's own socialist vision of ancient German society (and indeed, of the entire medieval period) may have been as factually inaccurate as Gibbon's in many respects, but by being "right" inasmuch as it reflected the same misconceptions that "already existed, and existed poetically, in the public imagination" (Lewis 43), it managed to give the x of socialist political algebra a value, and provided an alternative view of history which could serve socialism as effectively as more mainstream, non-socialist views served their own respective ideological masters.

As indicated above, prototypical socialist society's breakdown and individualism's subsequent rise were seen by Morris as being the result of the development of the class system that encouraged the separation of individual from communal interests. Contributing to this process was the corresponding rise of literacy, which undermined the oral tradition's function as folk history. This tradition, as I noted in chapter 1, may have been the culture's most important tool in encouraging the individual's sense of membership in a larger whole. Although the values of the oral tradition might have continued to play a similar though modified role in a literary tradition, there was never any possibility of this happening because literacy, in the ancient Germanic societies that developed into modern European society, generally speaking did not represent a natural

evolution of the oral tradition (the oral stories being generally regarded as "unfit for transcription" [Shepherd 45]), and therefore did not subsume the original history of the folk when the original oral tradition died out. Morris notes (in an observation confirmed by Lord [135]):

> Whatever oral works of imagination they [the early Germans] might have carried with them, their literature soon became that of Rome only; for the great epical and mythological poems of the race have been kept alive solely by those tribes who never crossed Roman civilisation. (*Socialism* 57)

Of course, it would be exaggerating to claim that the original oral tradition did not have any influence upon the literary tradition at all; otherwise, there would be no medieval romances of Arthur (the "Matter of Britain" being largely the work of Breton storytellers and singers in the twelfth century [Loomis and Loomis, 3]), but the influence of the Germanic societies Morris was interested in was extremely slight. Morris's own efforts as a writer might be seen as being in part an attempt to pick up where the original Germanic oral tradition died out and develop the literature that would have progressed naturally from that tradition, to create an alternative to the "literature of Rome." In this he is like his literary descendant J. R. R. Tolkien, whose own work was the product of a desire to carve a Celtic/Anglo-Saxon history/mythology for the British Isles independent of the Graeco-Roman tradition.

The importance of an oral tradition to Morris is suggested by his comment that "Bibles," literary works that have their direct origins in oral traditions (which include the Hebrew Bible, Homer, Hesiod, *Beowulf*, *The Edda*, and collections of folk tales), "are far more important than any literature. *They are in no sense the work of individuals* [my emphasis], but have grown up from the very hearts of the *people*" (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 655). It is natural that these works from the "very hearts of the *people*," reflecting the values of the people as a whole rather than those of single individuals, top Morris's list of favourite books prepared for *The Pall Mall Gazette*.

The oral tradition of the ancient German society, as visualized by Morris in the prose-poetic romances, provides a connecting flow or medium of communication that

reinforces the social fabric and promotes greater feelings of interdependence and mutual harmony. It is described in a particularly important passage in *Roots* as a "stream of song"; the Sun-beam, commenting on the exchange of songs between the visiting Face-of-god and her own people, says: "Here now hath been a stream of song running betwixt the Mountain and the Dale even as doth a river; and this is good to come between our dreams of what hath been and what shall be" (49). The symbol of the *stream* tends to be particularly important to Morris, and is usually tied to communication between cultures: in *News from Nowhere* the river voyage up the Thames provides an opportunity for Guest from the past to exchange ideas with Ellen of the future, and in Morris's last romance, the romance that is actually named after a stream, *The Sundering Flood*, the stream paradoxically both unites and divides the cultures living on either side of it, and offers the young lovers Osberne and Elfhild the ideal opportunity to exchange ideas and stories . . . to fall in love with each other's minds, as it were, without the distracting influence of physical contact. The treacherous flood running through the mountains that provides the passage by which the Wolf kindred and their newfound allies from the Dale return to Silverdale plays a similar paradoxical role, apparently separating the two cultures but proving to be the means by which they are united after all.

The stream is tied to communication, and the exchange of ideas and culture through the "stream of song" is very significantly depicted by Morris as being equal in importance to, if not more important than, the more mundane factors that might normally be supposed to provide unity between two cultures (such as intermarriage, trade, and so on). It is, after all, what makes these cultures what they are: it maintains their prototypical socialism and provides the link between their past and their future, between "dreams of what hath been and what shall be." According to Morris's ideology, the folk of the Burg and of the Mountain could never truly establish a meaningful relationship based on trade (an economic relationship being, in Morris's view, no relationship at all), but by sharing ideas and eventually developing a common stream of song, they can in effect become one large community—a vital progression for both cultures, since, as

Morris's comment on the "future form of the moral consciousness" suggests, "the limitation of scope to the kinship group in its narrower sense" was a key factor in the eventual dissolution of ancient society. The relatively small separate social groups of the Burgdalers, the Silverdalers, the Rose-dalers, the Woodland-Carles, and the Shepherd-Folk represent the "kinship group in its narrower sense," and are doomed to die out unless they can combine into a large socialist society—as they do, "for better or worse" in the socialistically-correct ending of *Roots* (424).

The presence of the stream of song in *Roots* (and in *Wolfings*, for that matter) underscores the importance and attractiveness of the oral tradition to Morris. The prospect of living in a world in a state of primary orality, like that depicted in *Wolfings*, likely would have suited him just fine. It is easy to see Morris in the role of the bard or scald, as E. P. Thompson mused in the first chapter; his daughter May called him "the inheritor of this easy narrative verse-making" who is "of the race of those who sing to the people, chanting long-forgotten things in a vivid half-dream" (*Introductions* 2: 627). As a folk-poet, Morris would have found a kindred spirit in the narrator of *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, the fourteenth century romance that Morris himself later adapted into *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), as he is described by Loomis and Loomis: "preëminently a man of the people," familiar with oral techniques, and "utterly unlike" sophisticated romancers such as Chrétien de Troyes and Gottfried von Strassburg, members of "the intelligentsia of their times" (286-7).

Morris's own interest in the contributions an oral culture might be able to make to socialism was perhaps not as isolated as the modern reader might be tempted to think, and might even be conceived as being, in a certain sense, the logical extension of events going on around him. Socialist songbooks, many of which featured chants Morris himself had composed for the movement, "shared the goal," as Christopher Waters notes, "of fashioning a literary and musical culture for the socialist movement" (133). These songbooks for the proletariat also acknowledged the importance of establishing a historical sense for the movement, the value of integrating the past into the present, and attempted to do so by including material from a large number of earlier writers

(particularly romantic poets and Shelley) as well as material written by late nineteenth-century socialists (Waters 133).

But as attractive as oral culture may have seemed to him, Morris was realistic enough to realize that, while any possible socialist future was going to need some sort of "stream of song" of its own to provide a unifying force, no possible socialist future was going to be an illiterate one. There still remained, however, the alternative of establishing a culture of what Ong calls "secondary orality," an oral culture based on the primary literary culture and which appears in our own time in the form of "residually oral subcultures" (Ong mentions American urban black and Chicano subcultures as examples [160]). Our own growing dependence on verbal sources of information such as radio and television is indicative of the elements of secondary orality at work in our own culture.

Like primary orality, secondary orality can also function as a means of developing the individual's sense of community: Ong notes that it "generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture—McLuhan's 'global village.' . . . In our age of secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically" (136). The socialist movement's musical culture, composed of the aforementioned socialist chants, was in fact a secondary oral culture, based as it was on written poetry and songs. The literary tradition for the socialist future that Morris is creating through his own prose-poetic romances, founded upon his understanding of primary orality, might therefore be best understood as an attempt to provide the raw materials for the development of a hybrid culture of literacy and secondary orality—a new kind of "stream of song" composed of works of literary value that could also be read or told aloud and which would play an integral part in maintaining a proper respect for the common good and a proper understanding of individual freedom. There is evidence of such a "stream of song" in Morris's future society of Nowhere; Silver notes: "While the oral tradition has been reborn, written tales still survive and flourish. Nowhere's 'popular culture' is truly popular, for it comprises tales from folklore, myth, legend and primary epic as well as romances that derive from these sources" ("Socialism Internalized" 121).

The composition of the popular culture in *Nowhere* indicated in Silver's comment above suggests the obvious content of this new stream of song: folklore, myth, legend, primary epic, sagas and romances . . . essentially, the same sort of "uncritical or traditional historical" material (to paraphrase Morris) that one would presume to find in the oral tradition of a culture of primary orality, with the specification that such material be interpreted or presented in a manner appropriate to the needs of the socialist cause. Face-of-god in *Roots* expresses his own intuitive awareness of the proper matter for the stream of song in his answer to his own rhetorical question concerning this topic (put forth, significantly enough, in the form of a song that spontaneously "came into his mouth," "would he or would he not"):

> And what shall the tale be now that dancing is over,
> . . . .
> Shall we tell of the dear days wherein we are dwelling,
> . . . .
> Shall we sing of these hands and these lips that caress us,
> . . . .
> O nay, but to tell of the fathers were better, . . . (348)

Similar values are expressed in *Nowhere* in the passage where Clara and Old Hammond debate whether or not the present is "good enough" to be a subject for art (86-7). "To tell of the fathers" is essential because the fathers represent a standard or ideal which by example helps to preserve the communal identity, and the sense of the individual's place within the community.

Assuming Morris's desire to establish a stream of song for the socialist future, a hybrid literary/oral tradition that could illustrate the proper relationship between the individual and the communal whole, he perhaps could not have found a more appropriate form upon which to base the new tradition than the one he actually used, the medieval romance. Traditionally affiliated with mythic and legendary subject matter and with symbolic heroic figures, the romance (along with its close cousin, the Icelandic saga, which more specifically provided models for Morris's use of prose and verse) is arguably the closest literary genre to the oral epics that were the original inspiration for Morris's stream of song . . . the "next best thing," as it were. Silver notes that in

choosing romance, Morris "chooses a 'truthful' genre that is popular, rooted in folklore, 'typical' in content, rich in incident, and free of middle-class conventions and ideologies" (Silver "Socialism Internalized" 121).

Romance may be free from middle-class conventions, as Silver notes, but as E. P. Thompson argues, it is also "often seen as a symptom of decadence within a culture" and is typically associated with the ruling classes, "the exploiters," and not the exploited "common man" who is Morris's intended audience (119-20). But Thompson, though acknowledging that romance found an audience in the middle and lower classes of society in the nineteenth century, largely ignores what Frye calls the "proletarian element" of romance that is intrinsic in the form and "which is never satisfied with its various incarnations" (186). The *Havelok* poet, mentioned earlier as a sort of fourteenth century prototype of Morris himself, is representative of this proletarian element in medieval romance, a writer who, rather than catering to ruling class tastes, "had in mind men like himself, of humble origin and experience" (Loomis and Loomis 287).

Thompson takes the common "escapist" view of romance, and believes that the middle and lower classes see in it "a refuge from the drabness of their own lives: a compensation for the extinction of the heroic and the beautiful in their everyday existence" (120). But, however valid such a view may be with regard to some of Morris's early poetic romances (Thompson was writing specifically about *The Earthly Paradise* and called the "Apology" to that work "a confession of defeat" on Morris's part, a more or less accurate assessment), it is invalid with regard to his later prose works, which represent a set of altogether different cases. Not all romance is literature of escape: some romance is exactly the opposite, a literature that forces us to confront the very things we might wish to escape from, and some of course represents a mixture of the two extremes. Thompson's apparent unwillingness to accept this fact and his preconceptions about the romance form as a whole are unfortunate, inasmuch as they dictate his interpretations of the later romances themselves as individual examples of the form. Similar prejudices against romance held by other critics partially explain the tendency to undervalue Morris's romances that I mentioned in chapter 1. Faulkner suggests that such attitudes

towards romance are the result of the belief that originated in the nineteenth century (as the result of the "great achievements of the realistic novel") that "the psychological development of characters is the proper stuff of fiction," a belief that naturally excludes romance, which is rarely concerned with such things (174-5). We must do our best to rid ourselves of such prejudices if we wish to properly appreciate Morris's work; in the words of Northrop Frye, "William Morris should not be left on the sidelines of prose fiction merely because the critic has not learned to take the romance form seriously" (305).

It is important to remember that the somewhat vague term "romance," as the introduction to this chapter indicated (note to mention my own use of the term to describe literature from sources as diverse as France and Iceland), may be used in reference to an extremely broad range of literary types, most of which are not the concern of this thesis. An adequate definition that includes all of these possible types may be virtually impossible (and is certainly beyond the scope of this study), but such a definition is not necessary to our understanding of romance as Morris understood it. For the purpose of this thesis, it should suffice to say that Morris's conception of the prose-poetic romance, the "true conception of history" based on medieval forms that seem to bear a more direct relation to oral epic forms, is hardly likely to be confused with romance in its more common nineteenth century incarnations, such as the popular romances of contemporaries like Conan Doyle and Rider Haggard. Since Morris, however, is as much a product of his times as these other romancers, and often seems to have been reacting to similar stimuli, a brief comparison of the political values inherent in Morris's romances with those typically found in more popular forms of romance in nineteenth century English literature is warranted.

Wendy R. Katz, writing specifically on Haggard, but more generally on nineteenth century writers of escapist romance as a class, notes that "romance prefers the past to the present, forgoes the prosaic for the wonderful, and appeals more to the senses than to the mind . . . " (30). Ironically, this brand of romance, which bears a superficial resemblance to Morris's own, represents a flight from many of the same typical evils of the nineteenth

century that Morris reacts against. Katz suggests that Haggard's own escapism results from "a personal sense of frustration with his society's growing attachment to machines, industry and urban living," an attachment that he saw as a threat to the conservative way of life of the comfortable landed gentry of which he was a member (30). He finds a way to deal with this frustration by escaping through his romances into the wondrous and remote underdeveloped frontiers of the Empire, where he can still get "a little respect" (and indeed, where even the least of white Englishmen enjoys a doctrinal illusion of superiority over other men). Paradoxically, however, such escapes were in real life officially sanctioned by English imperialist policy, which encouraged adventurous men to open new markets for the products of the same industrialization that was undermining the prized traditional way of life back home. (Morris himself defined imperialism as "simply the agony of capitalism driven by a force it cannot resist to seek for new and ever new markets at any price and any risk," and is on record as saying that it is what "brought him to Socialism" [Brantlinger 145].) Given the situation, one might expect Haggard himself to therefore oppose the policy of imperialism, but of course he did no such thing, and is remembered today as one of the two most popular literary enthusiasts of the Empire (the other being the more talented Kipling, who was at least capable of some restraint when it came to praising the benefits of imperialism). Haggard's "escapism," then, can be seen as being in reality based upon an almost blind acceptance, for better or worse, of the dominant middle class ideology; rather than providing a solution for the problem, it promotes the ideology that created it in the first place.

Morris's fiction has also been interpreted as simple escapism from the industrial world of nineteenth century England, but he cared little for the fate of Haggard and his class. In contrast, he was much more concerned with the disastrous and dehumanizing effects industrialization was having on the mass of common workers and the skilled trades. And rather than simply trying to "escape" from this problem, he challenged the dominant social and political thinking of the day and attempted to articulate solutions that would contribute towards a new and better society.

Misreading Morris is unfortunately quite easy: Bono notes that the romances "assume a forcefulness and artistic clarity when interpreted in a manner consistent with his socialist beliefs," but that "their affinities to traditional religious symbolism and their alluring sensuousness, tempt those slightest of transpositions which would make them congenial to a species of otherworldly or aesthetic escapism" (54). But, as Bono adds, "it is unfair to slant the reading of Morris' fictions and then blame him for the critic's vagaries." His choice of romance, as Frye notes, cannot "be regarded as an 'escape' from his social attitude" (305); if Morris's work is "escapist" in any sense, it is only as an escape from the unquestioning acceptance of the status quo that we see in a contemporary like Haggard into a much more provocative (and potentially volatile) form.

Morris's unique concern with the social group in his romances is one of the qualities that most distinguishes him from his contemporary romancers. Escapist romance, even in some of its more respectable guises, tends to conveniently ignore the relationship between the individual and society: it is not necessary, in the successful adventure tale, for the characters to be "complexly related to each other or to society or to the past," since "'experience' has less to do with human beings as 'social creatures' than as individuals" (Chase 283-4). Towards this simplified end, characters ranging from Allan Quartermain to Kipling's Kim find themselves conveniently "'liberated' . . . from the restraints of such things as family and job" (Katz 42). The myth of individualism is taken as a given. Characters like Morris's Thiodolf and Face-of-god, on the other hand, are continually conscious of their relationship to the society; the essence of their "adventures" might be seen as finding their way back to their proper place within their own societies (a subject that I will demonstrate in chapter 4, discussing Face-of-god in particular). Even in the later romances, which feature the more traditional motif of the hero leaving on a quest that physically takes him away from his society, the object of the quest is always something that will benefit the group that has been left behind (even if that object is something as vague as the hero's "maturity"), and the eventual return of the hero and heroine to play an important role within the social group is never in

question. As Lewis puts it, "[n]o wanderings are allowed to obliterate our love for 'the little platoon we belong to'" (50).

The "ideological plasticity" (Katz 44) of the romance form offers an extraordinary potential that Morris and his contemporaries chose to exploit in quite distinct ways. For Morris's contemporaries, this plasticity allowed them to present to their readers an essentially comforting message, often one that justified British imperialism, the existing class system, and the status quo in general; as Katz notes, "[t]he special quality of romance which satisfied the needs of late-Victorian society . . . was its simple avowal of an existence of absolute truths which could pacify a large number of potentially disaffected people" (32). Unlike the realist, who "finds the kernel of truth within his real or imagined experiences," the romance writer "fabricates experience to illustrate a truth, which in his vision or his theory he has already apprehended" (Eigner 256-7). It should be noted that Eigner, writing on Stevenson, sees nothing wrong with this as a method of generating fiction (admiring the romance writer for presenting truths that are "more mystic, more inspirationally derived, more visionary" and for being "more intellectual than the novelist" [256]); Katz, on the other hand, takes Eigner's observations and suggests that this is why "a lack of vigourous intellectual struggle, if not anti-intellectualism, prevails" in the romance form (Katz 34).

Morris himself is as guilty of fabricating experience as his contemporaries; as I have shown, it is a necessary part of his "true conception of history." What differentiates his efforts from those of a writer like Haggard, however, is that whereas romance usually leads to escapism because the comforting "absolute truths" it endorses conform to those approved of by the society in general—and especially by the bourgeoisie and upper classes—Morris's absolute truths are disturbing, challenging the status quo and stressing socialist/proletarian rather than capitalist/imperialist values. Rather than providing an escape, the prose-poetic romances therefore do support an "intellectual struggle"—the struggle between the nineteenth century reader's conception of class-oriented society and Morris's radical democratic view. To understand this fully, it is important to realize just how novel Morris's socio-political views would have seemed to his audience: if the

modern reader does not find signs of an intellectual struggle in his or her own reading of the work, it may be because more than one hundred years of social and political change has altered his or her world view enough to find some sympathy with the egalitarian values Morris expresses, or at the very least, to see them as nothing new and therefore not particularly intellectually challenging.

Morris's and his contemporaries' choices to work in the general field of romance may be related to their being products of their times, but Morris's decision to base his own efforts on medieval romance rather than some more modern form more specifically reflects, as I have already established, his desire to found a stream of song for the socialist future and his belief that this stream must be related somehow to oral culture. I should perhaps reestablish the point raised in chapter 1 that Morris's intention in choosing medieval romance as the model for his own prose-poetic romances was not simply to imitate medieval romance, but rather, to use it as the starting point for a completely new form of romance altogether; as Norman Kelvin notes, Morris in his later works "indulged himself more freely, permitting his imagination to be governed only by the conventions of traditional romance and treating these, moreover, only as low hedges and boundaries to be vaulted at will" (98).

As I noted earlier, Morris's adaptation of medieval romance into his prose-poetic romances was particularly appropriate because medieval romance is arguably the closest literary form to the oral epics that formed the dominant part of oral tradition. This is because medieval romance, unlike modern forms like the novel, directly mined the oral tradition of "those tribes who never crossed Roman civilisation"—by which phrase Morris seems to vaguely designate various "tribes" whose "crossing" of Roman civilization was perhaps not quite so socially and culturally catastrophic—for its source material. Lord suggests that many medieval epics—I should digress here and note that Lord considers epic and romance as being "not really separate genres, but actually the same genre of oral narrative poetry," with the romance form being coloured by the "chivalric and religious age" (219)—were actually transcribed from oral performances, noting how transcribed texts of contemporary Yugoslavian oral performances without music often resemble these

medieval epics (127). Loomis and Loomis similarly note that "[m]ost of the Germanic, Carolingian and Arthurian legends were developed for centuries as the stock in trade of reciters and singers and had proved their worth before they were adopted as subjects for romance literature," and that many well-known romances (such as *Havelok the Dane*, for example) "give internal evidence that they were meant to be delivered orally," while others "in all probability were actually composed by minstrels" (ix).

The combination of prose and verse that is occasionally found in medieval romance (and commonly in the Icelandic sagas) is also reminiscent of oral tradition, and is an effective tool for representing the ability to combine these forms in everyday speech—the capability for "beautiful expression"—that Morris considers as being one of the most markedly different aspects of oral-influenced cultures like those of *Wolfings* and *Roots*, and perhaps the key to the effectiveness of the oral tradition. Lord Raglan once noted regarding romance that "it will hardly be maintained that historical persons were in the habit of speaking in verse, or that it occurs naturally to a story-teller to represent his characters as doing so" (241); he would have found a vocal opponent in Morris, whose own views must have been formed by his own reading in romance and the sagas. As Charlotte Oberg suggests, "Morris must have come across numerous examples of traditional narratives, sagas and chronicles as well as folktales, that employ both prose and verse" (103-4). Raglan himself notes that "[t]hough most of *Grettissaga* [which was translated by Morris and Magnússon] was is in prose, we find that on important occasions the hero always bursts into verse" (a device which Raglan attributes more to the saga writer's failure as a prose artist to break completely away from the traditional verse forms than to precedents set by actual historical speakers) (65). As well, the well-known *chante-fable* or "song-story" of *Aucassin and Nicolette*, which also combines prose and verse, might be a direct continental ancestor of Morris's prose-poetic romances; it is telling that the Loomises favourably compare the thirteenth-century writer of this work to Morris as "a man of warm heart, of true social vision, and an adorer of medieval beauty" (242). While I have not been able to confirm whether Morris was actually familiar with this specific work, I think it safe to say that he was, given the scope of his own reading, the

popularity ascribed to it by the Loomises, and the fact that it was "discussed or translated by Swinburne, Pater and Lang," all of whom were either intimates of or acknowledged influences on Morris (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature* 49).

Not surprisingly, a characteristic of romance is its use of traditional subjects similar to those common to oral tradition, semi-historical and legendary heroic figures removed in time and space. Romance, however, tends to deemphasize the heroic struggles of the folk (such as those that Morris chose to revive) in favour of tales of chivalry that incorporate religious elements and the doctrine of courtly love. The sagas, of course, are an exception to this rule, and Morris himself followed their lead in weeding such non-Germanic elements out of his prose-poetic romances in his attempt to recapture the feel of the earlier oral tradition. (Such typically "chivalric" elements are more likely to appear in the more fantastic later prose romances that followed *Roots*.) Romance also resembles oral tradition in that it has more interest in "historic truth" than historic accuracy; Lord notes that the oral singer, the "defender of the historic truth of what is being sung," cannot change "what he has heard *in its essence*" [my emphasis] but this does not require close attention to fine or even gross details (28). While it is naturally more possible to preserve detail in a written record (a consideration whose importance has grown steadily until "accuracy" has become more important than "truth"), such details are relatively unimportant for a "true conception of history" and would not have concerned the average romance poet, who, "like Shakespeare or Walter Scott, would have acknowledged his anachronisms with a shrug" (Loomis and Loomis 235).

But while romance, developing as it did "on the edge of orality" (Ong 159), might therefore be seen as the logical successor to the oral tradition, it must be remembered that the introduction of writing, as I noted in chapter 1, changes everything. While "[r]omances are the product of chirographic culture, creations in a new written genre heavily reliant on oral modes of thought and expression," they do not usually represent conscious attempts to imitate earlier oral modes (Ong 159). And while written romances may have found a new listening audience—printed prose romances being "often written to be read aloud" (Ong 149)—they could also be read by solitary readers, and this perhaps

accounted for a gradually diminishing interest in and degeneration of oral performance arts (Lord's study in *The Singer of Tales* seems to support this view). Ironically, the very form Morris found most appropriate for a depiction of the oral tradition is the same form that was responsible for its disappearance in the first place.

As a written form, romance is more radical than an oral tradition can be, less conservative and more open to new ideas and possibilities. It is, as Laura Donaldson notes, a liberating form, and it is this ability "to liberate experience from the bourgeois ethic that makes romance so necessary in order to achieve the goals of reconstructive socialism" (33). Despite such differences from the oral tradition, however, the ability of the romance to play a social role in the literate culture analogous to the role played by the oral epic in the culture of primary orality is Morris's best reason for using it as the model for his new literary tradition. As Hodgson observes, "he could have written in few other ways if he was to fully express in his literature his artistic and political convictions" (133). The medieval romance, by assuming many of the social functions of oral epic when it replaced it in the transition from oral to literate culture, supplanted its role as the custodian of the folk history and was actually more effective, counteracting the homeostatic tendency of the oral tradition almost in spite of itself (since, as I noted above, the romancer is likely to be unconcerned with historical accuracy). Unfortunately, however, the "folk history" that the romance actually maintained was *not* that of the oral tradition at all (that is, the history of the ancient German societies), but rather that of the alien language through which literacy was introduced (that is, the history of Graeco-Roman culture and, much later, that of other European cultures as well). On the other hand, when wedded to the folk history of a communally-based socialist culture imaginatively reconstructed according to socialist doctrine, the prose-poetic romance form, with its formidable power to influence or even change the consciousness of entire classes of society, became not only an appropriate choice for the foundation of a new stream of song for the socialist future, but Morris's best possible choice.

Chapter 3: The Language of Romance

While it was Morris's socialist ideology that led to his belief in the importance of a "stream of song" in a future socialist society, it was his views regarding the potential of a literary form and, more broadly, language itself to change thoughts and attitudes that caused him to believe in the power of the "stream of song" to effect change in the first place. Morris's belief in what Kirchhoff calls "the *primary potency of language* and its capacity to disturb and transform" ("Anti-Books" 99-100) was born out of what he himself called, in the excerpt from his letter to Henderson presented in our first chapter, "an enthusiastic appreciation of mere language, which I think few people feel now-a-days." This lack of appreciation, as Morris saw it, explained the particularly sorry state of the English language in the late nineteenth century, a sorry state against which his own literary efforts rebelled and which he might have hoped would someday be corrected through the influence of a healthy "stream of song."

Morris's disdain for modern English, riddled with jargon and vulgarity and corrupted by various outside influences, is, unlike his literary theories, relatively well documented. From the Henderson letter we have the depiction of modern language as "daily jabber," the product of "centuries of degradation" (*Collected Letters* 2 Pt. B: 483). Mackail (2: 340) tells us that "Morris denounced modern literary English as 'a wretched mongrel jargon'" and May Morris quotes Magnússon, his co-translator of the sagas, as saying: "There must be living many of his friends who heard him frequently denounce it as something intolerable to have read an Icelandic saga rendered into the dominant literary dialect of the day—the English newspaper language" (*Introductions* 1: 181).

The "English newspaper language," the daily jabber that was the accepted idiom for communication both spoken and written—following Ong I might call it a "grapholect," "a transdialectal language formed by deep commitment to writing" (7-8)—represents a devolution from "the early days of language," when "everybody who could express himself at all did so beautifully, was a poet for that occasion, because all language was beautiful." As Gallasch notes, Morris "refuses to accept modern language as a poetic

medium, for it had become too degraded to satisfy the lofty requirements set by fine literature" (39). In the poet's mind, the culprit responsible for this degradation is easily fingered; Magnússon notes that Morris "often used to say that the Teutonic was the poetical element in English, while the Romance element was that of law, practice and business" (M. Morris *Introductions* 1: 181). But as Morris's comment about the early days of language indicates, it is not simply a matter of the language not offering an appropriate medium for poetic speech: because it does not allow for "beautiful expression," it is not even to be considered as an acceptable medium for everyday speech. Presumably, the "stream of song" of a socialist future would, by example, contribute to a refinement of speech that is comparable to that characteristic of the common man in *Wolfings* and *Roots*; none of the residents of Nowhere, significantly, would seem to speak in the colourful dialects of, say, one of Dickens's cockneys.

As the evidence of the romances and his own letter to Henderson suggest, Morris's disgust with modern language is rooted in his view that the ability to use language and poetry in particular is an art. For Morris, however, art is not "for art's sake": it has a practical (even utilitarian) value. His convictions regarding art in general (acquired partially from his oft-acknowledged "master" Ruskin, long before his conversion to socialism) stipulate that art and the life of the people are inextricable (E. P. Thompson 35) and that "art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour" (Mackail 2: 275; Morris qtd. from an introduction to Ruskin's "On the Nature of Gothic"). Essentially, Morris believed that virtually everyone is capable of and should be creating art, and that the business of living should itself be an art. The ability to use language effectively, as part of the business of living, is therefore an art in itself, one which it is the responsibility of every man or woman to master, just like the other arts of daily survival (woodcraft, the arts of war, and cultivation, for example). Verse modes in particular, while being more sophisticated means of expression, would be learned as another form of language (as Lord suggested is possible) and could therefore be used as casually and simply, in their appropriate places, as non-metrical forms.

Morris's conception of art contrasted dramatically with the common "idealization of art" in the nineteenth century, the result of a "strange historical development" that went hand-in-hand with the same move towards a class society decried by Morris in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*; Williams notes:

> Art was idealized to distinguish it from "mechanical" work. One motive, undoubtedly, was a simple class emphasis, to separate "higher" things—the objects of interest to free men, the "liberal arts"—from the "ordinary" business ("mechanical" as manual work, and then as work with machines) of the "everyday world." (160)

Partially as a result of this historical development (and perhaps also indirectly because of the overvaluation of the achievements of literacy on the part of pre-literate societies discussed in chapter 1), the nineteenth century literate world devalued the common artistic (in Morris's sense) and predominantly oral use of language by, paradoxically, placing a disproportionate value on what it considers artistic expression (especially with regard to verse). By idealizing individual artistic achievement (and primarily, literate achievement), a differentiation is made between the expressions of A, the artist/poet, and B, the non-artist. As is typically the case in any craft when the efforts of the craftsman are not appreciated, this results in the deterioration of the ability of the "craftsman"—that is, the member of the "non-artist" class, the "common" individual—to fulfil his or her potential to express him or herself "beautifully," and more specifically in verse. Predictably, it also results in an overall lack of appreciation for or understanding of more sophisticated uses of language, especially in its literate forms, which become the province of the "privileged class" possessing more "leisure for observation and reflection." Morris himself noted that the working classes in general did not have the training to appreciate his poetry, which was why the style in his overtly socialist works "had to be more direct and simple, that is, the matter, not the handling, was the important thing" (M. Morris *Artist 1*: 498).

As his comments on the English *newspaper* grapholect suggest, for Morris the devaluation of the everyday artistic use of language in favour of the "special" artist's use of language was an unfortunate by-product of both literacy and the class system. Given

our understanding of the different ways in which oral tradition and literacy affect the individual member of society as outlined in the first chapter, as well as our knowledge of the alliance between literacy and the dominating classes discussed in the second, it is not surprising that with the rise of literacy comes the rise of the individual "voice," the artist who is specifically identified with his or her work (as opposed to the oral tradition, in which the poet does not feel the same sense of ownership with regard to the work [Lord 155]), whose identity is not subsumed into the tradition but is rather unique, and the value of whose art is dependent specifically on its uniqueness rather than its faithfulness to rigourously specified conventions. Williams calls the "figure of the individual author" a "characteristic form of bourgeois thought" (193). Morris, who refused to believe in the special nature of the individual artist's gifts—"many people," he wrote in an earlier letter to Henderson, "think as deeply and as beautifully as poets do, it may be more so, but yet are not poets" (*Collected Letters* 2 Pt. B: 469)—and who valued group compositions by "the folk" more highly than any other form of literature, would have us recognize the fallacy (in his terms) of this perception of art and reestablish a more democratic view of art and the artist. It is significant that he himself was quite "democratic" in the way in which he used his own skill with words: his practical approach to artistic expression meant that he did not give himself airs as a writer. He was quite willing to "throw away" his talent on socialist propaganda of a possibly ephemeral nature, such as "Chants for Socialists" (E. P. Thompson 668). In this respect, Morris's modest conception of the value of his "knitted" speech might therefore be seen as being closer to the oral poet's perception than to his literate counterpart's.

The similarity of Morris's views to those characteristic of a poet working in an oral tradition suggests the value of such a tradition in promoting this view of language as an art. Naturally, the ability to use language effectively and artistically is facilitated by an encouraging environment, and in the prose-poetic romances it is the oral tradition in *Wolfings* and the still strong but passing influence of it in *Roots* that represent the most notable factors in making the characters capable of expressing themselves as well and as diversely as they do. The new stream of song for the future would fulfil a similar

function by continually trying to recapture the vital essence or "primary potency" of the oral tradition.

Given Morris's views on the artistic use of language and its important role in society, it is not surprising that in his prose-poetic romances (and especially in *Roots*) he links the ability to speak or orate beautifully to the process of maturing, which in Morris invariably implies an acceptance of one's proper role within the society. The ability to express oneself in an artistic manner is seen as the "mark of a man": a man is not thought "great" unless he is well spoken in addition to being accomplished in other arts, and great men are always willing to place the needs of the many before their own. In *Roots* especially, the youth and naivete of the hero is demonstrated by his inability to use language and recognize the ways in which others manipulate it, as well as by his search for his place in the social group. These principles will be illustrated in the more specific discussion of the primary texts in chapter 4.

While the character's ability to use language and exploit its potential is typically an important indicator of his or her social development in the romances, the capability of the society in its entirety to do the same is seen as an important indicator of its own health or maturity. The Romans' defeat in *Wolfings* is quite explicitly the result of the failure of their communication system (that is, their intelligence network, their ability to send messages between units, and so on), while the failure of the Dusky Men in *Roots* is attributable to the fact that they cannot use language effectively at all. These failures to communicate, which I will look at in somewhat greater detail in chapter 4, seem to metaphorically indicate that the invading cultures are inherently flawed, in contrast to the cultures of the Wolfings, Silverdalers and Burgdalers. Based on Morris's particular concerns with language, it does not require any particular stretch of the imagination to presume that these flaws are related not only to their inferior social organization, but also to their lack of a stream of song comparable to that of their opponents. The Romans' communication systems fail them because their literate tradition does not serve them as well as the oral tradition serves the Wolfings, and the Dusky Men fail because they

apparently lack any such sort of tradition (and therefore any sort of valid cultural identity) altogether.

While I have already discussed the ideological motives for Morris's dislike of the "pablum of the modern novel in its various dressings" (*Socialism* 308-9) in chapter 2, his disdain for modern "degraded" language and concern with beautiful expression explains, from an aesthetic perspective, his strong dislike for the dominant literary form that was associated with this language, a form which valued so-called "realistic" portrayals of language. Significantly, Morris's single abortive attempt to write a novel took place several years prior to both his romances and his socialism, well before his private literary theories might be imagined to have been fully developed. In light of his intention to establish a stream of song and its proposed content, it is doubtful whether a modern form could have suited Morris's particular needs anyway, since he believed the novel was a dying form.

On the other hand, the romance forms which the Romantic Movement had partially revived and which the current trend towards realism was superseding offered the potential to work in a medium that allowed for the possibility of beautiful expression. Romance in general represented "a form of fiction antithetical to the fashionable naturalism of the 1890s" (Faulkner 165), and Morris recognized the efforts of the early Romantics to restore beauty to the language. No writer in the nineteenth century could have been unaware of Wordsworth's statements on the language of common men as expressed in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and Morris noted with regard to the time immediately following the French Revolution, during which the literature of romance was undergoing a rebirth of sorts:

> . . . in good earnest poetry was born again, and the English Language, which under the hands of sycophantic verse-makers had been reduced to a miserable jargon, whose meaning, if it have a meaning, cannot be made out without translation, flowed clear, pure and simple, along with the music of Blake and Coleridge. . . . ("The Beauty of Life" 545)

(Morris's comment here on the "sycophantic" nature of the "verse-makers" is a clear indication that he saw the decline of beautiful expression as being, as I noted earlier, partially the product of social conditions as well as the influence of literacy.)

Unfortunately, the regeneration of the language was not in particularly good hands: Morris elsewhere commented that "Coleridge was a muddle-brained metaphysician, who by some strange freak of fortune turned out a few real poems amongst the dreary flood of inanity which was his wont" (Mackail 2: 310), and his statement that he "pretended to like Wordsworth" as a young man does not encourage the view that he had much real respect for his work (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 677). It should also be noted that Morris's comments regarding Blake applied only to "the part of him which a mortal can understand" (M. Morris *Introductions* 2: 657); we can only imagine what the straight-forward Morris would have made of Blake's more inscrutable works, given his stated concern with meaning that flows "clear, pure and simple."

For Morris, language could only be renewed through an attempt to recapture the essence of an earlier time in which everyone was naturally capable of the artful use of language. Given that no true record of the language of the ancient German proto-socialist societies existed, it is not surprising that the earlier time that he idealized was the Middle Ages, during which era, Morris believed, a standard of excellence for the artistic use of language in both spoken and written forms was established that modern usages are unable to approach. His views on the value of medieval oral tradition are hinted at in the lecture "Feudal England," in which he mentions the "ballad poetry of the people" which existed alongside that of Chaucer but was "wholly untouched by courtly elegance and classical pedantry; rude in art but never coarse, true to the backbone"; his final summation of this ballad poetry is that

> . . . [h]alf a dozen stanzas of it are worth a cartload of the whining introspective lyrics of today; and he who, when he has mastered the slight differences of language from our own daily speech, is not moved by it, does not understand what true poetry means nor what its aim is. (Gallasch 38)

Assuming that "courtly elegance and classical pedantry" are the effects of literary influences, we can assume that this ballad poetry more closely reflects the influence of oral traditions. Observations made in a preface to *Medieval Lore* by Robert Steele, a medieval work reprinted by the Kelmscott Press in 1893, more specifically identify stylistic elements desirable in written language: "the language is as simple as if the author were speaking by word of mouth, and at the same time is pleasant, and not lacking a certain quaint floweriness, which makes it all the easier to retain the subject-matter of the book" (M. Morris *Artist* 1: 288).

Morris's interests in the language of the Middle Ages and high barbaric culture were not confined to English, however; he was also intensely interested in the language of the Icelandic sagas, the literary records of a strong oral tradition which appealed primarily to his Teutonic side. Morris saw in the sagas a model for English literature as it might have been, had it not been exposed to the corrupting influences of Latin and French: regarding the epic tale of *Sigurd the Volsung*, which Morris produced in his own long verse version in 1876, he said: "This is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks. . ." (Mackail 1: 330). Naturally, the powerful influence of the North would drastically affect Morris's perceptions of beautiful language as well as his own style.

The attempt to recapture the essence of medieval language naturally required the adoption of a literary form associated with that time, and this made the romance, which originated in the Middle Ages and allowed for the integration of stylistic elements from the sagas, a logical choice. The romance not only offered the opportunity for beautiful expression, but also, by virtue of its apparent obsolescence, paradoxically offered the opportunity for a different and perhaps greater kind of experimentation with language than would have been possible in a modern novel. Essentially, it offered Morris the opportunity to create his own language . . . or at least, his own version of the English language. And because it allowed for the incorporation of both poetic and prose elements, the form also offered Morris the challenge of exploring and demonstrating the different purposes that prose and verse might serve in an ideal socialist culture, in which

both forms would be equally important in everyday communication, and would be used in fairly well-defined situations to fulfil different purposes. This was, as I have already indicated, a subject of particular interest to Morris, and in the following chapter I will examine how he rose to the challenge. For the moment, however, I will focus on Morris's new language.

The challenge offered by the prose-poetic romance form to create a new kind of language was a formidable one; Morris's response to it was the creation of a unique form of literary English that was somewhat archaic yet modern in its simplicity, a form that attempted to replace the despised Romance elements with Teutonic elements culled from both Middle English and Old Norse, as well as with new words (primarily compounds) created according to Old Norse principles of construction (Gallasch 143). Morris's approach to creating this language reflected his ideas concerning the "true conception of history": rather than attempting to ape authentic Middle English (as so many fantasy writers unfortunately find it "meet" to do), he imaginatively reconstructed the language according to his own needs and the needs of his stream of song, creating a "Teutonic English that might have been," had there been no profound influence by Latinate/Romance forms. This is perhaps the most novel and original characteristic of Morris's unique style, and the quality that most differentiates him from contemporary romancers and his predecessors. As Gallasch notes, his efforts were remarkably systematic, his diction being "the product of a philosophical concept which reaches far beyond the bounds of his literary works alone" (17). Most of his contemporary critics were not inclined to see it this way, however, and denounced this new language as "Wardour-Street English" (Wardour Street being famous for producing "sham antique furniture") after the phrase coined by R. Y. Tyrell in the July 1889 edition of the *Quarterly Review* (Faulkner 129).

It is particularly interesting to note that, generally speaking, critics who dislike Morris's style overstress the predominance of the archaisms, and find them much too distracting: Paul Thompson complains that the later romances combine "a relatively simple syntax with a strange archaic vocabulary, which only Morris could easily

understand" (158)—implying, apparently, that the relatively simple syntax itself contributes nothing to the readability of these works. As Peter Faulkner comments, "It is unfair to Morris's achievement in the romances to note the elements of archaism in the diction as if these superseded other elements of style"; he goes on to suggest that criticism that overstresses these elements "ignores an equally significant element in the prose style, the predominance of monosyllables" as well as "the straightforward syntax" which "helps to create a sense of direct movement, in which the narrator is felt to be firmly in command of his material" (166).

On the other hand, admirers of Morris often seem to be oblivious to the fact that many of Morris's constructions are not and never have been common English usage; Henry Hewlett, for example, the only contemporary reviewer with a positive view of the romances, called Morris's prose "a pure draught from the 'well of English undefiled,' for its prevailing archaism stops far short of pedantry" (*The Nineteenth Century*, 26 [August, 1889] 341; qtd. in Gallasch 47), while Faulkner himself claims that "the diction is remarkable for the purity of its Old English emphasis" and rarely uses words that are obscure or difficult for the modern reader (166). Morris's use of archaisms, it would seem, tends to encourage critics to view it in absolute terms; however, "[t]he truth concerning Morris' archaic diction," as Gallasch notes following her "qualitative study of the archaic and obsolete words," "is to be found somewhere between Morris' own theory and the most extreme opinions of the critics" (157). Gallasch's study finds, among other things, that Morris could not rid his diction of Romance forms entirely, and that most of his archaic forms can also be found in Chaucer, Malory and Lord Berners's Froissart, "three of the works which Morris himself said had particularly influenced his writing" (157).

That Morris's desire to create a language capable of beautiful expression involved a certain conscious archaism makes his development of the prose-poetic romance especially appropriate, since such archaism would often seem to be characteristic of romance forms, provided a necessary "distancing from the ordinary" (Le Guin 79) by

"casting an unfamiliar, special aura about the whole narrative" (Mathews 22: speaking here specifically about *Wolfings*). One of Morris's models, Malory himself, seems also to have been distinguished by his tendency to incorporate older grammatical forms (Cottle 26), and, like Morris, possessed the ability to make something completely new of existing forms. George Saintsbury notes that Malory "supplied a mortar of style and a design of word-architecture for his brute material of borrowed brick or stone, which is not only miraculous, but, in the nature even of miraculous things, uncompilable from any predecessor" (82). But Malory, unlike Morris, was working with "borrowed material" that was largely contemporary—the English verse-romance of his own time, which Saintsbury describes as "a great body . . . with a half-conventional phraseology, which was not yet in any sense insincere or artificial" (91) so his own archaisms were likely not so conscious as Morris's. (I will digress to note that Saintsbury's own aesthetic principles, based on modern "theories of individual creativity, of innovative genius" [Williams 181] that Morris disowned, seem to prevent him from accepting the possibility that such oral-influenced verse-romance might have been "conventional" and "artificial" without necessarily being "insincere.")

Malory's romances, though revolutionary in style, very much represent a progression of the literature of his time. Morris, in contrast, was borrowing his forms not from his own time, which no longer had a comparable healthy verse-romance tradition, but from Malory's; the product was a unique and more obvious sort of archaism, an even greater "distancing from the ordinary" than is the case in Malory, and a greater disparity between the language of Morris's romances and the everyday usage of his own time. Morris's particular archaic style is what Saintsbury refers to when he notes that Morris used "a sort of white magic" to become Malory's literary heir (115).

The archaism of the language in Morris's prose-poetic romances serves multiple purposes: it not only allows the author to express himself beautifully (and thereby allows the characters within the work to express themselves beautifully as well, as I will show in the following chapter), it is also particularly appropriate to the subject matter of the romances. Saintsbury observes this when he remarks that Morris's following of "Malory

and some saga-men . . . very nearly always" seems to be "your only style for the matter" (435); the "matter" to which he refers is the history of the high barbaric and pre-medieval societies depicted in *Wolfings* and *Roots*. Syntax as well is suitable to the material: Faulkner notes with regard to *Wolfings* that "[l]anguage is being used in a way felt appropriate to the primitive Gothic peoples with whom the story deals; Morris avoids words of Latin origin, and uses a simple syntax, with semi-colons rather than subordinate clauses. The effect is of a primitive simplicity" (130). The archaic language is particularly effective in representing the oral tradition that holds sway in *Wolfings* and the early stages of literacy in *Roots*, if for no other reason than that it resembles closely enough our imaginative picture of what language must have been like in these epochs. Oberg comments:

> . . . the distinctive style Morris developed for his romances is not peculiar or eccentric but a sensible and original response to a literary problem. He was faced with the same difficulty all translators and writers of historical fiction must face: how to convey the essence of a civilization different from one's own in language intelligible to contemporary readers. . . . he is obviously trying to suggest his conception of the style of Gothic language spoken by the Wolfings in an age when writing was almost unknown among them and, in consequence, no record could be kept of their language. (105)

In accepting the romances as the "histories" or literary "record" of the imagined high barbaric cultures that are to provide some of the inspiration for the socialist future, the reader is also asked to accept the convention that they have "come down to us" ("subtly," Kirchhoff notes, "we ought to get the feeling that this story is not written for us" ["Anti-Books" 98]); this being the case, the romances should perhaps ideally have been written in the original non-existent language of those cultures, as the literary records of Roman and Greek civilizations that have come down to us are written in Latin and Greek. Unlike a James Macpherson or Thomas Chatterton, however, Morris was only willing to take this convention so far; at no point did he display any intention of deceiving his reader as to the authorship of his own tales. Still, like Macpherson's Ossianic works, Morris's romances are imaginary "translations" after a fashion, and according to his own views regarding what a translation should be (which clashed with

current and even contemporary theories—his *Beowulf*, for example, was generally regarded as a failure and often criticized for being as hard to read as the original [Mackail 2: 284; Faulkner 164]), the archaism and Teutonic style (reminiscent of the Teutonic nature of these cultures) were therefore prerequisites. Naturally, it would have been inappropriate for such a style to be merely an imitation of previously existing forms; it would also have been poor art, and even the social agenda of the new literary tradition was not a valid excuse for second-rate artistic expression.

Morris's desire to appeal to a modern audience brings up the problem of the relationship between his intentions and actual practice. His ideology dictated the creation of a literature that would be accessible to all—"[i]f I can't be the Laureate of reading men," he once remarked, 'I'll be the Laureate of sweating men" (E. P. Thompson 673)—but his success is questionable. As Gallasch notes, "Morris himself considered his diction to be simple and straightforward—he wished those not possessing a broad education to be able to enjoy his works. This was in reality not the case, however" (158). Gallasch follows this observation with a question, but one that must be left to each reader of the romances to answer: "Is the relationship, then, between his tale and the language he uses to express himself so out of harmony that the diction hinders the enjoyment of the story?" (158). We might as well ask, "Is his language of beautiful expression so artificial and remote that it is ineffective?" Some readers will answer "yes"; others, favouring the "simplicity" of newspaper English, might be expected to answer "no." Morris himself might not have understood the need to ask this question: to him his style was "natural . . . in a much deeper way than modern newspaper English is natural to the ordinary educated writer" (Mackail 2: 340), and he had an unrealistic tendency to believe, as his earlier quoted comment regarding the simplicity of mastering the "slight differences of language from our own daily speech" in medieval poetry suggests, that picking up a new language was as easy a task for everyone else as it was for him.

It would be tempting to conclude, based on something as unreasonable as popular opinion, that Morris's attempt to create a new kind of English was a failure simply

because it was challenging to the average reader, were it not that the grapholect he created is essentially sound. There is nothing inherently difficult about it, just as there is nothing inherently difficult about, say, the slang that grade schoolers learn from Ninja Turtle cartoons (though it may seem incomprehensible to an adult): it is simply a different idiom, and like all idioms, including the ones in which we normally choose to write, the one in which I type these words, for example—it can be learned. C. S. Lewis noted, with regard to Morris's language that:

> . . . most instructed people are now aware (as Wordsworth was not aware) that what we call "ordinary" or "straightforward" English prose, as we have all tried to write it since Dryden's time, is almost equally an artificial speech—a literary or "hypothetical" language based on a French conception of elegance and a highly unphilological ideal of "correctness." When we begin to teach boys "essay-writing" at school we are teaching them to translate into this language, and if they continue to write as they talk we plough them in School Certificate. The question about Morris's style is not whether it is an artificial language—all endurable language in longer works must be that—but whether it is a good one. (38)

Judging by the romances that were composed in Morris's language, it most certainly is a "good one," one that offers at least as much potential for beautiful expression as our own "hypothetical" versions of English. The challenge it presents to the average reader in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in sum, is no reason why it cannot be used effectively by the characters in the prose-poetic romances . . . no reason, for that matter, why it could not eventually become the grapholect of the future, the basis for the common tongue of Nowhere.

While the unique artistic challenges inherent in the romance form—the opportunity to create his own language, the opportunity to intermingle poetic and prose forms—might have appealed to Morris as a poet regardless of his socialist ideals and opinion of the state of modern language, the prose-poetic romance was particularly well-suited to his concern with the way in which language as an art is inextricably interwoven with human behaviours, simply because its beautiful expression and archaism amount to a "self-conscious" "high" style that allowed him to bring the language to the forefront. By doing this, the romance form offered Morris an excellent opportunity to express his

own opinion of both "English newspaper language" and what might be called "English newspaper society"—the class society that fostered the language. The prose-poetic romances represent a rejection of both. The inability of the "in-dusky-ral" men and the Romans, the progenitors of the modern style that Morris so despised, to use language as effectively as the Wolfings and Dalesmen is a critical commentary on the use of language in Morris's own industrialized age . . . and, by association, our own, because as much as we may root for the Wolfings and the Burgdalers, we are really the Romans and the Dusky Men, and this story is not, as Kirchhoff observed, "written for us."

Chapter 4: The Voice of the Wolfings and the Speech of the Mountains

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I have proposed that Morris's prose-poetic romances ought to be seen as an attempt to establish a new literary tradition that could serve the social and aesthetic needs of the socialist future, a "stream of song" that was the product of both his socialist background and his concern with the artistic use of language. This stream of song can be seen as providing models for both "beautiful expression" and acceptable individual behaviour within the context of the socialist community; it derives these models, in turn, from sources in ancient society, the proto-socialist (in Morris's view) Germanic tribes in the midst of primary orality and the early stages of literacy, and the romances of medieval Europe. In the stream of song, the former becomes the subject of the latter, for the stream is founded on the medieval genre of romance, and takes as its subject the German oral and early literate cultures.

The language of the prose-poetic romances, as I noted in chapter 3, represents an attempt to provide a means of expression that will not only meet Morris's criteria for beautiful expression, and thereby inspire the future readers of these works to raise their own standards regarding the use of language, but also reflect the language of the "folk" who are the subjects of the prose-poetic romances, societies that possess the long-lost capacity to speak "in speech both loose and knitted up"—that is, in both prose and verse forms. In *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, as I will attempt to show, a fundamental link is established between one's ability to function as an individual within the freedom of the communal society and one's ability to express oneself artfully.

In his own life Morris himself might have been seen as a living metaphor for this fundamental link, being both a conscientious socialist and an effective user of both prose and verse forms, "a real *trouvère* of the first class," as George Saintsbury notes, "a person of inexhaustible fertility and power in weaving the verse and the prose of romance" (M. Morris *Artist* 1: 392). But while Morris's combination of both prose and poetic forms in his romances is perhaps the hallmark of his later style, many critics seem to misunderstand his use of the forms and fail to realize that it was not simply an

affectation, but rather an expression of an apparent belief that people *actually could*, under proper social conditions, speak this way. Lord Raglan's views on this general subject have already been noted (though he was referring to Morris's source rather than to Morris in particular); E. P. Thompson dismisses Morris's efforts to combine prose and verse in *Wolfings* as unsuccessful and states his belief that Morris "knew well that his 'Folk of the Kindreds' and 'woodland carles' would not really have conversed, made love and quarrelled with the melodious courtesy which he gave to them" (676), while Paul Thompson is typically more hostile in noting that "*The House of the Wolfings*, in which the vacuous narrative and silly rambling speeches are alternated with unsettling sections in verse, is the worst of all [of Morris's later romances]" (158).

Even admirers of Morris seem to miss the point and assume that the combination of prose and poetry was simply a device to set the tone or make the prose-poetic romances more "readable." Mackail notes with regard to *Wolfings*:

> By the use of prose for the main narrative, he [Morris] avoided the languor which is almost inseparable from verse as a medium of continuous narration; and in speeches and ornate passages, where prose in its turn would flag, the rolling verse . . . seems the natural medium of the heightened emotions. (2: 213)

Mathews similarly comments on the "systematic" framework of the romances, noting that the "[p]oetic style was appropriate to *Wolfings* because its regular cadences and vigourous rhythms suited the inevitable march of events which it depicted"; in *Roots*, on the other hand, the "tighter discipline and structure" of "[s]ustained passages of poetry . . . would not properly represent a sense of possibility Morris hopes to convey" (27). While there is perhaps nothing wrong with Mackail's and Mathews's observations, it is significant that their stress is on what *Morris* is doing with the prose and verse, rather than what his *characters* are. Mackail seems to see Morris as following a convention akin to something that might be found in one of Shakespeare's plays, wherein a base character might speak in prose and a noble character in iambic pentameter, with both characters being, according to convention, *completely unaware* of the mode in which they speak. This is not the case in the prose-poetic romances, however; the very first time a

character speaks in the *Wolfings*, the context quite clearly indicates that he is *conscious* that he is speaking in verse and not in prose: "As he [the messenger] stood there gathering his breath for speech, Thiodolf stood up, and poured mead into a drinking horn and held it out toward the new-comer, and spake, but in rhyme and measure" (9). Mathews, to be fair, does notice that "[t]he alteration of prose and poetry emphasized the special artistic and elevated quality of the language itself" (27), but he seems to be talking about Morris's language rather than the characters'.

The most important thing to realize about the prose-poetic romances is that they are not "about" the *author's* use of language so much as they are "about" the *characters'* use of language and how this both reflects and determines their ability to function as individuals within the communal society. Oberg seems to almost realize this when she notes regarding *Wolfings* that:

> . . . all characters in the tale seem to be capable of framing their thoughts in verse at appropriate moments. Morris may have been trying to suggest that the democratic dignity of Germanic tribal life actually caused each individual to develop into a poet. . . . The ability to burst into song is a symbolic by-product of the primeval freedom of tribal life. (103-4)

Oberg is dead on in recognizing the relationship between the democracy of tribal life and the creative power of the tribal member; unfortunately, she seems to write off this creative power as being inconsequential—trivializing it by calling it a "by-product" and the "ability to burst into song," an ability which, for the reader, is likely to be connotative of little more than the surreality of Broadway musicals. In doing so, she fails to recognize the importance that being able to frame one's thoughts in verse—an act that requires a radically different way of thinking from that of a modern literate person—might actually have in maintaining the integrity and "primitive freedom" of the proto-socialist tribal life.

In one of the few key statements on his works that we actually do have from Morris, a letter to his daughter Jenny on the 29th of January, 1889, the author clearly indicates that a connection exists between his character's level of cultural and linguistic development and their ability to exploit the potential of prose and verse. Commenting

on the writing of his new book, *The Roots of the Mountains*, Morris notes: "This time I don't think that I shall 'drop into poetry,' at least not systematically. For one thing the condition of the people I am telling of is later (whatever their date may be) than that of the Wolfings" (Mackail 2: 218). The fully realized ability of the Wolfings to "drop into poetry" is only suitable for an earlier "condition" of society, which is to say, a condition of both primary orality and proto-socialism. In such a condition, individual "personality structures," as Ong calls them, are different from our own—different enough to make every individual member of the Wolfings and their sibling "houses" (the Elkings, the Beamings, and so on) capable of expressing him or herself in both poetry and prose, and different enough to allow each individual to accept without question his or her equal status within the group.

As I noted in the first chapter, the individual living in a state of primary orality is forced into interaction with the social group partially because sustained thought in an oral society requires speech in lieu of alternatives like reading or writing. This in turn leads to a greater respect or "enthusiastic appreciation" (as Morris put it) for the "magical potency" of language than is likely to be found in literate society. In the prose-poetic romances, and especially in *Wolfings*, this respect for language is apparent in the characters' beliefs regarding the power of words to alter or define reality (or at very least, perceptions of it), including the reality of one's identity as a member of a group, and in the way they use their language.

Characters in the prose-poetic romances are notably leery of ill words spoken in jest or anger, as if afraid that to speak a thing were to make it true. After a Beaming warrior on the way to the Folk-thing has the bad taste to make a joke about the possibility of the kindreds' defeat at the hands of the invading Romans, one of the Wolfings, Wolfkettle, chides him for his "evil words" (*Wolfings* 43). Ideas can only be developed in the oral society through speech, but there is a catch; the verbalization of any idea is the first step towards the actualization of the idea, and what is said cannot be unsaid. Because this is true for any speech, whether prophetic or not, good or evil, evil thoughts are better left unspoken. Once said, however, they must be listened to, as

the Beaming notes in a later response to Wolfkettle: "from time to time is a word said in our Folk-hall for good or for evil; and who can choose but to hearken thereto?" (44). In *Roots*, there is an incident in which Iron-face, Face-of-god's father, warns his son not to call the Bride, his betrothed, "kinswoman" because it is a bad omen: "lest it seem that thou art to wed one too nigh thine own blood" (70). In this case, the implication is that reality can be changed by mass consent (a similar incident later in the romance has Hall-ward making the Sun-beam a member of the house of the Steer through a verbal announcement that forbids anyone to *say* that she is not of the blood of the Steer [390]); this is exactly what Face-of-god is counting on in this instance, in that he no longer wishes to marry the Bride by this point, and must count on an altered reality (one which does not include their future marriage) to provide him with an "out" from a no longer pleasant situation. Most of the "omens" encountered in the prose-poetic romances, significantly, are verbal rather than visual; it is "words of evil omen," for example, that are the deciding factor in Thiodolf's final refusal to wear the hauberk (*Wolfings* 105).

Vestiges of beliefs in the reality-altering power of language are of course not uncommon in our own time, which suggests perhaps that if the modern individual does not have Morris's enthusiastic appreciation for the language, his or her willingness to give somewhat more than lip service to its power might make it possible to cultivate an appropriate level of appreciation. The strength of Morris's characters' own belief in the power of even rashly spoken words to alter reality accounts for their particular faith in words that are spoken with the *intention* of transforming reality, such as visionary or prophetic speech and oaths. Both prophecy and oaths might be seen as self-fulfilling, in that the articulation of a possible future sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in that future. The Hall-Sun, the oracle of the Wolfings, in foretelling the burning of the House of the Wolfings to the Wood-Sun (36-7), affirms the Wood-Sun in her decision to give Thiodolf the hauberk that will save his life at the expense of his ability to providing adequate leadership for his men, and it is Thiodolf's subsequent lapses in his role as general that indirectly puts the homeland of the Mark itself in jeopardy.

Oaths are like prophecy inasmuch as they are also ostensibly self-fulfilling, statements of future intention that bind the individual to a specified course of action that will alter reality, but they differ in that they are only seen as binding if they are in the best interests of the social group. This makes them particularly valuable as tools to be used for the good of the folk. Iron-face's Arthuresque oath "to gainsay no man's asking if I may perform it" (*Roots* 73) would seem, in the convention of the romance, to be courting disaster, to summon it into one's own home, as it were, as in the initial events of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the qualifying "if I may perform it" precludes him from doing anything without first taking into consideration its effects upon the folk. Rather than inviting disaster, Iron-face's oath eventually makes it possible for the Burgdalers to unite with the Children of the Wolf. The second part of his oath, "to set right above law and to set mercy above custom," commits him to a sort of social ethic essential to the proto-socialist society of Burgdale, which would presumably "devolve," if too much stress were laid on law and custom, into a bureaucratic state much like our own.

The social qualifications of Iron-face's oath are in marked contrast to the superficially similar oaths of other romance figures like King Arthur, which usually result in the oath-swearer's regretting the commitment made in the oath. The complications that traditionally arise as the result of such oaths are usually linked to a sort of hubris on the part of the oath-swearer, a too-great reliance upon individual power which makes it difficult for him to act in a manner that Morris would consider to be more socially responsible. The problem arises, essentially, out of the social structures which allow individuals to be elevated to such positions of power in the first place. In Morris, social concerns must be put before individual desire; vainglorious oaths that are motivated more by the latter than the former are considered to be neither serious nor binding, and are easily put aside. For this reason, the oath of the "braggart" to be "a captain over the men of the Plain" before the end of the year, sworn before Iron-face's own oath, is "deemed foolishly sworn," and the man is jeered and shamed (73). More importantly, Thiodolf's oath to fight unhelmed is ignored once he has realized that it is not in the best interests

of the folk in their most desperate hour for their most valued commander to risk unnecessary injury (*Wolfings* 167). His final acceptance of the priority of his social responsibilities over his individual interests leads Thiodolf to a proper understanding of which commitments he must live up to and which he can discard.

Morris's characters' perceptions of the power of words lead them to invest the name itself with a great deal of magical potency, which explains the symbolic names of characters in the romances (for example, Iron-face, the Hall-Sun, Folk-might, the Bride, and so on). As noted in chapter 1, this is typical of an oral culture like that of *Wolfings*, and likely to be typical of a culture still heavily influenced by orality like that of *Roots* as well. But the name of an object or individual does not simply endow that individual with the qualities of the name, or suggest that the individual is the embodiment of the name; knowledge of the name of an object or individual also conveys power over the named thing, a basic principle of magic (Rumpelstiltskin is only the most obvious example) and an ancient idea which the romances themselves provide numerous examples of. Face-of-god gains mastery over Sure-foot, the ferocious hound that is to be his guide to the Shadowy Vale, simply by calling him by name (100), and Folk-might's belief that knowledge of his name will give the Burgdaler a similar power over himself is clearly implied in his comment, upon Face-of-god's request for his name ("for how can we talk together else?"), that "[t]he young chieftain thinks that this house also shall be his!"—as if the "young chieftain's" knowledge of his name will give him the power to rule him (*Roots* 39). That Folk-might and the Sun-beam do not go by their true names until their return to Silverdale is assured suggests that they do not wish to give their actual enemies, the Dusky Men, any similar power over them; their anonymity prevents the Dusky Men from drawing a connection between a mysterious band of raiders, who conceivably pose no threat to them, and the remnant of their defeated enemies, who naturally do.

The power inherent in the name itself is a source of magical potency that can be invoked in the swearing of oaths, in battle cries and so forth. The totemistic names of the kindreds of *Wolfings* allow the members to draw on the individual strengths of their

"patrons": the Wolfings draw on the strength and intelligence of the wolf (an important symbol for "Teutonizers" of all political viewpoints [Oberg 109; Brantlinger 149; etc.]), the Elkings on the swiftness of the elk, and so on. The name of the group also becomes identified with the group itself, and the group member is therefore also capable of drawing on the power of his or her whole society by drawing on the power of its name. Thus Face-of-god, alone in the woods and suddenly overcome by a sense of entrapment, shrugs it off by drawing strength from the fact that he is a "man of the Face" and therefore not truly alone in this situation, nor in any situation, for that matter (*Roots* 35). Similarly, calling aloud on the social group in the heat of battle—e.g., "The Burg and the Steer! The Dale and the Bridge! The Dale and the Bull!" "The Greenwood and the Wolf!" (*Roots* 347, 349)—allows the warrior to draw on the group's strength while simultaneously being a public admission of membership that can remind his comrades of their membership in the same group, strengthening them in turn while reminding the enemy of their exclusion from a comparable whole.

A slight shift between *Wolfings* and *Roots* in the way Morris names individual characters suggests that he wished to call attention to the magical potency of the name, which he may have felt was obscured in *Wolfings* by his decision to call his main character Thiodolf rather than Folk-wolf, its easily forgotten literal translation (*Wolfings* 8). As a name, Thiodolf is perhaps more "authentic," but it is like many modern names inasmuch as it has no obvious "meaning." Its translation, on the other hand, continually calls attention to the hero's relationship with his society, in that it identifies him as the embodiment of the "Wolf-folk"; to truly emphasize the great distance between such a convention of naming and contemporary conventions, it is necessary only to point out that a modern equivalent would be a man with the (by modern standards) ludicrous name of "People-Alberta." It is easy to forget the significance of "Thiodolf" however, and to simply treat it as "just another name." Morris may have recognized this and come to the conclusion that more symbolic and meaningful names were more effective for his purposes, and more effective as reminders that a radically different culture is being depicted here. It is as difficult to forget, no matter how many times we read it, that

"Folk-might" is the strong arm of the exiles from Silverdale, as it is to forget that "Spider-man" can stick to walls and "spin a web, any size."

Morris's characters' enthusiastic appreciation for language, born of their respect for its reality-altering potential and their oral-culture influenced way of thinking, is nowhere more apparent than in their ability to use both prose and verse in their everyday speech. As I noted earlier, Morris seems to have taken as a given that the capability to speak in verse forms could, under favourable conditions such as those represented by ancient Germanic proto-socialism, be learned by almost anyone. Levin notes in his Preface to Lord's *The Singer of Tales* that the oral performer's "art of improvisation is firmly grounded upon his control of traditional components" (xi), and it is not presumptuous to assume that the Wolfings and their fellow kindreds, within the extremely encouraging environment of their idyllic proto-socialism, have developed their control over similar components in their own language (which is, after all, their most important art form) to a superlative degree. This would not necessarily result in a society in which all men and women are poets, as we might be inclined to think at first—there are still people such as Geirmund, "a minstrel of renown" (his name literally translates as "Mouth of the Geirings") who is distinguished by an extremely well developed facility for verse: "he spake in rhyme from beginning to end" (*Wolfings* 57)—but at the very least it would be a society in which even the most common of individuals, simply because the common speaking idiom is intrinsically beautiful in itself, would be capable of relatively "beautiful expression."

The use of verse speech forms in Wolfing society is actually quite systematic, representing an "elevated form of communication" (Oberg 104) which is the preferred mode of expression for a number of fairly well-defined, important occasions. Verse is commonly used in formal situations, which explains why Thiodolf's greeting to the messenger and the messenger's response in the first conversation of the romance are both in "rhyme and measure":

> [Thiodolf:] Welcome, thou evening-farer, and holy be thine head,
> Since thou hast sought unto us in the heart of the Wolfing's stead;

. . . .

> [Messenger:] All hail ye Wood-Wolfs' [sic] children! nought may I drink
> the wine,
> For the mouth and the maw that I carry this eve are nought of mine;   (9)

Following the message of war and Thiodolf's response (also in verse), Thiodolf announces the coming Thingstead in a formal speech; the gravity of this occasion also dictates the use of verse, which is, in most cases, the most appropriate idiom for addressing a large party (11).

That all of the speech in the second chapter, the first to actually contain any speech at all, is in verse might suggest to the unwary reader that the entire romance is going to follow this pattern; however, in the first conversation of the following chapter Thiodolf and the Wood-Sun revert to what the reader might think of as a more natural form of expression, prose, and this is the reader's first clue that there is a method in Morris's versification, inasmuch as it is not considered appropriate for all occasions.

As the more formal of the two modes of expression, verse is considered a more acceptable idiom for important communications between leaders or different houses. The preceding example of the messenger arriving with word for the Wolfings is one example of this, as are the various incidents where runners communicate their messages between the forces of Thiodolf and Otter. Its mnemonic functions make verse especially important in military communiques: since success in military operations can often depend upon the accuracy of intelligence information, verse is used because a message containing vital information formulated in verse is less likely to be forgotten or misremembered by the courier.

It is noteworthy that the identities of the runners are, in such incidents, subsumed by the messages they carry, the words in effect having a power or life of their own; the runner quoted above remarked that his "mouth and maw" were not his own on this occasion, and another runner, Geirbald, similarly refers to the summons for help that he carries as "the word that Otter yestre'en hath set in my mouth" (118). Here again, Morris demonstrates the strong belief in the magical potency of the spoken word held by his oral influenced characters. Words are viewed as instruments of power; an

identification of Otter with an enchanter is tempting, and his messages might be viewed as magical "spells" (which are, traditionally, also couched in rhyme), a sort of geas that must be carried out by the messenger and which is in fact powerful enough to even displace the messenger, as in Geirbald's statement: "[Otter's] word fled from him and on my horse it rode" (118). Yet the power of the word, ultimately, does not seem to reside within the individual, but rather elsewhere—apparently, in a source available to the collective society as a whole. And while men like Otter may tap this source through their own words, the source often finds its own outlet, as in the spontaneous group and individual outbursts of song that are common to both romances.

Given his characters' belief in the magical potency of the word, and the common ethnographic view that "verse was originally ritual in character" (Raglan 241), it is therefore not surprising that verse in Morris's romances is also particularly associated with various types of ritual occasions. Verse is the most favoured mode of expression at folk-motes, for example, though prose is acceptable as well for those who are less proficient in the former and depending on the nature of the information the speaker wishes to impart. After a Dayling warrior opens the folk-mote with a ritual-like verse, Bork, the Geiring who was one of the first to discover that the Romans are abroad and on the move, tells his lengthy story in prose, the more appropriate form for specific and rather trivial detail, but concludes with the more dramatic form of verse to emphasize the seriousness of the threat posed by the Roman invaders (55-7). He is followed by the minstrel Geirmund, who, as already noted, has a greater talent for the verse form and can keep it up much longer. After various other speakers are heard, some in prose and some in verse, the mote eventually ends as it started, in verse (66-7).

The preference for verse at the folk-mote is quite natural, considering that the folk-mote is intended to be a forum, a meeting of minds as it were. Since sustained thought in a primary oral culture essentially requires dialogue, verse, which requires a greater intellectual discipline—a greater organization of thought—would naturally seem the most appropriate mode for intellectual discussion in such a culture. Chapter 3, in

which Thiodolf and the Hall-Sun debate the case of the magic hauberk in rhyme, seems to support this view.

As might be expected, verse is also associated with the rituals of prophecy and oath swearing. The Hall-Sun, the oracle of the Wolfings, speaks primarily in verse throughout the story, both in visions of the future and in clairvoyant experiences of the distant Wolfing battlefield; similarly, the seer Asmund the Old's cryptic and foreboding remarks regarding Thiodolf (68-9) and later the Wood-Sun (99) are also in verse. Thiodolf, when he swears his two-fold oath to the Wood-Sun, finds it necessary to use the more formal mode of expression:

> Two things by these blue edges in the face of the dawning I swear;
> And first this warrior's ransom in the coming fight to bear,
> And evermore to love thee who hast given me second birth. (107)

Outside of its public uses, verse is also used in private speech in *Wolfings*, and quite often in the intimate scenes between Thiodolf and the Wood-Sun, who alternate between prose and verse depending on the seriousness of their conversation. As I have already noted, Thiodolf and the Wood-Sun debate the important topic of the hauberk in verse, and in chapter 17, Thiodolf initially addresses the Wood-Sun informally in prose, but switches to poetry himself upon realizing the serious nature of her errand (102-4).

Just as verse is associated in *Wolfings* with important formal occasions and purposes, prose is associated with less important occasions. Bork and Fox the Red at the folk-mote use prose for the fine details of their individual encounters with the Romans and their victims because these details would take longer to tell in verse form than their importance justifies. For a similar reason, simple accounts of the day's fighting brought by various runners are told in prose because these accounts are less significant and not vital to the safety of the Mark, unlike, say, Otter's aforementioned appeal to Thiodolf for help, which is of immense strategic importance and thus merits verse. In short, prose is seen as a more effective medium for relating relatively trivial details (what a modern audience might call "news"), but not for recording history, which is the province of verse in an oral culture. Morris's conception of history, it must be remembered, celebrates the

whole, not the individual, and stresses the *essence* of the events rather than the hard facts. (Indeed, as Raglan suggests throughout *The Hero*, oral tradition is incapable of preserving such facts for any great length of time—the result of what Ong calls its homeostatic nature.) It is this essence that will eventually form the basis of songs celebrating the kindreds' victory over the Romans; the specific details are of lesser importance, and in the oral tradition (as Lord demonstrates throughout *The Singer of Tales*) they are eventually supplanted by the formulas that are the poet's greatest tool for composition and which the literate reader perceives as being relatively generic.

One specific chapter in which characters use prose exclusively in *Wolfings* is perhaps worth a closer look here. In chapter 25, all of the speaking is done in prose, even the inspirational speeches of the Hall-Sun and Arinbiorn that the reader would expect (based on the precedents set in the preceding text) to be in verse. The lack of verse at this point seems to reflect the fact that in this darkest hour of the Wolfings, when they are "heavy-hearted and redeless," none of the speakers are quite up to the demands of verse (149). Arinbiorn's prose speech in particular, which is necessitated by Thiodolf's inability at this point to play his role as the leader of the folk, stands in sharp contrast to Thiodolf's own eloquence, and emphasizes the grimness of their prospects at this most crucial point in the history of the Wolfings. The entire episode might therefore be seen as a particularly effective example of the way in which Morris makes a connection between the Wolfings' socialism and their power of expression, since it is as a direct result of their "unravelling" as a social community (inasmuch as they doubt, at this point, their future *as* a community), that they lose their ability to express themselves in a "knitted" fashion. However, they still maintain at least enough sense of community to express themselves in "loose" fashion; Thiodolf, in contrast, loses even this lesser power of expression as the result of his own more complete alienation from his people. This alienation, the product of the dark magic of the hauberk, results in a total inability to communicate, to "give that sign," as in the following example: "[t]here was Thiodolf leading his host, and all men looking for the token and sign to fall on; but even

as he lifted up Throng-plough to give that sign, a cloud came over his eyes . . . " and he falls into a swoon. (*Wolfings* 141).

Given that the first spoken words in the romance are, as I have already noted, in verse, it is notable that the last spoken words, the Hall-Sun's whispered goodbye to her dead father, are in prose (197-8). While the Hall-Sun uses verse forms more than most characters in the romance (owing to her responsibilities to the community as oracle/mystic), in this last private and emotional moment when she is speaking outside of her formal capacity and simply as a daughter, prose is naturally more appropriate. Morris uses this final opportunity to remind the reader that verse is, after all, essentially a public or social mode, and therefore not always the most powerful means of expression, not even in a culture as fluent in it as that depicted in *Wolfings*.

So far I have discussed at some length some of the various common uses for verse that are illustrated in the first of Morris's prose-poetic romances, but have only occasionally touched on the subject of how this use of verse seems to contribute to the stability of the proto-socialist culture itself. To truly understand this relationship, it is necessary to look at the songs of the Wolfings, since it is primarily through the use of verse in song that individuals within the society are made conscious of being part of something bigger than themselves.

Boos makes an interesting observation in noting that despite Morris's well-known interest in the arts and crafts, "[t]he only artistic creation described with some frequency in both romances is the composition of songs" (338). This is not surprising: Morris can transcribe the songs of the Wolfings and the Dalesmen, but he cannot transcribe the tapestries that they weave or the swords that they forge. The dominant role of verbal arts in the prose-poetic romances, moreover, underscores their importance in the societies that are the subjects of these romances, in which they are to be seen as the key factor in ensuring social cohesiveness. Inasmuch as they ensure the social stability that in turn allows for the flourishing of other art forms, it might even be said that all other arts depend, to one extent or another, upon the preexistence of verbal art.

The songs of the Wolfings ensure the continuance of the proto-socialist society by affirming, as Boos notes, "the universal quality of their experience" (337). By continually reminding both the singer and the singer's audience that they all belong to a single "tale"—a commonly used term in the romances for "history"—and share similar values, hopes and dreams; by placing the fame and accomplishments of the tribe before personal fame; by stressing the merits of self-sacrifice; and by promising a kind of immortality through the tribe's fame, the songs of the Wolfings and their kindreds, like the romances themselves, promote a sense of identification with the group—a "melting of the individual into the society of the tribes," as Morris himself put it in chapter 1— that is necessary in a communal state.

The strength of the link between the songs and the group identity is most dramatically demonstrated in the spontaneous "group songs" that occasionally seem to pour from a sort of collective consciousness in the heat of battle, such as "The Song of the Woodland Wolf," which springs from the Woodlanders after their overthrow of the Dusky Men (*Roots* 351-2), and the victory song of the kindreds in *Wolfings* (175-6). Morris's use of this device might perhaps be said to reflect a "nineteenth-century concept of composition by the 'folk' which has long since been proved invalid" (Lord 6), a conception that was also likely behind Morris's view that the "Bibles" mentioned in chapter 2 were the compositions of the people as a whole. Lord indicates that what proved the concept of group composition invalid was that "no one could show how the people as a whole could compose a poem" (6); Morris, however, seems to have been at least willing to try, and it must be admitted that if such a method of composition were indeed possible anywhere, it would only be in a society as focussed as those of the ancient Germanic tribes depicted in the prose-poetic romances.

It is not primarily through group songs, of course, that Morris demonstrates the link between song and society, but rather through the more common songs performed by individuals. The song of the old warrior in chapter 20 of *Wolfings*, for example, stresses group identity primarily through images of comradeship in battle. "Rideth lovely along / The strong by the strong"; "When all mingled together, the war-sea of

men" (122): the emphasis here, as in the song of victory on 175, is on the valiancy of the warriors as a group, "mingling" and melting into the "war-sea." There are no individual names given, no outstanding heroic figures who tower above and eclipse the achievements of their fellows. Rather, there are only the "strong by the strong," men of equal worth and distinction, fighting side by side for the great cause of preserving their homes—the "wall and fair hall, / Where oft the mead-sea we sipped in old days" (122) —and their egalitarian and agrarian way of life. This way of life is presented in such songs as being that which is truly important to the folk ("Welsh" cultures like the Romans, in contrast, value the glory of conquest itself), and this explains why metaphors of battle as harvest are common to songs in both romances. "And as oft o'er the sickle we sang in time past / . . . / So sing o'er the sword . . . " (122): such images are intended to remind the warriors that there is more rewarding work yet to be done, work that has been interrupted by the annoying business of war. Similarly, the Hall-Sun's song in chapter 29 also stresses the importance of returning to more essential tasks:

> And to-morrow and to-morrow shall we take the hand of life,
> And wend adown the meadows, and skirt the darkling wood,
> And reap the waving acres, and gather in the good. (178)

It is worth noting that the song that comes unbidden into Face-of-god's mouth is "a song of the meadows of the Dale" (*Roots* 348), and that even after their long exile from their homeland, the Children of the Wolf in the same romance attribute their desire to return not to dreams of vengeance, but to the ripe fields' call to be harvested, a task that has been neglected by the wasteful Dusky Men, naturally because they do not properly value the agrarian way of life that is essential to proto-socialism in these romances (369).

Songs such as Otter's in chapter 22 glorify the prospect of dying in the service of the people and for the advancement of the people; Otter's inspirational song, the fruit of his accurate premonition of his death, is especially interesting in that it implicitly compares his immature and socially irresponsible self-centredness as a youth ("all the world methought / For me and my heart's deliverance that hour was newly wrought") with his mature and socially responsible willingness to die on the "fathers' field" (a world

"wrought" for his whole tribe) in the service of the folk (138). Death is not to be feared because "each life," as Boos notes, "merges in some large cycle" (337). Death may end the individual's life, but not the more important social group; the larger cycle will continue, and the properly socialized group member recognizes and learns to draw strength from this truth. And while the individual's life may be over, he or she will continue as a part of the tale of the folk. Through this kind of existence in the stream of song, the individual achieves a sort of immortality, as the Hall-Sun's song in *Wolfings* notes: "And we that have lived in the story shall be born again and again / As men feast on the bread of our earning, and praise the grief-born grain" (178). The individual's actions will "live on because they condition the way of life of his descendants" (Hodgson 142-3).

In the ideal proto-socialist culture, the great tale of the folk is to be seen as the sum of its parts, the many little tales or lives that compose it. This is a truth that Stone-face explains to Face-of-god in *Roots*. Face-of-god is reluctant to tell his grandsire his untold tale, denying that it is interesting and suggesting that other tales will eventually make it seem "of little account" as "one nail driveth out the other." Stone-face responds, however, by observing that "one tale belike shall be knit up with the others, as it fareth with the figures that come one after another on the weaver's cloth; though one maketh not the other, yet one cometh of the other" (*Roots* 164). Face-of-god's conception of tale telling reflects his youthful and immature understanding of the role of the individual in the society; filled with dreams of personal achievement, Face-of-god wants to "drive out the nails" of other men's achievements. Stone-face, on the other hand, recognizes that the strength of the social fabric is dependent upon the contributions made by all within the society—the individual threads of the society, rather than the tacks that seem to hold the tapestry in place.

The success of the Wolfings' songs and their oral traditions in general in fulfilling their necessary social role is demonstrated by the fact that virtually every member of the society depicted in *Wolfings* is capable, to some extent, of using language beautifully and effectively. As I have already noted at several earlier points in this thesis, Morris uses

the individual's or society's capacity for beautiful expression as a gauge of the individual's or society's acceptance of socialist values, or social maturity. In *Wolfings*, those who are "socially immature" are the outsiders, the potential destroyers of the social group who are not capable of beautiful expression and who are significantly identified by their unintelligible tongue, "Welsh" (10). The outsiders in *Roots*, the Dusky Men, are a similar socially threatening culture with an even more incomprehensible language. But the Germanic tribal cultures that are the focus of the later romance also face an inside threat to their stability: they are moving away from a state of primary orality, and the acquisition of literacy has begun to erode the "personality structures" that are characteristic of orality and which (in Morris's view) allow members of oral cultures both to spontaneously express themselves in verse forms and to unhesitantly accept their role in the social group.

Literacy, as I have noted in previous chapters, can have various dramatic and irreversible effects on individual consciousness and the society as well. For the group member, it tends to lead to greater introspection, greater individualism and a greater sense of alienation. It allows thoughts to be kept to oneself, since ideas no longer need to be shared with other group members to be developed. On a cultural level, literacy leads to a general devaluation of the artistic use of language, and to a decline in the use of poetry in general, as the more efficient record keeping potential of writing eliminates the mnemonic functions of verse. This in turn leads, as I have noted in the previous chapter, to an overvaluation of individual artistic achievement, which again contributes to the development of class structures and the corresponding movement towards individualism. Literacy breeds suspicion within the group, especially among non-literates who do not understand and may therefore fear the "magic" power of writing.

The society of the Burgdalers represents what Ong calls a "manuscript culture" (30), a society that is still in a transitory state between orality and full literacy. In such a society, where books are relatively rare, one would not expect to find the more advanced social effects of literacy, because reading is still primarily a group activity, and not a solo one. But the fall has begun; while the Burgdalers are still capable of speaking

poetically, they lack the Wolfings' easy ability to do so in verse, an indicator of how literacy has altered their ways of thinking. Their songs, as Bow-may notes, are "soft," as if "made by lads and minstrels rather than by warriors," in comparison to those of her own people in the same romance (49). The stream of song that should be the greatest source of strength for the Burgdalers and which is supposed to be the sum of the tales of all the society's members has now become primarily the product of its idle elements, its "lads" and "minstrels."

The ability of the Burgdalers to use language, in short, is inferior to that of the Wolfings in the previous romance and even to that of the direct descendants of the Wolfings in *Roots*, the Folk of the Wolf. It is extremely important to recognize that when Folk-might is asked to tell something of his people, he does so by speaking *in verse* for the first time in the romance, just as his ancestors in *Wolfings* commonly did (*Roots* 296). By putting verse into the mouth of Folk-might, Morris makes a stylistic allusion to the previous romance and invests this point in the narrative with a great deal of power—especially apparent for the reader who is aware, as we are, of the way in which language is used in *Wolfings*. Folk-might's use of verse causes us to immediately identify him with his illustrious ancestors, and his ability to use language in this way establishes him as the social superior of his Burgdale contemporaries. But while Folk-might might be seen as a sort of throwback to the "Golden Age" of beautiful expression, the age of primary orality, his use of verse suggests that a "Silver Age," an age of literacy, might be possible. Folk-might, like Thiodolf, his cultural ancestor, knows and understands his role in the group, a fact which is symbolized by his ability to speak in verse despite his own literacy. He provides a model for what Face-of-god and the other Burgdalers can hope to be, and for what they seem to become in the end.

Morris uses Face-of-god in *Roots* to examine the problem of individuation that is inherent in literacy, and to demonstrate how the literate individual can be melted into the proto-socialist tribe. Morris had a longstanding interest in this subject: before Face-of-god there was Sigurd the Volsung (whom Morris dealt with on two occasions, both in his prose translation of *The Volsung Saga* with Magnússon and in his own

epic-length poem based on the tale), another character who develops "a consciousness which grows beyond accommodation in a static society" (Goode 241) as the result of his education and learning of "runes"—that is, writing—from Regin. Face-of-god also develops a consciousness that seems to grow beyond the ability of Burgdale society to accommodate, but Face-of-god, unlike the mythic figure of Sigurd, is not doomed, and Morris is therefore free to show how his consciousness can eventually be satisfactorily merged with that of the group after all.

As he is presented to the reader at the very beginning of the romance, Face-of-god is a sort of finished product of literacy, an individuated, somewhat self-centred man who follows no path but his own —"the way of my will," as he expresses it to an inquiring couple—which is basically directionless, as he freely admits (28). Face-of-god's aimlessness, which contributes absolutely nothing to the group, is the negative effect of his literacy and is hardly to be approved of; neither are the immediate effects of his receipt of a written communique from the Silverdalers in an incident that is the best example in the romance of how literacy leads to individuation. After receiving the note (which he is careful to let no one see him read), Face-of-god demonstrates disturbing and anti-social behavioural patterns: "[h]e went joyfully and proudly, as one who knoweth more tidings and is better than those around him," and lies easily ("answered lightly") to his father when he is questioned about his plans for the Bride (*Roots* 99-100). A direct connection is established here between reading and disruptive social behaviour; what is perhaps the worst implication, in terms of the group, is that writing offers group members the opportunity to be in secret communication with aliens and therefore to move away, psychologically, from the group.

In his consciousness of himself as an individual, as a nail capable of driving out other nails, Face-of-god is (in Morrisean terms) socially immature, and this immaturity is reflected, as is commonly the case in Morris, in his ability to both express himself artistically through language and to properly understand the ways in which others use language as well. A particularly good early example of this immaturity and imperceptiveness regarding language occurs in his first encounter with the Folk of the

Wolf. Wild-wearer begins asking Face-of-god detailed questions about the "ways of the Dalesman"—their homes, crops, character, and so forth—"no otherwise than if he had been the goodman of some neighbouring dale," and Face-of-god in response "told him whatso he knew, for he saw no harm therein" (*Roots* 41-2). Morris's own comment, "no otherwise than if he had been the goodman of some neighbouring dale," in itself is a clue that Wild-wearer's neighbourliness is something other than it appears, but Face-of-god is apparently oblivious to this. While Face-of-god may have possessed the good sense not to reveal anything important, his inability to even consider the possibility of ulterior motive in the other man suggests an extraordinary degree of naivete.

Face-of-god eventually grows out of this, of course, primarily as the result of his gradual recognition of his place in the society and his exposure to the positive influence of the exiled Silverdalers, and as he grows he demonstrates an increased ability to distinguish himself through his words as well as his deeds. It is primarily through a contest of words that he finally manages to receive Folk-might's grudging approval (*Roots* 131-2); eventually, he comes full circle, and reconnects with the source of magical potency to reacquire his people's lost power of spontaneous singing at precisely the moment he becomes one with the group:

> Then Face-of-god shook Dale-warden in the air, and strode forward
> fiercely, but not speedily, and the whole company went foot for foot along
> with him; and as he went, would he or would he not, song came into his
> mouth, a song of the meadows of the Dale. (348)

This song, as I noted in chapter 2, asks the question "what shall we sing of?" The answer is the "we"—how "we were fashioned from out of the earth," how "we whet the sickle that bideth the wheat," how we, the group, are, essentially, the best possible subject for the song. Face-of-god, at this moment, learns the value of the threads in the tapestry of the social group.

The process of Face-of-god's melting into the group is of course much more complex than the above may suggest, because Morris does not choose to simply ignore the effects of literacy and individuation on his character. In fact, the case is quite the opposite: in this prose-poetic romance, as in the subsequent fairy romances, the question

of individuation is Morris's specific interest. Whatever sentimental feelings Morris might have had regarding primary orality, he realized, as I have noted before, that individuation was going to be a factor in any possible socialist future simply because no possible socialist future was going to be an illiterate one. This being the case, the problem then becomes one of demonstrating how literacy and the individuation that it brings with it might strengthen the social group, as opposed to weakening it.

As noted in chapter 1, literacy does have positive social effects as well as negative; by raising consciousness it makes the individual more conscious of others, and it effectively counteracts the homeostatic effects of the oral tradition, the tendency to live in the present and forget the lessons of the past that might be eventually lost in the evolution of the everchanging oral histories. The effects of literacy on Face-of-god, while apparently leading him away from the group, eventually lead him back, once he recognizes the fundamental socialist truth that true individual freedom (as I noted in chapter 2) is only possible through an identification of individual with social interests.

Face-of-god's literacy proves, in many ways, to be to the benefit of his people; the most obvious example is the note from the Silverdalers, which, despite the immediate negative effects upon Face-of-god's character mentioned above, also leads to the eventual alliance that is to the benefit of all parties concerned. Without literacy, there could have been no note, and likely no secret meetings with the Silverdalers as well. But this is, as I have said, only the most obvious example. Mostly, Face-of-god's literacy contributes to the group indirectly by facilitating his individuation and therefore enabling him to make the break from the conservative traditions of his group that enables him to act in its best interests. Only as the result of his individuation is Face-of-god able to put aside his people's superstitious fear of the woods and the unknown to "interpret" or read, as Mathews notes, the "'runes' of the wood-mysteries which were mistakenly read by Stone-face, Iron-face, and the other elders, to unite that which was divided and severed" (30). And only by embracing literacy is Face-of-god empowered to ignore the voices of the past that urge him to follow a mode of conduct that was perhaps

appropriate for a more primitive proto-socialism (like that in *Wolfings*) but which requires modification for more modern times:

> ". . . in this dim hall there are words crossing in the air about us—words spoken in days long ago, and tales of old time, that keep egging me on to do my will and die, because that is all that the world hath for a valiant man; and to such words I would not hearken, for in this hour I have no will to die, nor can I think of death." (126-7)

The more "civilized" literate world that Face-of-god is part of, moving slowly from the stage of high barbarism into something new, is more complex and consequently requires more from the group member than a willingness to die for the group; it demands a willingness to live for the group as well. Face-of-god breaks free from the old tales to establish a new tale and sing a new song appropriate for new times. In doing so, he is in essence serving the communal whole by living up to his father's oath "to set right above law and to set mercy above custom," a sure indicator that he has melted successfully into the tribe.

In Face-of-god, Morris presents a character who moves from alienation to integration, from unproductive individualism to a productive social maturity in which he is able to capitalize on his individuation. His social growth is reflected in his corresponding development from a singer of the effete songs of "lads" to a spontaneous composer of battle hymns celebrating the socialist collective. The prose-poetic romances, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, are particularly interested in this sort of correspondence between characters' use of language and their social maturity. What, then, do the ways in which outsiders (the Romans in *Wolfings* and the Dusky Men in *Roots*) use language reveal about their own social structures?

In the case of the Romans, a "people mighty, but unhappy," the flaws inherent in their social organization are clearly outlined in chapter 6 by an Elking warrior: "mighty men among them ordain. . . . in all wise what manner of life shall be amongst them; and though they be called free men who suffer this, yet may no house or kindred gainsay this rule and order" (42). According to the principle governing the prose-poetic romances, these faults in the society manifest themselves as an inability to use language effectively,

or at least not as effectively as the Wolfings and their kindreds. Fox the scout, for example, deceives the Romans by using their own password, "no limit," against them (61), and a warning by one of their own Gothic allies is ignored because he calls it out in the Gothic tongue, which none of the Romans understands (121). Similarly, the legions' lines of communication continually fail them, a factor which contributes greatly to their eventual defeat. At one point, it is noted that the Romans do not have any news of the defeat of their reinforcements (122), news that is something like two days old by this point, and the absence of which leads to the grave strategic errors on the part of the Roman captain described in chapters 20-21. The Wolfings' system of sending messages in verse, in contrast, is far more effective.

The Dusky Men in *Roots* are in some ways the direct opposites of the Romans: while both races are conquerors, the Romans would "civilize" the Wolfings and impose their own law and order upon them. The Dusky Men, on the other hand, would drag their more civilized enemies down to a level beneath their own animalistic one. They represent individualism taken to an extreme and lack any apparent social structure within which to act, and this is naturally reflected in their language, such as it is. The first the reader "hears" of the Dusky Men is that they howl like "scalded curs" and seem incapable of human communication; as Hall-face remarks, "no true tale could we get out of them, nor indeed any word at all" (159). When they do speak, it is only for evil purposes: to torment a young bed-thrall with threats of replacement, for example (212-4), or to mock their enemies "in the tongue of the kindreds" in their own hall underneath the mummified bodies of the heroes of the wolf (this latter example representing the first and last time in the romance the Dusky Men give evidence of being able to speak in the "human" speech of the kindreds) (367).

The communication systems of the Dusky Men also fail them in battle, not so much because they cannot understand their enemies, as was the case with the Romans, but rather because they cannot even understand each other. At one point, the reader is told that one group of Dusky Men cannot hear the warnings of another because they "fell to yelling and cursing, and their fellows on the plain Place could not hear their story

for the clamour, and they also fell to howling as if a wood full of wild dogs was there" (335). This is in striking contrast to the well-organized and disciplined communication systems of the Dalesmen and their allies, which reflect their complete identification with the group (in this case, the army) and which work so well and efficiently that the command to attack can be voiced silently and orders can be exchanged almost telepathically (332). The armies of the kindreds move soundlessly "as one man, slowly and with no jostling" in their attack, while the Dusky Men "for their part came on drifting and surging up the road to the hill" with a "hideous confused yelling" (339).

The Romans and the Dusky Men, as I noted in chapter 3, are mirrors of the modern age, symbols of the inherent tyranny and rampant individualism that Morris saw in modern capitalism and which was antithetical to everything that socialism represented. In the prose-poetic romances, the inability of these aliens to communicate effectively becomes a metaphor for their dysfunctional social organizations. The proto-socialism of their enemies, in contrast, allows for a level of artistic expression and individual freedom unknown in our time. The message Morris is sending to his reader is clear: art and social organization are inextricably intertwined, and "beautiful expression" is both a prerequisite for and a product of "beautiful existence."

Chapter 5: Conclusion

"It may be that the world will be too busy for many years to turn back to these fairy stories; there is little in them from which it can learn": such were E. P. Thompson's final words on Morris's late romances in the first edition of *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* (789). They are words that I must take issue with, while paradoxically acknowledging the truth of Thompson's initial observation. The world— the real world of the "sweating men" of whom Morris wished to be the Laureate—apparently is "too busy" to take much notice of Morris's "fairy stories"; the prose-poetic romances in particular seem to demand too much from the casual reader, used to having his or her poetry and prose served up in neat portions on the literary platter (where the poetry, like parsley, can preferably be ignored), and unwilling to waste time in puzzling out the possible meanings of "speech-friend," or, for that matter, even the meanings of the unfamiliar words that Morris did *not* make up. While it might once have been truly said of Morris that "many saw that he was singing," it cannot be said now; I would not hesitate to assert that to the average person in the street—even the average university-educated person—Morris remains either relatively or completely unknown. The "noise and the clamour" seems to have largely drowned out the song of this most extraordinary singer.

This is, of course, a tremendous shame, because Thompson errs in stating that there is nothing that the modern world can learn from the prose-poetic romances. (Thompson himself seems to have recognized the possibility of this later in life; while his own opinions of the works do not seem to have vastly changed in the years between the first edition of his biography, published in the mid-fifties, and the second, twenty-one years later, his original final judgement is conspicuous in its absence in the later revised version.) If *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* have no other lessons to teach than that there may be other paths to fulfilment than those we know, other ways of looking at the world than through the eyes of cynicism, other possibilities for artistic expression than those found in the mainstream of literature, and other ways

of reading the truths of history than through the rose-coloured glasses of fact and science, then there is still a "little in them" from which the world can learn. Morris's concerns with social organizations and oral tradition are especially relevant to the modern global village that is continually seeking to redefine itself and which is immersed in what Ong calls secondary orality. Whether or not Morris's "dreams of the life of the past," which he himself admitted (as I noted in the first chapter), "cannot fail to be more or less unsubstantial imaginings," represent a "realistic" vision of what once was is moot; they are visions of hope, and there is no good reason why they could not provide the basis for the "stream of song" of a utopian socialist future, as I have suggested throughout this study.

While Morris remains relatively unknown to the general public, there is no reason to suppose that this must always be so; his literary reputation, for example, and the reputation of the late romances in particular, would seem to be steadily growing, if the ever-increasing number of thought-provoking studies on this multi-talented individual (many of which I have cited here) can be taken as any indication of trends in academic circles. It is to be hoped that this increasing scholarly interest can translate into an increasing popular interest, since the prospect of becoming a subject of purely scholarly curiosity would have been mortifying to the man who was vocal in his disdain for literary critics: "[t]o think of a beggar making a living by selling his opinion about other people!" (Mackail 2: 134). I would like to think that my own study of Morris might, in its own small way, stimulate (as it has for me) a greater interest in Morris's works and in particular the values and ideology behind the work, along with a renewed interest in the search for solutions to the social and aesthetic problems that he attempts to deal with in his prose-poetic romances. Morris, as Kirchhoff notes in the conclusion to his brief biography, can have a "terrifying" effect upon his reader:

> . . . his very aloofness—his refusal to accept the world as he found it—makes him a model for any of us who long to make the world a more adequate place for human life. To come to know Morris, whatever the avenue of approach, is to find him a "fact" of one's existence. He becomes, inescapably, a conscience. (*William Morris* 169)

Various relatively recent attempts to popularize Morris's work suggest that others outside academia have recognized that it is valuable to have him as a "fact" in our own existences and that there is "a little" in Morris from which we can learn. At the time of this writing, a major exhibition of Morris-designed and Morris-influenced handicrafts is touring Canada, and was the subject of a television mini-documentary on CBC *Prime Time News*, and in the late sixties/early seventies, partially as the result of the explosion of interest in fantasy literature occasioned by the phenomenal success of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, several publishers released paperback editions of Morris's romances. Ballantine and Newcastle in particular brought out editions of several of Morris's works, including *The Well at the World's End* and *The Wood Beyond the World*. These might be seen as encouraging signs that perhaps Morris will after all reach the popular audience that he ostensibly wrote for, though the long term effects of these attempts at popularization remain to be seen. Somewhat pessimistically, it must be noted that the mass market paperback editions published by Ballantine pointedly *did not* include either *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains* (which were published in relatively greater obscurity by Newcastle), the two romances in which Morris's socialist ideals are expressed most strongly and which were the keys to his own "stream of song." It should also be noted that Lin Carter, who edited and wrote the introductions to the Ballantine editions, dismisses *Wolfings* in his introduction to *The Wood Beyond the World* as "little more than a historical novel, and nothing new" (xii) and suggests that there is little difference between the work and the novels of Walter Scott! In his introductions Carter demonstrates little interest in the values and ideologies of Morris's romances and instead unfortunately stresses at all times the sensational and superficial elements of Morris's romances: he typically calls Morris "the first major writer to discover and explore the potentials of the story laid in a consciously made-up world where magic works, and gods and monsters, witches and dragons, co-exist in a carefully worked out context of subreality" (*The Wood Beyond the World* x). This is unfortunate not only because such elements are actually quite rare in Morris's romances and are usually not the focus of the narrative (as Carter's comments· seem to imply), but also because this discourages

attempts to read the works as something with more substance. Indeed, in the twentieth century such sensational "literature" has "developed" to the point at which it represents little more than novelizations of role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. Can such books, then, possibly be the "stream of song" that Morris imagined?

Of course they are not, but what then has become of Morris's original conception? Did the stream of song end with Morris? Apparently so: while Carter and Mathews (in the latter's more scholarly introductions to the Newcastle editions) alike note that Morris was the grandfather of the modern genre usually known as heroic fantasy (of which the role playing novels are the bastard children), and that he was an apparent influence on writers like Lord Dunsany, E. R. Eddison, and J. R. R. Tolkien (writers who in their own diverse ways demonstrate keen interests in the "special" language affiliated with romance, and who in their turn influenced a subsequent generation of fantasy writers), this genre seems to have more or less taken the trappings of Morris's romances and left out a great deal of the substance, and the socialist substance in particular. Readers of Eddison, for example, may catch occasional echoes of Morris's archaisms and syntax in the antique prose and occasional casual verse of *The Worm Ouroboros*—for example: "Now this seemed good to them all. So when they had talked on it awhile and concluded what they would do, glad of heart the lords of Demonland turned them back to the lofty presence chamber. And there the Lord Juss spake . . . " (21)—but they will find none of Morris's concern with social issues. Eddison's romances are only interested in the doings of aristocrats. I should note that Morris's influence on Eddison is a topic that to my knowledge has never been fully explored, and that, given Eddison's own use of occasional verse in his long prose works—though on a scale much smaller than in that of *Wolfings*—a comparison of the two might be an interesting topic for future research. Similarly, while a comparison of the ideologies behind Morris's and Tolkien's romances might also be called for (alongside an examination of their individual attempts to create alternative mythologies for England and their corresponding interests in "medieval" English), it will not likely reveal evidence of an interest in egalitarian ideals in the class-conscious *The Lord of the Rings* (in which Sam, as Ursula K. Le Guin once commented, "keeps on saying

'sir' to Frodo until one begins to have mad visions of founding a Hobbit Socialist Party" [163]).

Morris's prose-poetic romances, then, would seem to enjoy the unique distinction of being both the first, last and only narratives in an orally-influenced socialist literary tradition. In speech both loose and knitted up, they challenged some of the most basic values of nineteenth century society, values upon which our own modern society is founded, and which still, almost one hundred years after Morris's death, should be the concern of all men and women who, as Kirchhoff stated, "long to make the world a more adequate place for human life." It is unfortunate that we cannot visit the kind of world that might have embraced such works as these, and compare it with our own; if it were anything like what Morris himself imagined it to be, it is difficult to believe that it could be inferior to our own "noise and the clamour."

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