

## NOWHERE AND EVERYWHERE: THE END OF PORTABILITY IN WILLIAM MORRIS'S ROMANCES

BY JOHN PLOTZ

Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.

—Philip Larkin, "I remember, I remember"

Through much of the nineteenth century, local truths seemed the novel's distinctive contribution to the Smithian project of producing effective sympathy. A letter tucked inside a set of stays, the unmistakable set of a heroine's mouth, a whispered cockney version of the Lord's Prayer—each generates generality from extreme particularity.<sup>1</sup> No type without the individual, no general rule without the named character who strikingly exemplifies it.<sup>2</sup> Leo Tolstoy's claim that each unhappy family is unhappy in its own peculiar way, for example, requires him to produce a new and unfamiliar piece of domestic unhappiness that can be recognized, precisely on account of its novelty, as another avenue back towards a shared human condition. Romantic desire is so central to the Victorian novel's *modus operandi* because there is no emotion more defined by its concurrent specificity (I love this person alone) and universality—for each character and each reader, some distinct love-object, desired in an all-too-common way. William Morris, though, recoils against the notion that an investment in poignant particulars is the best avenue towards the universal.<sup>3</sup> He sees the penchant for arriving at general rules via personal sorrows not as the novel's acme but as its Achilles' heel. Morris's indictment of the genre, indeed, is strongly reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's argument, half a century later: novels promulgate a corrosive kind of public discussion of the private problems of the body and its emotional apparatus. By her account, novels displace politics from its proper place by extending griefs that should be local into a shared social realm.<sup>4</sup> They plug in compassion where solidarity is required, and replace judgment with soul-shivering empathy.<sup>5</sup> Exemplarity there must be, but it is judgment, understood as the capacity to apply the correct general rule to individual instances, that allows us to move outward from the exemplar to the type.

Morris and Arendt share a distrust for aesthetic works that claim to put local circumstances into global circulation. In Morris's 1891 *News from Nowhere*, an unlikable character gets the Dickensian nickname of Boffin the Golden Dustman because he has a penchant for digging around in the ugly dust of the past: "[H]e will spend his time in writing reactionary novels, and is very proud of getting the local colour right, as he calls it."<sup>6</sup> Another reactionary old man embraces the "fun" of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, while his more enlightened interlocutor explains disapprovingly that novels belong to a time when "intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, and when they needs must supplement the sordid miseries of their own lives with imaginations of the lives of other people" (*N*, 158, 151). These characters are mocked because they, like the realist novels Morris spurned, imagine that poignant individual details can be conduits to universal knowledge. Morris makes the case that to think of novels as containing real human beings, with real sufferings, is radically to misunderstand what any artwork can possibly contain.

As might be expected from a founder of the Arts and Crafts movement (and arguably the first industrial designer), Morris's formal experiments—both in *News from Nowhere* and the subsequent prose romances—are not arguments against art per se. His attachment to "that great body of art, by means of which men have at all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life" does, however, explain why Morris was unprepared to rank fiction as an exemplary art form.<sup>7</sup> The imperative to beautify the familiar springs from Morris's conviction that the work of art forms a material part of human lives rather than simply representing those lives. Morris, in his novels as much as in his fabrics, is not committed primarily to mimesis but to beauty: "Everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with nature and thwarts her."<sup>8</sup> The best art cultivates an "intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth" (*N*, 132).

Morris sees himself, in fact, as refuting one of the Victorian novel's core assumptions: that personal identity and cultural privilege are portable properties, and that characters' capacity to retain a durable sense of self even when amongst strangers is what engenders readerly empathy. Morris believed that the novel's paradigm of sanctioned identification with certain people was problematic because it underwrote disidentification elsewhere. And he made his case against dominant Victorian conceptions of the novel's form and purpose in large part

by producing (not just writing, that is, but also himself illustrating, typesetting, and publishing) his late romances, which aimed to move readers towards a kind of universal identification with beauty distributed consistently over a beautiful world.<sup>9</sup>

Alex Woloch has recently argued that nineteenth-century realist novels are centrally defined by a tension between their readers' "ability to imagine a character as though he were a real person, who exists outside of the parameters of the novel, and [readerly] awareness of . . . highly artificial and formal aspects of the narrative structure."<sup>10</sup> Literary analysis of the realist novel, then, ought to proceed by "establishing a relationship between the referential elaboration of a character, as implied individual, and the emplacement of a character within a coordinated narrative structure."<sup>11</sup> Woloch proposes to do so by analyzing

[t]he *character-space* (that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole) and the *character-system* (the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure).<sup>12</sup>

When applied to Morris's romances, that approach fails. Morris rejects the logic of "character-space," rejects even the idea of minoriness, rejects the implicit pathos caused, in the realist novel, by the "squeezing" of "an actual human being placed within an imagined world."<sup>13</sup> By removing from the late romances the poignant peculiarities of psychology that make readers feel a character's restriction by his or her world, Morris refuses the tension Woloch sees as definitive of the realist novel.

Instead, Morris proposes that characters be thought of as systematically flat, placed within the novel to fulfill the demands of its plot rather than to represent the excessive human individuality or alterity that makes for poignancy in the realist novel. Because Morris's romances are conceived as a radical break from the realist tradition, though, this disjunction between Morris's writing and the exigencies of character-space confirms, rather than undermines, Woloch's account. The silence and indifference that have greeted the romances—barring a brief revival spurred by fantasy novelists in the 1970s—speak as well to Morris's abiding strangeness, his uneasy relationship to an English prose fiction tradition heavily indebted to the logic of portable properties he sets out to undo.<sup>14</sup>

In a world fully defined by what Woloch calls character-system, Morris believes the anguish associated with the restriction of character-space need never arise. The quasi-poignant end of *News from Nowhere*, in which Guest sees and feels his chances for Ellen vanishing before his eyes, never recurs in the romances because love's triumphs and tribulations are fully folded within the overarching constraints of the tale (its encompassing system, you might say). As a result, good and bad outcomes alike are understood primarily for their role in forging the human solidarity that arises from shared appreciation of the beauty incarnate in the tale itself—or in the actual printed book that is the tale's material avatar. In Morris's fiction, where interior depth of character never arises, the resonance of portable properties vanishes. Rather than functioning as auratic bearers of a never-fully-shareable meaning, portable properties become another set of beautiful surfaces, memorable only for their place in the interplay of forms through which the text's aesthetic value is constituted.

#### EVER SINCE CHARTISM

If this aesthetic sounds odd, problematic, and doomed to obscurity, it may be illuminating to know that Morris's oeuvre stands deeply indebted to the subterranean tradition of Chartist and early working-class writing.<sup>15</sup> Chartist fiction is marked, like Morris's work, by diverse and unsettling experiments with the delineation of individual character. Chartist fiction often features sympathetic personae whose idiosyncrasies are gradually erased as they come to stand in for the larger body of struggling English workers. They are particularized initially, that is, but their variation is progressively subordinated to their typicality within the greater body ("the people") they represent.<sup>16</sup>

Consider the ending to what has been called the "the first working-class novel," Thomas Martin Wheeler's *Sunshine and Shadow*.<sup>17</sup> Having spent 36 of its 37 weekly "communions" (it was published between 1849 and 1850 in the Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star*) delineating a hero, the novel ends by dropping the pretense that the persona is a person. Instead, it deposits the responsibility for living as a post-1848 worker firmly back in its readers' laps. Denying that the story of any individual working man—including the novel's hero—would possess any interest apart from its representation of the shared Chartist struggle, Wheeler urges a consciousness of shared bodily suffering and a solidarity that springs from commonality above all:

The spirit of despotism is still in the ascendant, and we still bow beneath its influence; but all hope is not lost, the earth still labours in the pangs of travail, and will ere long give birth to a new and better era; the spirit of freedom is again taking wing. Men walk wistfully abroad, and hold their breath in the deep ponderings of suspense. These are not the hours to waste in idle dalliance; we must be up and doing, or when the time comes, we shall again be found unprepared.<sup>18</sup>

By this account, protagonist North (did Wheeler give him that name because the work was published in the Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star*?) is only a minor part of a whole class whose composite story is far more important than that of any particular member.<sup>19</sup>

Here is the essence of why Chartist fiction was not only doomed but almost even engineered to fail. To disavow a protagonist's importance makes for good Chartist doctrine but bad romance. Wheeler admits this, yet he gamely plunges on, trying to make Chartist doctrine palatable—doing so, however, in a form profoundly uncongenial to the literary marketplace of the 1850s:

In quitting our simple tale, we seem like parting with friends, and with these reflections delay the minute of final separation. We have endeavoured to prove that Chartism is not allied with base and vicious feelings, but that it is the offspring of high and generous inspirations. . . . We might have made our tale more interesting to many, by drawing more largely from the regions of romance, but our object was to combine a History of Chartism, with the details of our story.<sup>20</sup>

A recent account of the afterlife of Chartist writing has singled out Morris as the keystone upon which any bridge back to mid-nineteenth-century socialist aesthetics can be built.<sup>21</sup> There is no clearer evidence for that link than his pilloried and ignored prose romances: *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, and *The Sundering Flood* (both published posthumously in 1897). They offer a dream of mutuality linked to the same critique of private property and of local differentiation between persons that structures *News from Nowhere*.

#### OBJECT LESSONS

John Stuart Mill's liberalism, Jürgen Habermas has argued, arises from a crucial mid-Victorian change in notions of political representability: Mill envisions a deliberative democracy predicated on neces-

sary, rather than merely contingent, exclusions of certain social classes from both deliberation and suffrage.<sup>22</sup> That necessary exclusion helps explain Arendt's hostility towards the role that novels play in the social realm.<sup>23</sup> Novels allow readers to establish a basis for sympathy with other insiders—precisely by using the potent tool of sympathy to represent the downtrodden, excluded, and wounded, whose fate could be publicly mourned even while their voices remained barred from the polity. This kind of ready sympathy promotes a sense of fictive inclusion, often within national boundaries—as if the novelistic representation of, say, the beaten wife of a drunken brick-maker could serve as a substitute for working-class parliamentary representation. This sort of substitutive representation depended, moreover, upon a set of necessary and yet generally unspoken exclusions from aesthetic representability itself: the novel, with its moveable feast of local color, is thus an essential part of reaffirming, or even engendering, the temporary barriers that forestall solidarity in real life. By rejecting the realist novel's logic of distinctive personality and its attendant exclusions, Morris offers a new model for the sympathy that artworks can engender, one founded on the refusal to admit abiding disjunctions between persons. One way to understand the Victorian novel is as the genre that fuses particularity and generality by positing hidden personal motivations, and then (whether by first-person narration or free indirect discourse) revealing those motivations to the reader, while hiding them from other characters. Morris, though, refuses to admit the very existence of the epistemological deficit upon which such revelations are predicated. There is no hidden knowledge to be uncovered in Morris's late romances. Ralph, for example, the hero of *The Well at the World's End*, can safely assume that all his companions will know that in a given forest-glade he lost his beloved; it is as if the glade itself reveals that truth. The space between objects and persons, or places and persons, turns out to be the same for everyone: there is no sentimental road to deeper sorts of associations between one person and a place or object.

In *News from Nowhere*, for instance, the protagonist—a Morris stand-in who wryly calls himself Guest—goes in search of a pipe. He is offered the most beautiful pipe in a store. “What if I should lose it,” he asks the little girl behind the counter, who replies, “What will it matter if you do? Somebody is sure to find it, and he will use it, and you can get another” (*N*, 37). The most noteworthy distinction made between persons up to this point in the novel, apart from that between men and women, is between smokers and nonsmokers. But

now readers are asked to suppose that this pipe can be anyone's pipe, valued exactly the same by nonsmoker B (who will perhaps only use it by gazing admiringly) and smoker A.

*News from Nowhere* makes the case, moreover, that if other people are suffering in ways that we ourselves have not—if the world, that is, has set up insuperable barriers between one somatic experience and another—then no amount of aesthetic work will cross that bridge, and it would be gross indecency to try.<sup>24</sup> Morris's memorable description of the poet as an "idle singer of an empty day" relates to the poetic responsibility to produce an object equally delightful to all viewers anywhere.<sup>25</sup> "Story" and "story-telling," by contrast, are two of the most excoriated words in *News from Nowhere*.<sup>26</sup> It was only in the unhealthy nineteenth century, the wisdom character Hammond explains that "there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life." Fortunately, Hammond continues, "they never did so"—because there is no real possibility of indexical reference between artwork and the world, imagined as a series of dismal encounters with objective referents (*N*, 102). All those artworks that imagine such a connection give up on their real role, which is (like a Morris and Co. textile) to "sharpen our dull senses" by a beauty that derives from an "accord with nature."<sup>27</sup>

By Morris's account, the best sort of art in a happy society will absolutely fail to convey the reality of another human being's suffering. The best musical performance one can imagine, Hammond explains to Guest in *News from Nowhere*, is a woman singing about deprivation and misery without any answering empathic pang:

To hear the terrible words of threatening and lamentation coming from her sweet and beautiful lips, and she unconscious of their real meaning: to hear her, for instance, singing Hood's 'Song of the Shirt,' and to think that all the time she does not understand what it is all about—a tragedy grown inconceivable to her and her listeners. Think of that, if you can, and of how glorious life is grown! (*N*, 66)

Morris's example is a striking one. Thomas Hood's 1843 crowd-rousing lament on dehumanizing female labor is famously filled with bloody imagery and sustained rhetorical melodrama:

It is not linen you're wearing out,  
But human creatures' lives!  
Stitch—stitch—stitch,  
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,  
Sewing at once, with a double thread,  
A Shroud as well as a shirt.<sup>28</sup>

Morris picks this fraught example—a song almost impossible to imagine stripped of semantic content—as the most radical way of advancing the claim that art should properly aspire to a non-narrative function. In a world where suffering has passed away, the song can cease to mean anything, except to a determined memorialist, and can simply, delightfully be.

Moreover, the brief against pity is deliberate here and pervasive in the romances. Morris offers an earlier version of Arendt's memorable indictment of empathy as a replacement for other sorts of political engagement. Pity may motivate individuals singly, but when it becomes the basis for political action (Arendt's example is the Rousseauvian fervor of the French Revolution, where collective will was mistakenly taken as a replacement for an intersubjectively constituted solidarity), it gets in the way of a more fundamental basis for human connections. It forestalls, that is, recognition of the human uniformity that is precisely attested to by surface differences, by the infinite individual variations that make "plurality" the basis for cohesion.<sup>29</sup>

#### EQUALITY OF CONDITION

A reform in art which is founded in individualism must perish with the individuals who have set it going.

—William Morris to Andreas Scheu, 5 September 1883

The arts of the nineteenth century, *News from Nowhere* argues, are crippled by their felt obligation to depict present suffering. The "record of the so-called arts of the time before Equality of Life" is so sordid because such arts are the product of the rich feeding ghoulishly off the "pinched and sordid lives" of the poor (*N*, 192, 193). When a character is reproached with failing to enjoy himself in the "easy-hard work" of haymaking, he is told that he must be "wanting to nurse a sham sorrow, like the ridiculous characters in some of those queer old novels" (*N*, 173, 198). The sorrows of a novel are by definition sham because they consist of morbid inward self-examination, when the real problems of life exist outside, in the structures of inequality. Recognizing the equality of condition between all human beings will make us treat one another like what we truly are—incorporate extensions of one another's being.<sup>30</sup>

Morris's commitment to a socialism based on "equality of condition" produces in his romances an egalitarianism so pure that the differences between persons seem to disappear.<sup>31</sup> Strikingly, this depersonalization proceeds not by the elimination of romantic desire and sensual beauty

from the texts but rather from a new way of generalizing such desire. Particular bodies do not disappear from the romances; if anything, the attention to carnal detail grows, so that the notably decorous insinuations of Victorian romance plots are replaced by an aesthetic at once undecorous and un-insinuating. Bodily beauty is frankly described and treasured, and yet from it follows none of the breathless romance that it would be expected to provide in a Victorian novel.

The prose romances have been critically and popularly punished for their indifference to individual sensibility. They have generally been treated, by Morris's own family, by his enthusiasts at the time, and by recent critics, as a kind of excursion into indulgent fantasy that leaves his socialist praxis behind.<sup>32</sup> Does what Morris describes as "socialism seen through the eyes of an artist" lead to nothing more than indifferent aesthetic hedonism?<sup>33</sup>

Phillippa Bennett has argued for describing Morris's appreciation of beauty in the romances as a form of "wonder."<sup>34</sup> We might also describe his advocacy for blindness to suffering, and for attunement to beauty, as stemming from a kind of aesthetic promiscuity. In the late prose romances, Morris is not so much eradicating the idea of a central romantic love as he is exploring ways in which it can be generalized. Not one but a hundred men can kiss the Beloved in *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*; in *The Well at the World's End*, a whole nation finds its desire realized in the just reign of a beautiful but self-effacing ruler.<sup>35</sup> The omnipresence of lavish kisses is a way for strangers to express their admiration for a beautiful man or woman: phrases like "since he had kissed her so sweet and friendly, like a brother" recur in each of the romances.<sup>36</sup> Morris is committed not to obliterating but to universalizing the bonds of romantic love. He wants all persons to feel the same sort of deep emotional bond to one another that lovers now mistakenly believe separates them from the rest of the world.

In the romances, those who turn desire into grounds for jealousy are profoundly misguided. Many of the most passionate and far-gone lovers are, like the Boffin of *News from Nowhere*, figures of fun. The amorous monk in *The Well at the World's End* loves his "Lady" so devoutly that he is convinced, falsely and against all evidence, that "she weareth a hair" (that is, a hair-shirt) beneath her gown and is as devout a Christian as he.<sup>37</sup> In his mad love, he has replaced the object of his devotion with himself (he is the only hair-shirt wearer in the book), and so what purports to be flattery of his lady is really only a form of self-indulgence.

Nineteenth-century socialism is generally understood as deeply indebted to Karl Marx's critique of capitalism's classed structure, which relegates the working class to the role of mere bodies.<sup>38</sup> By Marx's account, this relegation ensures the rupture of sensibility between people placed in different relationships to power. (In Georg Lukács, this is transmuted into the notion of the labor-produced class consciousness of the proletariat.)<sup>39</sup> Socialism differs from liberalism, then, in its insistence that the bodily component of a worker's experience is a true component of the lived social world rather than simply an impediment to participation in a realm of unfettered public discourse. Marx's notional attachment to a sphere of sanctioned privacy—as in his notion of a future marriage freed of economic shackles—may even implicitly rely on the suffering of working bodies as proof that capitalism's putative objectivity is the force destroying a zone of subjective intimacy.

Morris approaches the problem of shared or unshared bodily experiences differently. In *News from Nowhere* incipiently, and overtly in the late romances, the recognition of a virtually indistinguishable humanity in all persons becomes an avatar of eventual co-corporeality. Like the naturalists, Morris foreswears characters possessed of psychological depth, through whom readers might attempt to experience narrated events as if they themselves had been present. Unlike the naturalists, however, he is not committed to a form of impersonal description that results from "the domination of capitalist prose over the inner poetry of human experience, the continuous dehumanization of social life, the general debasement of humanity."<sup>40</sup> Naturalism—generally taken to be the *fin de siècle's* most socialist literary form—insists that if the sufferings of the common people continue long enough, those people are successfully made into nothing more than cogs in a machinery designed to grind them small for others' benefit.<sup>41</sup> Morris takes hold of the other side of the word "people" and postulates, contra naturalism, that distinct social roles are as illusory as any other bit of cruel local color that the masters of the nineteenth century have superadded to essential human resemblance.

Morris's turn toward what might be called not impersonality but super-personality can be aligned with what he called artist's socialism: "Art cannot have a real life and growth under the present system of commercialism and profit-mongering. I have tried to develop this view, which is in fact socialism seen through the eyes of an artist."<sup>42</sup> Morris's socialism drove him to decide that he ought to exclude the corporeal suffering of the working classes from his art; he aims not to feel oth-

ers' suffering, but instead to envision their shared future happiness. This sentiment, most famously expressed in the 1894 essay "How I Became a Socialist," commits him to attacking the idea that people may have different minds, different bodies, differently constructed feelings, desires, and even thoughts from one another, which in the better world of the future will no longer be the case:

Well, what I mean by Socialism is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor over-worked, neither brain-sick brain workers, nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all—the realization at last of the meaning of the word COMMONWEALTH.<sup>43</sup>

Morris's attachment to "equality of condition" is best expressed, from *News from Nowhere* onward, in his studied refusal to grant psychological depth to his characters. Norman Kelvin, for example, argues that it is not so much the persons as the house in *News from Nowhere* that underwrites Guest's "intimate aesthetic experience" of the future. By Kelvin's reading, a visit to the future frees us from complicated human dynamics but facilitates sensuous relationships with beautiful surfaces: gray stone walls, for instance, become both more attractive and attainable in the radiant future.<sup>44</sup> There is, by the same token, a telling moment in *News from Nowhere* when Guest finds himself falling in love with Ellen, the most arresting in a succession of unearthly beautiful women he encounters: "[Ellen] was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of 'a young lady,' but was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise and please me" (N, 182).

So far, the incident reads as a novelistic description of the depth of feeling in one person called out by another's perennial mystery—my love has features invisible to ordinary perception. But now Morris returns to that account and revises it strikingly: "Not, indeed, that there was anything startling in what she actually said or did; but it was all done in a new way, and always with that indefinable interest and pleasure in life, which I had noticed more or less in everybody, but which in her was more marked and more charming than in anyone else that I had seen" (N, 182). What seemed startling in her, then, was only a "charming" version of the novelty of this whole world; she is principally his point of entry to an entire world filled with an "inter-

est and pleasure in life,” which she exemplifies rather than possessing uniquely. All the deeper feeling is an outgrowth of Guest’s initial attraction to her world, not her personality.

Morris’s romances extend the logic of Guest’s love for Ellen-as-world, or world-as-Ellen. Every man and every woman who is not deluded and wrongly possessed by monomania worships great beauties. The pleasure involved in gazing at them need not derive from a corresponding sense of disgust in looking at something else: the world may, like a perfect wallpaper design, simply be so satisfying to see in all its aspects that a non-exclusive beauty prevails. “Oh! but thou art beautiful, O earth, thou art beautiful,” another beautiful Morris heroine cries out at one point.<sup>45</sup> Such beauty needs no divisions. Art at its best is part of the process whereby we come to understand and thus arrive at the true equality built into the world itself.

The relationship between world and individual is the same, albeit with a different valence, when it comes to kissing: the personal turns global. People are constantly being embraced—willingly, reluctantly, or while sleeping. Such kissing and embracing is freely practiced between heroes and their applauding throngs, between young women and their various (unloved) admirers, and practiced so indiscriminately that the line between hero and throng or lover and beloved blurs. Morris means this “queer old” form of republicanism not simply as a carnalization of union, but as a political affirmation that differences fall away at contact (*N*, 198).

In Morris’s awkward early fiction, the tension between desire for one person alone and appreciation for beauty in the world as a whole is much more evident. It emerges in a series of troubled and troubling meditations on how a beautiful body is linked to the soul that may or may not dwell within. Descriptions of Clara, the heroine of his unfinished 1871 *Novel on Blue Paper*, for example, stress the beautiful nature of “those eyes, that body”—but then hasten to add that those eyes and that body are beautiful because “her soul has made” them.<sup>46</sup> Still, after dwelling with such lavish detail on the adorable visibility of Clara’s body itself (both heroes gawk unashamedly at her barely clothed form), Morris can’t supply an interior to match—or rather an interior with all the decorous but passionate involution that a Victorian novel requires. The novel falters, in fact, because Morris is astonished, possibly even slightly ashamed, to discover that he has nothing but cliché to evoke Clara’s spirit, cloistered as it is below a body that he loses no chance to render in loving detail.

The lesson Morris learnt from that juvenile failure seems to have been that imaginative capacity resides not in the inaccessible inner recesses of enigmatic young woman's souls but on the surface, the depthless surface, of the page. The last line of *News from Nowhere* makes the insight explicit: "If others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream" (N, 211). Just as a selfish individual desire is nothing—it may lead one to hallucinate that one's beloved is wearing a hair-shirt—so too merely individual dreams evaporate, while visions verified by others' similar experiences endure.

#### ILL TEACH YOU DIFFERENCES

Morris's is a socialist critique of the novel's dependence upon difference—linguistic, ideological, class, racial, or even psychological. That critique would seem trivial or simply false if Morris were simply to ignore or evade the mundane fact of human distinction and the gaps between persons, or groups, that such distinctions bring. If suffering in a factory bends my back and makes my demeanor obnoxious, what point is there in ignoring that divergence and dwelling solely on the human generalities that connect us? Social roles—defined by gradients of power and strata of class privilege—deeply define not just an individual's personality but even the ways in which he or she perceives the shared world. Even if Morris wants to argue that such classifications stem from fatal political mistakes in the modern world, and that they form a vivid scar tissue on top of a common humanity, such classifications must still be mapped, even in order to discern the true, shared human life beneath. But consider Morris's account of why Hood's "Song of the Shirt" will eventually seem beautiful: there will come a day when its aesthetic attributes will emerge unscathed by the incidental horrors of social inequity it documents. In that day, its appeal will derive from something entirely intrinsic to the artwork itself. But that can only be the case if "threatening and lamentation" are pushed down, if historical consciousness and objective referent are traded in for an entirely different way of acknowledging the song. This kind of acknowledgment must stem from a consciously achieved obliviousness to the suffering with which the poem was once associated.

This marks a formal progression from the Chartist writing to which Morris was so formally and conceptually indebted. Chartist novels, from their beginnings in Alexander Somerville's 1839 *Dissuasive Warnings to the People on Street Warfare* to Ernest Jones's 1850–1851 *De Brassier* were necessarily caught up in the minutiae of a daily struggle.

Or, even worse, they were beleaguered, like Jones's late novels, by the ill-fitting garb of conventional melodrama, with its dependence on suffering bodies tied to lovelorn souls. By contrast, Morris refuses both the immediacy of contemporary political struggles and the confines of "timeless" love or unforgettable passions, turning instead to an unexpected solution—forgetting.<sup>47</sup> "My vision . . . is of a day when . . . the words poor and rich, though they will still be found in our dictionaries, will have lost their old meaning; which will have to be explained by great men of the analytical kind."<sup>48</sup> Were we to remember we would be forced to internalize others' sadness. So it is better, in the face of a world of inequities, for art to help us forget. By itself that claim for forgetting—of worker's woes, of suffering past, even of the bodily inscribed differences that make some of us workers and others lords—seems to do little. Here the teaching and un-teaching of differences in Morris becomes crucial.

Only what is first understood can be forgotten. So Morris's vocabulary lessons, in his essays, *News from Nowhere*, and the prose romances alike, go out of their way to describe words whose formerly highly differentiated meaning has been, or will be, lost. For example, Morris relies heavily on the words "carle" and "quean" to describe men and women.<sup>49</sup> An angry common man proclaims at one point in a late romance that "churl" (a variant on Morris's much beloved word for peasant, carle) is just another way to say earl, and vice versa.<sup>50</sup> Those who note such class differences (those who care if a man is churl or earl) will always be locked in linguistic disputes about how priority is to be established. Once the human race in general has been trained to forget the alternative readings, however, as it forgot the suffering described in "Song of the Shirt," then "carle" will emerge as a catch-all term. As the final lines of "The Folk-Mote by the River" put it, the erasure of the terms comes only with the oblivion after revolution:

And yet in the Land by the River-side  
 Doth never a thrall or an earl's man bide  
 .....  
 And we live on in the land we love,  
 And grudge no hallow Heaven above.<sup>51</sup>

"Thrall" and "earl's man" disappear simultaneously, and in their place appear "manfolk" lost in the battle that actually turned them from thrall or earl into simply dead men. Thus the lowliest serf and the highest lord occupy the same category, under different headings—because the words are racinated together, the true correspondence between them shines through the temporary disjunction.

C. S. Lewis praises the “doctrine of generality” under which Morris’s descriptions avoid specifics and ascend immediately to platonic forms.<sup>52</sup> But in fact that generality is constantly arrived at via particularity. “Carl” and “quean,” in their capaciousness, are anything but general words. Carl means both a peasant and a man, and it can imply both surly and slovenly (like a peasant) and tough, vigorous, and reliable (again like a peasant, or perhaps simply like a man); while “earl” lingers by the transom, suggestively. The analogy holds for “queane” which gives the word “queen” (for effeminate men) and even “queening” as well as meaning “sluttish.” Yet the word’s first meaning is “woman” and “womanly.” In choosing a word that has connotations running from negative to merely descriptive to highly positive, Morris is not sticking to some transparent earlier language. Instead, he is pointedly invoking contrast so as to overcome it.

This may be the primary reason that there are no Babels of tongues in Morris’s romances; virtually without exception all of the characters speak a common “latin,” as one hero dubs it.<sup>53</sup> Given the generally medieval matrix of the romances, calling the tongue “latin” seems a way simultaneously to preserve specificity and generality—Latin is a specific tongue but at the same time a *passepourtout*. There are no foreign languages in this world because only within a matrix of a common human speech can difference itself be registered. Only if “carle,” “earl,” and “churl” mean similar but distinct things within a single semantic code can the revelation of their uniformity strike readers.

Morris delights in creating different categories only in order to shut down the differences between them. One of the Nowhereians offers this version of converging differences: “[L]et us take one of our units of management, a commune, or a ward, or a parish (for we have all three names, indicating little real distinction between them now, though time was there was a good deal)” (N, 88). The differences of the past have to be forgotten, and the very process of forgetting them is what produces a new and better world. That finality, however, is reached by promulgating and then incorporating the old divisions—just as the historical change that brings Nowhere about comes via a class struggle between the people who rule and the people who serve them. Churls and earls share their humanity only when history has been learned, then left behind. For Morris, etymology is part of the trick played on the suffering by history: the endless discovery and promotion of difference is part of a conspiracy to blind readers to the sameness beneath.

In his anti-etymologies, Morris may implicitly be picking a quarrel with the prevalent Victorian taste for jingoistic etymology, promulgated

in such widely circulated works as Richard Trench's 1851 *On the Study of Words*. For Trench, the durability of words bespeaks an intimate or even an organic link between their form and their meaning. The perdurability of language's greatness helps in reckoning up a goodly Burkean heritage:

Language is the amber in which a thousand precious and subtle thoughts have been safely embedded and preserved. It has arrested ten thousand lightning flashes of genius, which, unless thus fixed and arrested, might have been as bright, but would have also been as quickly passing and as perishing, as the lightning.<sup>54</sup>

Coupled with this account of how individual greatness lingers in language is an account of how a culture organically builds on its strengths:

Far more and mightier in every way is a language than any one of the works which may have been composed in it. For that work, great as it may be, is but the embodying of the mind of a single man, this of a nation. The *Iliad* is great, yet not so great in strength or power or beauty as the Greek language. *Paradise Lost* is a noble possession for a people to have inherited, but the English tongue is a nobler heritage yet.<sup>55</sup>

This echoes Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840) by taking a single phenomenon (here, the English language) as the proof of a national solidarity that cannot be otherwise established. Noble heritages can be a reliable way to register, or to engender, differences between nations.

Morris, by contrast, repeatedly makes note of the differences within a set of signifiers, simply so as to assert that underneath that difference sameness runs. These experiments with collapsing apparent difference also dominate the various games and experiments in Morris's typography. Consider the opening and closing pages of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, which was published first as a widely circulated magazine edition in 1890, but for its two Kelmscott editions (first in 1891, then an illustrated edition three years later) received a new title: "The Story of the Glittering Plain which has been also called the Land of the Living Men or the Acre of the Undying. Written by William Morris." Notice the curious interchangeability in Morris between related words: "land" and "acre" are distinct, yet in this case they will be the same; ditto with "living" and "undying." The final words appended to the end of the novel convey the same lesson:

Here ends the Tale of the Glittering Plain, written by William Morris, & ornamented with 23 pictures by Walter Crane. Printed at the Kelmscott Press, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, in the Country of Middlesex, & finished on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of January, 1894.

KELMSCOTT

Sold by William Morris, at the Kelmscott Press.<sup>56</sup>

This interchangeability does not quite extend to the distinction between “written,” “ornamented,” and “sold.” But it might as well, since all three are descriptive of operations performed on an essentially continuous artwork by a vertically integrated production studio.

Moreover, the physical layout of the Kelmscott books themselves (which I discuss more fully in my forthcoming book, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*) also plays a crucial role in establishing differences designed to be at once noticed and overcome. Such visual vividness urges the reader to conceive of a future in which an illuminated manuscript or a Kelmscott book will bring the same pleasure Nowhereians get from hearing “The Song of the Shirt” or gazing at a beautiful pipe.<sup>57</sup> However, Morris is ambitious to produce an aesthetic and hence a political totality, even at the cost of distinctions apparently as fundamental as those between letters. Imagination’s power as a socialist desideratum derives from its capacity to register the diversity of human experiences only insofar as the prospect of a shared vision highlights the potential agreement in aesthetic judgment between all people. In our own disordered time of disaggregated liberal subjects, imagination is necessarily more constrained than in a world where the complicated meaning of both “Song of the Shirt” and of “earls” and “carles” has been lost. Readers are accordingly asked to embrace an aesthetic practice of small differences, along with an ideology that looks to the end of those differences. On the one hand, the fine distinctions that Morris himself notates; on the other, the delighted laughter of the residents of Nowhere when they hear Guest trying to make subtle and entirely meaningless pronouncements about distinctions between “city” and “country” people.

#### NOT SYMPATHY BUT SOLIDARITY

By George Eliot’s time, it has recently been argued, the Victorian novel reader expects not a universal but a cultural or national ground-  
ing for their sympathetic attachment to characters.<sup>58</sup> Eliot herself seems to speak through Daniel Deronda in arguing for “exchanging that bird’s-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and

loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance.”<sup>59</sup> Morris reverses this. Although often called a poet of the People, and hailed for his socialist chants that vaunt the struggling masses over evil oppressors, his work makes a sustained effort to justify such solidarity by invoking impersonal forms of judgment that make all humanity cohere. In Morris’s romances, like his late socialist “chants,” enemies are defined only positionally: triumph comes not in conquest but in the transformation that makes opposition between persons only the result of a semantic mistake.<sup>60</sup>

The result is that language itself can come to be represented as a common property, common enough that distinctions between persons dissolve without characters needing to notice such dissolution. The ideal form of this dream of mutuality—in, for example, *The Dream of John Ball* (1886)—involves imagining human beings sharing a world so intimately that they may know one another’s speech better even than they know their own. At one point in *The Dream of John Ball*, the dreaming narrator is asked what his own place is in John Ball’s army. The question is asked by way of what might be called a shibboleth, that is, a triggering cue verse to which he is expected to know the password response. Someone recites to him: “John the Miller, that ground small, small, small.” His response is automatic: “From between my lips *without my mind forming any meaning* came the words, ‘The king’s son of heaven shall pay for all.’”<sup>61</sup> Speech is the medium in which meaning is suspended, but that meaning need not pass through the individual consciousness to be transmitted. Rather, it is best understood as a memorized verse or an object so well known it passes below the threshold of attention.

Morris pursues an art that is visionary precisely because it is resistant to the artistic verities of his own day. Walter Pater in 1868 could already discern this trend in Morris’s early poetry: “Into this kingdom of reverie, and with it into a paradise of ambitious refinements, the earthly love enters, and becomes a prolonged somnambulism. Of religion it learns the art of directing towards an imaginary object sentiments whose natural direction is towards objects of sense.”<sup>62</sup> That is, Morris has found a way to capture in writing not so much the features of the world as its feel, not the social spaces we move through but the sensory traces those movements produce.

## CONCLUSION

The movement towards an “equality of condition” suggests Morris’s wish to avoid turning etymological or historical difference into something essentially divisive. Yet the rich variety woven into his design work suggests his discomfort with homogeneity, if by homogeneity is meant the erasure of all surface distinction. It is contrast, after all, that makes his ornaments what they are. The diversity that is woven into his fabrics reflects something about his conception of endlessly diverse human life and its infinite potential. His designs, with their multifoliate variations on ornament, on color, on torqued geometrical shapes, establish a matrix that is beautiful precisely by virtue of such variations. Rather than consisting of a backdrop that frames or half-conceals particular beautiful objects, Morris’s designs are beautiful in how they arrange objects, not necessarily beautiful in themselves.<sup>63</sup>

Why, then, has Morris’s utopian jeremiad against inegalitarian, oppressive difference not attracted or persuaded latter-day readers? In evacuating depth from his characters Morris has created a “no-place” that relies on a rigorous conceptual distinction between sympathetic novelistic representation and an art responsive to “the skin and surface of the earth.” Perhaps it was impossible in Morris’s day (perhaps it is still impossible) for readers to appreciate a prose genre that so relentlessly conceptualized its refusal of personhood, a refused to pursue avenues by which a socialist all-over aesthetics might be intertwined with or even nourish a revived form of sympathetic novelistic representation. Like Chartist fiction, then, Morris’s may have been an experiment not only doomed but even designed to fail, because Morris was angry enough with what came before him to be unwilling to see compromise as the way forward, that is, an aesthetic design that incorporated both novelistic modes for depicting idiosyncratic personhood and his new vision for an artist’s socialism.<sup>64</sup>

That Morris’s work did not lead directly to any novelistic fusion of forms, however, should not lead us to conclude that the romances were themselves failures. The late romances are infused throughout with Morris’s mastery of the art of intertwining bodies and intermingling landscapes, and in that sense they are the vital artistic legacy of his final decade. Morris’s textual genealogy of the differences embedded in etymology is of a piece with his visual commitment to variation and diversity upon the continuous, flat, two-dimensional space of the page itself. A manuscript may feature an illuminated initial letter, entwined with tendrils that pierce its top bar to make it legible as a “t” rather than an “a” or an “o.” The letter remains legible, and the tendrils,

rather than being pure visual information, contribute towards allowing us to read figure as text.<sup>65</sup>

The final word has yet to be written, however, on why these experiments came about at the time they did and in the form they did. How should we understand Morris's experiment in "equality of condition," his insistence on finding new ways to envision diversity and uniformity as equally indispensable components of an artwork? One spur to the experiment may have been the linguistic division occurring all across Europe in the latter nineteenth century as the word "people" came to mean two entirely divergent things—the citizenry in general, on the one hand, and the mere common "mob," on the other.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the romances take on such an explicitly anti-particularizing form because Morris believes that the only way to prevent the deadly particularization that results in a politics of division and exclusion is to annihilate all foundational distinctions between persons, along with all distinctions between places. Morris's turn towards the seemingly archaic "no-place" of the utopian romances stems from his conviction that the fate of the working classes, the insignificant "people," would also become the fate of their citizen counterparts as well, once the lexical as well as the conceptual meaning of "people" had been successfully bifurcated. Accept that churl and earl are truly distinct, and the battle is lost.

The portability of valued objects and of distinctive individual psychology that I argue sustained the Victorian novel had, therefore, no place in Morris's work—not only because in Morris's romances there is nothing for individuals to carry that will make them meaningfully different from other individuals, but also because there is nowhere different to go with that portable property. This is most graphically demonstrated in Morris's final novel, *The Sundering Flood*, in which a river divides two lovers and two communities from one another. The lover who sets out to cross the river arrives, finally, to find that there is, and can be, no difference between those living on one side of the river and those on the other. The river's purpose was simply to generate the proper form of love—his love for his beloved, his community's love for the community on the other side of the river. All Sunderings are effectively joinings.

Morris's romances assume that a true social life, rich in aesthetically mediated differences, can reemerge only when the "people" are not etymologically and conceptually broken in two. This movement from particularities to beautiful, formally general solutions colored even Morris's private life. Overcome with jealousy by his wife's affair with Dante Rossetti, Morris—in a letter to an old friend—reminded

himself of a larger universe within which his sorrows could radically diminish: “O how I long to keep the world from narrowing on me, and to look at things bigly and kindly!”<sup>67</sup> “Bigly” here means with a kind of universal comprehension of love in all its forms, and “kindly” means not only with compassion but also “in kind”—that is, with an eye for the homologous love he is looking for, a universal attachment to the skin and surface of the earth, a love broadened and strengthened, rather than attenuated, by its global application.

Where do Morris’s experiments against portability ultimately lead? His romances seem to mark one potential terminus to the novel’s logic of portability, which had insisted that the most enduring kinds of sympathy, and of understanding, could be attained only by keeping particular affinities intact in transit, keeping their application narrow even when the object to be loved or understood (a sweetheart, a country, a particular street in London) was far distant. The enviable forgetting practiced in *News from Nowhere* is one way to put an end to the circulation of stubbornly local patriotism. Another way, more suited for Morris’s un-radiant present, might be crafting Kelmscott books—at once objects and tales—with the power to persuade readers that cultural durability, like individual idiosyncrasy, has been systematically misunderstood and overvalued in the grim present—a present which only the hope of a shared vision can make bearable.

### *Brandeis University*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Dorothy Van Ghent memorably puts it, “The fictional hypothesis is peculiar in that it has to carry at every moment the full weight of all its concrete experimental data. . . . The particular body that a thing has is of the very greatest importance to the whole fictional structure. Does it squeak, is it scared, is it brown, is it round, is it chilly, does it think, does it smash? . . . The procedure of the novel is to individualize” (*The English Novel, Form and Function* [New York: Rinehart, 1953], 4).

<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Gallagher, “George Eliot: Immanent Victorian,” *Representations* 90 (2005): 61–74.

<sup>3</sup> Christoph Menke-Eggers explores the tension within Kantian aesthetics between imagining art as staking out an entirely separate way of looking at the world and imagining art as an alternative pathway to the same apprehension of the world that analytic judgment provides. See Menke-Eggers, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998). Alain Badiou has recently criticized philosophical misapprehensions about analytically parsing the truth found in aesthetic objects and proposed instead that aesthetic truths are to be found in art’s resistance to philosophical paraphrase, since art is “the thinking of the thought that it itself is” (*Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005], 14).

<sup>4</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Brighton: Harvester, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958; repr., Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 23–73.

<sup>6</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1910–1915; repr., London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1992), 16:22. Hereafter abbreviated N and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” in *The Collected Works*, 22:4. E. P. Thompson’s *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955) and Fiona McCarthy’s *William Morris: A Life for Our Times* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) are the biographies of record. On questions of design, see Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts* (Palo Alto: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1996); and Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1980). Recent work on the poetry includes Herbert Tucker, “All for the Tale: The Epic Macropoetics of Morris’ *Sigurd the Volsung*,” *Victorian Poetry* 343 (1996): 373–432; and Jeffrey Skoblow, *Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, Art* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 22:4.

<sup>9</sup> See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001) and George Lewis Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002) on the late-Victorian interest in impersonality. Anderson genealogizes the detached intellectual; Levine investigates instances of scientific knowledge seemingly only attainable by renouncing personhood.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Woloch, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Woloch, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Woloch, 13.

<sup>14</sup> I have found almost no modern editions of the romances apart from a small 1970s flurry, among which are Morris, *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1980), *The Sundering Flood* (Seattle: Unicorn Bookshop, 1973), and *The Well at the World's End: A Tale*, ed. Lin Carter (New York: Ballantine, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> The following two paragraphs draw on my article, “Chartist Literature,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, 5 vol. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 1:440–44.

<sup>16</sup> The authoritative recent account is contained in Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics, and the People, 1790–1860* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Haywood, *Working-Class Fiction: From Chartism to Trainspotting* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Martin Wheeler, *Sunshine and Shadow*, in *Chartist Fiction*, ed. Haywood (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 192.

<sup>19</sup> In the same way, the lost girl of Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Ann(e), may have been named after the parish, St. Anne’s, in which De Quincey describes her living. See Grevel Lindop, *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (New York: Taplinger, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Wheeler, 192.

<sup>21</sup> See Anne F. Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998). Janowitz focuses on Morris's visible debt to Chartist poetry and chants while I am aiming to elucidate the prose affinities. This topic is also explored in Sally Ledger, "Chartist Aesthetics in the Mid Nineteenth Century: Ernest Jones, a Novelist of the People," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 57.1 (2002): 31–63; and Michael Sanders, "Poetic Agency: Metonymy and Metaphor in Chartist Poetry 1838–1852," *Victorian Poetry* 39 (2001): 111–35.

<sup>22</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1989), 137.

<sup>23</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 39; but compare to additional discussion of the novel's relationship to "storytelling" (50–51).

<sup>24</sup> This helps explain, for example, the curious coolness that Morris's characters often exhibit in the face of palpable suffering near them. The dwellers near the steep, dangerous mountains that shield the World's End from the ordinary world in *The Well at the World's End* are inexplicably tormented. But Ralph and Ursula can remain apart from these sufferings, which arise from residents' doomed infatuation with the sublime dreadfulness of their native mountains.

<sup>25</sup> Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, ed. Florence Saunders Boos, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1:52. The line in context reads:

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,  
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,  
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,  
Or bring again the pleasure of past years,  
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,  
Or hope again for aught that I can say,  
The idle singer of an empty day.

<sup>26</sup> Ellen, for example, says reprovingly to a fan of Thackeray, "But I say flatly that in spite of all their cleverness and vigour, and capacity for story-telling, there is something loathsome about [Victorian novels]" (Morris, *News*, 16:151).

<sup>27</sup> Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 22:4.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hood, "Song of the Shirt," in *Selected Poems of Thomas Hood*, ed. John Clubbe (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970), 305.

<sup>29</sup> See Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber, 1963). See also Deborah Nelson, "The Virtues of Heartlessness: Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt, and the Anesthetics of Empathy," *American Literary History* 18 (2006): 86–101. Also compare: "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8).

<sup>30</sup> See James Buzard, "Ethnography as Interruption: *News from Nowhere*, Narrative and the Modern Romance of Authority," *Victorian Studies* 40 (1997): 445–74. Buzard charts in *News from Nowhere* a kind of ethnographic imagination and obsessive focus on "the role of interruption in fiction" that makes it a critique of the novel that "brought to heightened self-consciousness important formal problems arising from nineteenth-century conjunctions of narrative, history and collective identity" (447, 446).

<sup>31</sup> Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," in *The Collected Works*, 23:277.

<sup>32</sup> To the socialist Richard Norman Shaw, Morris was "a great man who somehow delighted in glaring wallpapers," while to many of his artistic admirers his socialism

was a continuing embarrassment or a non sequitur (Shaw, quoted in *William Morris by Himself: Designs and Writings*, ed. Gillian Naylor [London: Macdonald Orbis, 1988], 315).

<sup>33</sup> Morris to Andreas Scheu, 5 September 1883, in *William Morris by Himself*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> See Phillippa Bennett, "Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances," *Journal of the William Morris Society* 16.2/3 (2005): 31–48.

<sup>35</sup> Critical appraisals of Morris's romances are scarce; important recent work includes Norman Kelvin, "*News from Nowhere* and *The Spoils of Poynton*: Interiors and Exteriors," in *William Morris: Centenary Essays: Papers from the Morris Centenary Conference Organized by the William Morris Society at Exeter College Oxford, 30 June–3 July 1996*, ed. Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: Univ. of Exeter Press, 1999), 107–21; Norman Talbot "William Morris and the Bear," in *Centenary Essays*, 94–106, and "'Whilom, as Tells the Tale': The Language of the Prose Romances," *Journal of the William Morris Society* 8.2 (1989): 16–26; Carole G. Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1982); and the essays collected in *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, ed. Boos and Silver (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Morris, *The Well at the Worlds End*, in *The Collected Works*, 19:270.

<sup>37</sup> Morris, *The Well*, 19:270.

<sup>38</sup> This occurs, on Marx's account, because the masses had ceded "criticism and control . . . [to] the private sphere of civil society [who rule by means of] their power of control over the means of production" (Habermas, 128).

<sup>39</sup> This is a rupture that Marx believed could only be overcome when "private persons came to be the private persons of a public rather than a public of private persons" (Habermas, 128–29). See also Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in his *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 83–221.

<sup>40</sup> Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in *Writer & Critic, and Other Essays*, ed. Arthur D. Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), 127.

<sup>41</sup> David Baguley stresses naturalism's anti-exceptionalism—that there are no grounds for distinguishing human experience from any other natural phenomena: humanity is "materialistic in its ontology, mechanistic in its cosmology, empirical in its epistemology and relativistic in its ethics, and its main direction is towards reconciling, even to the point of assimilating, the natural world and human experience" (*Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990], 44). Jennifer Fleissner shows how naturalism may be present as motif, theme, and ideology in works not generically classifiable as naturalist, in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Morris to Andreas Scheu, 5 September 1883, in *William Morris by Himself*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," 23:277. For the tradition of British socialist fiction, see H. Gustav Klaus, *The Socialist Novel in Britain: Towards the Recovery of a Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

<sup>44</sup> Kelvin also instructively contrasts Morris's attention to surfaces with the attention to psychological depths in Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*; see Kelvin, 107–21.

<sup>45</sup> Morris, "The Water of the Wonderous Isle," in *The Collected Works*, 20:210.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, *The Novel on Blue Paper*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald (London: Journeyman, 1982), 73.

<sup>47</sup> Chris Waters ("Marxism, Medievalism and Popular Culture," in *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism*, ed. Boos [New York: Garland, 1992],

137–68) makes an interesting analogy to Nietzsche's axiomatic insistence on creative forgetting.

<sup>45</sup> Morris, "Society of the Future," in *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Asa Briggs (London: Penguin, 1962), 191.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Morris, *The Well*, 19:174.

<sup>50</sup> Morris, *The Well*, 19:245.

<sup>51</sup> Morris, "The Folk-Mote by the River," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Faulkner (Manchester: Fyfield, 1992), 154–55. Note too the "hallow Heaven," which might be allied to "hollow" heaven. That is, the absence of Heaven is like the absence of "earl's man" and "thrall"—the language has changed, and Heaven has not so much been lost as it has been shown never to have existed. See also Waters, "Morris's 'Chants' and the Problems of Socialist Culture," in *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, 127–46.

<sup>52</sup> C. S. Lewis, "William Morris," in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), 39.

<sup>53</sup> Morris, *The Well*, 19:169.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words* (New York: Redfield, 1852), 33.

<sup>55</sup> Trench, 33–34.

<sup>56</sup> Morris, "The Story of the Glittering Plain which has been also called the Land of the Living Men or the Acre of the Undying. Written by William Morris." (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1894), n.p.

<sup>57</sup> Jerome McGann ("'Thing to Mind': The Materialist Aesthetic of William Morris," in his *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993]) argues that Morris is interested in reminding readers that the space of imagination depends upon the flinty edges of distinct signs—the deadly space between them.

<sup>58</sup> According to Audrey Jaffe, "Sympathy, like national identity, has power to the extent that it seems to emerge from within" (*Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000], 130).

<sup>59</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 638.

<sup>60</sup> Morris does retain an attenuated notion of national identity. But it is striking how little real importance attaches to the "English and Jutish blood" in *News from Nowhere* (16:62) or to the difference between blonde farming folk and brunette "Cheaping-town" residents in *The Well at the World's End* (19:8). The purpose of physical distinction is not so much to racialize communities as it is to diversify the "skin and surface" of the earth.

<sup>61</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, in *The Collected Works*, 16:220; my emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> Walter Pater, "Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review*, n.s. 34 (1868): 301.

<sup>63</sup> See Caroline Arscott, "William Morris: Decoration and Materialism," in *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, ed. Andrew Hemingway (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 9–27. The artist David Mabb, by selectively painting Mayakovsky-like white squares over Morris wallpapers and fabrics (but not painting over one design element, for instance the primrose flower) has shown the very different aesthetic effect of isolating individual elements within Morris works. See David Mabb, Arscott, and Steve Edwards, *William Morris* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> I am grateful to Alex Woloch for conversation on this point.

<sup>65</sup> By contrast, the "decorations" that Aubrey Beardsley is attaching to his work at this

time—as in the *Morte D'Arthur* he produced in 1893–1894—often work by exaggerated or elaborated borders that quite overwhelm the text they purportedly illuminate or complement. Seemingly, the idea of “decoration” in Beardsley is at least partially to remind the reader that what strikes one initially as sense (words) can also be seen as simply markings on the page. See Nicholas Frankel, “Aubrey Beardsley ‘Embroiders’ the Literary Text,” in *The Victorian Illustrated Book*, ed. Richard Maxwell (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 2002), 259–81.

<sup>66</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1998), 144.

<sup>67</sup> Morris to Aglaia Coronio, 25 November 1872, in *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 173.