

## **“Paradyse Erthly:” *John Ball* and the Medieval Dream-Vision**

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William Morris’s understanding of the Middle Ages combined the artisan’s strong grasp of the relics of Gothic architecture with the scholar’s knowledge of medieval history and primary texts. That is, not only was Morris intimately acquainted with the works of Chaucer and Froissart, but he recognized the labour and craftsmanship that went into the building and furnishing of the humblest medieval barn. Morris immersed himself in study of the concrete objects of everyday medieval life, surrounded himself with them, and, indeed, could make many of them himself; as a result, he could write as a modern writer in an almost unstrained medieval idiom. It is significant that even during the later 1880s, when his life was dominated by his agitation for socialist change, his interest in medieval culture never flagged: J. Bruce Glasier, for example, fondly recounts how Morris would occasionally at Socialist League functions “relate one or two of the old Norse legends” (38).

To see Morris’s medievalism as forming a sphere of his creative life apart from his socialism, as early Morris scholars such as J. W. Mackail did, is misleading. Morris saw in the Icelandic Alþing, for example, a form of mutual aid and democracy that he felt could be a partial model for a communist society. In the fourteenth-century European guilds Morris, like his Russian anarchist contemporary Peter Kropotkin, perceived another nascent model of mutual aid that would be nipped in the bud by the onset of early capitalism. Moreover, Morris’s interest in the art of the Middle Ages was not merely aesthetic, but was

based on his conception of craftsmanship and of the necessity for a popular art, both of which were to him inherent in medieval art and literature and capable of reaching their fullest expression only in a truly democratic communist society.

From the intersection of Morris's socialism, his interest in history, and his love of medieval art and culture springs the first of Morris's two socialist dream-visions, *A Dream of John Ball* (the other is, of course, *News From Nowhere*). It is worthwhile to read both works in conjunction with the extant body of fourteenth-century allegorical dream-poetry; not only does such a reading reveal Morris's familiarity with that literature, but it provides a context both for the wealth of visual detail in *A Dream of John Ball* (the "wonders" of the dream-vision genre) and for the work's socialist underpinnings as well (the dream-vision's idealism, not to mention didacticism).

In his lecture "The Beauty of Life" Morris calls for art to be "made by the people for the people as a joy for the maker and for the user," and it is clear that he saw an organic and popular art made manifest in the art and literature of the Middle Ages. Following Ruskin, Morris saw the aristocratic classicism consequent upon the European Renaissance as an inorganic "break in the continuity of the golden chain" of a popular art (*Collected Works* 22: 58); significantly for Morris's adoption of socialism, that break in the "golden chain" occurred simultaneously in history with the rise of capitalism. Morris did not intend his own mediievally-influenced work to be an imitation of the medieval link in the golden chain, but to be a newly-forged link in its own right. If Morris often used medieval techniques of dyeing in the making of his tapestries, medieval tales of chivalry as the inspiration for his prose romances, and the

medieval form of the dream-vision for his socialist propaganda, he was always certain to put his own stamp upon the old tales and formulas; this is, in fact, in the very nature of Morris's concept of an organic "art of the people."

The dream-vision genre that Morris adopted for his two long socialist fictions reached its peak of popularity in the fourteenth century, Morris's favourite medieval period. Following upon the heels of the premier poem of the genre, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose*, the genre spread rapidly from France, where such writers as Guillaume de Machaut and Jean de Froissart wrote dream-visions, to England, to be adopted by Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Lydgate, and King James I of Scotland, among others. The genre was quickly adapted to various didactic purposes: while the *Romance of the Rose* was a love-vision, and many English writers also wrote love-visions (of which Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, written in the early 1380s, is just one example), the anonymous late fourteenth-century *Pearl* is a vision of the next world and of the New Jerusalem as described in Revelations, and Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman* (ca. 1367-86) and its antecedent the anonymous *Winner and Waster* (1352-3) deal largely with social issues.

In the conventional poetic dream-vision the narrator, wrestling with a particular question, goes to sleep and has a dream in which he encounters a guide and an authoritative figure or figures who lead him through a sequence of events in a fantastic landscape (usually a garden) and explain to him the answer to his question. The framing fiction of the dream may be open-ended (either intentionally ambiguous, like Chaucer's *House of Fame*, or fragmentary, as the

unfinished *Winner and Waster* is) or, more often, closed by the dreamer's awakening and a description of his reaction to the dream. Significantly, the narrator is rarely completely satisfied with his dream, and often remains wholly mystified. The final authoritative meaning of the vision is left to the reader's interpretation.

That emphasis upon the reader's involvement makes the dream-vision form useful for a didactic purpose, be it moral instruction or socialist propaganda. Peter Brown points out that

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

The dream-vision is thus an ideal vehicle for an inquiry into such intangible concepts as life after death (*Pearl*), conjecture as to the significance of the peasants' revolts of the Middle Ages to the socialist movements of the nineteenth century (*A Dream of John Ball*), or the appearance of a future socialist society (*News From Nowhere*). Such abstract concepts are best approached allegorically; accordingly, the dream-vision points towards an ideal (of behavior, of society, and so forth), helping the reader to come to a greater understanding of

an elusive concept. The dream-vision, like allegory, demands serious consideration on the part of its reader, and rewards thought with an insight into its particular concern (whether that be the nature of mourning, as in *Pearl* and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, or the distribution of wealth and work, as in *Winner and Waster* and *News From Nowhere*) that is thus individualised. It is easy to see how Morris, who believed that the first duty of the Socialist League was education in its broadest sense – “to make Socialists” (“Where Are We Now?,” *Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 517) – saw in the dream-vision a didactic convention that nonetheless was directed towards making the reader think independently.

Although the dreamer may aspire to an absolute truth, even to paradise itself, he is bound by his human nature to the corporeal world, or earth. Kathryn Lynch, in her study of the fourteenth-century dream-vision, interprets the dream-vision as a liminal phenomenon, “an experience that happens to a man when he is between stable physical states – neither of the body nor removed from it” (49). Elsewhere, however, she speaks of the relationship between flesh and spirit as an interpenetration (26), which seems to me more apt. In *Pearl*, for example, the dreamscape appears to be a place between heaven and earth, partaking of both. Although the dreamer in *Pearl* cannot cross the river and reach heaven from the dream-garden, the poem's final image is of the sacrament, symbolic of that interpenetration of flesh and spirit. Morris's characteristic image of the “earthly paradise” is typical of his melding romance with radicalism: he acknowledges the creative importance of both idealism and hard work.

Although on the surface a dream-vision like *A Dream of John Ball* follows the same patterns of sleep, journey, and waking that are found in *Pearl* or the poems of Chaucer, with a guide, authoritative figures, and a beautiful dreamscape, Morris puts his own peculiar stamp on the genre no less than Chaucer does. Morris's dream-visions are turned to the didactic purpose of socialist literature, and they seek to invoke the realization, in the past and in the hoped-for future, of his ideal of a popular art. Moreover, to mold the medieval convention to his own ends was, as he saw it, entirely within the tradition of the convention itself. *A Dream of John Ball* is the product of its author's desire to portray the place of mutual aid and "fellowship" in the Middle Ages and to discuss the "encouragement and warning" (*Socialism From The Root Up* 497) that history holds for the socialist; *News From Nowhere* holds out the promise that an organic tradition of art will be able to arise under socialism while hinting that history will not end but will also be organic; and the secular, religious, and political dream-visions of the fourteenth century pointed beyond themselves in a similar manner towards their own ideals.

Morris chose for the backdrop of his first socialist dream-vision the failed English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, and one of its leaders, the priest John Ball, for his chief protagonist. The immediate cause of the revolt was an unpopular poll-tax, and it was not only the labouring classes who threw in their lot with the rebels; but the descriptions in the chronicles (which include Morris's perennial favourite Froissart) seem to support to a certain extent Morris's approximation of the revolt with a socialist-style uprising. Froissart, for example, describes the historical John Ball as saying: "Ah, ye good people, the matters goeth not well to

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

More important than Morris’s scholarly interpretation of the Peasants’ Revolt in *A Dream of John Ball* is his interpretation of history along Marxist lines: the narrator, for example, speaks of his confidence in the inevitability of change (285-6). Engels’s study of the German peasant revolts of the sixteenth century, however, is partly an attempt to assert that the rise of capitalism in the later Middle Ages was the only possible response to feudalism: “the anticipation of communism nurtured by fantasy became in reality an anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions” (*Peasant War in Germany* 46). In “Socialism From the Root Up,” on the other hand, Morris writes that the guilds were in fact “corrupted into privileged bodies” (506). It is clear from *A Dream of John Ball*, as well as from “The Revolt of Ghent” and other of Morris’s writings on medieval history for *Commonweal*, that Morris saw in the rise of the artisan guilds during the later

Middle Ages the potential for a very real change in the makeup of society. His writing rarely gives the sense of an inexorable progression from feudal to capitalist to communist societies; indeed, as *News From Nowhere* hints, social progress is sadly reversible (294).

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

Because neither of the central figures is meant to have the final word, *A Dream of John Ball* (a dream about John Ball, or John Ball's dream) is not a definitive pronouncement by an authoritative figure – what the late-classical dream-taxonomer Macrobius called an *oraculum* – but a *somnium*, enigmatic, in

the tradition of the most ambiguous of the fourteenth-century dream-visions. The engagement between the two perspectives of the medieval priest and the Victorian socialist in the dialogues which comprise the second half of the work are meant to engage the reader just as allegory does. The reader gradually becomes aware not only of the simple parallels between the peasants' revolt of 1381 and a modern socialist movement, but of a theory of history which owes something to the Marxist view of the inevitability of social change and even more to Morris's own conception of history as organic. So in the dialogues between Ball and the narrator we learn that the two characters find each other to be kindred spirits in their quest for justice (in other words, that fellowship can exist even across the centuries) and still more importantly that the ideals of a free society held by the socialists in late Victorian England have not just antecedents but *roots* in the hopes and fears of fourteenth-century artisans and peasants. This is the true (and, if Marxist, then heretically so) significance of the oft-quoted passage in *A Dream of John Ball* wherein the narrator ponders "how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name" (231-2). Feudalism ended in spite of the defeat of the 1381 rebellion, but it was replaced by competitive capitalism instead of by co-operative "fellowship," and the activists of the 1880s were, in Morris's opinion, fighting for fellowship under the banner of socialism.

Morris believed that history was not cyclical but organic; his medievalist socialism was not the ordinary "Whiggish celebration of the antiquity of British

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

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

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

Accordingly *A Dream of John Ball* is also, besides being a socialist dream, an “architectural” dream (*Dream* 215), conscious always of the flesh-and-blood

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

William Morris had immersed himself so fully in medieval art, architecture, and literature that he could imagine with utmost ease the practical details of an entire medieval town, down to the “big salt-cellar of pewter” (258) which adorns the middle of Will Green’s table and affirms the simple prosperity of fourteenth-century Kent. Hand in hand with Morris’s recognition of the denizens of the fourteenth-century as human beings of flesh and blood goes his feel for practical details. He had, after all, a knowledge of medieval dyeing techniques, of calligraphy, of stained glass, and of tapestry which was not simply the connoisseur’s, but the artisan’s own.

Thus it is with zest and not a few wry comments on his own times that Morris describes his architectural dream of the Middle Ages. The dream is full of visual detail, from the inscription upon the cup in Will Green’s house (260) and

the girdle-book (“a book in a bag,” 228) at John Ball’s side, to the “unhedged tillage” (217) of the Kentish village’s agriculture which is, of course, an incidental criticism of the enclosed and covetous nature of farming practices in Morris’s day. No detail is too small for Morris’s architectural eye: the chancel of the church, “so new that the dust of the stone still lay white on the midsummer grass beneath the carvings of the windows” (218), attests to Morris’s awareness that the additions to a medieval church accumulated over time, as well as to his recognition of the anonymous artisan.

The “architectural dream” thinly veils the vision’s socialism, and is part of the dream-vision narrator’s conventional modesty. As is well known, however, Morris followed Ruskin in his perception of a clear link between a society’s architecture and its health, incidentally a secular aesthetic version of the sacrament in *Pearl*, with art as the wafer and the creative impulse as the divine spirit. “[T]he essence of what Ruskin taught us,” he claims in “The Revival of Architecture,” was simply “that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life” (*Collected Works* 22: 323), and it was no secret to anyone who knew him that he saw the art of the fourteenth century as being far more healthy than that of the nineteenth. The art of the fourteenth century was not only an “art of the people,” but it was organic, a link in the golden chain of the Gothic tradition of art and artisanship. As such, it was tied very clearly in Morris’s mind to the art of socialism, expressing the freedom of the artisan as well as fellowship among artist-workers.

The ideals of egalitarian fellowship are, of course, laid out in *A Dream of John Ball* in John Ball’s speeches at the cross; but Morris also asserts those ideals

in the frescoes above the chancel arch, which figure forth “the Doom of the last Day, in which the painter had not spared either kings or bishops” (263). His architectural dream therefore includes both freedom (to paint as one wishes) and fellowship (in the form of the frescoes’ egalitarian sentiment). Indeed, the scene Morris’s unsung artist paints for the reader in the chancel, although not immediately recognizable as any one particular surviving medieval painting, is true in spirit to the egalitarian architectural vision of the fleeting nature of fame in *The House of Fame*, with its pervading sentiment *nihil est quod perstet in orbe* (see lines 1136-46), as well as to those passages in James I of Scotland’s *Kingis Quair* describing the wheel of Fortune (stanzas 159-72). In stanza 162 of that poem the poet describes how

So mony I sawe that than clymben wold,  
 And failit foting, and to ground were rold.  
 And othir eke that sat aboue on hye  
 Were ouerthrawe in twinklyng of an eye. (lines 1138-41)<sup>1</sup>

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

In the prolegomenon to *A Dream of John Ball*, the narrator sets up the expectation of the “architectural dream,” discussing the varieties of architecture which please him best and which he claims to have seen from afar in previous dreams: Elizabethan houses (like Kelmscott Manor), fourteenth-century churches, even once an entire medieval city “untouched from the days of its

builders of old” (215-16). The progression from least pure to purest (the Elizabethan house with its later additions, the scattered fragments of medieval domestic architecture, and finally the untouched city) is obvious, and this particular dream’s actualization of the Middle Ages is the natural final step in the series. The prolegomenon also sets up the expectation of a socialist dream, however, in the intervening comic *insomnium* of the narrator’s speaking engagement (“the earnest faces of my audience ... who ... were clearly preparing terrible anti-Socialist posers for me,” 216). These are the two preoccupations – architecture and socialism – which the prolegomenon arranges as the subject-matter of the dream-vision, just as the opening lines of *The Parliament of Fowls* figure forth the theme of love which is to be the major concern of the narrator’s vision.

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

If the pattern of the high medieval dream-vision is to be faithfully adhered to, the reader familiar with its conventions will expect the entry of an

authoritative figure or guide soon after the architectural scene is set in *A Dream of John Ball*. Such an expectation is not frustrated, for as soon as the dreamer is acclimatized, we are introduced to Will Green. Will Green, like certain of the characters in Morris's later dream-vision *News From Nowhere*, seems to intuit that the dreamer is not entirely of his world – “Well, friend,’ said he, ‘thou lookest partly mazed” (219) – and acts as the narrator’s passport into the peasant society of Kent in 1381.

Although the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* is characterized as “stammering” (261) and “shy” (263), as befits his outsider status in the world of fourteenth-century Kent, he is at the same time surprisingly comfortable in his strange surroundings. After all, the Middle Ages were not foreign territory to Morris. Morris had not only devoured a vast number of books from and about the Middle Ages (especially among the primary texts, and especially regarding the arts and crafts), he had internalized the information in them to the point that in his dream-vision he can mingle freely with these folk of another era. For example, he is quick to note that the rosary at John Ball’s waist would be called a “pair of beads” (228; cf. *Canterbury Tales*, “Prologue,” lines 158-9), rather than by its modern name; he recognizes by the figure of St. Clement over a door that a blacksmith is housed therein (218); and in the tavern he tells a tale of Iceland that would be outlandish but not anachronistic to English peasants of the time (224). The one thing he could not have learned from Chaucer, Froissart, or from an illuminated book is how to carve meat according to the fashion of 1381 and, accordingly, he fails in this (223).

Such artlessness on the part of the narrator is an integral part of the dream-vision convention, serving to undermine the “authority” of the narrator. Usually the narrator’s clumsiness (often, in fact, his outright tactlessness) is the cue for another character in the poem to set the errant narrator on the right path: the jeweler in *Pearl*, for example, is chastised numerous times by the pearl-maiden for selfishly mourning and for forgetting his spiritual duty to trust in God’s mercy. His words “To be excused I make request” (line 281) are echoed by one dreamer after another in the poetry of the fourteenth century. The narrator is regularly mystified by what he sees and hears; he often appears even to be deliberately naïve. In *The Book of the Duchess*, for example, it does not become clear to the dreamer until the end of the poem that the loss to which the knight refers is the death of his lover (“Is that youre losse? Be God, hyt ys routhe,” line 1310), although a perspicacious reader would have understood the knight’s hints much earlier in the conversation. The jeweler is equally obtuse: he ignores all his guide’s admonishments not to cross the river between earthly life and the next world, and suffers a rude awakening as a result. Similarly, the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* views the battle at the township’s end from a safe but hardly glorious position at Will Green’s feet, suffering only the occasional taunt from his protector (such as the earlier “thou art tall across thy belly and not otherwise,” 227; for a similar gibe, see *House of Fame* lines 573-4). Dream-vision narrators, from “Geffrey” and the joyless jeweler to William Guest, are part of an honorable tradition of good-humored, even self-effacing, self-creation.

The narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* is unique among dream-vision narrators in that, in addition to learning from the authoritative figure of the

dream, he has something to tell him as well. In fact, the narrator may well be the authoritative figure of John Ball's own dream-vision, a fellow come from the future to give encouragement and warning as befits the enigmatic dream (that is, the *somnium*), and to explain reluctantly, after the fashion of Macrobius's *visio* or *oraculum*, the fate of the revolt (269). The narrator's knowledge could, if this were a simple tale of "time-travel," prove invaluable to the rebels. However, such an adventure-story is not what Morris has in mind; he is not planning to attempt an alternate history after the fashion of speculative fiction. Morris is more interested in the place of the rebels in history, and the relationship of their goals to those of his own revolutionary fellowship. As will become apparent, the narrator returns to John Ball not to save the rascal hedge-priest's life, but to hold out to him a "little glimmer" (284) of hope.

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

in which fellowship endures and continues to strive for social change. Morris's socialist thinking is similar to the twentieth-century Marxist Ernst Bloch, for whom hope is not only a sustaining social principle but a creative one as well. Behind Bloch's pronouncement "Thinking means venturing beyond" (*Hope* 4) lies the same insistence upon the individual's involvement that the allegorical dream-vision requires of its reader and that Morris's *Nowhere* requires of its citizens, each of whom must play an active role in the affairs of the community.

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

From the past, Morris desired a model for socialist co-operation and for a popular artistic tradition, as well as, perhaps, an affirmation that his conjectures on this half were correct. The narrator of *A Dream of John Ball*, like his counterparts in the fourteenth-century dream-vision, has a certain question he is grappling with. It begins with the trope of the "architectural dream,"

as the narrator discovers that the objects he sees in the medieval village satisfy his desire to find an “art of the people” (and satisfy Morris’s dictum, “have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or perceive to be beautiful,” “The Beauty of Life,” *Collected Works* 22: 76). John Ball’s speech at the cross, the moment in which the priest speaks with the most confidence (or, in which he is most authoritative), provides the narrator with a model of co-operation, or “fellowship.”

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

In the first half of *A Dream of John Ball* the narrator takes on the role of the dreamer and John Ball the role of the authoritative figure. The tumult which greets the priest before his speech at the cross, and the ensuing hush (228), for example, are reminiscent of the deference shown to Nature in *The Parliament of Fowls* (line 617). John Ball’s approach is as solemn as that of any figure “of grete auctorite” in the corpus of fourteenth-century dream-visions, and indeed he has “the sternness and sadness of a man who has heavy and great thoughts hanging

about him” (229). His demeanour, however, is “kindly” and his face “not very noteworthy;” there is little of arrogance about him, as befits one who believes in the fellowship of all. Most intriguing of all is the description of his eyes, “at whiles resting in that look as if they were gazing at something a long way off, which is the wont of the eyes of *the poet or enthusiast*” (229, my emphasis). Such a description of John Ball serves to underline the identification of John Ball with Morris himself that E. P. Thompson has noted (425); Morris was, after all, a poet, and certainly zealous in the cause of socialism. Moreover, if we take “enthusiast” in its sense of “mystic” or “visionary,” this description hints at the reversal of roles which will take place halfway through the work, when it begins to appear that the dream-vision is taking place for the instruction and encouragement of John Ball.

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

man shall do the work of a hundred men” (278). As a visitor from five hundred years in the future, the narrator can describe wonders both technological and social which surpass the wildest fancies of the fourteenth century dream-vision, and which are all the more remarkable for being true.

Neither figure is completely satisfied as a dreamer nor completely authoritative as a teacher: “sorry and glad have we made each other,” says John Ball (286). For John Ball, disappointment lies in the fact that his every attempt to understand the marvelous advances of the coming centuries results in a paradoxical frustration of his desire to see some gain in social equality resulting from them. Not all the wonders the dream-vision has to offer are heartening, or even pleasant: the narrator may promise marvels but he delivers only a “harvest of riddles” (279). The narrator’s (Morris’s) disappointment lies in the ending of the architectural dream (“a great pain filled my heart at the sight of all that beauty” 287) and in the return to the sordid nineteenth century.

Each speaker has something to learn and something to teach, as befits both the dream-vision’s use of authority and the very nature of the socialist dialogues. Moreover, each respects the other, and recognizes the value of what he is being told, in accordance with the socialist precept that all are equal.

According to most contemporary accounts, Morris tried to put his egalitarian ideals into practice: Fiona MacCarthy paraphrases Philip Webb as noting of one of Morris’s lectures that “the working men in Morris’s audience had seemed pleased at being addressed as adult men and not as children” (MacCarthy 383). This mutual relationship extends itself to Morris’s conviction that the denizens of the Middle Ages had a real flesh-and-blood existence outside of the idealized

pages of illuminated manuscripts and histories; accordingly, he has John Ball comment on the narrator that “thou art alive on the earth, and a man like myself” (268).

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

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

since we have been kind and very friends, I will not leave thee  
without a wish of good-will, so at least I wish thee what thou thyself

wishest for thyself, and that is hopeful strife and blameless peace.

(286)

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

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

In the dialogues of *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris is not concerned so much with evoking a marvelous landscape or “garden dil[i]table” such as is described in *The Romance of the Rose* (tr. Chaucer, line 1440), as with pointing the way to a socialist ideal. He is as concerned with a social earthly paradise as with an architectural one. When, for example, the narrator tells a tale of Iceland (a place which had always been one of Morris’s ideals of community) to the folk at the Rose, one of his listeners answers: “Yea, in that land was the summer short and the winter long; but men lived both summer and winter; and if the trees grew

ill and the corn throve not, yet did the plant called man thrive and do well” (224). The short summers and long winters of Iceland are a far cry from the blissful transcendent realms described in *Pearl* or *The Romance of the Rose*, but Morris still sees that society as ideal for its sense of fellowship and co-operation. In spite of the good weather for the duration of the dream’s action, Morris’s practical nature will not allow him to imagine a world with no “grevance ther of hoot ne colde” (*Parliament of Fowls*, line 205). Although Lyman Tower Sargent characterizes the ideal life “when ye lack masters” that John Ball predicts in his speech at the cross as “an idealized peasant society with a touch of the golden age or the arcadia” (Sargent 66), even the passage he quotes does not fail to acknowledge the possibility of times “when the seasons are untowards, and the raindrift hideth the sheaves in August” (*Dream* 237).

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

architecture precisely as it was executed in the fourteenth century; and after all, one of the prominent characteristics of the church is its “fitness.”

When John Ball asks the narrator if he comes from “the King’s Son of Heaven,” the answer is, of course, negative (268). The world of the dream in *A Dream of John Ball* seems to be a world between heaven (the marvelous, the ideal) and the everyday (the human, the mundane), just as the concept of the earthly paradise recalls the interpenetration of flesh and spirit which Lynch recognizes in the dream-vision: “the relationship between [the dreamer’s] corporeal and spiritual natures” (52). The earthly paradise as it appeared in the fourteenth-century dream-vision seemed to occupy a place between earth and heaven, partaking of both yet attaining to neither. It was an ideal, rather than an actuality. None of Morris’s works dealing with the earthly paradise describe the *attainment* thereof. This, too, is in keeping with the spirit of the medieval visions. As Morris’s wanderers find in *The Earthly Paradise* and as the jeweler discovers in *Pearl*, the earthly paradise is unattainable for mortals in any permanent sense.

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

roads towards freedom, and found that they led nowhither, then shall they try yet another" (*Dream* 276). Carole Silver remarks of the Prologue to *The Earthly Paradise* that

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

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

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

The dream-vision was a non-restrictive convention in spite of its didacticism; or, rather, its didacticism was of a non-restrictive nature. The dream-vision allowed for fantastic events, characters, and architectures; it made authoritative statements which were not meant as “final words” on the subject, but were rather part of an ongoing dialectic; most importantly, like allegory it pointed towards an ideal which the reader was relied upon to discover actively. Although Morris believed he had a very important message to convey, like his master Chaucer he was under no illusions about the definitive nature of his message. When John Ball tells the narrator that “scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of the days beyond thine to tell what shall be, as thou hast told me, for I know not if that shall help or hinder thee” (286), he is not only anticipating the yet-to-be-written *News From Nowhere*, he is underlining the ambiguous nature of the dream experience as Morris and the fourteenth-century dream-poets saw it. The vision described in *The Parliament of Fowls*, after all, only made its dreamer desirous of dreaming more (“I hope, iwis, to rede so, somday, / That I shal mete some thyng for to fare / The bet,” lines 692-4). Whether Ball’s and the narrator’s dream-vision is ultimately to be a help or a hindrance, its “true” nature is purposely as elusive as the earthly paradise.

Standing behind the solid visual detail in *A Dream of John Ball* is Morris’s ideal art of the people. For William Morris, the spirit of a popular art expressed itself in those times when the worker was as free as possible to create; that spirit would thus be most fully developed in a communist society, attaining to new and ever-varied forms. To Morris, all this was inherent in the medieval literary tradition itself; Morris’s concern with the possibilities of life as they had been and

as they might one day be in more creative epochs is a natural outgrowth of his immersion in the art and literature of the Middle Ages and of the dream-vision's concern with the real and the ideal. The tangible relics of the past, the hopeful strife of the present, and the possibilities of the future combine in Morris's dream-visions, which are no more imitations of Chaucer than his socialism is an imitation of Marx.

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, in August of 1887 Morris received from William Bell Scott a copy of the *Kingis Quair* that Scott had illustrated himself and printed privately for his friends. From Morris's letter of thanks to Scott for the volume, it appears that Scott had sent a number of his etchings for the poem on to Morris some time before (*Letters* 2: 685). This particular dream-vision may have been before Morris in a very visual form during the writing of *A Dream of John Ball*.