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William Morris: the romance of home

The central concern of this paper is to defend the romanticism of William Morris's socialism. It focuses on a particular debate about the relationship between his masterpiece, *News From Nowhere*, and one of his late prose romances, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. I consider the argument, forcefully developed by Roderick Marshall, that Morris's decision to publish the latter book signalled his rejection of the political ideal captured in *News From Nowhere*. This argument rests on the contention that Morris's books treat the same, highly romantic image of socialism in radically different ways. *News From Nowhere* celebrates it as utopia. In contrast *The Glittering Plain* reveals that it is in fact a dystopia. This revision, Marshall argues, suggests that at the end of his life, Morris adopted an anti-utopian – and in some respects, an anti-socialist - position. Against this view, I argue that the utopia described in *News From Nowhere* differs in important ways from the dystopia depicted in *The Glittering Plain*. Far from representing a rejection of utopia, this second book affirms Morris's commitment to socialism. His image of the future is romantic, but should not therefore be dismissed as vapid or sentimental. Looking again at the relationship between *News From Nowhere* and *The Glittering Plain*, I consider the implications of this reading for Morris's peculiarly English treatment of the landscape. Defending Morris against those who detect a conservative and regressive streak in this treatment, I argue that Morris used Englishness as an instance of home: a place defined by particularity but universally identifiable, through instinctive recognition, as an

area of comfort and ease.

1. News From Nowhere and the Glittering Plain

On first reading, it is not obvious why a comparison of *News From Nowhere* and *The Glittering Plain* should be useful. *News From Nowhere* is framed by an overtly political argument about the character of socialism, between anarchists 'up at the League' (the Socialist League, Morris's campaigning organisation) and two other comrades, one who dreams of the future and the other who describes this dream in the story. The text of this story is driven by a series of conversations between Guest, the visitor to the future, and a variety of Nowhere's inhabitants (the most important of which are Old Hammond and Ellen) which provide a running critique of late Victorian capitalism through the analysis of communism. As David Leopold points out, these conversations have a historical and geographical location.¹ Set in the twenty-third century, the book follows Guest's travels through London, up the Thames to Oxfordshire - from Kelmscott House, Morris's house in Hammersmith, South West London, to Kelmscott Manor, his Elizabethan home near the Gloucestershire border.

Morris called *Nowhere* a 'utopian romance', a term which aptly captures the book's spirit without giving much indication of its political significance. But even admitting the vagaries of Morris's subtitle it is clear that *Nowhere* falls into an entirely different genre to *The Glittering Plain*: this book is a fantasy. It relates the story of Hallblithe and his quest to rescue his love,

¹ D. Leopold, introduction to *News From Nowhere*, p. xxvii.

the Hostage, from bondage to the King of the Glittering Plain. The King, who has lured Hallblithe to the Plain for the sake of his lovesick daughter, lords over a land of everlasting life. Hallblithe refers to this as the 'land of the undying' but desperate seekers of eternal youth call it the land of living men. Admittedly, Morris builds real landscapes into the story and injects it with a clear medieval flavour - not least through his prose style. But in contrast to *News From Nowhere*, *The Glittering Plain* is set in an unspecified historical and geographical location and it has no political context. Whereas *News From Nowhere* brims full of the ideas that Morris discussed in his other political essays, in *The Glittering Plain* these are almost entirely absent.

Nevertheless, some Morris scholars have treated *News From Nowhere* and *The Glittering Plain* as a pair. In his 1979 study, *William Morris and his Earthly Paradises*, Roderick Marshall argued that *The Plain* was written to qualify the easy optimism of *News From Nowhere* and to review and revise the socialist ideas it contained. He was encouraged in this belief in part because Morris wrote them concurrently. *Nowhere* first appeared in 1890, serialised in the socialist journal, *Commonweal*, to be published in book form, with substantial revisions, the following year. *The Plain* also appeared in 1891, significantly the first work to be published by his own Kelmscott Press. But Marshall was not just concerned with publication dates. For the most part, his argument rests on the remarkable similarity he detects in the imagery of utopia and the very different ways in which Morris treats these images. In one respect, Marshall argued, the 'differences between *Nowhere* and *The Plain* (...) are mainly superficial, having to do with setting, chronology, and

adventures'. In the other, 'they clash on one of two essential matters'.²

Turning first to their agreement, Marshall suggested that both books depict lands of perfection characterised by youthfulness, physical beauty, social harmony and abundance. Both are near anarchies, (notwithstanding the existence of the King in *The Glittering Plain*) and neither have need of military or judicial systems. Finally, both are lands of leisure. Nowhere provides its people with 'the "rest and happiness of complete Communism"', (Morris subtitled the book, *An Epoch of Rest*). The King of the Plain, though not a communist, also describes his land as a world of 'rest'.³

When Marshall considered the differences between Morris's two works, he was struck by the absence of 'polemical discussions' in *The Glittering Plain* and, above all, by Hallblithe's desire to escape from the paradise he finds. Whereas Guest realises that he belongs to the past and that he cannot stay in Nowhere, Hallblithe fights to leave the Plain. These differences, Marshall argued, have a clear political significance: they suggest that Morris wanted to disengage himself from socialism ('[f]ed up with the endless jabber about dialectical materialism'), having finally come to realise that a communism was an impossible dream.⁴

In his introduction to the 1996 edition of *The Plain*, Norman Talbot echoes Marshall's view. *The Glittering Plain*, he argues, is 'indeed paradisaical, and specifically like the far-future "Nowhere" Morris had constructed less than a year earlier'. Both Guest and Hallblithe find 'happy, industrious and free-loving folk, who retain their youth and beauty for most of a very long lifespan'. Though *The Glittering Plain* has little to say about work or leisure, Talbot also

² Roderick Marshall, *William Morris and his Earthly Paradises*, p. 274.

³ Marshall, *Idem* p. 275.

⁴ Marshall, *Idem*, p. 279.

finds that the inhabitants of both places 'enjoy craftwork and outdoor labour, music and dancing, eating and drinking, and especially loving their neighbours'. His conclusions are entirely in accord with Marshall's thesis. In *The Plain*, Talbot argues 'Morris discovers that he has unfinished business with Nowhere'.⁵ Indeed, when he revisits his utopia in *The Glittering Plain*, he firmly rejects it. Talbot argues: 'Marshall's comparison with Nowhere shows that from the viewpoint of the Glittering Plain Hallblithe is (...) a blight on innocent happiness'.⁶ Morris's hero celebrates a 'readiness to live a wholly mortal life', a 'life worth living' that does not 'seek to control the future, nor submit itself to a rule of deathless power'. Through Hallblithe Morris 'finds he prefers the vitality of human beings to "an epoch of rest".⁷

At the heart of these arguments is the contention that *News From Nowhere* and *The Glittering Plain* both model a mythic land of perfection that Morris first probed this idea in his early poetry, notably the four-volume *The Earthly Paradise*, written before he became a socialist in 1883. As Marshall argues, *The Glittering Plain* is only a 'more thrilling' version of this myth.⁸ Talbot follows suit. Though there is a twist in the tale, *The Glittering Plain* begins as 'just another version of that old chestnut, the quest for a Promised Land, a Heaven on Earth'. Its contrasting axioms 'are that you'd have to be a damn fool not to be tempted by the glittering legend of an Earthly Paradise of eternal youth, love and unselfish happiness - and a damner fool to be seduced by it'.⁹ In Marshall's view, the earthly paradise was not merely a hallmark of Morris's literature it reflected his deep yearning to find fellowship

⁵ Norman Talbot, introduction to *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, p. xxxiv.

⁶ Talbot, *Idem*, p. xxvi.

⁷ Talbot, *Idem*, p. xxxvi.

⁸ Marshall, *Earthly Paradises*, p. 279.

⁹ Talbot, introduction, p. xxvii

and love in his own life. Analysing Morris's life through this prism, he is deeply sympathetic to the desires that paradise represents. Nevertheless, he suggests that the dream-like world Morris wished to create reflected a nostalgic conservatism. The widely held view of Morris's early poems is that they are 'mere embroideries, tapestries (...) in verse meant to decorate (...) life with mythic images arranged in repetitive patterns'. Morris produced masterpieces of 'escapist literature, ignoring tragedy, never piercing below the surface psychologically'. It was as if he wanted his readers to 'forget the dull and pointless lives they lived among the sordid squalor they were every day compounding for themselves and for the world'. Marshall admits the criticism and suggests that this view contains 'a grain of truth'.¹⁰

Marshall's willingness to link *News From Nowhere* with this romantic and escapist literature and to represent *The Glittering Plain* as its critique is encouraged by the comparison he draws between Morris's earthly paradises and Carl Jung's mandala - an archetypal dream of psychic unity and completeness. As a consequence of this comparison, Marshall's attention is drawn to the set of symbols Morris used to signify the attainment of paradise: enclosed gardens, orchards, cloisters, pavilions, fountains, fire-lit halls and, at the centre of these, the female figure.¹¹ Admittedly, in *News From Nowhere*, the mandala is painted on a slightly larger canvass than it is in *The Glittering Plain*. Indeed, whereas the Plain appears as a paradise set apart from the real world, there is no mandala within Nowhere, for Nowhere is the mandala. Yet Marshall is convinced that the Plain describes the same quality of space as Nowhere and he turns to Morris's descriptions of his female characters to

¹⁰ Marshall, *Earthly Paradises*, p. 59.

¹¹ Marshall, *Idem*, pp. ix; 86.

demonstrate this relationship. *The Glittering Plain*, he notes, 'is a land of glorious semi-nudity where permissiveness prevails by day and night, and the women of Nowhere take other mates *ad libitum* (...)'. In a similar vein, he comments:

As has often been pointed out, Guest, the dreamer from the nineteenth century, never encounters a single ugly, aged or sexually unattractive woman in Nowhere. This also holds true for the women of the Glittering Plain, who are "exceedingly fair of skin and shapely of fashion, so that the nakedness of their limbs under their girded gowns, and all glistening with the sea, was most lovely and dainty to behold". In that land, where it is always summer, they dress in garments of gauze, but the women of Nowhere, where there is said to be some procession of seasons, dress just as lightly.¹²

Talbot arrives at a similar conclusion by a different route. Instead of focussing on the symbols Morris used to describe paradise, he considers the unreality of the image that Morris created. For all its lush abundance, peace and beauty, Hallblithe considers the Plain to be a 'land of lies'. Not only does the King mislead him about the whereabouts of the Hostage, so becoming a 'King of lies', the apparent tranquillity of the Plain conceals the slavish condition to which he has reduced his people. In this respect, Talbot argues, Morris treats the Plain as a metaphor for Victorian rule: hidden behind the pomp and ceremony of monarchy is a world of poverty and commercial slavery. Yet the message of the book is not about the evils of monarchical rule, it is that the promise of perfection is itself misleading. The idea of paradise is a lie. And because Talbot, like Marshall, identifies the Plain as the same paradise as Nowhere, and because the hero Hallblithe rejects it, he argues that *The Glittering Plain* has an entirely different cast from *News From Nowhere*. The book is rightly regarded as a romance, but one that 'subverts

¹² Marshall, *Idem*, pp. 274-5.

exactly (...) sentimental quest-romance, and the self-pity born of infatuations with “images”.¹³

The persuasiveness of these arguments is that they seem to tie in with a well-established interpretation of the British romantic tradition and of Morris's place within it. This interpretation distinguishes the dynamic idealism inspired by the French Revolution, encapsulated in the life of Byron and the political radicalism of Shelley, from the sentimental conservatism which followed in the wake of the counter-revolution and was most famously embraced in the medievalism of Sir Walter Scott. Morris did not distinguish between these early and late traditions, but his scattered remarks suggest a lukewarm appreciation of the earlier generation and an enormous affinity with Scott. Indeed, on more than one occasion he identified Scott as the most powerful influence on his early work. Little wonder then that his work should exhibit the hallmarks of the late Victorian movement and the consoling and nostalgic themes that Wagner dismissed as bourgeois entertainment.¹⁴

There is a danger, however, that this view of British romanticism has had a distorting effect on the interpretation of Morris's work and that it may itself be distorted. In particular, Marshall tends to overemphasise the importance of the symbols - the visual images - that Morris used in his literature at the cost of analysing the values and ideas they were supposed to signify. For example, he is so taken with the symbolic beauty of Morris's women that he apparently ignores the independence and self-will they possess in *Nowhere*, in contrast to the women who inhabit the Plain. On his arrival at the Land of the Glittering Plain, Hallblithe's shipmate, the Sea-eagle,

¹³ Talbot, 'Introduction', p. xxv.

¹⁴ M. Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, p. 149.

'turned about to three maidens and took them by the hands and kissed their lips, while they fawned upon him lovingly'.¹⁵ He then selects one of these women - the 'fairest of the damsels (...) white-skinned and fragrant as the lily, rose-cheeked and slender' - to be his mate. She has neither a name, nor even a memory of having had one. Still, she is there for the Sea-eagle's taking,

so he cast his arms about her and strained her to his bosom, and kissed her face many times, and she nothing loth, [reluctant or unwilling] but caressing him with lips and hand. But the other two damsels stood by smiling and joyous: and they clapped their hands together and kissed each other for the joy of the new lover; and at last fell to dancing and skipping about them like young lambs in the meadows of Spring-tide.¹⁶

Even by the standards of Nowhere, this is strange behaviour. When Ellen first meets Clara she kisses 'her new friend' and breaks into 'a sweet shrill song'. But she resists fondling any or all of the men.¹⁷ Guest comments on her 'capacity and intelligence', her 'love of pleasure' and 'impatience of unreasonable restraint'. Through their joint reflection, she contrasts her life as it is in Nowhere to what it would have been had she been born into Morris's age.

"I should have been one of the poor [...] Well, I could not have borne that; therefore my beauty and cleverness and brightness" (she spoke with no blush or simper of false shame) "would have been sold to rich men, and my life would have been wasted indeed; for I know enough of that to know that I should have had no choice, no power of will over my life; and that I should never have bought pleasure from the rich men, or even opportunity of action, whereby I might have won some true excitement. I should have wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or by luxury".¹⁸

Talbot's focus on the unreality of Morris's images has a similarly

¹⁵ W. Morris, *The Land of the Glittering Plain*, p. 255.

¹⁶ Morris, *Idem*, p. 255.

¹⁷ W. Morris, *News From Nowhere*, p. 132.

¹⁸ Morris, *Idem*, p. 176.

distorting effect. None of the three principal 'lies' told by the King of the Plain - the promise of eternal youth, everlasting love and permanent rest - are recreated in Nowhere. Nowhere is Guest's dream of a world reformed, but unlike the Plain, it is a mortal world and everything on it is subject to change: death and renewal. Indeed, Guest's worry that the people of Nowhere pay insufficient attention to the past, risking the opportunities to learn from it and perhaps repeating earlier mistakes, is indicative of his sense of Nowhere's transitory status. Though Ellen is not convinced of this, she is at least willing to listen to Guest's warnings of complacency. Life on the Plain is very different. When Hallblithe asks whether he's arrived on the fabled land, the damsel replies: "dost though not see how the sun shineth on it? Just so it shineth in the season that other folks call winter". And when he compares it to other places, she tells him that "we have nought but hearsay of other lands. If we ever knew them we have forgotten them".¹⁹ In contrast to both the Plain, where there is no memory and no sense of time, and to Morris's own period, where there is a mistaken belief that the future can be controlled, in Nowhere the people have an intimate relationship with the changing environment. As Clara notes, the mistake of Morris's contemporaries was to think of 'everything (...) animate and inanimate - "nature" (...) - as one thing, and mankind as another. In Nowhere, people adopt a very different attitude. At the end of Guest's journey, Ellen declares: 'The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say how I love it!'²⁰

Similarly, in Nowhere Guest is told that love remains impermanent. Even the most devoted lovers - Dick and Clara for example - fall out of love.

¹⁹ Morris, *Glittering Plain*, p. 253.

²⁰ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 174.

Indeed, Guest is told that love is the only remaining source of conflict in Nowhere. Though men have attempted to mitigate the social costs of love's failure by abandoning marriage (freeing women to indulge their inconstancy), they are resigned to suffer all the unhappiness and confusion that love brings.²¹ Everlasting love is achieved only in death and usually through manly sacrifice; and Guest's departure from Nowhere, freeing Ellen from his love, suggests that twenty-third century people remain bound by this nineteenth century conception. On the Plain, things are quite different. Here, love has been abandoned in favour of fantasy. All desires, save that of the King's daughter for Hallblithe, are realised. As a result, the people - men and women - have lost all sense of feeling and emotion. Love is endless only because the people of the Plain cannot appreciate its loss. Hallblithe is told, 'this land is happy, and nought but happy people dwell herein'. Moreover, though the King's daughter lives 'in sorrow', forever staring at his picture, she does not love Hallblithe as he loves the Hostage: she has fallen in love with an image, not a person.²²

Finally, whereas the people of the Plain live in idleness, those in Nowhere are creative and industrious. Hallblithe is distinguished by his activity, setting about 'his quest as a craftsman sets about his work in the morning'. When he makes the boat that furnishes his escape, like a medieval artisan he knows 'the whole craft thereof'.²³ Everyone else on the Plain is rather puzzled by his activity. Observing the 'great strokes' he 'smitest', one of the men asks: 'what shall all thy toil win thee?'²⁴ Like him, the people of

²¹ Morris, *Idem*, p. 49.

²² Morris, *Glittering Plain*, p. 271.

²³ Morris, *Idem*, p. 294.

²⁴ Morris, *Idem*, p. 295

the Plain spend their time playing and feasting, picking flowers and laughing. They are 'soft merry folk' who have 'no skill to help him'.²⁵ They have clothes, food, tools, beasts, vineyards and farms but play no obvious role in the provision or care of these possessions. The King is the 'Gift-giver and assurer of joy'. As he tells Sea-eagle "'I deem not that thine heart may conceive a desire which I shall not fulfil for thee, or crave a gift which I shall not give thee'.²⁶ In Nowhere, where ownership has been abolished and art reborn, industry is no longer considered work but instead enjoyed as pleasure. Nevertheless, the people of Nowhere recognise the difference between purposefulness and aimlessness. Guest is told that they have learned 'the trick of handicraft'. Their time is spent - like Hallblithe's - in pursuit of 'the utmost refinement of workmanship' combined with 'the freedom of fancy and imagination'.²⁷ So, whilst the gap between work and leisure has been overcome, the result is continuously gainful activity. Even in repose, Ellen is 'far from languid; her idleness being the idleness of a person, strong and well-knit both in body and mind, deliberately resting'.²⁸

Talbot and Marshall are right to point out that Hallblithe does not seek a dream, "'but rather the end of dreams'" so that he can to live (and die) with hope in the real world beyond the Plain.²⁹ Their mistake is to conflate the paradise he finds with Guest's dream of utopia and to use his experience of the Plain as a commentary on Nowhere. Hallblithe has far more in common with the people in Nowhere than he does with those on the Plain. And if Morris illustrates anything in his two stories, it is that the Plain corrupts and

²⁵ Morris, *Idem*, p. 271.

²⁶ Morris, *Idem*, p. 261.

²⁷ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 155.

²⁸ Morris, *Idem*, p. 162.

²⁹ Morris, *Glittering Plain*, pp. 273-4.

denies the conditions of real life that Nowhere enhances and perfects.

If Morris was not trying, through his use of imagery, to evoke in *News From Nowhere* an earthly paradise that he would subsequently reject as illusory in *The Glittering Plain*, what light do these books shed on the Morris's romanticism? The answer to this question is suggested by a conversation in *News From Nowhere* between Guest and Ellen about knowledge and history. Ellen says: 'I should be quite content to dream about past times, and if I could not idealise them, yet at least idealise some of the people who lived in them'. Her pleasure in these musings is not a sign of self-indulgence. She fears complacency. People, she continues, 'are too careless of the history of the past'. Even in Nowhere, "happy as we are, times may alter; (...) many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid"³⁰. The conversation has a double significance. First, it identifies romance - the habit of dreamy musing - with history. Second, it points to a dynamic conception of history. On the first point, Morris's conception echoed eighteenth century usages. Even though 'romance' was then used as a literary term, it suggested 'the archaic and remote culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance'.³¹ Morris expressed his understanding of this idea in his 1889 address to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Posing the question: 'what does romance mean', he answered: 'what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present'.³² On

³⁰ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 167.

³¹ M. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, p. 1.

³² W. Morris, Lecture to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 12th Annual Meeting, July 1889, in M. Morris, *William Morris: Artist Writer, Socialist*, p. 148.

the second point, Morris does not suggest that romance offers a route to escape the reality of the present. He suggests that it is an instrument through which individuals might reflect on and understand their current predicament and/or the precariousness of the life they treasure. In her romance Ellen considers the danger of acting in ignorance of history and the unintended consequences these actions might have. The complexity of the historical process was a theme close to Morris's heart and one that he developed more fully in *The Dream John Ball*. At one point in this story, Morris warns John Ball that whilst the victory of his struggle is ultimately assured, his revolt will end in immediate defeat: if nineteenth century workers learned the lessons of the past they might avoid committing the same mistakes.

These men are strong and valiant as any that have been or shall be, and good fellows also and kindly; but they are simple, and see no great way before their own noses. The victory shall they have and shall not know what to do with it; they shall fight and overcome, because of their lack of knowledge, and because of their lack of knowledge shall they be cozened and betrayed when their captains are slain, and all shall come to nought by seeming (...).³³

News From Nowhere is no more a simple tale of the past's recovery or an otherworldly fantasy than *The Dream of John Ball*. Its imagery paints an idealised picture of the future in order to highlight the unpleasantness of the present and demonstrate, through its transcendence in communism, how this ruination came about and what its future remedy requires. Certainly, *News From Nowhere* is a romantic vision of socialism and for most technologically developed capitalist states it appears impractical. Yet it is more than mere sentimentalism.

In a brief reflection on Scott's Romanticism, Isaiah Berlin wrote 'that by

³³ W. Morris, *The Dream of John Ball*, 95

painting these very attractive and delightful and hypnotic pictures of these ages he place alongside (...) the values of the early nineteenth century (...) another set of values, equally good if not better'. In doing so, Scott 'shattered the possibility that every age is as good as it can be, and is indeed advancing to an even better one'.³⁴ Berlin's view of romanticism was shaped by a particular critique of Enlightenment thinking. Nonetheless, in pointing to what he sees as Romanticism's philosophical impulse Berlin usefully challenges the idea that it can be defined solely with reference to the politics or behaviour of its leading figures. Marilyn Butler makes the same point: romanticism is far too protean and diverse to be categorised in this way. Moreover, Berlin's comments shed some light on Morris's project. Perhaps Morris's images of twenty-third century medievalism in *News From Nowhere* were an attempt to show his readers that they could vastly improve the quality of their lives by re-ordering their values. In *Nowhere* choice and efficiency give way to beauty and pleasure. Morris was a revolutionary who believed fervently that the workers should fight to destroy the commercial system. But he hoped the promise of *Nowhere* might also encourage them to rediscover what was valuable about the past, and not discard it all as outmoded or otherworldly.

2. *Englishness*

One of the problems scholars have identified with Morris's romantic image of socialism is that it bears a politically narrowing cultural stamp. Discussion of Morris's 'Englishness' is usually focused on his understanding of early English history and the relationship between his concept of nationality and his critique

³⁴ I. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 136-7.

of Victorian imperialism.³⁵ In contrast, this argument turns on use Morris makes of the landscape – particularly in *News From Nowhere*. As Michelle Weinroth argues scholars eager to defend Morris’s revolutionary credentials have been deeply disturbed by this usage, for its “Englishness” suggests a patriotic fervour at odds with his socialism. On a crude reading of the thesis Morris’s representation of the landscape suggests a willingness to affirm a class-bound pattern of land ownership and/or an idea of the nation that sits uneasily with his professed internationalism.³⁶ Given Old Hammond’s lengthy discourses on the achievements of the revolution, the abolition of property ownership, the abandonment of government and international geo-political divisions, these suggestions seem faintly ridiculous. More nuanced versions of the thesis suggest the possibility that Morris’s image of England evokes an ideal that is inherently conservative, even whilst Morris attempted to subvert it. This is Weinroth’s view. Morris’s romanticism, she argues, ‘is imbued with an Englishness which Conservative rhetoricians have stamped as decidedly ruling class’.³⁷ Perhaps Morris himself suspected that this might be the case, once describing his love of the sythe as reactionary. Yet the idea that his vision might be described in this way points to the simplified politicisation of late romanticism that underpins the critique of *Nowhere* as an unearthly paradise of cosy sentimentalism. Once the idea that late British romanticism is necessarily conservative is challenged, it is possible to treat Morris’s image of England as one of his sites of struggle - not an emblem of cultural

³⁵ For a discussion see Kinna, R., ‘Morris and the Problem of Englishness’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, forthcoming.

³⁶ N. Gilbert, ‘The Landscape of Resistance in Morris’s *News from Nowhere*’, *Journal of the William Morris Society*, 16:1 (2004), p. 22.

³⁷ M. Weinroth, *Reclaiming William Morris: Englishness, Sublimity, & the Rhetoric of Dissent*, p.10.

imperialism or national pride.

There are two distinctive features about Morris's treatment of the landscape in *Nowhere*. Guest's lengthy description of Hampton Court, just before the start of his boat trip up the Thames to Oxfordshire, is illustrative:

As we went higher up the river, there was less difference between the Thames of that day and the Thames as I remembered it; for setting aside the hideous vulgarity of the cockney villas of the well-to-do, stockbrokers and other such, which in older time marred the beauty of the bough-hung banks, even this beginning of the country Thames was always beautiful; and as we lipped between the lovely summer greenery, I almost felt (...) as if I were on one of those water excursions which I used to enjoy so much in days when I was too happy to think that there could be much amiss anywhere.

At last we came to a reach of the river where on the left hand a very pretty little village with some old houses in it came down to the edge of the water (...) and beyond these houses the elm-beset meadows ended in a fringe of tall willows, while on the right-hand went the tow-path and a clear space before a row of trees, which rose up behind huge and ancient, the ornaments of a great park: but these drew back still further from the river at the end of the reach to make way for a little town of quaint and pretty houses, some new, some old, dominated by the long walls and sharp gables of a great red-brick pile of building (...) but so blended together by the bright sun and beautiful surroundings (...) that even amidst the beautiful building of that new happy time it had a strange charm about it. A great wave of fragrance, amidst which the lime-tree blossom was clearly to be distinguished, came down to us from its unseen gardens (...)³⁸

First, the landscape Guest describes is familiar. Indeed, Morris emphasises its familiarity by referring back to the river excursion he took with friends in 1880.³⁹ Morris does not give readers an image of a bye-gone age, but instead presents a picture of the landscape taken from his present, with the obstacles to its enjoyment - the well-to-do houses - excised. Morris had

³⁸ Morris, *Nowhere*, pp. 125-6.

³⁹ An account of the trip, 'Description of an expedition by boat from Kelmscott House Upper Mall Hammersmith to Kelmscott Manor Lechlade Oxfordshire with Critical Notes' is in the British Library, BM. Add. MS. 45407A. His correspondence on the excursion is in N. Kelvin, *Collected Letters of William Morris*, vol. 1, pp. 579-83. A useful account is given in P. Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends*, pp. 261-4.

identified the body to be excised on the 1880 trip. His comment on passing the 'ugliest' part of the river was: 'a mountain before a plain; a plain before a suburb, a suburb before a dust heap, a dust heap before a sewer, but a sewer before a gentleman's house'.⁴⁰ In *Nowhere*, the removal of these blots on the landscape had been achieved by the rediscovery of construction materials - and methods - used in the Middle Ages. Moving further up the river, Guest contrasts the ugliness of "'Gothic" cast-iron bridges' to their 'handsome oak and stone' replacements.⁴¹ Here, however, the builders do not replicate what has been before: the landscape has been constructed afresh by its modern inhabitants. As Guest notes, some of the houses at Hampton Court are new. And to underline the point Old Hammond distinguishes between three aesthetic periods in construction: the early medieval period, when 'England was (...) a country of clearings amongst the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed'; the second, the commercial era characterised by 'huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by masters of the workshops'; and the last, the epoch of rest, where England is 'a garden (...) with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty'.⁴² Morris, like Scott before him, accepts 'the irreversibility of history'.⁴³ The people of the future have not attempted to turn the clock back. Indeed, the idea that they would have done was inimical to all that Morris stood for in his campaigns against restoration. In his view, the problem of capitalism was that it had destroyed the skills necessary for the upkeep of the

⁴⁰ *Idem.* fol. 4.

⁴¹ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 137.

⁴² Morris, *Idem*, p. 62.

⁴³ Butler, *Romantics*, p. 111

monuments of the pre-capitalist era - not that it had become impossible to build in old styles. In the future, when art was reborn, the landscape would be built by crafts people animated by the spirit that had pervaded the medieval guilds, but not with any desire slavishly to mimic their work.

The second feature of Morris's landscape is its variability. Even at this one small stretch of the river the country is put to different uses and the buildings marking it are distinguished by their peculiarities. The result is not a mess. On the contrary, the landscape and the build environment form a coherent whole. Morris explains this achievement by the empathy and sensitivity the inhabitants of Nowhere feel for their surroundings. They do not merely treasure the beauty of the natural world and attempt to preserve it - fencing off designated area as parks, nature reserves or areas of special scientific interest.⁴⁴ They feel themselves to be a part of it. Like Ellen, they experience themselves through the ebb and flow of the seasons: there is no 'other' to the natural world. As a consequence, the landscape in Nowhere is constructed in a wholly benign way. In the post-revolutionary world, Piers Hale rightly notes, labour becomes 'a process through which humanity might rekindle a harmonious relationship with the rest of the natural world'.⁴⁵ In other words, from art comes beauty. Today, Morris's ideal might be described as one of 'unity in diversity'. Morris described the constructed landscape in the term 'character'. For example, up the river at Pangbourne, Guest sees 'five large houses (...) very carefully designed so as not to hurt the character

⁴⁴ This point is sometimes misunderstood and the scope of Morris's ambition misunderstood. For a short commentary on Morris and preservation see J.B. Foster, 'William Morris's Letters on Epping Forest', *Organization & Environment*, pp. 90-4.

⁴⁵ Piers J. Hale, 'Labor and the Human Relationship with Nature: The Naturalization of Politics in the Work of Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert George Wells, and William Morris', *Journal of the History of Biology*, p. 280.

of the country'.⁴⁶ By building in character the people of Nowhere encourage flora and fauna to thrive, (at Pangbourne Guest remarks on the number of birds, predatory and non-predatory, in the area) further emphasising both the unity of the natural and constructed environment and the local diversity of the landscape.

In *News From Nowhere* the landscape Morris describes is English, because this is the land he knew and loved (even whilst describing himself as a Welshman). Yet the real significance of the landscape in Nowhere is not that it captures an anodyne picture of England - still less Merrie England – an anodyne image designed to stir patriotic hearts. Certainly, Morris's image is sensuous. And as Weinroth notes, political conservatives have been able to paint Morris's picture as one that 'inspires a desire for psychic fulfilment' without too much difficulty (to return to Marshall's analysis, England becomes the mandala). But Morris's idea of England is not realisable through the senses alone. The England of Nowhere has been brought into being by a violent revolutionary struggle. And it was because the inhabitants waged war against slavery and commercialism that they were able to re-define their relationship to the natural world. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, Old Hammond tells Guest, the 'town invaded the country'. In time, 'the invaders (...) yielded to the influence of their surroundings, and became country people', vivifying the country 'by the thought and briskness of town-bred folk'.⁴⁷ In short, they made the landscape their own; and Morris's attempt to capture its image is an attempt to describe what they made of it - their home.

⁴⁶ Morris, *Nowhere*, 146.

⁴⁷ Morris, *Idem*, p. 62.

The significance Morris attached to home is indicated in *The Glittering Plain*, as well as *News From Nowhere*. Whilst he is on the Plain, Hallblithe longs to return to 'Cleveland by the Sea and dwell in the House of the Kindred (...) to behold the roof of his fathers and to tread the meadow which his scythe had swept, and the acres where his hook had smitten the wheat'.⁴⁸ Indeed, as M.M. Patterson Muir noted in 1909, the same theme recurs in many of Morris's prose romances. Before setting out on the dangerous journey to the water of life, Ralph, the hero of his 1896 fantasy, *The Well at the World's End*, remarks: 'When I have accomplished this quest, I would get me home again to the little land of Upmeads (...)'.⁴⁹ Turning his attention to another two of Morris's romances, Patterson Muir finds:

The adventures of the seekers after the Well were impossible in any other country save that set before the reader of *The Well at the World's End*. Birdalone could not have lived and love, and been glad and sad, and at last satisfied with love, anywhere except in the strange lands around the great water of *The Wonderous Isles*. The adventures of Elfhind and Osberne depend almost wholly on the character of the countries on the two sides of *The Sundering Flood*. Scarcely any other writer has so completely bound up the scenery of his stories with the characters, the joys, and the sorrows of those of whom the stories tell.⁵⁰

In all these stories, Morris is careful to preserve the idea of mutability and change in the landscape and to show that 'home' can mean different things to different people. Thus, as Patterson Muir notes, the 'scenery in which each Romance is set has an intimate and personal character of its own'.⁵¹ However, the clearest signal Morris gives of his understanding of the landscape comes in the use he makes of Kelmscott Manor, his own beloved

⁴⁸ Morris, *Glittering Plain*, p. 263.

⁴⁹ Quoted in M.M. Patterson Muir, 'Prose Romances of William Morris', *Oxford and Cambridge Review*, p. 39.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, p. 45.

⁵¹ *Idem*.

home in Oxfordshire. In both *News From Nowhere* and *The Glittering Plain*, the Manor is described as a place of comfort and love. Hallblithe sees the house 'grey, ancient, and lovely' in a dream that leads him to find the Hostage.⁵² In *News From Nowhere* the Manor is Guest's final destination. When he arrives Ellen introduces him to it. Marvelling at its beauty as he marvels at hers, she senses - as he does - that the house's purpose has been finally realised. 'It seems to me', she tells him 'as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past'.⁵³ Guest, of course, cannot stay but he knows that he has finally arrived at the place he most wants to be.

3. Conclusion

What then, was Morris's image of utopia: medieval or modern, romantic or revolutionary? I have argued that it is a blend of all these currents of thought. Morris's socialism was romantic, but this does not make him a utopian of the wrong sort: an egalitarian with conservative leanings; someone who harked back to a pre-industrial, medieval world that had been exploded by capitalism and that socialism could not (and should not) attempt to resurrect. *News From Nowhere* paints a romantic picture of socialism that is strongly English. His picture is neither wholly archaic, inherently conservative nor necessarily patriotic. The squirearchy might revel in Morris's love of the countryside just as feminists will worry about the domestic arrangements masked by the comforts of home. It is surely no more reasonable to deny Morris's

⁵² Morris, *Glittering Plain*, p. 293.

⁵³ Morris, *Nowhere*, 173.

romanticism in order to reject the charge of conservatism than it would be to deny or ignore feminist concerns. Morris's utopia describes an idea of individual (and communal) well-being associated with a by-gone - medieval - past.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the image of Nowhere, like the image of life *beyond* the Plain, is an image of the world transformed, creating a permanent picture of a socialist home. Morris's dream is that we should keep this image in our minds eye and like Hallblithe, fight for it.

⁵⁴ For an argument that the Romantics idea of natural beauty is inherently conservative, see R. Scruton, *The Intelligent Person's Guide to Modern Culture*, p. 46.

E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (Merlin Press, 1977). Pamela Todd, *William Morris and the Arts & Crafts Home* (Thames & Hudson, 2012). Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880-1914* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010). Marcus Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Ideal of Hospitality* (D. S. Brewer, 2006). Credits. William Morris (24 March 1834 – 3 October 1896) was a British textile designer, poet, novelist, translator and socialist activist associated with the British Arts and Crafts Movement. He was a major contributor to the revival of traditional British textile arts and methods of production. His literary contributions helped to establish the modern fantasy genre, while he helped win acceptance of socialism in fin de siècle Great Britain. Welcome to the Official home of Morris & Co. Discover Morris & Co.'s timeless range of homeware with Sanderson Design Group and incorporate our beautifully crafted fabrics and wallpapers into your home. William Morris (1834-1896) is regarded by some as the greatest designer and one of the most outstanding figures of the Arts and Crafts Movement. He was also a poet, artist, philosopher, typographer and political theorist. In 1861, with a group of friends, he started the decorating business Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. providing beautiful, handcrafted products and furnishings for the home. Morris was motivated by the desire to provide affordable "art for all" and driven by his boundless enthusiasm, the output of the company was prolific.