

# Riot, Romance and Revolution: William Morris and the Art of War

*Phillippa Bennett*

## I. THE SPECTRE OF THE BARRICADES

In his preface to the 1906 re-print of *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, George Bernard Shaw reflected on how, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Fabian Society, ‘amid the jeers of the catastrophists’, had ‘turned its back on the barricades and made up its mind to turn heroic defeat into prosaic success’. The Fabians had set themselves ‘two definite tasks’, Shaw wrote: ‘to provide a parliamentary programme for a Prime Minister converted to Socialism’, and ‘to make it as easy and matter-of-course for the ordinary respectable Englishman to be a Socialist as to be Liberal or a Conservative’. With some self-satisfaction, Shaw concluded: ‘These tasks we have accomplished, to the great disgust of our more romantic comrades. Nobody now conceives Socialism as a destructive insurrection ending, if successful, in millennial absurdities.’<sup>1</sup>

Shaw celebrated early twentieth-century Socialism as simultaneously progressive and stable. It was a political movement which had matured to adulthood, and could now look back with a certain parental affection at its own rebellious and wayward youth. But what a dynamic and ambitious youth that had been – a youth infused with the fervour and optimism evoked by its guiding intellects, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in the final paragraph of their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: ‘The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims’, proclaimed Marx and Engels:

They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic

revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.<sup>2</sup>

The contrast between the aspirations of Socialism's youth and the realities of its adulthood could scarcely be rendered more striking than by a comparison of Shaw's preface and Marx and Engels's conclusion. There is little concern for facilitating the smooth transition of the 'ordinary respectable Englishman' from Liberalism to Socialism in the Manifesto's call for 'the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions'. And the young activist with 'a world to win' would surely have contemplated with some dismay a grown-up future dedicated to constructing parliamentary programmes. Shaw's lauded State Socialism might have turned its back on the barricades, but in doing so it had also divested itself of much of the excitement and expanded sense of possibility which had motivated and sustained Socialism through its formative years in Britain.

This essay considers ways in which the heroic ideal of the barricade, and what might be termed 'romantic' conceptions of social revolution, maintained their potency in nineteenth-century Socialism – despite Shaw's dismissal of their significance – by focusing particularly on the work of William Morris, undoubtedly one of the key individuals Shaw had in mind when referring to his 'more romantic comrades'. Morris was a leading Socialist activist, and a prolific political lecturer and essayist during the 1880s and 1890s, but he was also a renowned writer who produced during the last years of his life an extraordinary series of pseudo-medieval prose romances. The essay explores the connection between Morris the political revolutionary and Morris the romance writer, particularly in terms of the concepts of warfare and violence. I will suggest that whilst Morris lost hope of seeing the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism on the streets of English towns and cities during his own lifetime, he successfully translated these aspirations to the pages of his final narratives, and in doing so found a means of resolving his ambivalent response to physical violence in nineteenth-century revolutionary politics through the strikingly unambiguous violence played out on his imaginary battlefields of the past.

## II. THE POLITICS OF PROTEST

In order to place William Morris's political and literary motivations in context, it is important first briefly to consider the role of conflict and violence in the broader development of the nineteenth-century Socialist movement. Street-corner preaching and organised demonstrations, the circulation of revolutionary reading material, and regular letters to the press were central activities for Socialist activists, whose agenda was captured in the motto on the Social Democratic Fed-

eration's membership cards: 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. But whilst the three elements of this rallying cry were regarded as interrelated and self-supporting, as the Socialist movement grew in experience and confidence the idea of 'Agitation' lent itself more readily to the construction of a high-profile public agenda, two particularly prominent outcomes of which were the Hyde Park 'riots' of February 1886 and the events of 13 November 1887 which came to be known as 'Bloody Sunday'.

On 8 February 1886, what E.P. Thompson describes as 'a curious gang of "Tory Fair Traders" ' had arranged a meeting in Trafalgar Square, which prompted 'a counter-demonstration of the unemployed called by the SDF'. After addressing the alternative crowd they had generated, Socialist leaders 'led the crowds up Pall Mall for a further meeting in Hyde Park'. They were jeered from windows and doorways by members of the gentlemen's clubs which lined the way, in response to which some of the demonstrators began throwing stones and smashing windows, incidents which were followed by looting and further acts of property damage.<sup>3</sup> Over the next few days, London and provincial newspapers reported the events of 8 February in moods which ranged from sombre soul-searching to national moral hysteria. *The Times* reflected on what it termed 'the most alarming and destructive riot that has taken place in London for many years' and castigated the Social Democratic Federation for expounding its revolutionary doctrines to members of 'the dangerous classes'.<sup>4</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* in turn characterised the day as a conflict between civilisation and 'the primordial forces of society', describing a 'terror-stricken' group of tradesmen standing powerless in the face of a 'huge and overwhelming crowd', in streets where 'plate glass smashed to atoms was strewn over the pavements on each side'.<sup>5</sup>

Socialist journals found it equally useful, however, to utilise the violence of the events of February 1886 in order to promote their own political agenda. 'The 8th February will be a day to be long remembered by the working classes in London', proclaimed *Justice*, the journal of the Social Democratic Federation; nor should the public be surprised if the destitute responded violently to the taunts of the idle rich, for the brave victims of capitalism knew 'they had better die fighting than die starving'.<sup>6</sup> The newspaper of the Socialist League, *Commonweal*, edited by William Morris, adopted a more philosophical approach, asking 'what was the meaning' of the events of the 8 February, and concluding: 'at bottom misery, illuminated by a faint glimmer of hope, raised by the magic word *Socialism*, the only hope of these days of confusion. That was what the crowd represented'.<sup>7</sup>

Various heroic and revolutionary sentiments thus attached themselves readily to the events of one memorable London afternoon in 1886, which became known as 'Black Monday', their purpose to elicit either fear or hope depending on the political persuasion of those who employed them. But whilst February 1886 could thus be interpreted as something of an early warm-up act for social

revolution, 13 November 1887 adopted the rather more sombre reality of a dress rehearsal – and one which exposed the unpreparedness of the Socialists for the final performance. On the day immortalised as ‘Bloody Sunday’, Socialists, Free-Speech campaigners and the unemployed attempted to hold a protest rally in Trafalgar Square. Public meetings had been prohibited in the Square by the Government in the light of recent unrest, provoking mass demonstration marches on Sunday 13 November through key London thoroughfares leading into it.

The demonstrators were confronted by a combination of police and military forces which dispersed the crowds with a brutality which was as shocking as it was unexpected. The *Daily News*, with the assistance of Biblical metaphors of deluge, described the following day how: ‘The disorders that have been ebbing and flowing in the metropolis during the last few weeks rose to high tide yesterday; and that sacred day of rest, at least in and around Trafalgar Square, was a Pandemonium Sunday, disgraceful to any Christian land’.<sup>8</sup> In similarly apocalyptic imagery, a journalist from the *Pall Mall Gazette* dramatically recreated his experience of events, describing how ‘the police ride very roughly upon the people, there is a sound of the whacking of staves and sticks, there are scuffles and scampers and falls, and there is the clatter of the horses upon the flagged pavement as they gallop across the various refuges, striking sparks of fire with their shoes as they go’.<sup>9</sup>

Writing in *Commonweal*, William Morris, who had experienced the violence at first hand, recalled the ‘wild shrieks of hatred’ at the police and military ‘from the women who came from the slums’, and described ‘one brave man wrapping his banner torn from the pole round his arm and facing the police until he was hammered down with repeated blows’. Nonetheless, Morris attempted to draw something positive from what was at best a disheartening experience for the Socialist cause, declaring:

Sir Charles Warren [the Commissioner of Police] has thus given us a lesson in street fighting, the first point of which is that mere numbers without organization or drill are useless; the second, which ought also to be noted, is the proper way to defend a position in a large town by a due system of scouts, outposts, and supports.<sup>10</sup>

There is a hint of Morris relishing this lesson – of taking more than a passing interest in the tactics that would render future violent confrontations more successful for the Socialist side. And the violence of Bloody Sunday had given the Socialist cause something else highly useful for their future political propaganda – a fallen hero. Alfred Linnell, one of the protestors, died of the injuries he received in the conflict and his funeral served as a public demonstration of political solidarity against the brutal tyranny of the state. Morris wrote ‘A Death Song’ for Linnell, which was sung at his graveside to the music of Malcolm Lowson,

the final stanza of which particularly articulates the revolutionary heroics of the Socialist cause:

Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison;  
 Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest;  
 But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen  
 Brings us our day of work to win the best.  
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,*  
*But one and all if they would dusk the day.*<sup>11</sup>

Here, the work becomes the fight, and the inevitability of violence in securing a Socialist future is clearly implied; Morris's 'A Death Song' is thus essentially a call to arms at the tomb of a martyr to the Cause.

### III. TO LIVE OR DIE IN THE QUARREL

'Black Monday' and 'Bloody Sunday' thus became significant dates in the Socialist calendar, prefiguring, in the minds of revolutionary Socialists, the final encounter which would issue in a Communistic future. But alongside these actual events in which violence visibly played its part, the concepts of war and violence also underpinned the terminology and imagery of many Socialist writings of the period. As Socialist writers often presented their cause in the form of a quest for a future of fellowship, happiness and rest, so too they frequently conceived and articulated the active nature of that quest through traditional metaphors of struggle and conflict. George Sorel recognised this ingrained propensity in the Socialist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, noting how 'men who are participating in great social movements always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is certain to triumph'. Utilising such imagery himself, in his 1908 publication *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel claimed that the propagation of, and belief in, such myths as a catastrophic revolution or a General Strike, played an essential role in stimulating people 'to prepare themselves for a combat which will destroy the existing state of things'.<sup>12</sup> It was, after all, with a sense of preparation for combat that Marx and Engels chose to conclude the *Communist Manifesto*, 'WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!' serving as a rallying cry in the face of an inevitable forthcoming conflict.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting during the 1880s on the early decades of the nineteenth century, H.M. Hyndman, the leader of the Social Democratic Federation, acknowledged the effectiveness of such threats in securing legislative reform: 'It was force', he concluded, 'and the fear of force which really enabled the workers to get any measures whatever passed for their benefit'.<sup>14</sup> Whilst Hyndman was clear

to assert that he sought a revolution for England devoid of the 'anarchy and bloodshed' espoused by continental revolutionaries, the language he employed in order to depict the transformation of society is nonetheless steeped in metaphors and analogies associated with the traditional heroic quest. Achieving the Socialist ideal would not be swift or easy, Hyndman admitted: 'But if only we are true to one another, and stand together in the fight, the brightness of the future is ours – the day before us and the night behind.'<sup>15</sup> The Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin similarly adopted traditional images of conflict and heroism in his 1880 essay 'The Spirit of Revolt', in which he lauded those 'men of courage' who would lead the way to revolution, those 'men of integrity for whom the act is one with the idea'. These, Kropotkin claimed, were 'the lonely sentinels who enter the battle long before the masses are sufficiently roused to raise openly the banner of insurrection and to march, arms in hand, to the conquest of their rights'. The bravery and audacity of these revolutionaries would, Kropotkin asserted, ensure the 'coming of the cataclysm' which would issue in a new era for humanity – a cataclysm that would be at once wonderful for the oppressed and terrible for the oppressors. Thus, he assured the youth of the working classes:

All of us together, we who suffer and are insulted daily, we are a multitude whom no man can number, we are the ocean that can embrace and swallow up all else. When we have but the will to do it, that very moment will justice be done: that very instant the tyrants of the earth shall bite the dust.<sup>16</sup>

Kropotkin's emphatic declaratory style and the catastrophic overtones of his imagery are potent and alluring, and shrewdly designed to appeal to the undeterred confidence of youth.

Such deliberate suggestions of impending violence cannot simply be dismissed as the excesses of anarchism, for Morris's colleague in the Socialist League, Ernest Belfort Bax, a Firm opponent of the anarchist element which came to dominate the League, defined the Socialist mission in terms similarly replete with metaphors of upheaval and force. In his 1887 essay 'The Modern Revolution', Bax emphasised that before society could be reconstructed, 'we have the last agonized throes of Revolution to pass through', and there would not be long to wait, he assured his readers, for 'we are nearing the catastrophe' and 'the end is approaching'. Adopting the fantastic metaphors of the German legend of Wilhelm and Leonora, Bax warned that:

Already the discerning may see the open tomb in the distance, already hear the chant of the goblins of destiny indicating the termination of the mad chase and the dissolution, it may be by a quiet euthanasia, it may be in blood and fire, of the ghastly mockery of human aspiration we call 'the civilization of the century'.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst Bax's focus here is on the apocalyptic overtones of Old German nar-

ratives, Friedrich Engels found a less drastic but equally inspiring relevance for modern Socialism in the myths of his native land, and particularly in that of Siegfried, the ancient tale which held such resonance for Morris in its Old Norse version and which inspired his own re-telling in *Sigurd the Volsung*. 'What is it about the legend of Siegfried that affects us so powerfully?', Engels asked, concluding that its appeal was most strong for those 'who still carry in our breast a heart unfettered by the restraints of life', those who showed 'the same defiance of convention', who desired 'to get out into the free world' and 'to overrun the barriers of prudence and fight for the crown of life, action'. 'Perhaps', mused Engels – the man who labelled Morris 'a settled sentimental Socialist' – 'a friendly Morgan le Fay will make Siegfried's castle rise again for me or show my mind's eye what heroic deeds are reserved for his sons of the nineteenth century.'<sup>18</sup>

William Morris employed his own quest metaphors, ancient battle analogies and mythic constructs to define the work of the Socialist movement during the 1880s and 1890s, one of the most potent and recurring of which was the overthrow of an enervated Roman Empire by the vigorous tribes of the Goths. In his lecture 'Art and Socialism', Morris claimed a contemporary relevance for the Roman defeat at the hands of what he termed 'the Fury of the North': 'To those that have hearts to understand,' Morris warned, 'this tale of the past is a parable of the days to come; of the change in store for us hidden in the breast of the Barbarism of civilization – the Proletariat'.<sup>19</sup> It is an analogy he employs again in his lecture 'The Development of Modern Society', in which he concludes by encouraging his audience: 'So shall we be our own Goths, and at whatever cost break up again the new tyrannous Empire of Capitalism'.<sup>20</sup> As Paul Meier observes, 'the myth of the new barbarian' was thus 'a constructive and optimistic myth' for Morris, and in his loosely historical romances of the late 1880s, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, he gave fictional expression to that 'constructive and optimistic myth'.<sup>21</sup>

In both these narratives Morris utilised his proficient knowledge of early warfare in order to depict the tribes of 'primitive Communism' defeating the forces of tyranny and oppression, and such imaginary battles undoubtedly enabled him to project their overthrow in more optimistic and decisive terms than the skirmishes of late nineteenth-century Socialism had so far evidenced. This is exemplified in the Goths' battle with the Roman invaders of their homeland in *The House of the Wolfings*, in which Morris describes how Arinbiorn:

smote at all before him as though none smote at him in return; yea, as though he were smiting down tree boles for a match against some other mighty man; and all the while amidst the hurry, strokes of swords and spears rained on him, some falling flatwise and some glancing sideways, but some true and square, so that his

helm was smitten off and his hauberk rent adown, and point and edge reached his living flesh [...] so that at last he fell rent and shattered.<sup>22</sup>

Here, conviction of the justice of his cause inspires the Gothic warrior to fight to his death in order to preserve the communal values threatened by the tyranny of the Roman Empire. And the details are compelling – heroic and uncompromisingly brutal at the same time – revealing not only Morris’s knowledge of the technicalities of warfare but something also of his thrill at the glory of the battle.

In attempting to envision how such decisive action leading ultimately to social transformation might be secured in his own age, Morris conveyed his speculations through Old Hammond in his utopian narrative *News from Nowhere* published in 1890. An inhabitant of post-revolutionary Nowhere, Old Hammond describes how the demonstrations and sporadic riots with which Morris and his Socialist colleagues were familiar had helped gradually to erode the last bastions of capitalist oppression: ‘a sort of irregular war was carried on with varied success all over the country’, Old Hammond remembers, forcing the Government into a short period of outright war before the revolutionaries triumphed. And whilst this predicted final conflict of the capitalist era could not be presented in terms quite so dramatic and glorious as those of the Wolfings’ and Burgdalers’ revolts, Morris was still keen to imbue it with its own heroic spirit and conviction. Thus Old Hammond relates how success was contingent on that fact that ‘the sloth, the hopelessness, and if I may say so, the cowardice of the last century, had given way to the eager, restless heroism of a declared revolutionary period’.<sup>23</sup>

The slothful, hopeless, cowardly century Old Hammond recalls is, of course, Morris’s own age, indicating just how depressing Morris found the absence of this eager heroic spirit in the political machinations of late nineteenth-century society. Indeed, the recurrence of historical and legendary conflicts in his political and fictional writing and his emphasis on the value of the heroic spirit suggest something of a dichotomy at the heart of Morris’s revolutionary Socialism. In a letter to Thomas Coglean Horsfall in 1883 he expressed ‘a religious hatred towards all war and violence’, and a hope that the next great social revolution ‘would work itself out without violence’.<sup>24</sup> It is a position which Morris continued to articulate throughout his Socialist career, with an increasing emphasis on the pointlessness, not just the undesirability, of a deliberate recourse to violent methods in order to secure revolution.

Immediately prior to leaving the Socialist League, because it had fallen under anarchist control, Morris asserted in his 1890 farewell *Commonweal* article, ‘Where Are We Now?’, that ‘the method of partial, necessarily futile, inconsequent revolt, or riot rather, against the authorities, who are our absolute masters, and can easily put it down’ was a waste of time and effort.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, in a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones following the events of Black Monday in 1886,

Morris had confessed: 'If you had only suffered as I have from the apathy of the English lower classes (woe's me how low!) you would rejoice at their awakening, however ugly the forms it took'.<sup>26</sup> And if Morris was thus prevented by his own temperament and values from asserting a claim for violence as a necessary stage on the path to greater social good, he always believed that it would to some extent be inevitable when the revolution arrived at its final stage.

#### IV. ROMANCE AND REVOLUTION

Despite this, the system of 'scouts, outposts and supports' which Morris argued should be developed for besieged towns and cities in the light of the events of Bloody Sunday in 1887 was never called into action during his own lifetime. The Socialist struggle, as it developed through the 1880s and 1890s, was a struggle which, as Morris knew all too well, expressed itself far more often in the duller daily grind of recruiting new members or agitating for parliamentary reform than in the heroics of the battlefield. Nor did Morris possess any real desire to see the cataclysmic conflicts of the barbarian era played out in literal terms in the streets of nineteenth-century British cities. But the employment of such metaphors did allow him to articulate the ways in which the values which linked the early Communist tribes with the modern Socialist movement were always worth fighting for, even if the terrain had shifted from the battlefield to the street corner and preaching had replaced killing.

By the 1890s, Morris had in fact recognised that what became known as 'Gas and Water Socialism' – the kind of Socialism which aimed at incremental social improvements rather than social revolution – might need to be accepted as a necessary first stage on the road to that revolution. But he never lost his desire to see a far more emphatic and unambiguous overthrow of capitalism, and in the prose romances written during the last six years of his life he found an effective and satisfying means of envisioning, over and again, dramatic and conclusive processes of social transformation through the construct and activities of the battlefield.

Battles are of course a traditional feature of the romance genre and, as Andrew Lang claimed, in his 1887 essay 'Realism and Romance', they appeal at a fundamental level to that love of 'a good fight' that 'lingers in the minds of men and women'.<sup>27</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson proffered a similar argument in his 1882 article 'A Gossip on Romance', in which he argued that the most compelling element of the story books of childhood was their inclusion of 'some quality of the brute incident'.<sup>28</sup> But Morris's use of battles in his last romances goes beyond a simple appeal to a latent savagery in human nature, for he recognised, as John Goode argues, that 'battles are moments in which the processes of change are

accelerated'. Furthermore, Goode's claim that 'the battle scene is very much a realization of a moment of creative and undivided labour, the community working together in its own defence and each individual occupying a complete role' is of key significance in regard to Morris's Socialism.<sup>29</sup>

In these terms, Morris recognised the battle as a crucial event in securing social change; the battles of the last romances always move beyond the merely sensational to become critical and decisive moments for both the individual and society, moments in which individuals accept the possibility of their own personal annihilation in the quest for the greater possibilities of the community – in which they experience a shift from a position of self-interest to one of communal interest.

It is in the battles of his final narratives that Morris presents his most optimistic vision of what such fellowship and individual selflessness can achieve. Thus, in Morris's very last romance, *The Sundering Flood*, published posthumously in 1897, the protagonist Osborne is motivated to assist Sir Godrick in his quest to liberate the City of the Sundering Flood after his direct questioning of his new master's character and motives has procured a desirable vision of the city's future. Determined to test the integrity of Sir Godrick's support for the oppressed Lesser Crafts in their impending rebellion against 'their King and the tyrants of the Porte', Osborne asks him: 'wouldst thou give them so much help as not to be against them, but let them fight it out and the mightiest to prevail? Or how much more wouldst thou give?' Sir Godrick fervently responds:

I will have them home with me and arm them and clothe them and feed them and house them, and my lands shall be their lands, and bite and drop shall we share together, so long as it holds out: and a noble host shall we gather, and harry the King and his dastards till we prevail at last, and we will have a new rule of the City and a new Porte, and I will be the captain thereof if they will have it so: or else to die in the pain.<sup>30</sup>

It is a vision of equality and fellowship which Osborne judges worthy of his commitment and which places his personal quest to find his lost beloved within the wider context of the quest for a new social order. And it is a quest which is ultimately successful, as are all the quests of Morris's last romances – primarily because they are quests which are informed by ideals of justice and social harmony.

Hence, in his 1895 romance *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, at the moment when Christopher, 'steady and strong' in his purpose, leads the forces of Oakenrealm into battle, we read how:

a great shout rose behind him, and none shrank or lagged, but spears and bills, and axes and swords, all came on like a wall of steel, so that to the foemen the

earth seemed alive with death, and they made no show of abiding the onset, but all turned and ran.<sup>31</sup>

It is a scene echoed in Morris's 1896 romance *The Well at the World's End*, in which Ralph confronts the enemy at the head of his forces at Upmeads and there 'befell a marvel' on the battlefield as the enemy 'cast down their weapons and fled wildly down the hill, overturning whatever stood in their way, till the whole mass of them was broken to pieces'.<sup>32</sup> In each of these scenes the remarkable personal qualities of the leader and the ethical conviction of their cause generate a notable loyalty and commitment in their followers and a reflective sense of hopelessness and inadequacy in their enemies, rendering the final assault on tyranny one of relative ease.

Morris's last romances thus enabled him to explore the values, concerns and aspirations of his own late nineteenth-century Socialism in the broader context of historical, mythical and legendary warfare. And indeed this is a device utilised by Arthur in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897); eager to assault the Red Hold, the location of a brutal tyrant, and to dispel the 'evil things' it harbours, Arthur urges his companions to 'gather force and go thither in arms to live or die in the quarrel, and so sweeten the earth, as did the men of ancient days when they slew the dragons and the giants, and the children of hell, and the Sons of Cain'.<sup>33</sup> In these analogies Arthur confirms the persistent human tendency to conceive contemporary conflicts in terms of ancient and traditional narratives which repeatedly enact the conflict between the forces of good and evil—a tendency revealed in Bax's use of the apocalyptic stories of German legend, and Kropotkin's envisioning of the day when the tyrants of the earth would bite the dust.

The battlefield thus offers itself in these romances as a necessarily violent but also transformative space, in which personal, social and ethical concerns interact, and out of which new social orders are born. And it is through the dynamic and symbolic nature of the battle that Morris is able to demonstrate how the revolutionary consciousness of the individual can in turn foster a revolutionary people. This process is exemplified in the interaction between Ralph and the men of the small rural thorp through which he rides on his way to wage war against the enemies of Upmeads in *The Well at the World's End*: 'now thou hast come,' the spokesman for the thorp tells Ralph, 'we have little will to abide behind, but were fain to follow thee, and do thee what good we can'.<sup>34</sup> Once awakened, the revolutionary spirit of the people thus performs a direct role in securing social change, a point emphasised in Morris's Socialist drama *The Tables Turned* in which, on the last and decisive day of revolution, the soldiers of the establishment 'remember that they too belong to the "lower classes"' and join the Socialist ranks.<sup>35</sup> Notably, these events recur in *News from Nowhere* in Old Hammond's description of the final days of the revolution: when 'that revolu-

tionary instinct' which the Socialist movement aroused 'acted on the ordinary soldier in the ranks', Old Hammond tells Guest, 'the greater part, certainly the best part, of the soldiers joined the side of the people'.<sup>36</sup> Thus, although Goode suggests that the romance 'celebrates the hero and his revolutionary consciousness', whilst only utopias portray 'the revolutionary consciousness of the people', the conflicts of Morris's last romances confirm the essential connection between the two.<sup>37</sup> Morris's protagonists invariably release the greater possibilities of the worlds through which they move, their quests and conflicts fostering not only the growth of their own revolutionary consciousness, but that of the communities with which they interact.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Shaw was correct to conclude that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Socialism had not issued into mainstream British political life through destructive insurrections or millennial absurdities. Instead, it slowly and laboriously built its public support through the more mundane channels of contesting School Board seats and fighting Local Government elections – neither of which proffered an obvious platform for the kind of dramatic performances enacted previously in Hyde Park or Trafalgar Square. But Shaw failed to emphasise that this somewhat duller 'daily grind' of converting the respectable English gentleman to Socialism was, for many potentially disillusioned activists, made bearable because of their resilient confidence in a far more glorious future. As William Morris admitted, 'steadiness of purpose is surely impossible without some high ideal to aim at, nor will a wise man consent to take pains and trouble, to sacrifice his leisure or his pleasure unless he can see and feel that he has set before him something worthy of all that sacrifice'.<sup>38</sup>

One way in which Morris himself promoted such ideals and encouraged the various sacrifices consequent on a commitment to the Socialist cause, was through the writing of his last romances – and nowhere better were high ideals and noble self-sacrifice demonstrated than in the battles which punctuate these narratives. The values Morris and his Socialist comrades espoused are here articulated in dramatic and inspiring form, and with an immediacy and conclusiveness that nineteenth-century political propaganda could never achieve. But that does not render these narratives escapist, any more than it suggests that Morris had abandoned his hopes for a Communist future by the time he wrote them. Rather, it suggests that, for Morris, literary romance and Socialist activism could and should be allies in the progress towards revolution and social transformation.

## NOTES

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