In 1831 John Stuart Mill wrote of English society,

It is felt that men are henceforth to be held together by new ties and separated by new barriers; for the ancient bonds will now no longer unite, nor the ancient boundaries confine.\(^1\)

In these words he articulated one of the driving political necessities of his time, the need to transform a dynamic society into a united England. Such was the challenge and the goal of most of the major political and social thinkers of the age, from the extreme right to the extreme left. That William Morris shared both a desire to re-structure English society and an interest in the medieval past is well known: like many others including Cobbett, Pugin, Carlyle, and Ruskin, he used the Middle Ages as a vantage point from which to criticize his own. As E.P. Thompson says, in the ‘restructured’ Middle Ages of the nineteenth century, ‘... Morris found a place, not to which he could retreat, but in which he could stand and look upon his own age ... judging his own time by standards other than his own.’\(^2\) Morris’s conception of a new English society rooted at once in a medieval ideal of fellowship and a socialist vision of a utopian, classless society, owes much of its spirit to progressive socialist and communist ideas of the late nineteenth century, as well as to medievalism. Yet while Morris undoubtedly sought to create in England a socialist society totally different from what had gone before, he expressed his vision as well as his criticism in language and themes very like those used forty years earlier by Young England, a group of four young MPs who had sought during the 1840’s to create in England a society based on many of the values of late medieval England.\(^3\) What united Morris the socialist and Young England was their common belief that only the creation of a true community of all classes could save England from ruin. What both believed must be overcome to create such a spirit of community was the flagrant disregard of capitalists for the workers of the nation and the selfish motives of the newly rich who had no sense of obligation or duty as attendant on the possession of
wealth. What both stood for—non-political in the sense that it was unlegislatable and ultimately the platform of no one political party—grew out of their common medievalism.

It is, of course, a long way from Young England’s concept of a structured, graded society to Morris’s classless, moneyless world, but the principles of shared work and fellowship united both visions; the young were the active leaders in Disraeli’s novels and Morris’s dream-visions, while the value of manual labour and the right to rewarding, useful work formed the bases of both Morris’s and Young England’s ideal societies. Moreover, both rejected utterly the Whig-Liberal idea that a cash-nexus provides a sufficient matrix in which to structure human relationships. For both, what would save England was a radical restructuring of society on the premise that man needs more than material means to be happy, that he needs beauty, a sense of reward, and a feeling of belonging to some group that can nurture both his body and his spirit. These common goals, uniting in their idealism two such apparently opposite political philosophies, suggest the wide range of political ideas medievalism might support. In an effort to ‘look face to face’, as Carlyle put it, on the past in order to criticize the present, Morris and Young England used similar ideas, images and phrases to express their attitudes toward the past, to advance their distinctly different visions of community, and to convey their belief in the symbolic function of architecture.

Janus-like, both Morris and Young England looked to the past not to re-create the present, but for principles and patterns to use in shaping a better future England. Much of their writing focuses on re-kinding the spirit of brotherhood they perceived as the animating force of medieval society. That their programs were reduced by critics both then and now to absurd proposals to revive only such ancient forms of medievalism as monasteries and maypoles has obscured their real message—that nineteenth-century England could profit from reviving the spirit and the spirituality of the medieval past. As Alexander Baillie-Cochrane put it, remembering his part in Young England, ‘It was not, like Columbus, the Old World seeking the New; it was the New World of ideas starting forth to influence, if not to renew the Old.’

Morris, too, turned to the past out of disgust with the present state of England; quite naturally his ideas about the past, especially the fourteenth century, shaped his hopes for the future. For Morris, as for those who before him saw in the Middle Ages a means of criticizing the present, the image of the past was drawn in broad strokes; he was not
interested in particular analysis, but with making a point through generalizations. He acknowledged the faults of medieval society, but through the lens of time these faults seemed dim in comparison with that society’s strength. Repeatedly he uses the argument and the tone typified in this passage by the conjunction ‘yet’;

The craftsman of the Middle Ages no doubt often suffered grievous material oppression, yet in spite of the rigid line of separation drawn by the hierarchical system under which he lived between him and his feudal superior, the difference between them was arbitrary rather than real; there was no such gulf in language, manners, and ideas as divides a cultivated middle class person of to-day, a ‘gentleman,’ from even a respectable lower-class man . . . .

Although he loved the study of history, Morris’s attitude toward the past was not one of the dispassionate historian, neither was it one of the anxious lover of all things medieval; rather it was one of the searcher. In his lecture ‘Architecture and History’, delivered at the London Institution on 1 July 1884, he said of the past in reference to the Gothic Revival, ‘. . . to my mind it is a strange view to take of historical knowledge and insight, that it should set us on the adventure of trying to retrace our steps toward the past, rather than give us some glimmer of insight into the future . . . ’ (22:314). These words suggest Morris’s characteristic attitude toward the past. In many ways he looked to the past as a lumber-room where he could find what might be useful in transforming a wretched present into a better future—in art as well as society. One sees this eclecticism in the details of setting in News from Nowhere, in the bridge over the Thames, the articles of men’s and women’s dress, and in the architecture of the Guest House, all drawn from medieval forms. Morris sought not to re-create the Middle Ages in his Utopia, but to abstract from the past elements he conceived to be useful and beautiful. As he said in ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’, ‘. . . let the past be past, every whit of it that is not still living in us . . . ’ (22:151).

For any writer who used the Middle Ages as a source of images and comparisons through which to criticize the present, the medieval Roman Catholic Church provided a rich store of symbols. Morris, like Young England, drew upon this source of comparison and contrast to outline the new economic and social spirit he hoped would arise in England. Not an orthodox, practicing Christian, he could nevertheless idealize ecclesiastical landlords in ‘Feudal England’, because, ‘. . . living as they did on their land and amidst of their tenants, they were less oppressive than the lay landlords’ (23:43). He looked for their spirit to provide a model for
economic relations in which capitalists and property-holders would regard their wealth as a temporary trust.

In this sentiment he echoes Disraeli's words in *Sybil or the Two Nations*, as well as Lord John Manners' constant theme, that ecclesiastical landlords were easy landlords because the monastic system was a form of pure communism. The monasteries, writes Disraeli, ‘... expended their revenue among those whose labour had produced it. These holy men, too, built and planted, as they did for everything else, for posterity ...’8 They did so because, ‘The monastics could possess no private property; they could save no money; they could bequeath nothing. They lived, received, and expended in common’ (1:87). This idea, not original with either Young England or Morris, pervaded nineteenth-century writing about the role of the Church in medieval society. That two such different thinkers as Disraeli and Morris used this theme in their work suggests that it was not to be taken literally—that readers would understand the ancient system so described symbolized a way of thinking and of being in a society built on principles different from the utilitarian and later capitalist ones being criticized.

For Morris medieval Catholicism, ‘a natural growth of that simple and naive conception of the universe’, 9 typical of the Middle Ages, insured that its faithful were always surrounded by the sense of their belonging to a larger congregation than that of their immediate parish. Indeed, the Church was but the most visible of what Morris refers to as the ‘great corporations, which were such a prominent feature of the Middle Ages’ (p. 65). It was this aspect of the Church, the encompassing, all-embracing Mother Church which dominated men's lives for good that so many earlier medievalists had sought to re-create in England. For Morris the Church was not so much a source of doctrine or of spirituality as it was an institution dedicated to the idea of fellowship. Young England, too, had looked to the Church to provide a model for spiritually-centered lives; Manners, particularly, hoped the church would help rebuild Victorian society through her teachings. In *A Plea for National Holy-days* (1843), he said of the Church,

She it is, and she only, that can knit together in the sanctifying bands of Christian joy and sorrow, of Christian fast and festival, the high and low, the rich and poor;—she it is, and she only that can bless the enduring toil of the husbandman or the craft of the mechanic on earth with glimpses of heaven (p. 25).

One of the concrete proposals for creating community out of a spirit like that fostered by the early Church was to increase the number of
holidays for labourers. Manners proposed reviving the medieval Church’s observance of holy days as means of limiting the burden of labour imposed on the poor. In his *Plea* Manners argued that the absence of regular holidays in the Victorian calendar stemmed from a bourgeois equation of lost time and lost money. He said

... so long as the spirit and conduct of the age is at once so profuse and so niggard—so generous, yet so sparing—so democratic, and yet so careless of the poor—so long it may be deemed a sufficient reply to any proposals for shortening the hours of factory labour, or reviving holy-days and sports among the people to say, ‘We are too poor; time is money, and we cannot afford it’ (p. 8).

Wondering how a nation unaccustomed to celebration will observe a newly proclaimed peace day celebrating the end of wars in China and India, Manners paints a picture of past social integration, a way of life he looks forward to reinstituting in England, whose people engaged in

... lawful recreations, such as dancing, either men or women, archery for men, leaping, vaulting, or any other such harmless recreations ... where the lusty apprentice shall not fear to outleap his master’s son, nor the pauper’s heir to contend with the guardian’s brother, while the alms of the faithful that were collected at the offertory in the morning are making the widows’ and the orphans’ hearts sing with joy ... (p. 4).

That Morris shared Manners’ enthusiasm for physical activity as a symbol of social integration is evident from the pages of *News from Nowhere* where hay-making and road-building symbolize the harmonious working of a society in which no one is excluded from labour and in which each happily labours for his own good and that of the community. Morris even goes so far as to repeat in ‘The Hopes of Civilization’ virtually the same interpretation of medieval life that Manners builds on, like Manners seeing in the past, in medieval ‘play-days’, signs of a healthy, vigorous society; life in the Middle Ages,

... was easy, and common necessaries plenteous; the holidays of the Church were holidays in the modern sense of the word, downright play-days, and there were ninety-six obligatory ones: nor were the people tame and sheep-like, but as rough-handed and bold a set of good fellows as ever rubbed through life under the sun (23:60).

For both Morris and Manners the idea of games and holidays was much more than a matter of fellowship on the village green. For both men holidays and games flourished in an age keenly aware of the bonds of love, trust, and mutual dependence that bind all men.
Thus, to a large extent, medievalism in the service of Morris’s Socialism, as in the service of Young England’s radical Toryism, helped to express their perception of the fragmentation of nineteenth-century English society. One part of Morris’s solution to this problem was to eliminate the ‘propertied class living on the labour of a propertyless one’ (23:75), to ‘abolish a class of men privileged to shirk their duties as men, thus forcing others to do the work which they refuse to do’ (23:106). While Young England supported a graded class system as both inevitable by virtue of the laws of nature and necessary to the smooth functioning of any society, they, too, agreed that an idle upper class, whether industrial or aristocratic, could not be tolerated in English society. They, like Morris, saw in medieval society a social system in which each group had its rights and its responsibilities. What they would establish, or rather re-establish, was England’s ancient aristocracy, cognisant of its duties to the lower classes and careful of its welfare, both physical and spiritual. If it was a paternalistic system, substituting a benevolent tyranny for a harsh one, if it was essentially deadening because it was so patronizing, it was yet a system based on the conviction that men on earth are absolutely equal in the sense that any one person’s weal is a matter of common weal; that for any to prosper, all must prosper; that only an integrated community of labour and mutual obligation could be the basis for a just society. In the dark days of the 1840s they offered some sort of alternative to the effects of Utilitarianism and laisser-faire. The motto they adopted, Disraeli’s credo, ‘The tenure of property is the performance of its duties’, was a concept Morris could believe in, too.

In spite of the forty years time between Young England’s writings and Morris’s, Morris frequently expresses his social criticism in surprisingly similar terms, as if the issues of the 1840s were still urgent in the 1880s. In England’s Trust and Other Poems (1841), Manners had lamented the loss of the ‘ties that then bound peers and gentry to their fellow men’. In ‘The Hopes of Civilization’, Morris refers to the ‘bonds of the great hierarchy’ which in the past had held men together. They were bonds in which, ‘theoretically at least, personal rights and personal duties between superior and inferior all down the scale’ united men (23:60). In Sybil Disraeli’s aristocratic young hero, Egremont, pleads for understanding from Sybil, the heroine into whose working-class home he has come under somewhat misleading circumstances. He has done so, he says, in order to discover whether there is in England an ‘impassable gulf’ between rich and poor, whether there are in England two separate nations with ‘no thoughts or sympathies in common’ (1:352). In ‘Art and Socialism’, a lecture given on 23 January 1884,
before the Secular Society of Leicester, Morris makes virtually the same point about the evils of his age, that in England the 'terrible spectacle is exhibited of two peoples living street by street and door by door, people of the same blood, the same tongue . . . but yet one civilized and the other uncivilized' (23:193-4). He goes on, however, to draw a point that Young England would never have drawn, that the spectacle of two nations is part of the system that has 'trampled down Art and exalted Commerce'. Morris's characteristic emphasis on the state of the labourer and the correlative state of art is his alone.

Characteristic of Morris, too, is the intensity of his vision. Nowhere in nineteenth-century writings about the Middle Ages is the ideal of community so vividly presented as in *A Dream of John Ball* where Morris describes scene after scene of fellowship—in home, in battle, in suffering and in exultation. In a speech to the men of Kent, John Ball, echoing fourteenth-century thought as well as nineteenth-century 'radical-medieval' theory, describes Hell as a state of isolation. True happiness rests in feeling oneself part of the fellowship of men and in harmony with nature, as Ball implies in the following passage recalling both the medieval notion of the Great Chain of Being and Manners' image of medieval England as a circle of community:

For hearken, my friends and helpers; many days ago, when April was yet young, I lay there, and the heart that I had strung up to bear all things because of the fellowship of men and the blessed saints and the angels and those that are, and those that are to be, this heart, that I had strung up like a strong bow, fell into feebleness, so that I lay there a-longing for the green fields and the white-thorn bushes and the lark singing over the corn, and the talk of good fellows round the ale-house bench, and the babble of the little children, and the team on the road and the beasts afield, and all the life of earth . . . (16:232).

Here Ball's thoughts encompass a double image of community; first the cosmic unity that links all creation and all generations of men; second, and equally important, the social community man feels in his daily life as he participates in the joys, sorrows, and cycles of natural, earthly life. Together these two sorts of community combine to create a web of relations uniting past and present, extending horizontally among all living creation. Ball's image of this dual network reiterates one of Young England's chief themes, 'You cannot disfranchise the dead; and so long as a nation is, and feels itself to be, a living organism, its ancestry is as much a part of its being as its posterity'. Morris himself incorporated this very idea into Chapter IX, the discussion 'Betwixt the Living and the Dead'. The dreamer says, 'This . . . that though I die and end, yet
mankind yet liveth, therefore I end not, since I am a man...’ (16:265). Here one sees explicit evidence that the idea of the past and the idea of community for Morris and Young England are essentially one; true community is based on an acknowledged link with the past.

For both Morris and Young England, architecture, especially Gothic ecclesiastical architecture, became the outward, visible symbol of the ideal of fellowship and of a society’s relation to its own past. Both saw architecture as a statement of social values, Disraeli going so far as to say in Coningsby, ‘A great city...is the type of some great idea’. The nineteenth century’s preoccupation with the question ‘What form shall our public architecture take?’ is reflected in Morris’s and Young England’s insistence that a nation’s architecture testifies to its human concern, to the value its people place on their relations with each other, with the past, and with nature. Morris in ‘Architecture and History’, describes architecture as the expression of the network of community Ball evokes, one which stretches back in time and across society:

Well, it must be admitted that every architectural work is a work of co-operation. The very designer, be he never so original, pays his debt to this necessity in being in some form or another under the influence of tradition; dead men guide his hand even when he forgets that they ever existed. But furthermore, he must get his ideas carried out by other men... (22:300).

His complaint about modern style is that it ignores this bond of architecture. In ‘Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century’, Morris links medieval architecture with the hopes that produced it and the destruction of those hopes in his own time; writing of the Church of St. Peter at Peterborough, he says, ‘... and there it stands now, with the foul sea of modern civilization washing against it; a token, as I said, of the hopes that were, and which civilization has destroyed’ (22:379).

What Morris and Young England saw in their contemporary architecture was indeed the encroachment of a ‘foul sea’ of ugliness and squalor. Morris, writing of London’s urban sprawl, creates the image of a monstrous, unstoppable industrial spawn, virtually eating beauty. Its action is at once intrusive and destructive, characteristics completely antithetical to fellowship. Disraeli, too, shows a keen awareness of the sort of blight Morris describes and of its relation to the development of industrialization in England. In Sybil he contrasts the slum dwellings of the factory hands of Marney to the stone cottage shared by Sybil and her father, Walter Gerard. The town of Marney, crowded, full of open drains, is home to people who must eat, live and sleep in one or two
rooms in crumbling, dank dwellings. In these places proximity and
desperation create a perverted form of community; we see how close
physical association with none of the bonds of spirit or joy necessary to
unite people creates aggregations of misery.

Over against this melancholy picture of disease, crowding and desperation,
a picture familiar to readers of bluebooks and to those who had travelled
to the manufacturing cities in the 1830’s and 1840’s, stands the image
of Gerard’s cottage. Of ancient Anglo-Saxon stock, Gerard lives in a
stone cottage, modern, but of medieval simplicity:

Its materials were of a fawn-colored stone, common in the Mowbray
quarries. A scarlet creeper clustered round one side of its ample porch; its
windows were large, mullioned, and neatly latticed; it stood in the midst
of a garden of no mean dimensions but every bed and nook of which
teemed with cultivation; flowers and vegetables both abounded, while an
orchard rich with the promise of many fruits—ripe pears and famous
pippins of the north and plums of every shape and hue—screened the
dwelling from that wind against which the woods that formed its back­
ground were no protection (1:190).

The furniture of the cottage matches its design, being of oak or beech,
simply but beautifully constructed. Here Disraeli appears to anticipate
Morris’s stress on clean, functional lines and old English design as the
hallmarks of beauty. What is more, here the garden of England both
nourishes and protects the home, itself symbolizing the peace and
prosperity of England’s ancient order. It is a theme repeated throughout
News from Nowhere in the sense of man’s closeness to nature, the
harmony of their cycles and the mutual support each derives from the
other.

In A Dream of John Ball we find even closer parallels in respect to the
symbolism of architecture and its relation to nature. In the following
description of Will Green’s house the dwelling is pictured as poor but
beautiful, because like Gerard’s home, it is simple, open and integrated
with its natural setting.

The room we came into was indeed the house, for there was nothing but it
on the ground floor, but a stair in the corner went up to the chamber or
loft above. It was much like the room at the Rose, but bigger; the
cupboard better wrought, and with more vessels on it, and handsomer.
Also the walls, instead of being panelled, were hung with a coarse
loosely-woven stuff of green worsted with birds and trees woven into it.
There were flowers in plenty stuck about the room, mostly of the yellow
blossoming flag or flower-de-luce, of which I had seen plenty in all the
ditches, but in the window near the door was a pot full of those same
white poppies I had seen when I first woke up; and the table was all set forth with meat and drink, a big salt-cellar of pewter in the middle, covered with a white cloth (16:258).

Having had such visions of past architecture and of how that style could contribute to the comfort of nineteenth-century Englishmen, both Morris and Young England saw their own century’s architecture not only as lacking the virtues of the medieval, but also as working actively to defeat the very purposes of community and integration the medieval style served. In ‘Art and Socialism’ Morris protests the absolute gulf between the servants and the served in Victorian households. Echoing Disraeli’s words, he contends that though they live in proximity, often under the same roof, they remain strangers to one another.

Neither Morris nor Young England were to realize their visions of architecture or of the social integration it could support except in their writings. Morris’s vision lives in News from Nowhere where servants and served are one and the same, where everyone takes his or her turn for the good of society and the sheer pleasure of useful labour. Disraeli’s and Manners’ visions live in passages such as the one in Coningsby where the keeping of Christmas at Beaumanoir Castle includes a pantry open for a week to all tenants.

Such visions, linked to an idealized, half-glimpsed past, offering hope for a better future, unite Morris and Young England in spite of the very real differences of philosophy that separate them. Their common vision of community was fed by a common source—medievalism—which provided the themes, symbols and rhetoric for their expression. Their common examples show how deeply rooted in the conventions of medievalism was Morris’s social vision. He tapped a reservoir of images, language, and themes—a rhetoric of medievalism which had served others, but which none before had used more earnestly than Young England in their political effort to change the course of their society. They, writing earlier, looked to the past for examples to help them describe the present. He, adapting this rhetoric to his own vision and his own philosophy, gave it new life at the end of the century by stressing the need to look forward, beyond the problems of the day. Following his own admonition to use the past that is living in the present, Morris focused his attention on drawing the image of a better future.
NOTES


3 The four young men who loosely organized themselves into a political group who sat together in the Commons and who often voted together on economic, social and ecclesiastical issues were Alexander Baillie-Cochrane, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord John Manners, and George Smythe. Disraeli and Manners appear, in retrospect, to have been the chief spokesmen for their opinions.


6 William Morris, ‘Art Under Plutocracy’, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, intro May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1915), vol. 23, pp. 164–91, p. 175. All subsequent citations of Morris’s work will be from this edition and will be identified in the text; each reference will be followed by the volume number and page number in parentheses.

7 As Margaret Grennan put it, Morris travelled from Anglicanism to agnosticism and ‘stopped just short of materialism’, p 64.

