If we first look at William Morris the man we are less likely to mistake the writer. The man was more acceptable to common folk than any other writer of the time—and this despite his placing his strange ideals before them. Who else would have been accosted in Kensington High Street with ‘Beg pardon, sir, but was you ever captain of the Sea Swallow?’ or spent so much time and energy, physical and mental, stumping England and Scotland in the Socialist cause? Then again, he is more of an artisan than Ruskin, the core of his genius being expressed partly in ways more or less identical with those of the common folk in workshop or kitchen. The social ideal he set before him, soon after leaving Oxford, was social in the fullest sense—he placed highest what he called ‘Fellowship’. In one of the early prose romances, ‘The Hollow Land’, Florian, the old knight, looking back over his life, exclaims:

O my brothers! Lives passed in turmoil, in making one another unhappy; in bitterest misunderstanding of our brothers’ hearts, making those sad whom God has not made sad. . . .

And thirty years later, in A Dream of John Ball, the priest from Essex, John Ball himself, addresses the crowd with ‘Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death . . .’.

For Morris escape was neither possible nor desirable. If he fled the nineteenth century it was to return to it with healing in his wings. His flight was to places he deemed more beautiful than the ‘six counties overhung with smoke’, but he did not forget those counties, or the rest of England, spoiled or unspoiled. In The Sundering Flood the river is given a touch of the homely by being made ‘as big as the Thames at Reading’, and the splendid sword that Waywearer gives young Osberne is useful for both Morris’s purposes—mediaeval and modern—in being ‘such as no smith may work now’. His poems and romances—what they meant for him, and the whole of which they were part—existed for the reclaiming of England. His favoured Middle Ages were a depot or emporium for aesthetic ideas that were at last justified by their application to the nineteenth century. Morris could be modern only by pretending to be mediaeval—or occasionally Greek. If he loved the beauty of ages dead and gone it was for the sake of men still living. And indeed the beauty of those dead ages was largely of his own making. It was a modern beauty, inspired in an air his imagination found it easier to breathe in. Morris’s escape was tied by the leg. He wrote in his workshop, and when he took pen in hand he found the air around him stifling. He did once start a novel but abandoned it because it was merely an instance of how not to do it. He wrote a short story—Frank’s Sealed Letter—which is up-to-date scarcely further than in mentioning a railway. And there is the late longish poem
The Pilgrims of Hope in which, as Jack Lindsay has pointed out, he seems to be reflecting on what was unsatisfactory in his marriage because of his wife's interest in Rossetti, and in which some part of its triangular action takes place in Paris during the time of the 1871 Commune. Otherwise he wrote nothing that could bear the title of Trollope's The Way We Live Now, though something of his views on that subject could be inferred from News from Nowhere.

Rossetti saw Morris's Sigurd the Volsung as outre—he did not want to read a story about the son of a dragon, which was Sigurd's strange condition. The prose romances also show the lives of men subject now and again to magic, and in his objection to this element in Morris's stories Rossetti was speaking with firm voice, knowing that he had the nineteenth century crusade for 'truth' behind him. We can ignore his objection, however, because in the first place it offends against the principles of literary criticism—principles that allow a writer freedom of choice, inquiring only what is made of the chosen. We do not disqualify King Lear because its devastating action is set going by a situation appropriate to a fairy tale. Morris made something good of his matter, and his particular good contained some of the good aimed at by the 'truth' makers. He used magic—but used it responsibly. I mean that it is suffered by people we accept as human—by human beings who otherwise would qualify for parts in a novel of, say, Trollope, or, since there is in all Morris's stories a franker acceptance of the human body complete than was common in nineteenth century stories, in a tale of Chaucer. If a poet—or novelist or playwright—can persuade us that he is writing of human beings, nothing else matters in comparison. If we are given men and women, their setting can be ancient or modern, though in this mood and that we may well prefer one setting to the other—we may declare that we do not like historical novels, and yet reading The Cloister and the Hearth can enjoy Reade's version of the late Middle Ages, if only because we are experiencing it with Margaret and Gerard.

And this even holds for stories that deal in magic. Reading one of Morris's prose romances, we read on for two main reasons—that it is good to breathe the air of them, and because the people experiencing them are living human beings. The stability of that vital sort of truth is not infringed by Morris in his romances any more than it is by Chaucer in his. Not that his stories demonstrate a reading of human nature as profound as Chaucer's—the Medea of his Jason is often instanced as a failure to rise to a great occasion, or, to take a recurrent detail, when one of his young people 'reddens' he does not usually explore differences between reasons for blushing. As far as he goes, however, he reads human nature truly—his sketch is right even if he cannot give it the microscopic shading supplied by the great novelists of his time. There is the same sort of difference between him and Chaucer as Johnson had in mind when he contrasted Fielding (who could tell the time) and Richardson (who could make the watch). Those, then, who thought or think of his romances as merely escapist literature must rate human nature as not constantly important to readers.

During the nineteenth century language was much experimented with, for the sake of literature, and mainly of narrative literature. Dobell desiderated a language completely new, invented bit by bit and for himself, during the thousand years he
would need for the job; he thought it unreasonable that an original genius should have to use a language made by others. The rest of the experimenters proceeded practically. Barnes, who campaigned for a thorough-going Saxonisation of diction (and amused Swinburne by advocating 'pushwainling' for 'perambulator') turned to his native Dorset for the language of most of his poems. Hopkins promoted words he had met in Lancashire and in our earlier literature in order to match his earnest thought with words seemingly more earnest than their competitors which, being used from habit, were used saltlessly. Swinburne made Saxon the quiet staple of his verse, the Romance words cropping up sparsely.

Even some of the prose writers, now that their matter often lay remote in time and place, avoided at least some of the current diction—and even language—by way of obsolete words and expressions. Freeman wrote his history in a language strewn with mediaeval words—they have the effect of littered scraps of raw meat!—and the same can be said of Burton's famous translation of the Arabian Nights, as of Doughty's Travels in Arabia Deserta. As for Morris he wrote all his prose romances according to Freeman's principle—which Morris's practice may have helped him to formulate:

(The true historian) shall forbear to deck his tale, or feel no call to deck it, with the metaphors or smartness of the novelist, but he shall tell it in clear and manly English. . . .

Freeman, it may be added, owed something also to Carlyle's fondness for 'un'-compounds: his history revels in neologisms like 'unright' and 'unlaw' which Morris entirely avoids. Morris's practice illustrates Emerson's advice: 'Avoid adjectives: let your nouns do the work.' Nouns and verbs are what he most favours for his mediaevalising as for his reported imprecations: when he found an old church ruined by a restorer, he broke out with 'Beasts! Pigs! Damn their souls!' The result of all this is that his prose paces rather than walks. If some of the thinkers of the age, in novel and poem as well as in treatise, could not get on without inflating their sentences, Morris could and did, like other more ordinary folk. He had some few great ideas, and they concerned concrete things, to which he clung, filling his prose with their names.

An indication that mediaevalising did not come by nature is afforded by his falling for a mot juste without seeing that it is many centuries too late for his purpose—as when in The Hollow Land he speaks of knights spinning 'round and round in a mad waltz to the measured music of (their) meeting swords'. Later he made his mediaevalising diction undisturbedly all of a piece, which did not rule out the admission of a certain number of those Romance words that had already become part of Middle England—pavilion (first made prominent in nineteenth century verse by Shelley) peril, valiance, diligence, consequence, in special. Some of the words contributing to the homely staple were available only in scholarly dictionaries—kenspeckle—recognisable, conspicuous—a Scottish word: boun—made ready; a word that had been revived by Scott: gangrel—vagabond: bever—drink (or snack). But the rest are words still familiar—wallet; hanker; inkling—familiar but also striking because of the new look they have assumed in the general mediaevalising.
Among all the archaisers it is Morris who gives the reader most pleasure—Yeats thought the style of the prose romances ‘the most beautiful language I had ever read’. The gains of his procedure far outweigh the initial irritations. The flow of the English is easy, and many of the new expressions happy—‘nodded a yea-say’ or ‘six moons worn’ or ‘washed the night off his limbs’. And the prose can accommodate strange ideas without effort, as when Osberne is warned against the misuse of the sword given him by Waywearer:

Now then thou hast the sword; but I lay this upon thee therewith, that thou be no brawler nor make-bate, and that thou draw not Board-cleaver in any false quarrel, or in behalf of any tyrant or evil-doer, or else shall thy luck fail thee despite the blade that lieth hidden there.

There may well be something personal about Morris’s bizarre success. Free and easy as a man, he could not be stiff and self-conscious as an innovating prose-writer. Max’s brilliant cartoon showing him ‘settled on the settle’ cannot but pay tribute to the rounded comfortableness of the settler. The reader accepts that Morris is not giving him a ‘language such as men do use’ or ever did, but on the basis of that acceptance enjoys the artefact as he enjoys the performing artefacts of ballet. It is because of the quality of the prose, and of Morris’s deficiency as a metrist, that his masterpieces are his prose romances and not *Sigurd the Volsung*.

Morris’s lingo, in rebellion against much of the English round about him, also had a social purpose. The hero of *The Wood Beyond the World* is introduced as follows:

A while ago there was a young man dwelling in a great and goodly city by the sea which had to name Langton on Holm. He was but of five and twenty winters, a fair-faced man, yellow-haired, tall and strong; rather wiser than foolisher than young men are mostly wont; a valiant youth, and a kind; not of many words but courteous of speech; no roisterer, nought masterful, but peaceable and knowing how to forbear: in a fray a perilous foe, and a trusty war-fellow.

Here we get ‘winters’ instead of ‘years’: valiant, roisterer; masterful; perilous; trusty;—words better at home in a world more primitive than ours, who have a subtler and less decisive sense of character than had men of the seventeenth century or earlier. This reversion was part of Morris’s criticism of his times—he was showing his fellows what men were like before the modern degree of sophistication set in: Newman said he would welcome a wave of superstition, and Morris that he would welcome a wave of ‘barbarism’ once more flooding the world, its real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies. Even for his social purposes old diction was an advantage.

Morris, whose father left him rich at an early age, had every opportunity to fulfil his genius, and took advantage of them all. That genius was so various in its outlets that his life was as busy as that of any of our writers. It was as busy as Newman’s. But there was no agonising in his ‘busyness’ as there was in Newman’s, who described the process of writing a book as like painful childbearing; or as there was in Carlyle’s, who groaned over his desk and was made ill by composition. Morris’s busyness lacked the sort of literary earnestness that is another name for nineteenth
century intensity. His day was crowded, as was that of most of our writers, but without stressfulness. Indeed for Morris busyness could sometimes be restful. He was the only English poet of any standing who could exclaim ‘If this is poetry it is very easy to write’ and ‘If a chap cannot compose an epic poem while he is weaving tapestry, he had better shut up.’ He achieved the fulfilment of his multiform genius as comfortably as anybody could have, and the comparative effortlessness of it left its marks on the product both in its negatives and in its positives. We do not go to Morris to have our minds stretched, but to have them cleansed as receptacles for literary experience. It must have been partly the experience of reading Morris’s poetry that prompted Andrew Lang to say that poets no longer wrote about the Thirty-nine Articles—he was glancing back at Clough—but about appleblossom. The passages I have quoted in verse and prose show that there was more than an appleblossom beauty to most of them, but that particular beauty is their hallmark. And it arises not only out of the beauty of the things he favours but out of that of the living people he invents. Of all things human, he most liked what was most accessible to the eyes—colours, dresses, hair, faces, bodies (especially when they were a credit to the species). He wished that men could live as happily as the gods allowed, and seconded Ruskin’s endeavours to lighten men’s burdens and to make them more interested in what was on their back. Near the green fields or not, he believed they found their best pleasure in working with tools they could hold in their crafty hands.

One idea that was specially dear to him was the mistaken one that men wanted to, or could, revert to days when tools were simple and hand-driven—his own designs should have given him pause, being the kind that best received the repetition they called for by the calling in of big machines. Nevertheless the mistaken idea was abundantly fruitful. To begin with, it was an aesthetic idea with expulsive powers. It encouraged people to value space, to give things more room to breathe, to let in among them a cooler and freer air, to make colours cleaner and clearer and to allow each to spread further before it yielded to another. Along with it went his reassertion of the pleasantness of stories other than novels. The nineteenth century has been well called ‘the narrative century’ and among its widely various narratives Morris’s stake a claim for the kind of narrative that the novel was ousting. Morris knew that for all the cry for truth, one of the favourite books of the century was The Arabian Nights. He knew that people loved quick moving stories, that they were still as mediaeval—or if you like, human—as the men in the framework of The Earthly Paradise, who needed to hear stories as Frederick the Great’s councillors (with whom Carlyle showed such sympathy) needed to smoke pipes. Morris asserted the right of people in the nineteenth century to shut up newspapers and novels and listen to a yarn.