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MORRIS'S GERMAN ROMANCES AS SOCIALIST HISTORY

A *TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT* REVIEWER ONCE REMARKED OF WILLIAM MORRIS'S use of history in later life: he "was always concerned with the future even when he seemed most absorbed in the past. He turned to it, not to lose himself in it, but to find what was best worth having and doing now."¹ The utopian socialist Ernst Bloch created a term for such historical searches for "anticipatory designs" of a new order, calling these past traces of as-yet-unachieved ideals "*novae*," and asserting that we must understand and recreate them in our own present and future.²

At the height of his most active period of socialist endeavor, Morris designed a series of such narrative "*novae*" as accounts of historical prototypes for social revolution. These were not only exercises in the practice of his socialist beliefs but also reflections of deeper, more private imaginative responses to the political events in which he participated; they express his belief in the need for self-sacrificing action in the service of justice as well as beauty. Morris's imaginary reconstructions of a proto-socialist past are among his most intriguing literary works, for they enabled him to express two dialectically opposed features of his art: a concrete sense of physical, everyday reality, and a deeper sense of the emotional transformations needed for a new social order.

I

The first of these reconstructions, "The Pilgrims of Hope," appeared in *Commonweal* from April 1885 to June 1886. A poetic commemoration of the nineteenth century's great socialist tragedy, the Paris Commune,

¹ Anonymous review, *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1912, p. 312.

² David Gross, "Marxism and Utopia: Ernst Bloch," *Towards a New Marxism*, eds. Paul Piccone and Bart Grahl (St. Louis, Missouri: Telos, 1973), p. 93; see also Ernst Bloch, "Incipit Vita Nova," in *Man On His Own*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 73-93.

“Pilgrims” reflects something of Morris’s early optimism in the “hope” of its title, for its protagonist’s martyrdom clearly contributes to the eventual triumph of a new order. *A Dream of John Ball*, serialized in *Commonweal* from November 1886 to June 1887, was the last historical reconstruction which Morris attempted before the shock of the Trafalgar Square murders on 13 November 1887; in it, Morris contrasted John Ball’s visionary prophecies with his impending execution and the brutal suppression of the Peasant Revolt in 1381. The murders in Trafalgar Square deepened Morris’s wariness of armed confrontations in which the enemy held all the arms, and Morris’s essays and *Commonweal* notes of the late 1880s reveal growing sadness at the slow progress of socialism. Perhaps partly in compensation Morris began to search for historical “traces” of socialist victories in a more distant past, of Germanic tribal societies in the twilight of the Roman Empire. *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889) both describe early struggles of imaginary tribal societies toward a more coherent communal order.

Such appeals to Germanic tribal values followed a rather venerable tradition, represented by Montesquieu’s claim in *De l’Esprit des lois* (book 11, 1748) that England’s political constitution had been “invented first in the woods [of Germany],”³ and David Hume’s warm praise for Saxon “valour and love of liberty” in the *History of England* (1762). The most likely direct influence on Morris, however, may have been Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), which Morris read both as a young man and in middle age. Many details of Morris’s descriptions closely parallel Gibbon’s pronouncements about the organization of Germanic society, but Morris’s interpretations of these details more closely parallel arguments by his socialist and communist contemporaries — Ernest Belfort Bax, Frederick Engels, and Peter Kropotkin among them — that small “medieval” societies at least adumbrated the realization of communitarian ideals.

Morris’s decision to write about early Germanic society also reflects his own deeply idiosyncratic belief in a poetic version of historical *Verstehen*. Again and again in his earlier poetry — *The Life and Death of Jason*, *The*

³ M. de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 2 vols. (London: Collingwood, 1823), I, 151: “One nation [England] there is also in the world, that has for the direct end of its constitution political liberty. We shall presently examine the principles on which this liberty is founded; if they are sound, liberty will appear in its highest perfection.” He also said “In perusing the admirable treatise of Tacitus On the Manners of the Germans, we find it is from that nation, the English have borrowed the idea of their political government. This beautiful system was invented first in the woods” (p. 161). For a summary of views on the subject, see Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1982) chapter four, and L. P. Curtis, Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts* (Bridgeport, Connecticut: University of Bridgeport: Conference on British Studies, 1968), chapters one, five, six. The relation of Morris’s Germanicism to his politics is also discussed in Rosemary Jann, “Democratic Myths in Victorian Medievalism,” *Browning Institute Studies* 8 (1980), 141-147, and Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 149-152.

Earthly Paradise, Love Is Enough, Sigurd the Volsung — he had sought to recreate past heroes' capacity for choice and suffering as fragmentary prophecies of what we ourselves may be if we do not alienate ourselves from our own cultural past. But *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* constitute Morris's most concrete reconstruction of an idealized pre-socialist society — its economic organization, political features, and heroic ideals in war and peace. Morris largely followed his sources' accounts of the tribal structures of work, farming, law, and kinship, but these structures also provided him with a narrative framework for his egalitarian social ideals and intuitive understanding of many forms of work, and encouraged him to identify the best features of medieval life for later incorporation into the ideal future society of *News from Nowhere*.

The House of the Wolfings is briefer than its companion romance, set in an earlier period, and more tied to concrete historical events. *The Roots of the Mountains* is a more leisurely recreation of a later period of tribal and communal life. According to J. W. Mackail, Morris seems to have taken greater satisfaction in *Roots*: "I am so pleased with my book . . . typography, binding, and must I say it, literary matter — that I am any day to be seen hugging it up, and am become a spectacle to Gods and men because of it.' As to the 'literary matter,' he said afterwards that this of all his books was the one which had given him the greatest pleasure in writing."⁴ In a letter to Jenny Morris he remarked of *Roots* that "the condition of the people I am telling of is later (whatever their date may be) than that of the *Wolfings*."⁵ Morris wrote little else about the political intentions or "literary matter" of the German romances,⁶ but May Morris later commented on them:

His thoughts were fixed on this point in mid-Europe where the great forces came and went and met in conflict before blending. . . . In the one tale [*The House of the Wolfings*] the exhausted Roman is the villain of the play, in the other [*The Roots of the Mountains*] it is the Savage of the East, the wild horsemen that "move like to the staves [*sic*] in autumn" [Huns]. Against these two elements, of outworn tyranny and ignorant brute-force, the free intelligent tribes are in warfare. . . . Love of the tribe and the kindred is the keynote in *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*.⁷

The House of the Wolfings clearly identifies its people as "Goths," and their opponents as "Romans," "Huns," "Franks," and "Burgundians."⁸ May Mor-

⁴ J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1899), II, 227.

⁵ William Morris to Jenny Morris, 29 January 1889, in Mackail, II, 218.

⁶ The sole exception occurred in a letter to Jenny Morris in March 1889, in which he stated that he had altered his original intention of having the Bride killed in favor of sparing her to marry Folk-Might: "It would be a very good alliance for the Burgdalers and the Silverdalers both, and I don't think sentiment ought to stand in the way." See the *Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915), XV, xi. Hereafter cited in the text as *CW*.

⁷ May Morris, ed., *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1936), I, 508-509. Hereafter cited in the text as *Morris*.

⁸ For examples of such usage, see William Morris, *A Tale of the House of the Wolfings and All the Kindreds of the Mark Written in Prose and in Verse* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1889), pp. 59, 65. Hereafter cited in the text as *Wolfings*.

ris's identification of "villains" in *Roots* with the Huns would seem to date the story before the defeat of Attila in the late sixth century and locate it in some part of alpine middle-Europe.⁹ The terms "Goth," "Roman," and "Hun" never appear, however, in *Roots* itself.

In some respects the relation between the two German romances is analogous to that between the two English romances, *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*. *A Dream of John Ball* focuses on preparations for an early revolt, while *News from Nowhere* looks back to a completed social revolution from a time of peace. *Wolfings* similarly presents an earlier, more threatened warlike tribal society, while *Roots* presents a fuller account of social relations in a time of relative peace. In effect, the historical reconstructions of Morris's "novae" became increasingly more abstract and remote: from an actual nineteenth-century event (the Commune) to an actual fourteenth-century event (the Peasants' War), to an imaginary event with quasi-historical participants (the war of a Gothic tribe with the Romans), to an imaginary and undatable event (the Wolf-Folk's war with the Dusky Men). If one sees *Roots* in these terms, as a near-abstract presentation of European tribal society, it becomes less surprising that Morris's next romance was *News from Nowhere*, whose future society exhibits significant features of this idealized "medieval" life.

Morris drew most of his historical information about Germanic tribes from Gibbon. At Exeter Morris had read H. H. Milman's 1852 annotated edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1852), and a briefer derivative of Gibbon's history, J. C. L. Sismondi's 1834 work, *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire* (Mackail, I, 38). According to his daughter: "Gibbon . . . was read through more than once during different bouts of illness and taken up constantly in the last years of the life" (CW, XXII, xxvi-xxvii). In "The Rough Side of the Middle Ages," an essay Morris coauthored with Bax, Morris and Bax cite four other nineteenth-century historians of the medieval period, but none of these provides any information or speculation on the early Germanic tribes that cannot be found in Gibbon.¹⁰

The documentary base for Gibbon's information, by the way, is remarkably slight. Gibbon lists twenty sources for his discussion of the

⁹ The "Folk," of *The Roots of the Mountains* is comprised of several sub-units: "the Men of Burgdale and the Sheepcotes; and the Children of Wolf, and the Woodlanders, and the Men of Rose-dale"; see *The Roots of the Mountains* in CW, XV, 411. For simplicity, throughout this essay I have referred to them as one unit, alternately the Children of the Wolf, Wolf-Children, or Wolf-Folk. References to this work will be cited in the text as *Roots*.

¹⁰ William Morris, "The Rough Side of the Middle Ages," in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Sonnenschein, 1893), p. 76. Hereafter cited in the text as *Socialism*. See also Henry Hallam, *A View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages* (1818); John R. Green, *History of the English People* (1877-1880); Edward Freeman, *Comparative Politics* (1873), and *Historical Essays* (1879); and William Stubbs, *Seventeen Lectures on the Study of Medieval and Modern History* (1886).

Germans, including Tacitus, but of these, only one — Caesar — seems to have directly encountered the peoples he describes.¹¹ The confident willingness of eighteenth and nineteenth-century ethnologists to base elaborate speculation on highly derivative sources is itself a striking phenomenon. Morris's German romances show little trace of the "historical" details of Gibbon's narrative — his lengthy chronicles of tribal reigns, emigrations, wars, and hegemonial disputes. Morris instead seems to have borrowed and heightened Gibbon's general descriptions of tribal life and military resistance, and extended his conjectural reconstruction of daily life, communal activity, and popular art. The historical indefiniteness of Morris's Germanic romances allowed him to sketch in loving detail the communal virtues of the Wolfings and Wolf-Folk, and mitigate or suppress practices which might seem harsh or brutal. Morris, in effect, ascribed to the Germans' traits of sophistication and kindness which Gibbon had denied them and contrasted their traits favorably with those of Roman "civilization."

Gibbon had described a tribal government by general council of free adult men, convened at stated intervals or in emergencies. The Wolfings' and Wolf-Folk's Folk-motes are of course such bodies. According to Gibbon this council was not legislative but judicial and military: "The trial of public offenses, the election of magistrates, and the great business of peace and war, were determined by its independent voice. Sometimes, indeed, these important questions were previously considered and prepared in a more select council of the principal chieftains. The magistrates might deliberate and persuade, the people only could resolve and execute."¹² Chieftains confer directly before battle in *Wolfings*; in the more developed society of *Roots*, several such prior consultations take place between Folk-Might, the Alderman, Face-of-God, and various other "principal chieftains." The narrator of *Wolfings* asserts that "neighbors" of the Folk-mote pass judgment at the Doomring (*Wolfings*, p. 5), but only one Wolfing Folk-mote, at which the tribesmen elect Thiodolf as War-duke, is actually described. By contrast, the Folk-mote in *Roots* adjudicates individual disputes, makes peace, and declares war (readers of *Roots* will readily recognize a passage in which Gibbon's tribesmen signal their willingness for battle with "a loud clashing of shields and spears" [Gibbon, I, 196]).

The Wolfings' council is attended by all males of the tribe: "At such Things would all the men of the House of the Wolfings or the Folk be present man by man" (p. 5); the virgin-priestess Hall-Sun is also permitted

¹¹ In addition to Tacitus, Gibbon lists the following sources for his German accounts: Pausanias, Priscus, De Guignes, Plutarch, Jornandes, Agathias, Ahmed Arabsiada, Diodorus, Lucan, Cluvenius, Signonius, Muratori, de Bunt, Tillemont, Ammianus, Gambil, Durnapius, Zosimus, and Caesar.

¹² Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (New York: Modern Library, 1932), I, 196.

to attend, and her advice solicited on the defense of the Wolfing Roof. Most of those present at the Folk-mote in *Roots* are also men, and its speakers refer to their audience as “men and brethren,” but *Roots*’ account departs slightly more from the pattern of Gibbon’s all-male council. The Sun-beam and Bow-may join the prior meeting of the inner council of chiefs, and the Sun-beam and the Bride attend the Folk-mote itself: the Sun-beam stands there with her brother, and the Bride in “the forefront of the Men of the Steer” (*Roots*, p. 278).

The elections of Thiodolf and Face-of-God as War-Leaders both follow Gibbon’s prescription according to which “a general of the tribe was elected on occasions of danger; and, if the danger was pressing and extensive, several tribes concurred in the choice of the same general. The bravest warrior was named to lead his countrymen into the field, by his example rather than by his commands. But the power . . . expired with the war, and in time of peace the German tribes acknowledged not any supreme chief. Princes were, however, appointed in the general assembly, to administer justice, or rather to compose differences, in their respective districts. In the choice of these magistrates as much regard was shown to birth as to merit” (Gibbon, I, 196-197). In *Wolfings*, Thiodolf conveniently doubles as chief administrator and principal warrior, for “he was deemed the wisest man and the best man of his hands, and of heart most dauntless” (p. 8). In *Roots*, Face-of-God actually gives few orders, but provides an (utterly implausible) example of personal heroism throughout the Wolf-Children’s battles with the Dusky Men. The Alderman violates the peace of the Folk-mote by attempting to strike his son; afterwards he fines himself with impartial severity, and his fellow tribesmen ratify the judgment.

Gibbon’s Germans venerated nature and “the Earth,” and followed elaborate codes of hospitality and exchange of gifts (Gibbon, I, 197). The tribespeople in *Wolfings* likewise worship assorted animals (“the holy beasts who drew the banner-wains,” [p. 50]), places (of the “Holy Thing,” [p. 161]), and objects (the Hall-Lamp [p. 6]); and the Wolf-Folk in *Roots* swear by “the Earth,” various natural elements, “the Warrior,” and the lesser divinities of their respective houses. They are also passionately generous to newly rescued kinspeople, and exchange gifts at every significant social gathering.

According to Gibbon, iron, silver, and gold were scarce among the tribes in the first and second centuries (Gibbon, I, 197). By the fourth through sixth centuries (the approximate period of *Wolfings* and *Roots*), trade in such commodities had become common.¹³ *Wolfings* contains several references to iron weaponry but notes that not every fighter can be provided

¹³ Mackail dates *Wolfings* as set in the second or third century A.D.; see Mackail, II, 213.

with iron armor; the tribal War-horn is made of gold. The Burgdalers in *Roots* have gold but lack silver, unlike the People of the Shadowy Vale, who are exiles from Silverdale. Iron-face's name clearly identifies the ring-mail armor, shields, spears, swords, and halberks he crafts, and visiting merchants provide "iron, both in pigs and forged scraped nails; steel they had, and silver, both in ingots and vessels" (p. 240).

Morris also followed rather closely several aspects of Gibbon's description of tribal war: the presence of women in the war-camps, their occasional participation in battle, the juxtaposition and mutual exhortation of kinsmen in the ranks, and the importance of archery, war-cries, and music. In *Wolfings*, two brothers and "a doughty maid, their sister" (p.124) bring news to the Wolfings' army and engage in the fighting, and Hall-Sun, other women, old men, and boys form a reserve contingent. In *Roots*, the Bride, Bow-may, and other women engage in battle, and the battle ranks are carefully organized by extended families. Both *Wolfings* and *Wolf-Folk* sing as they advance into battle, and in some cases they are accompanied by horns and trumpets. Thiodolf shouts a battle-cry in alliterative metre as he leads his final advance, and when Face-of-God enters the battleground of Silverdale, he chants: "The wheat is done blooming and rust's on the sickle" — a lyric which is surely more Morrisean than Germanic (p. 337).

Gibbon calls "desire of fame and the contempt of death . . . habitual sentiments of a German mind," and remarks on the tribes' distaste for tribute and negotiations (Gibbon, I, 202). Both *Wolfings* and *Wolf-Children* faithfully commemorate past heroism and expect the same from their descendants. In *Roots* those *Wolf-Children* who have yielded to the Dusky Men have become abject slaves, later freed by an alliance of exiles and kinspeople. The prewar Council and Folk-mote debate whether to attack immediately or prepare for defense, and Morris praises the wisdom of their surprise attack. Compare the following episode, in which Gibbon describes the only instance in which a Roman city (Azimus) has held out against the Huns: the Azimuntines did not wait, but "attacked, in frequent and successful sallies, the troops of the Huns, who gradually declined the dangerous neighbourhood, rescued from their hands the spoil and the captives, and recruited their domestic force by the voluntary association of fugitives and deserters. . . . *The ministers of Theodosius confessed, with shame and with truth, that they no longer possessed any authority over a society of men who so bravely asserted their natural independence;* and the king of the Huns condescended to negotiate an equal exchange with the citizens of Azimus. . . . Every soldier, every statesman, must acknowledge that, if the race of the Azimuntines had been encouraged and multiplied, the barbarians

would have ceased to trample on the majesty of the empire" (Gibbon, II, 1,214, my emphasis).

Morris, however, pointedly reverses Gibbon's censure of two other aspects of Germanic life: the bravery of their women and the absence of money for exchange. Gibbon remarks that "the Germans treated their women with esteem and confidence, consulted them on every occasion of importance, and fondly believed that in their breasts resided a sanctity and wisdom more than human" (Gibbon, I, 199). But he dismisses derisively women who "emulate the stern virtues of *man*": "Heroines of such a cast may claim our admiration; but they were most assuredly neither lovely, nor very susceptible of love. Whilst they affected to emulate the stern virtues of *man*, they must have resigned that attractive softness in which principally consists the charm of *woman*. . . . Female courage, however it may be raised by fanaticism, or confirmed by habit, can be only a faint and imperfect imitation of the manly valour that distinguishes the age or country in which it may be found." (Gibbon, I, 199). In *Wolfings*, by contrast, women who serve as scouts are "well-nigh as strong as men, clean-limbed and tall, tanned with the sun and wind" (p. 87). The Bride in *Roots* is brave as well as beautifully arrayed, and the archer Bow-may perhaps more effective in battle than the "war-Leader" himself; in fact, she becomes the most fully and sympathetically portrayed woman warrior in Morris's writings. Also when Gold-mane first encounters the Sun-beam, she seems to him preternaturally wise as well as "god-like"; and the Burgdalers remark of her "that they had never known before how fair the Gods might be" (*Roots*, p. 242).¹⁴

Obvious distinctions and reservations remain. *Wolfings*' virgin-priestess Hall-Sun is an isolated figure, and the goddess Wood-sun never considers entering battle to protect her lover. The Sun-beam, the most beautiful and desirable of *Roots*' women, accompanies her lover and kinspeople to battle, but she does so without weapons, and her presence requires others to defend her. The Bride and Bow-may eventually retire to marriage and motherhood, and Morris describes a curious mating ritual called the "Maiden Ward," in which attractively dressed young women carry their lovers' arms (not their own), and feign the defense of Burgdale.

Morris's view of money also differs from Gibbon's. The latter writes: "Money, in a word, is the most universal incitement, iron the most powerful instrument, of human industry; and it is very difficult to conceive by what means a people, neither actuated by the one nor seconded by the other,

¹⁴ Gibbon also describes the German women's preference for suicide over capture, a resolution shared by Morris's women scouts in *Wolfings* and in *Roots* by the women of the Shadowy Vale. In *Roots* the Bride and five other Daleswomen join the battle against the Dusky Men, but a much higher proportion of the Shadowy Vale women, who have directly experienced slavery and torture, engage in the battle.

could emerge from the grossest barbarism" (Gibbon, I, 192). There is no mention of currency in *Wolfings*; in *Roots* Morris gleefully accepts Gibbon's identification of civilization with money, and rejects both. His Dalespeople use various commodities (including gold) for barter and exchange, but no coins or currency. Coins of course are also absent from the future society of *News from Nowhere*, whose inhabitants are incredulous and puzzled when the narrator offers payment for their services. In his essay "The Society of the Future," Morris describes this utopian aspect of the ideal commonwealth: "Private property of course will not exist as a right: there will be such an abundance of all ordinary necessities that between private persons there will be no obvious and immediate exchange necessary" (*Morris*, II, 460).

Thus far Morris's revisions of Gibbon have been thoroughly consistent with his deep respect for nonclassical art and culture and for communitarian ideals. In one respect, however, Morris's beliefs parallel those of Gibbon. Throughout *Roots* he carries over with little change Gibbon's caricature of the Huns in his portrayal of the Wolf-Folk's antagonists, the Dusky Men. Gibbon had asserted, for example, that the Huns "were distinguished from the rest of the human species by their broad shoulders, flat noses, and small black eyes, deeply buried in the head; and as they were almost destitute of beards, they never enjoyed either the manly graces of youth or the venerable aspect of age" (Gibbon, II, 920).¹⁵ Gibbon could also write that "the portrait of Attila exhibits the genuine deformity of a modern Calmuck; a large head, a swarthy complexion, small deep-seated eyes, a flat nose, a few hairs in the place of a beard, broad shoulders, and a short square body, of nervous strength, though of a disproportioned form" (Gibbon, II, 1,202). Compare Morris's description of the Dusky Men: "They were utterly strange to him: they were short of stature, crooked-legged, long-armed, very strong for their size: with small blue eyes, snubbed-nosed, wide-mouthed, thin-lipped, very swarthy of skin, exceeding foul of favour" (*Roots*, p. 88). The Manichean "darkness" of Morris's villains is anticipated in Gibbon's traditional description of the Huns' atrocities,¹⁶ and the Dusky Men also practice human sacrifice, as had Gibbon's Huns. According to Gibbon: "If the rites of Scythia were practised on this solemn occasion, a lofty altar, or rather pile of faggots, three hundreds yards in length and in breadth, was raised in a spacious plain; and the sword of Mars was placed

¹⁵ Even Gibbon's account reflects restraint: compare the even more lurid descriptions of the Huns in J. C. L. Sismondi, *A History of the Fall of the Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1834), I, 102.

¹⁶ According to Gibbon, the Huns "massacred their hostages, as well as their captives, two hundred young maidens were tortured with exquisite and unrelenting rage; their bodies were torn asunder by wild horses, or their bones were crushed under the weight of rolling waggons; and their unburied limbs were abandoned on the public roads as a prey to dogs and vultures" (Gibbon, II, 1,209).

erect on the summit of this rustic altar, which was annually consecrated by the blood of sheep, horses, and of the hundredth captive" (Gibbon, II, 1,203). One reason the Dalespeople's surprise attack is so successful is that the Dusky Men are caught while crowded together to watch such a sacrifice and are unable to disperse in time. Both Huns and Dusky Men worship swords as crude religious totems. In Gibbon's words: "As they were incapable of forming either an abstract idea or a corporeal representation, they worshipped their tutelary deity under the symbol of an iron cimeter" (Gibbon, II, 1,202-1,203). Gibbon also records the practices of female infanticide and use of female captives as sexual partners to replace the slain. Reports of similar practices by the thralls of the Dusky Men may help explain the horror in which Daleswomen hold captivity, as well as the absence of Dusky Women.

Morris's simplistic characterization of the Dusky Men may be compared with his more muted presentation of the Romans in *Wolfings*. The Roman hosts are several times characterized as cruel, predatory, and greedy, but the narrator also notes instances of their bravery and skill, records their decency in preserving the corpse of the slain Gothic leader Otto, and describes them physically as "nimble and fleet of foot, men round of limb, very dark-skinned, but not foul of favor" (*Wolfings*, p. 96). In contrast to the Wolf-Children in *Roots*, the *Wolfings* also feel some respect and pity for their defeated opponents: "For pity of these valiant men was growing in the hearts of the valiant men who had vanquished them, now that they feared them no more" (*Wolfings*, p. 185). Morris seems, in summary, to have revised rather radically Gibbon's view of the Germanic "barbarians," while finding dramatically convenient the historian's traditional demonization of their little-known Asian opponents. Other historical instances of appalling cruelty, mass murder, and genocide make Gibbon's descriptions all too believable; but his facile identification of vicious brutality with oriental swarthy is itself part of the history of European racism, and Morris's use of these stereotypes seems inconsistent with his otherwise marked rejection of racial and national prejudices. Like Gibbon's Huns, Morris's Dusky Men are essentially icons of evil; they never speak, and die with little individuality and convenient speed. Obvious questions — what conditions formed the Dusky Men, what drove them to wander — are never asked.

In light of Morris's reliance on Gibbon, it may seem surprising that he did not also use Frederick Engels's *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates* (1884; translated into French in 1893 and into English in 1902), in which Engels also associated egalitarian and communist ideals with the social practices of "upper barbaric" Germanic tribes. The direct influence of Engels's work on Morris's romances seems to have

been rather slight. Morris knew Engels, of course, and may well have discussed with him, or with Bax and other socialists, the ideas of *Der Ursprung*, as well as its chief sources, Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877) and Edward Freeman's *Comparative Politics* (1874).¹⁷ Eleanor Marx alluded briefly to *Der Ursprung* in an 1885 *Commonweal* review of August Bebel's *Woman in the Past, Present, and Future*, and Bax very likely summarized its contents for Morris at some stage of their 1886-1887 joint composition of "Socialism from the Root Up," especially in regard to their first essay on "Ancient Society," which appeared in *Commonweal* for 15 May 1886. Morris, moreover, surely concurred with Engels that "all the vigorous and creative life which the Germans infused into the Roman world was barbarism. Only barbarians are able to rejuvenate a world in the throes of collapsing civilization."¹⁸ Both writers identified the decline of political liberty with the rise of private property, and Engels also disparaged coinage as a "new instrument for the domination of the nonproducer over the producer and his production" (Engels, p. 225). The descriptions of tribal social structure in "Ancient Society," however, are much more analytical and matter-of-fact than those of Engels:

... The unit of society was the *Gens*, a group of blood-relations at peace among themselves, but which group was hostile to all other groups; within the *Gens* wealth was common to all its members, without it wealth was prize of war.

This condition of war necessarily developed leadership amongst men . . . these warrior leaders began to get to themselves larger shares of the wealth than others, and so the primitive communism of wealth began to be transformed into individual ownership. . . . The Tribe in its turn melted into a larger and still more artificial body, the People — a congeries of many tribes, the ancient Gothic-Teutonic name for which — *theoth* — is still preserved in such names as *Theobald*. This was the last development of Barbarism; nor was there much change in the conditions of wealth under it from those obtaining among the Tribe, although it held in it something more than the mere *germs* of feudalism.¹⁹

In contrast, Engels concludes his argument with a ringing quotation from Morgan: "Democracy in government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education . . . will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient gentes" (Engels, p. 237).

Morris's portrayal of German tribal life contains no counterpart of Engels's great polemical attack on the patriarchal family. Engels ascribed to the *gens* a matrilinear extended-family system which permitted "group marriage," and he vigorously attacked the property-based monogamous

¹⁷ For a discussion of Freeman's ideas, see J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 155-228.

¹⁸ Frederick Engels, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884; rpt. ed., New York: International Publishers, 1972), p. 216.

¹⁹ *Commonweal*, 2:18 (1886), p. 53.

“marriage of convenience,” which “turns often enough into the crassest prostitution . . . far more commonly of the woman, who differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body as piecework as a wage worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery” (Engels, p. 134). The obvious patriarchy of Morris’s tribal societies is slightly mitigated by the active temperaments of their women; his reconstructions are in this sense less radical than Engels’s but probably more accurate. The evidence, in short, suggests that Engels and Morris both wished to interpret contemporary reconstructions of Germanic tribal society as forms of a socialist state-of-nature, but also that the motives and details of their interpretations differ in several respects.²⁰

II

Morris had discussed twelfth century Icelandic life and literature in “The Early Literature of the North — Iceland” (1887), and the life of later medieval England in the trilogy “Early England” (1886), “Feudal England” (1887), and “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century” (1887). He also summarized his views of the Middle Ages in the two *Commonweal* essays of May 1886, “Ancient Society” and “Medieval Society,” both coauthored with Ernest Belfort Bax. Morris and Bax later developed their views at much greater length in a section of *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1893; pp. 19-92), which included the essay-chapters “Medieval Society: Early Period” and “The Rough Side of the Middle Ages.” All of these extended reflections on medieval and tribal societies preceded the composition in 1886-1887 of *John Ball* and the German romances.

Morris’s joint essay with Bax, “The Medieval Society — The Early Period,” examines feudal hierarchies and the social and temporal role of the church with varying degrees of disapproval, and comments on the gradual organization of artisans into guilds, a topic which dominated Bax’s later *German Society of the Middle Ages* (1894). Their next essay, “The Rough Side of the Middle Ages,” criticizes a view of medieval society presented by “bourgeois historians, whose aim was the praising of the escape of modern

²⁰ Morris’s extensive reading in Icelandic chronicles and sagas also offered still another and quite different alternative source for his descriptions of patterns of endogamy and other practices which Victorian ethnographers and anthropologists attributed to their “Germanic” forebears. *Roots*’ elaborate description of the House of the Face, for example, has its counterparts in work of Morgan and Engels, but also in Samuel Laing’s descriptions of Icelandic household dwellings in his preface to *Chronicles of the Kings of Norway* (*The Heimskringla; or, Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*), 3 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1844), I, 122-123.

society from a period of mere rapine and confusion, into peace, order, and prosperity . . . [and] who have drawn so violent a contrast between medieval disadvantages and the gains of modern life" (*Socialism*, pp. 76, 77). Among the alleged forms of "rapine and confusion," Morris and Bax consider four: "Lawless" disorder; prevalence of "oppression and violence"; "rudeness of life and absence of material comforts"; and the constricting effects of "ignorance and superstition" (*Socialism*, p. 77).

In response to the charge of "lawlessness," they claim that feudal society was in fact characterized by "undue observance of laws" (*Socialism* p. 77). This may or may not have been so, but in any case Morris's choice of a *pre*feudal society as the subject of *Wolfings* and *Roots* largely sidesteps the issue. Morris and Bax give the second charge ("rudeness of life") short shrift: "There is no degradation in mere external roughness of life. . . . The medieval man in his turn would probably be ill at ease amid the 'comforts' of modern London" (*Socialism*, p. 78). The inhabitants of Mid-mark and Burgdale and their environs are actually rich in landscape, wildlife, water-power, and good soil, and skilled in carpentry, masonry, smithing, cookery, outdoor sports, and fighting. Consider *Roots*' first description of a meal: "There was bread and flesh . . . and leeks and roasted chestnuts of the grove, and red-cheeked apples of the garth, and honey enough of that year's gathering, and medlars sharp and mellow: moreover, good wine of the western bents went up and down the hall in great gilded copper bowls and in mazers girt and lipped with gold" (*Roots*, p. 18). Like all Morris's more lavish feasts, this one is vigorously carnivorous, and the "bread and flesh" are here served with wine in simple but brightly ornamented dishes at large communal tables. Other branches of the Wolf-Folk are not quite so prosperous; the hunting Woodlanders eat a simpler meat diet, and the Shepherds and People of the Shadowy Vale rely more on milk and cheese.

Tribal clothing and household goods are also ample and well-ornamented, and their special garments for festive occasions are brightly colored and especially well-made. Sitting on the dais as the Wolfing army depart for war, for example, Hall-Sun is beautifully arrayed "in a garment of fine white wool, on the breast whereof were wrought in gold two beasts ramping up against a fire-altar whereon a flame flickered" (*Wolfings*, p. 23). In *Roots*, the future chieftain Gold-mane dresses in a scarlet kirtle with a jewelled collar, and Sun-beam is described as "clad in a white smock, whose hems were broidered with gold wire and precious gems of the Mountains, and over that a gown woven of gold and silver" (*Roots*, p. 49). The Wolfings' and Wolf-Folk's armaments are among their most elaborate apparel. The Bride, for example, "bore a goodly gilded helm on the head, and held in

hand a spear with gold-garlanded shaft, and was girt with a sword whose hilts and scabbard both were adorned with gold and gems" (*Roots*, p. 178).

The Wolf-Folk have an abundance of everything which contributes to their activities and well-being but somehow are uncorrupted by surfeit. Their daily work — serving, weaving, hunting, smithing — requires constant physical exercise, but no one seems ill, oppressed by the severity of tasks too difficult to perform, or in need of release from work. Burgdale youth are resolutely healthy, take long walks, and engage in sports. No one raves or suffers mental breakdown, and there are no village idiots. If there were, they would presumably be cared for. According to Bax and Morris: "Whatever advantages we have gained over the Middle Ages are not shared by the greater part of our population. The whole of our unskilled labouring classes are in a far worse position as to food, housing, and clothing than any but the extreme fringe of the corresponding class in the Middle Ages" (*Socialism*, p. 79). Morris insists on this egalitarianism in all his essays on medieval life. He remarks in "Early England" that the Saxon kings not only ruled but participated in everyday work, and he makes elsewhere the same point about Icelandic heroes and aristocrats.²¹ In *Roots* the Alderman is an active weaponsmaker, and Gold-mane, who expects to be a chief of his people, looks forward to a life of vigorous labor (*Roots*, p. 144). In "The Early Literature of the North," Morris also notes with approval Icelandic society's relatively equitable treatment of women, for example in its provision of the right of divorce to both sexes (*Lectures*, p. 185). As we have seen, young unmarried women in both German romances are athletic and sturdy, and in *Roots* are permitted (but not encouraged) to hunt and fight before marriage. No women, however, seem to undertake the more physically strenuous crafts (carving, smithing), and as we have seen, none plays any direct role in the tribe's government.

In his discussion of medieval Icelandic society Morris also observes that it was founded by exiles who sought freedom from the Norwegian monarch and preferred the rule of local chieftains to that of a distant king. He remarks that law was based on the "equal personal rights of all freedmen," but does not mention that the latter were substantial property owners who supported bands of paid retainers and thralls.²² The societies described

²¹ William Morris, *Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene Le Mire (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 169, 184-185. Hereafter cited in the text as *Lectures*.

²² *Lectures*, p. 184. Morris wrote "freedmen," the term for freed former slaves; all freemen but few freedmen were permitted to vote, so it seems safe to assume he meant the former. A discussion of the Icelandic social system which may have influenced Morris appears in chapter three, volume one of the "Preliminary Dissertation" of Samuel Laing, "Of the Social Condition of the Norsemen" in the *Chronicles of the Kings of Norway*. For a more accurate, less sanguine commentary on the harsh injustices of medieval Icelandic society, see Gary Aho, "William Morris and Iceland," *Kairos*, 1 (1982), 103-134. Aho notes that only one in twenty-five persons belonged to a class of "masters," to which the other twenty-four owed subservience. Women were routinely repressed, and slaves killed for disobedience.

in *Wolfings* and *Roots*, in any case, are somewhat more egalitarian than the Icelandic one. At Folk-motes in both romances, each male has the vote and right to speak, regardless of wealth or social status, and at least one woman is present, though she does not speak. The *Wolfings* do keep captives from other tribes as slaves, but this injustice is slightly mitigated by occasional adoption: "Howbeit they had servants or thralls, men taken in battle, men of alien blood, though true it is that from time to time were some of such men taken into the House, and hailed as brethren of the blood" (*Wolfings*, p. 3). The Wolf-Folk in *Roots* no longer enslave captives from other tribes, but a residual caste system exists, which is quietly reinforced by the narrative conventions of the romance. Gold-mane comes from a family of chieftains, as do Folk-might and Sun-beam; Sun-beam occasionally waits on Gold-mane, but she is usually attended in turn by Bow-may and Wood-father's family. Gold-mane does at times wait on himself and assist with the preparation of food, and he also responds with politeness and gratitude to those who serve him. On one occasion he chides the cook of the House of the Face, Kettel, for calling him "lord"; on another, he disappoints the good-natured maid who fetches water for him when he forgets a customary thank-you kiss. All this individual good grace of course does not really suspend a social hierarchy which is fully internalized by the characters. All women admire Gold-mane and all men respect him; few seem to notice Kettel or the maid.

In "The Rough Side of the Middle Ages," Morris and Bax remark: "There remains the charge of violence and misery to be dealt with. As to the misery, the result partly of that violence and partly of the deficient grasp of the resources of nature, its manifestations were so much more dramatic than the misery of our time produces, that at this distance they have the effect of overshadowing the everyday life of the period, which in fact was not constantly burdened by them. What misery exists in our own days is not spasmodic and accidental, but chronic and essential to the system under which we live" (*Socialism*, p. 80). This passage parallels the analyses of Morris's "Monopoly, or How Labour is Robbed" (1887), and anticipates twentieth-century indictments of "institutional violence." But surely tribal and feudal wars were also "institutional" and "chronic," and the helplessness of medieval peasants also a fact of "everyday life." One recent bit of cliometry estimates that violent crimes were twelve times as frequent in the thirteenth as in the twentieth century; perhaps this is exaggerated, but so also may be Morris's special pleadings.²³ The death of one-half of Europe's population from the plague provides the very frame for Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*;

²³ James B. Given documents a high incidence of violence in the thirteenth century in his *Society and Homicide in Thirteenth-Century England* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1977).

this overwhelming horror was indeed a consequence of “deficient grasp of the resources of nature”; it did not result from any theft of surplus value, but its “manifestations” were not the less “burdensome” for it.

These problems do not appear in Morris’s descriptions of the Wolfings and Burgdalers, whose societies seem essentially free from crime and disease as well as from want. Only the Romans thieve, kidnap, and murder in *Wolfings*, and a band from the Shadowy Dale commits *Roots*’ only criminal (as opposed to warlike) acts of theft and unpremeditated manslaughter. The band’s representative, Folk-might, readily acknowledges the crime, pleads economic necessity, and offers reparation. More substantial violence is wholly imported into *Roots* by the sinister Dusky Men, and the great battle between the Wolf-Folk and Dusky Men is a rare event, the third recorded climactic war of their tribe, and the first such for many years.

The central war of *Roots* also provides the clearest instance of Morris’s conscious or unconscious evasion of the issue of violence and its consequences for “good” people. When the Wolf-Folk force of 1,581 warriors faces several thousand Dusky Men, the latter are exterminated, but only 122 Wolf-Folk, and none of their seven-odd female warriors, die. (One is reminded ironically of American “body-counts” in the Vietnam war.) The wounded warriors who survive “mended, and went about afterwards hale and hearty” (*Roots*, p. 364), and no one is crippled, mutilated, screams in delirium, or dies a lingering death. No wonder the Wolf-Folk commemorate their dead with such clear faith in the moral value of just war.

According to Morris and Bax, medieval suffering was impartially visited upon all: “In medieval times the violence and suffering did not spare one class and fall wholly upon another, the most numerous in the community. . . . The unsuccessful politician did not retire to the ease and pleasure of a country house, flavoured with a little literary labour and apologetics for his past mistakes, but paid with his head, or the torment of his body, for his miscalculations as to possible majorities” (*Socialism*, pp. 81-82). Perhaps. The Wolfings Thiodolf and Otter die heroic deaths, but other slain Goths are virtually anonymous, and none has been important to the narrative. In *Roots*, likewise, certain characters are clearly more protected by fate and each other than are the anonymous many. None of the tale’s central characters dies in battle, and only the Bride is severely wounded; her injuries are unspecified, however, and her later recovery complete. At one point in their account of “The Rough Side of the Middle Ages,” Morris and Bax become hopelessly mired in the ideology of noble savagery: “Furthermore, the very roughness and adventure of life of those days made people less sensitive to bodily pain than they are now. Their nerves were not so high-strung as ours are, so that the apprehension of torture or death did not

weigh heavily upon them" (*Socialism*, p. 82). Could Morris have really believed this? The "apprehension of torture or death" seems to "weigh heavily" enough on the escaped thralls of *Roots*, who commit suicide rather than endure recapture by the Dusky Men.

More moving (if not more convincing) is the Wolf-Folk's ability to transcend grief: "Death, moreover, to them seemed but a temporary interruption of the course of their life. Men in those days really conceived of the *continuity of life* as a simple and absolute fact" (*Socialism*, p. 82). The customs, rituals, and songs in the romances consistently express Morris's belief that each life merges in some large cycle. Hall-Sun sings over the corpses of her father and other warriors:

And these that once have loved us, these warriors' images,
Shall sit amidst our feasting, and see, as the Father sees,
The works that menfolk fashion and the rest of toiling hands. . . .
There then at the feast with our champions familiar shall we be
As oft we are with the Godfolk, when in story-rhymes and lays
We laugh as we tell of their laughter, and their deeds of
other days.

(*Wolfings*, p. 196).

In a cremation song, similarly, the Wolf-Children describe themselves:

We are the men of joy belated;
We are the Wanderers over the waste;
We are but they that sat and waited,
Watching the empty winds make haste.

Long, long we sat and knew no others,
Save alien folk and the foes of the road;
Till late and at last we met our brothers,
And needs must we to the old abode. . . .

For here once more is the Wolf abiding,
Nor ever more from the Dale shall wend,
And never again his head be hiding,
Till all days be dark and the world have end.

(*Wolfings*, pp. 383-384).

Other songs of the Wolf-Folk also express their acceptance of self-sacrifice and death. An unexpected contrast to their laconic everyday speech, these songs affirm the universal quality of their experience.

Central to Morris's romances is the concept of "popular art." Morris and Bax describe the Middle Ages as "the epoch of *Popular Art*, the art of the people; whatever were the conditions of the life of the time, they produced an enormous volume of visible and tangible beauty, even taken *per se*, and still more extraordinary when considered beside the sparse population of those ages. The 'misery' from amidst of which this came, whatever it was, must have been something totally unlike, and surely far

less degrading than the misery of modern Whitechapel" (*Socialism*, p. 83). The people of *Wolfings* and *Roots* adorn common objects of their life with a profusion of tribal or iconic symbols. The Wolfings' War-horn is "carved out of the tusk of a sea-whale of the North and with many devices on it and the Wolf amidst them all; its golden mouth-piece and rim wrought finely with flowers" (*Wolfings*, p. 8). Even more elaborate is their sacred lamp, which Hall-Sun guards; it is "fashioned of glass; yet of no such glass as the folk made then and there, but of a fair and clear green like an emerald, and all done with figures and knots in gold, and strange beasts, and a warrior slaying a dragon, and the sun rising on the earth" (*Wolfings*, p. 6). In *Roots*, images of Wolf, Face, and Steer are carved on the walls of clan houses, Gold-mane's sword is elaborately inlaid, and brilliantly decorated clan banners are carried into battle. These emblems and decorations exemplify the static and repetitive features of tribal life, and Morris's loving descriptions of them in *Roots* greatly slow the tale's narrative pace. Indeed, he devotes as many pages to the festive gathering, enumerating, and positioning of the ranks as to the battle itself. It is almost as if he had in mind Socialist gatherings and marches in Hyde Park, subdivided into larger groups by political affiliations, and smaller ones by local branches, all carrying homemade banners and other emblematic forms of identification. But of course the gathering of the Wolf-Folk is much more aesthetically satisfying.

Curiously, we see little actual creation of decorative objects in *Wolfings* or *Roots*. When not fighting, the men in *Wolfings* hunt, fish, and farm, and the women sew, weave, bake, and herd sheep. Only Iron-face, among the principal characters of *Roots*, is actually a craftsman, and we seldom see an artisan at work. One might have expected to learn that Gold-mane is a skilled mason, and Sun-beam a weaver of fine tapestries — but in fact Gold-mane is the sort of heroic ruler-lover-warrior figure familiar in Morris's work from Olaf of "Gertha's Lovers" forward, and represented in *The Earthly Paradise* by, for example, Ogier and Bellerophon. The only artistic creation described with some frequency in both romances is the composition of songs: the Wolfings listen to a minstrel as they dance and sing (p. 8), maidens play the harp and fiddle at banquets, and all the major characters express emotion in extemporaneous songs.²⁴ The Redesman, similarly, plays the fiddle at large gatherings in *Roots*, and Face-of-God, Bow-may, the Bride, and even Folk-might are poets and singers.

Morris's highly general descriptions of medieval society thus mute the importance of crime, violence, ignorance, disease, class divisions, and the tedium of rudimentary iron-age manual labor. Never does he face the

²⁴ The sixth-century Germans used a plucked six-stringed instrument called a "rotta," but no bowed instruments; this seems to be one of Morris's rare anachronisms.

likelihood of pervasive brutality in a society which valorizes combat, or admit any tension between the youthful Gold-mane's modest, sensitive spirit and his capacity for instant generalship. Iron-face lovingly crafts weapons and armor, men fight in defense of friends and kin, noncombatants are spared, and the Wolf-Folk have pure hearts and the strength of ten. Morris's equally passionate belief that all creators of pleasurable things feel pleasure during their creation is also problematic. Such idealizations paradoxically inclined Morris to demand more, not less, of a future society: that it restore the virtues he read into the past. He was never a pacifist, but he did come increasingly to disapprove of violence, as in his 1893 remark that "here I will say once for all, what I have often wanted to say of late, to wit that the idea of taking any human life for any reason whatsoever is horrible and abhorrent to me" (*Morris*, II, 351). It may also be significant that Morris does not introduce a great paroxysmal revolutionary battle into the future-perfect history of *News from Nowhere*. After the deaths and arrests in Trafalgar Square, he may have seen with painful clarity that naive medieval ideals of self-defense have little relevance for a reserve army of the poor. A revolutionary "war" is described in "How the Change Came" (chapter fifteen of *News from Nowhere*), but the "forces of reaction" that oppose the revolution are so divided and discredited that they have essentially lost before they begin (*CW*, XVI, 128-130).

Other idealizations in the German romances more severely circumscribe Morris's social vision. According to the sexual division of labor in *Wolfings* and *Roots*, men create tools, plough, and hunt, all men and a few unmarried women fight, and all women over twenty-five keep house and raise children. In *Nowhere*, of course, the women simply "choose" domestic tasks. Morris's delight in the nomadism of the sparse tribal communities of *Roots* may similarly account in part for *Nowhere's* implausible dispersion of the massive population of England into small, autonomous hamlets.

The *Wolfings* and *Wolf-Folk's* social structure also modeled Morris's identification of creative with craftwork: *Nowhere* noticeably ignores the extent to which creativity and social spirit can be expressed in forms other than craftwork. Morris's vision of a future society is the imaginative construction of an active man, who assumed that camaraderie and craftwork could, if universalized, suffice to provide for all social needs. One of this projection's chief limitations seems the extent to which it assumes that others are as strongly impelled to physical exertion as was Morris himself. In *News from Nowhere* he tended to assume that others would, like him, choose manual labor, craftwork, and artistic creation above, for example, medical, mechanical, or scientific discovery. There are many goods in Morris's ideal society but little provision of needed services other than the

teaching of handicrafts and the design of buildings. There is little apparent place for a James Clerk Maxwell or an Albert Einstein, and Morris seemed to have little sense for the aesthetic and cooperative qualities of intellectual discovery. The incurious Burgdalers are unlikely to offer explanations for their physical environment or to discover new medicinal herbs. Unlike Morris, they are tranquilly pious, and no one questions the many rituals in honor of the Gods of the Wolf, the Earth, and the Face. In *Nowhere* and Morris's later socialist essays, science is minimal and instrumental; there is little suggestion that a more refined technology might itself create new *technai* (the Greek term, after all, for Morris's beloved crafts). Nor does anyone in *Nowhere* express any wish or need to improve methods of subsistence farming, or to alleviate, for example, congenital retardation. Care of the sick may not always best take place in the cottage. *Nowhere's* applications of Morris's socialist ideals also seem limited at times by *Roots*-like prototypes of medieval craft and barter; these provide some adequate examples of creativity within a shared tradition, but ignore the vastly greater complexity and variety of real human community and intelligence.

III

In conclusion, then, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* embody Morris's highly selective and idiosyncratic interpretation of medieval society, an interpretation which elaborates those aspects of idealized tribal life which Morris hoped would be realized in a future socialist society, and provides a loose and simplified allegory of social change. To Morris the battles with the Romans and the Dusky Men represented a simple but encouraging model for socialist self-defense and revolutionary victory, but *Roots* is more convincing when he departs from Gibbon altogether, to create idealized precedents of deep mutual solidarity, loyalty, and daily enjoyment of life.

Morris's imagination was especially kindled by these romances' many congenial conversations, communal feasts, exchanges of gifts, ritual prayers, commemorative songs, and other gestures of social well-being. The central movement in *Roots* is the extension of the social fellowship to new groups, which then recognize their complex common history. Morris, in effect, miniaturizes standard ethnological speculations about common (Indo)European origins, and transforms these into a dream of a common community; it is here that "escapist" history converges most closely with his socialist hopes for an equal and unified society. *Roots* derives much of

its emotional force from the reunion of fragmented Wolf-Folk, and the four central characters' romantic fortunes closely parallel the merger and liberation of their oppressed people.

Morris thus followed Gibbon's interpretations when the latter described the Germanic tribes' struggles against the Huns, but constructed an internal social organization which paralleled Engels's communitarian ideals. The inhabitants of *Roots* are not yet members of Morris's communist *Nowhere*, but they differ radically from Gibbon's stereotypical barbarians. Erotic subplots of both romances draw on similar sources of larger narrative energy. *Wolfings* presents an allegory of the need to subordinate the exclusiveness of erotic attachment to love of the kindred. The goddess Wood-sun insists that her lover Thiodolf preserve his life by wearing into battle a dwarf-crafted magic hauberk which protects its wearer from physical harm at the cost of depleting the wearer's courage. As part of her effort to persuade him to value life above duty, she also reveals to him that he was not born in the Wolfing tribe in which he has spent his life, and assures him that his existence is merely physical and will in no way survive his death. After he has twice wavered in battle and retreated to a wood, she nevertheless suggests that he remove the hauberk. When Thiodolf does so, he chooses in the hauberk's place weapons crafted by his fellow men, asserts his full identification with the life of his people, and advances to what he knows is certain death. His reward is a characteristically Morrisean embrace-beyond-death with both kinspeople and enemies: "They are mine and I am theirs; and through them am I of the whole earth, and all the kindreds of it; yea, even of the foemen, whom this day the edge in mine hand shall smite" (*Wolfings*, p. 162).

Roots contains a corresponding parable of the spiritual value of exogamy: Gold-mane's need to explore beyond the well-known experiences of his tribe, at the cost of some pain both to his family and to his first betrothed. Songs interspersed throughout also form a cycle in which different children of the Wolf, singly and in groups, celebrate their present actions, the past sacrifices of members of their tribe, and their shared hopes for the future. Consider the final song:

Come back from the sea, then, O sun! come aback,
Look adown, look on me then, and ask what I lack!

Come many a morrow to gaze on the Dale,
And if e'er thou seest sorrow remember its tale!

For 'twill be of a story to tell how men died
In the garnering of glory that no man may hide.

(*Roots*, p. 401).

The Wolf-Children's many ceremonies — of purgation, burial, house-warm-

ing, mating — similarly celebrate the dependence and continuity of communal life.

All of this may begin to provide a partial answer to an obvious question: why did Morris (or Engels, for that matter) feel such deep satisfaction in the quasi-historical reconstruction of “tribal” societies which may never have existed? In part, of course, Morris believed with the singer of his *Earthly Paradise*, that one narrates tales “of names remembered . . . because they, living not, can ne’er be dead” (*CW*, III, 1). For all their borrowed ethnological specificity, these ceremonies are “rooted” less in the details of a single Germanic tradition than in Morris’s fascination with generalizable patterns of human love and historical solidarity. Even the totemic details of Wolf rituals — the use of clan patronymics, the inscription of the face of the Wolf on their dwellings, the pledging of unity on an ancient stone — reflect Morris’s interpretation of near-universal aspects of experience: the unities of nature, family, and political harmony. In the end the cultural cohesion of the Children of the Wolf approaches Morris’s ideal of a gradually expanding union of all peoples.

The image of prefeudal communities which Morris creates in the German romances anticipates both the weaknesses and great strengths of his vision of an ideal future in *News from Nowhere*. There is something vaguely ominous about the extinction of the Dusky Men in *Roots*, but its simple patterns of kinship, sacrifice, tolerance, and eventual union of the four branches of “Folk” provide a miniature model for Morris’s internationalism. It is the only late prose romance which finds in the past some hope for a brief equilibrium between personal happiness and social peace. As Gold-mane asks Sun-beam, “of this gladness, which is made up of many little matters, what story may be told?” (*Roots*, p. 140).

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