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Memory and History and William Morris's Medievalism

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## ABSTRACT

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Memory and history are at the core of the human condition. A deep concern for the human condition is at the heart of the work and ideas of the Victorian polymath William Morris. Morris abhorred the degraded state he believed to exist for so many in his own society and he worked long and hard for the greater part of his life to help create a more egalitarian world.

This thesis explores the centrality of memory and history in three important works from the beginning, middle and end of Morris's career. Its purpose is to show that in Morris's persistent return to these themes he was seeking a new ontological awareness, one that might be generated from an exploration, through his literary art, of the social phenomena that shape memory and history, and thereby our lives. Such an awareness might lead to an identification of the changes that might make possible his egalitarian vision of all people living a life of enrichment rather than one shaped by the impoverishment he deemed existed for so many. I consider too the importance of his changing choice of literary genre in working towards that goal.

Informing the thesis overall is Morris's intense love of the Middle Ages, such that his medievalism is central to understanding how and why his works still resonate and engage with individuals and social structures in the twenty-first century.

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## CONTENTS

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Abstract		ii
Acknowledgements		iii
Introduction		1
Chapter 1	“The Defence of Guenevere”	35
Chapter 2	<i>Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs</i>	59
Chapter 3	<i>News from Nowhere</i>	89
Conclusion		126
Works Consulted		128

## Introduction

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Art and society, and the vexed relationship between the two, engaged the Victorian polymath William Morris throughout his life. Now, more than one hundred years after his death, his work and ideas remain relevant and engaging, due in part to our having inherited the legacy of nineteenth century politics, and the ‘muddle’ that Morris saw surrounding them. Acknowledged as one of the most influential and hard-working personalities of his age, Morris by the end of his life had produced a vast body of work, encompassing art, poetry, book design, printing, textile design, illuminated manuscripts, such that his “achievements routinely exhaust the enumerative abilities of his biographers” (Boos 2008 1). These arts and interests spanned historical time and literary and artistic space, from the Middle Ages to an imaginary future, from tenth century Icelandic sagas to chivalric romance, and from tapestries to illuminated manuscripts. Morris’s work shows a deep concern with the quality of life for the individual and, through the individual, for greater society. This concern is manifest in the separate yet connected themes of memory and history that weave Ariadne-like through much of his work. Memory and history are at the core of the human condition, and it is through his constant return to these themes that Morris reveals his concern for that condition, which he believed had in his own time become so impoverished by industrial capitalism. Like many Victorians, Morris abhorred the effects of the industrial revolution on social structures and daily life, such as the separation of people from nature, of the individual from worthwhile labour, and the adulteration of artistic practices: his work protests the patterns of thought and history that

allowed such a state to obtain. The impoverishment of art he saw as a crucial factor in that state, since art for Morris was essential if life was to be worth living:

I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few. No, rather than art should live this poor thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible ... I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile [sic] ... rather than the wheat should rot in the miser's granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark. ("The Lesser Arts" 253)

This thesis examines three important works from the beginning, middle and end of Morris's career: "The Defence of Guenevere", title poem in *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858), *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876), and *News from Nowhere* (1891). My overall focus is on the strong threads of memory that recur repeatedly throughout, to the extent that memory may be seen as a defining element, as Morris seeks to understand through his art the crucial ways in which memory shapes life, at the individual level as well as society as a whole. My aim is to discuss Morris's use of memory from a perspective that sees its evocative nature as a force for social change, exploring in the process Morris's equally strong fascination with the human emotion of love, which so strongly influences those memories. The span of time over which the works were created reveals how the importance Morris allots memory deepens from a concern with purely personal love, as evidenced in the torque and tension shaping Guenevere's memories of her relationship with Launcelot; to the all-consuming love between Sigurd and Brynhild which is ultimately blighted by the social circumstances in which it is created, and finally

to the imaginary world of Nowhere, where the forming of sustaining love relationships seems to have been perfected at the individual level and the greater community.

In considering Morris's works it became clear, especially with *News from Nowhere*, that conceptions of memory have over time become interwoven and enmeshed with conceptions of history, to the extent that it now seems almost impossible to extricate one from the other, and to extricate the ways in which memory and history have contributed to our concept of self, and greater society. I do not attempt to separate the two, but rather see both memory and history as cultural constructs, since both draw on similar events and images for their creation, and use similar intellectual processes to analyse or make sense of them, including "perception, processing, storage, and retrieval" (Butler 14). It seems to me that in Morris's persistent return to these themes he was advocating a new ontological awareness, one that might be generated from an exploration, through his art, of the social phenomena that shape memory, and history, and thereby guide our lives. Such an understanding might then lead to identifying the changes that would make possible his egalitarian vision of all people living a life of enrichment rather than of the impoverishment he deemed existed for so many.

Morris abhorred the fact that the Victorian descendants of those medieval craftsmen who had experienced so much joy in their work seemed to be little more than cogs in the wheels of machinery that produced goods, goods that Morris maintained were useless and unwanted, and which in fact were produced with the intention of generating a need rather than satisfying one. In attempting to re-establish a connection between art and labour, Morris revived forgotten crafts such as dyeing, weaving, and stained glass making. Deeply influenced in



his views by the works of John Ruskin – especially the chapter entitled “The Nature of Gothic” in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853) – Morris’s over-riding concern was to expose how the practice of art had become severed from the physical act of its creation, had become an intellectual exercise carried out and enjoyed by a wealthy elite, rather than a natural act of creation, and one that he believed to be as essential to life as breathing – in fact, for Morris, art literally was life-sustaining, being “as necessary to man as his daily bread” (“How I Became a Socialist” 383). This belief is drawn straight from “The Nature of Gothic” chapter, in which Ruskin declares the foundations of society to be under threat: “It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread, and therefore look to wealth as the only means of pleasure” (Ruskin 42).<sup>1</sup> Especially influential was Ruskin’s belief that “the separation of manual and intellectual labour” had had a destructive effect on the shape of society and art, a view that “may have had an incalculable influence on Morris’s future career” (Thompson 36-37).<sup>2</sup> In later life, Morris actively challenged the political and economic conditions that saw the pleasure of art enjoyed only by a privileged few. Essentially, those crafts he valued and the social structures under which they were carried out reflect Morris’s love of the Middle Ages. His affinity for what has come to be described as medievalism served as lodestar throughout his life, influencing not only his life and work, but also providing inspiration for important changes in both.

The three works discussed all draw deeply on Morris’s love of the Middle Ages, and the thesis begins by defining the nature and importance of this in his

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Stansky states that “Morris came to socialism through art, which Ruskin argued seemed to be sickening in nineteenth century England” (65).

<sup>2</sup> All references to Thompson are to E. P. Thompson (1977) unless stated otherwise.

work. Medievalism has been defined by Leslie Workman as “the continuing process of creating the middle ages” (qtd. in Metzger 1-2) as well as being “coterminous with modern civilization” (Workman, qtd in Utz and Shippey 442-443).<sup>3</sup> Medievalism thus interlinks memory and history since it involves those living in the present defining their lives in some way by what they choose to retrieve from the past. Responses to the ongoing attraction to medievalism include “the activities of scholars, historians and philologists in rediscovering medieval materials”, as well as the use that might be made of such medieval materials “by political groups intent on self-definition or self-legitimation” (Shippey 2010 n.pag.). Perhaps the most pertinent definition in relation to Morris’s work is encapsulated in the following words: “artistic creations, whether literary, visual or musical, based on whatever has been or is thought to have been recovered from the medieval centuries” (Shippey 2010 n.pag.). As Shippey’s various definitions make clear, medievalism encompasses a rich cultural spectrum and broad application. I discuss below the nature of Victorian medievalism, followed by Morris’s medievalism, which was similar in some ways – he was after all a Victorian too – but seems somewhat more complex.

Victorian England was shaped to a greater or lesser degree by a medieval, especially Arthurian, revival. This revival is reflected in literature, for example, in Kenelm Digby’s *The Broad Stone of Honour* (1822) and Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1856-1885); it is represented in the built form in the Gothic revival in architecture; while in the lived form it appears in such events as the Eglinton Tournament of 1839, which Girouard describes as “the most obviously famous

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<sup>3</sup> Workman says that his study of the Middle Ages was fed in part by the work of William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, whose work he had been “interested in since high school”. (Utz and Shippey, 439).

product of nineteenth-century chivalry in Great Britain” (Girouard 88). More importantly for this study is that the Gothic style, from which Victorian medievalism stemmed, “has been inextricably linked to the myriad ways in which the present imagined its lost past ... [and] its revival has centred on how individuals and societies understood their own place in their own history” (Brooks 4). This preoccupation with identity was thought to have been prompted by the huge unsettling life changes left largely in the wake of the industrial revolution and the ensuing effects of industrial capitalism: “the price to pay for [such] a prosperous modernity [being] ... a permanent and melancholy exclusion from that affectively charged past” (Dentith 47).<sup>4</sup> For others, such as A. W. Pugin, the antidote to such “exclusion” was to be found specifically in the built form. In the so-called ‘battle of the styles’ between Gothic revival and Classical architecture, Pugin favoured the former as true Christian architecture, since classical architecture he believed stemmed from pagan beliefs (Williams 1987 131-32).<sup>5</sup> Pugin’s ideas were important during this period for establishing the idea of a connection between architecture and society, his ideas exerting an influence on the Victorian world (Williams 133).<sup>6</sup> In particular, Pugin’s series of *Contrasts* (1836) reveal the extension of his thought “from an architectural to a social judgment” (Williams 132). Pugin’s engravings depict graphic comparisons of past and present scenes such as the church-spire dotted landscape of a fourteenth century town with its nineteenth century version, in which work houses, prisons and “bare dissenting chapels” dominate (Williams 132). Similarly, in the

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<sup>4</sup> Although Dentith is referring here to Scott’s *The Lady of the Lake* (1810), he describes a feeling that continued to resonate in the Victorian psyche well into the rest of the nineteenth century, if not our own.

<sup>5</sup> See Kevin Morris, *The Image of the Middle Ages in Romantic and Victorian Literature*, for an extended discussion of the religious influence on the revival.

<sup>6</sup> See Corinna Wagner’s “‘Standing Proof of the Degeneracy of Modern Times’: Architecture, Society, and the Medievalism of A. W. N. Pugin” for an extended discussion of Pugin’s influence on the Victorian world.

engraving of the residences of the poor of both eras, Pugin juxtaposes Benthamite panopticon with welcoming monastery, kindly monk with truncheon-wielding constable (Williams 132). Such forms of medievalism thus harked back to what was seen as a nobler “[m]edieval society ... built upon imagination and emotion” (Chandler 152-53); modern society in contrast was based “upon a shallow rationalism”, and its inherent individualism and self-interest tended to split communities rather than bind them (153).

A separate strand of Victorian medievalism was shaped by a strong interest in the Icelandic sagas. In 1844, Samuel Laing had published the first translation of the twelfth century Icelandic poet Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, with “Snorri’s old northern tales of dynastic growth and decay, individual loyalty and treachery, pagan defiance and Christian conquest” (Wawn 2000 92) capturing the attention of some parts of the nineteenth century imagination and securing the work a place as one of “a handful of canonical texts of Victorian old northernism” (92). Later in the century, George Dasent’s *Burnt Njal* (1861) “initiated a remarkable new phase in the cultivation of old northern literature in Victorian Britain”, as evidenced by its pre-publication sales (2000 142). Morris’s own translations of the sagas, in collaboration with Icelandic scholar Eiríkur Magnússon, were respected enough for a late nineteenth century Icelandic poet to pen a heart-felt poetic obituary in which the saga hero Gunnar pays tribute to “Morris, the English ‘skald’” (Wawn 1999 269).

The English ‘skald’ was born in March 1834 and his life was influenced by things medieval from a very young age, until his death in October 1896.<sup>7</sup> Morris’s

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson notes that Morris was influenced too by having been born at the tail end of the Romantic movement, which according to Chandler was itself an aspect of medievalism.

first biographer, J. W. Mackail, describes the Morris family home and daily routine as having

[a]t some points ... links with medieval England. Woodford Hall brewed its own beer, and made its own butter, as much as a matter of course as it baked its own bread. Just as in the fourteenth century, there was a meal at high prime, midway between breakfast and dinner, when the children had cake and cheese and a glass of small ale. (1: 9)

While Mackail notes that these “slight remnants of medieval tradition in the daily life of Woodford did not go deep”, he states conversely of Morris that “the love of the Middle Ages was born in him” (1: 10). Mackail notes too the influence of Scott’s *Waverley* novels, which Morris read at a young age, as well as the many visits spent taking brass rubbings from Canterbury Cathedral. This early knowledge was supplemented by the wide-ranging reading undertaken while he was hidden away in the extensive library at his school, Marlborough. During his university years, too, Oxford was “still, in all essentials, medieval, an ancient university city” (Henderson xxxi). At Oxford his knowledge was further enriched by his detailed study of the illuminated manuscripts in the Bodleian Library (Thompson 6), as well as by his reading of the works of Froissart, Chaucer, Ruskin, and Carlyle. After university he remained in Oxford, spending a year working with the medieval revivalist architect George Street. It was during his Oxford years that Morris made his first stand “against the age” (qtd. in Morton 16), when he joined the Pre-Raphaelite group of artists, falling especially under the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to whom he dedicated *The Defence of*

*Guenevere, and Other Poems*.<sup>8</sup> While Morris was drawn in the first instance to the Pre-Raphaelites' artistic battle against the rigid rules of the Academy, he would go much further than any of the other artists in the group in challenging the exploitative capitalist system, as well as "industrialism as a creator of squalor and ugliness" (Morton 15).

Morris seems to have possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Middle Ages, not in the sense of having learned something, but as an instinctive, subliminal awareness, perhaps passed down through collective memory. Mackail relates that during the period when Morris, Rossetti, and other Pre-Raphaelite artists had gathered to paint murals based on Arthurian romance on the walls of the Oxford Union, in 1857, Burne-Jones commented that he needed models of armour from which to draw:

Therefore Morris, whose knowledge of all these things seemed to have been born in him, and who never at any time needed books of reference for anything, set to work to make designs for an ancient kind of helmet called a basinet, and for a great surcoat of ringed mail with a hood of mail and a skirt coming below the knees" (Mackail 1: 120).

One of the most important outcomes of Morris's medievalism was his revivifying of lost medieval arts such as stained glass making, weaving, dyeing, calligraphy, and gilding. It was through his re-creation of medieval crafts that Morris would later earn his living, developing in the process collaborative relationships with fellow artists, purchasers, employees, translators, and scholars. These close connections between art and the social relationships within which it

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<sup>8</sup> This dedication was omitted from later editions, no doubt due to the triangular relationship between Rossetti, Morris' wife, Jane Burden, and Morris himself, an agonizing love complication that troubled much of Morris's life.

was created, sold, and collected, must over time have given him a deeper understanding of the patterns and rhythms through which such relationships were forged, and therefore at least have influenced his ideas about how social change might be possible.

There appears to be a consensus among his critics that medievalism was at the core of Morris's creativity, even when viewed from differing perspectives.<sup>9</sup> In comparison to his contemporaries, Grennan states Morris was possibly unrivalled "in the range and variety of his medieval interests", which changed shape and deepened over time, finally developing into "medievalism with a purpose in the socialist years" (20). A reshaping of society influenced by medievalism seems to have been suggested, too, by Morris's visit in 1855 to the medieval cathedral of Rouen, a visit which according to Thompson, left Morris "seized ... [with] the sense of a whole alternative way of life" (808). Morris's own reflection on the visit seems to affirm this: "No words can tell you how its mingled beauty, history, and romance took hold on me" (qtd in Mackail 1: 48). While Morris's medievalism has been associated, too, with his revolutionary ideals, Thompson's comment that Morris's "youthful Romantic rebellion was not a rebellion of individual sensibility against 'society', but a rebellion of value, or aspiration against actuality" (808) suggests that he was not advocating a return to the Middle Ages, but rather a revival of what he saw as the most admirable aspects of that age for his own. Grennan asserts – in opposition to critics who describe Morris's medievalism as a form of escapism – that he had no illusions about the brutality of the Middle Ages (60-61), and that the attraction for Morris lay rather in the fact

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Florence Boos on his feminism; E. P. Thompson on his socialism; Fiona McCarthy on his day to day life; Coleman and O'Sullivan from within a range of disciplines, including anthropology, history, architecture.

that *even* with that brutality, it was possible for some to find enough pleasure in their work to create something beautiful and inspiring: Thus he was interested in “the *manner* of work in the Middle Ages, with the handling of materials by the medieval builder and craftsman, with substance and structure rather than with ‘style’” (Thompson 100). Morris’s medievalism, then, strongly influenced his attempts to help reshape the social order, thus combining his medievalism with socialism.<sup>10</sup>

Morris worked to identify and then help change those habits of thought that he believed trapped the individual in pre-conditioned patterns of behaviour, since in order to change the shape of society he recognised the need first to change how people thought about and understood their lives and place in the world. His frustration at his inability to make a difference as a young man is apparent in a letter he wrote in July 1856 in which he bemoaned his inability to “enter into politico-social subjects with any interest” because at this stage he was able to identify only that “things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree” (Mackail 1: 107). At this stage, then, he remains artist and poet rather than socialist reformer.

His artistic and literary treatment of different forms of memory – individual (or autobiographical), mythological, collective – reveals his concern with the limits of a world in which memory operates as a restrictive force, as apparent in dialogue, or repetitive behavioural responses, and is an attempt at the same time to suggest the possibility of other and better alternatives. Morris for example came from a privileged background that afforded him access to a wide range of artistic and

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<sup>10</sup> See Marcus Waithe’s *William Morris’s Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Idealism and the Ideal of Hospitality*, which explores the relationship between Morris’s medievalism and the social and political issues tied to notions of hospitality in the Victorian world.



social experience – books, art, manuscripts, cathedrals, wealth, friendships, leisure, and thereby a treasure house of memory from which to draw. In stark contrast to Morris's life was the sort of life experienced by the workmen whose noise and loutish behaviour outside his office window anger him initially, but later compel an empathy for their lives, which he sees as being shaped by sheer drudgery, lack of agency, and no art; essentially, a paucity of experience that must limit the memories on which they might call. His empathy later fires his socialist action, as evidenced in his lecture "Art and the Beauty of the Earth" first delivered in 1881:

As I sit at my work at home, which is at Hammersmith, close to the river, I often hear go past the window some of that ruffianism of which a good deal has been said in the papers of late.... As I hear the yells and shrieks and the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakespeare and Milton, as I see the brutal reckless faces and figures go past me, it rouses the recklessness and brutality in me also, and fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings.... I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, what would have saved them from this lowest depth of savagery: employment which would foster their self-respect, and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings which they could come to with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labour, reasonable rest.

Another lecture, entitled “Art, Wealth, and Riches” and delivered at the Manchester Royal Institution on 6 March 1883, was the subject of “an indignant [letter] in *The Manchester Examiner* complaining that [the] lecture raised ‘another question than one of mere art’” (Henderson 165 n3). Morris responded on 14 March 1883 that:

It was the purpose of my lecture to raise another question than one of ‘mere art’. I specially wished to point out that the question of popular art was a social question, involving the happiness or misery of the greater part of the community. The absence of popular art from modern times is more disquieting and grievous to bear for this reason than for any other, that it betokens that fatal division of men into the cultivated and the degraded classes which competitive commerce has bred and fosters[.]

His feelings of guilt over his position as one of the wealthy and privileged are evident when he goes on to contrast the pleasure he enjoys in his “own happy working hours” with the “unpraised, unrewarded, monotonous drudgery which most men are condemned to”. He concludes, “nothing shall convince me that such labour as this is good or necessary to civilization” (Henderson 166).

His changing choice of genre for the three works discussed reveals how his frustration was moulded over time into something more potent. In “The Defence of Guenevere” for example, he employs Arthurian romance for a poetic art which, as the anecdote about the workmen outside his office window suggests, is unlikely to have been available to many of those whose world he hoped to change; in the epic form, which he chooses for *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, lie “dissident responses to the violence of Britain’s progressivism and the imperial imperative” (Armstrong 392); finally, in *News from Nowhere*, he adopts the prose

romance to create a sustained vision of “an egalitarian society [which] might free the inner consciousness of its (men and) women” (Boos and Boos 28). This changing choice of genre reveals Morris’s recognition of the need to address and engage a particular audience, who must be actively involved if he is to realise his ideal society.

Clearly, any consideration of Morris’s work must be linked, then, to his medievalism, as well as to his recurrent use of memory and history with the intention of generating a new ontology, one shaped by a more acute perception of lived experience, rather than by the imperatives of linear progress. Morris rejects any understanding of history which, in the words of the historian Marc Bloch, “quite overlooks that, once an emotional chord has been struck, the line between past and present is no longer strictly regulated by a mathematically measurable chronology” (Tosh 2000 171). I consider the progressive shift from his Arthurian medievalism in “The Defence of Guenevere”, to the more rugged and fatalistic Icelandic medievalism of *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, and finally to *News from Nowhere*, in which Morris’s medievalism and socialism combine to suggest a world shaped by both, and one in which it is possible to think and live more richly and imaginatively.

A central methodological concern was to explore how memory and history combine to influence our thinking, our subjectivity, as well as to identify the contributory forces of social phenomena. First of all, I consider some of the juxtapositions and convergences between memory and history by touching briefly on some of the scholarship on the ideas of the seventeenth century philosopher, Giambattista Vico, who through his own research into the origins of human society sought to change contemporary beliefs about the nature of those origins. I

follow this with a brief review of Maurice Halbwachs's still important *The Collective Memory* (1950), in the process drawing inspiration from the connections made by the historian Patrick Hutton between scholars of memory and history, including Vico, Halbwachs, Frances Yates, among others. Secondly, in order to identify the ideological forces through which history and memory are channeled, I adopt some of the critical principles outlined in Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (2002). Belsey is particularly enlightening for the meaning she applies to the concept of "ideology", stating that ideology is not something external to ourselves, but rather something immanent and contingent on the circumstances into which we are born, and thus central to our subjectivity. Belsey's critical approach is based on post-Saussurean linguistics, and draws on the works of the French theorists of the 1960s-1980s who were inspired by de Saussure's work. Her approach pivots on the relationship between literature, history and the present: "Is literature most usefully seen as a means of access to history ... or as a way of grasping the present?" (142). She concludes that the distinction she posits is fallacious, since we cannot grasp the present without knowing the history from which it has emerged and, further, that any meaningful response to literature stems from an understanding that "meanings circulate between text, ideology, and reader" (143). While we can never experience the text as the author's contemporaries experienced it "we can use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology which is the source of its silences ... and the work of criticism [being] to release possible meanings" (143). Belsey's main concern is to illustrate how ideology is sustained through language, although her approach can of course be applied to other "texts", such as paintings, dance, film. But our subjectivity is formed and communicated through other channels too, and

I have found it necessary to supplement Belsey's approach with Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989), in which Connerton discusses the ways in which our subjectivity is formed in part through a bodily mnemonics. Using this mixed methodology allows me to weave together the threads of memory and history to reveal how they might work as agents for change in Morris's literary art.

A new ontology suggests a return to beginnings, which is exactly what Giambattista Vico tried to achieve in his study of humanity. His ideas were circulating in Europe from 1820, through the translation of his major work, the *New Science*<sup>11</sup> (1744)<sup>12</sup> by the French historian Jules Michelet. Grennan suggests Morris may have known this translation and identifies connections between Vico's own work and similar elements in Morris's, such as Morris's interest in barbarism, and organic and mechanic forms of society, and especially in his lectures on socialism (54-55), which were printed in the socialist publication *Commonweal* from May 1886 onwards. Research reveals more recent scholarly interest in possible echoes of Vico in Morris's work: Adriana Corrado sees "a convergence of thought between Vico and Morris" (39) in Morris's socialism and the utopian element in his work, as well as elements of Vico's concept of the heroic in the character of Sigurd (38). It is possible Morris's 'History of Pattern Designing' (1879) also drew inspiration from Vico's methodological analysis of the true nature and meaning of Homeric poetry, since Morris uses a similar

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<sup>11</sup> All references to Vico's *New Science* refer to the English translation by Bergin and Fisch (1968) unless stated otherwise.

<sup>12</sup> This was in fact the third edition of the second version of the work, as Donald Verene explains: "the *New Science* was published in two versions, one in 1725 and another in 1730....In 1735-36 Vico drafted a revised definitive text for a third edition that was given to the printer, with further annotations, in late 1743. Vico died in January 1744 while seeing this edition through the press. It appeared posthumously in 1744. This third edition of the second version ... has become known to the world as Vico's *New Science* – its full title being *New Science concerning the Common Nature of the Nations* (1730/1744)" (2009 1).

approach to trace the artistic history of design elements such as line, colour, shape, form, to their originating empire or age. Morris was resistant to hierarchical social structures (such as those favoured by Carlyle and Ruskin) and because of “his idealistic view of human nature ... is always drawn to democracy rather than benevolent despotism” (Chandler 229). Vico, too, was opposed to “hierarchies of status, or power, or to the influence of manipulators of any kind” (Berlin 181). Finally, Vico, like Morris, favoured the “creativity of peoples over great men” (Burke 1985 5).

Vico’s *New Science* (1744) represented a radical challenge to “the developing intellectual fashion” (Lemon 168) of his day, in its opposition to a purely Cartesian view of the world.<sup>13</sup> What exactly were Vico’s insights? His *New Science* is obscure, and confusing, but is a vast, original and imaginative reconstruction of the origins of human society, human thought, human language. Perhaps his most radical insight was that Descartes’ own theory was dependent on the imaginative faculty for its creation (Verene 41-44). I limit my use of Vico, though, to pertinent quotations from the *New Science* and the interpretative commentary of Donald Verene. Verene posits the centrality of the imagination to Vico’s insights: “Vico writes ‘the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables’” (2009 5). He goes on to describe Vico’s conception of the imagination as a creative space – separate from both reason and memory – capable of generating new ways of thinking, seeing, and understanding.

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<sup>13</sup> Vico’s originality lay in his historicist approach: he traced the origins of human society not from the mental landscape of his own world view, but rather by attempting to enter into the minds of the very first humans, an endeavour which “cost him twenty years” of hard work and research. His endeavour resulted in a philosophy of how society is shaped through patterns of growth, change and decay, cycles he described as the age of gods, the age of heroes, and the age of men. His theory drew on a combination of his philological and philosophical expertise, applied to his studies of the content and language of the poetry of the ancients, Homer in particular, leading him to the conclusion that Homeric poetry was not the work of a single author, intended to inspire from on high, but was rather a true reflection of how that society had shaped itself.

Essentially, such a space is a gift by which “... man, in a certain sense created themselves” (Vico 367).<sup>14</sup> For Verene, the “science of mythology provides Vico with his ‘ideal eternal history’ by serving as the basis of its first two ages, those of gods and heroes, which are the products of fantasia and precede the third age of humans, in which the pursuit of rational intelligibility dominates both society and thought” (Verene 2009 6). Thus Vico’s *New Science* offers a solution to “Plato’s ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry ... [which] is resolved by the realisation that there are two types of wisdom. That of the poets is the product of imagination (fantasia) found in the imaginative genera of the primal myths; that of the philosophers is the product of reason, found in the intelligible genera of reflective discourse. Philosophic wisdom is generated from poetic wisdom; these two types of wisdom, once delineated, remain in a dialectical relation to each other that runs throughout the *New Science*” (Verene 2009 5).

Memory is clearly crucial to Vico’s process, and he describes it thus:

Memory ... has three different aspects: memory when it remembers things, imagination when it alters or imitates them, and invention when it gives them a new turn or puts them into proper arrangement and relationship. For these reasons the theological poets called Memory the mother of the Muses.  
(819)

In contrast to the richness of memory Vico describes (linking memory, history, and the arts through Mnemosyne, and at least two of the muses – Clio and Calliope) Verene asserts that we live in an age “in which memory has grown weak ... [and] has become only the power to hold in mind a sequence of deduction, such as that required by Cartesian thought” (Verene 1981 108), an

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<sup>14</sup> Number references are to the paragraph divisions in the *New Science*.

observation tinged with a sense of loss, of imagination and memory both. It is in the genetic nature of Vico's methodology that I see links with Morris's intention, the difference being that where Vico traced human beginnings through its artistic output, Morris's aim was to recraft his artistic output to help construct a better future for humanity.

The relationship between memory and history is rich and complex, polyphonic and polysemic, the warp and weft perhaps, shaping the tapestry of human life. Patrick Hutton's *History as an Art of Memory* (1993) offers a valuable contextualisation of the relationship between the two. Hutton considers the variety of ways through which we remember the past in literary or written works and assesses the role to date of autobiographical memory: through what we choose to remember as a society (as evidenced in the monuments we erect, the museums we fund, the literary canon we acknowledge) as well as in the public rhetoric through which we recall, reconstruct or represent the past. Hutton marshals his argument by acknowledging and then drawing new insights from seminal works such as Maurice Halbwachs's *The Collective Memory* (1950) and Frances Yates's *The Art of Memory* (1966), connecting their theories into the workings of memory and history with those of Vico (as well as later historians such as Michelet, Aries, Nora, and Foucault). Hutton is most useful to my study because of his suggestion that Frances Yates's exploration of the inherent power of memory stopped short by not including the insights achieved by Vico. Had she done so, Hutton says it may have been more obvious that the historical importance attached to memory is at the same time a record of its later loss, or at least distillation, as a powerful aspect of our humanity. Yates traces the history of human memory, and its ability to be trained to hold vast amounts of information, a valuable and desirable skill



before the invention of the printed page. She opens her study with the story about the ancient Greek poet Simonides who, having exited a dining hall moments before its roof collapsed, is able to help distressed relatives identify the mangled bodies of their loved ones, through his ability to remember exactly who was sitting where at the table. The realisation that it “was through his memory of the places at which the guests had been sitting that he had been able to identify the bodies led Simonides to the insight that orderly arrangement is essential for good memory” (Yates 2). What needs to be made clear here, I think, is the difference in creation of Simonides’s imaginary material images as an internal – and therefore independent – process, from the creation of external material images, over which the individual has less control. Such external images might include “‘memorials’ such as tombstones, statues, and medals”, which serve to “assist in the retention and transmission of memories” (Burke 1989 101), and while we may engage with such images as members of the social structure in which they were created we are not usually responsible for their creation.

Yates goes on to describe the further development of memory as a part of the skill of rhetoric, and its association with divine knowledge. Yates’s erudite study is cited here largely because her work underscores the massive, often untapped power of memory to shape the individual and society, as well as a huge sense of loss at its attenuation into something far less rich in the modern world. Hutton pays homage to Yates’s text, but more as a prelude to reinvigorating Vico’s enlightening work, since Vico “was the first scholar to explain the historical conditions out of which the techniques of the ancient art of memory had emerged” (Hutton 33).

In contrast to Yates’s focus, Halbwachs’s concern was with the ways in which

memory is both “autobiographical and historical. The former ... make[s] use of the latter, since our life in history belongs, after all, to general history” (Halbwachs 52). Memory spans time, over which nothing much may change, but exists within a cognizance of history as a series of events, a record of changes (Halbwachs 86-87). For Halbwachs, memories of a nation’s past are events that “we say ‘we remember’ but only know about through newspapers or testimony of those directly involved. In recalling them, we must rely entirely on the memory of others, not as corroborator of [our] own, but the very source of what [we] wish to repeat. [We] often know such events no better nor in any other manner than [we] know historical events that occurred before [we were] born” (Halbwachs 51).<sup>15</sup> While this is especially germane to my discussion of “The Defence of Guenevere” and the ideas shaping *News from Nowhere*, even more germane is Halbwachs’s description of the recording of history: “An event takes its place in the sequence of historical facts *only some time after its occurrence*” (55) (my emphasis) which therefore posits a space in which it is possible to determine the present in which we live, as well as the future we pass on.

Halbwachs defines two types of memory: “internal or inward memory and external memory, or personal memory and social memory ... [or] I would consider more accurate ‘autobiographical memory’ and ‘historical memory’” (52). He asserts that individual memory is always socially constructed, and therefore is constituted more or less in collective memory. Collective memory is key to our subjectivity as Hutton’s definition reveals: “Collective memory is an elaborate

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<sup>15</sup> Halbwachs’s research “illuminates a number of problems in the history of collective mentalities: imaginative representation as a topic for the historian’s scrutiny; the archaeological character of the history of memory; tradition as an index to the power of political or social groups; the long periods of time that must be scanned in order to grasp the otherwise imperceptible process by which traditions are modified; the broad range of evidentiary sources, once considered beyond the historian’s ken, that can be brought together to illuminate an historical problem: among them, iconography, architecture, geography, archaeological artifacts, eyewitness accounts, and historiographical traditions.” (Hutton 88).

network of social mores, values, and ideals that mark out the dimensions of our imaginations according to the attitudes of the social groups to which we relate. It is through the interconnections among these shared images that the social frameworks (Halbwachs's *cadres sociaux*) of our collective memory are formed, and it is within such settings that individual memories must be situated if they are to survive" (Hutton 78).<sup>16</sup> Hutton's definition does not state clearly *how* the collective memory becomes collective, which is the focus of my discussion of *News from Nowhere*, and I therefore reserve discussion of that process for the introductory pages of that chapter.

While Halbwachs revealed the many ways in which memories of the past define and shape our present, especially the manner in which memory is formed almost unconsciously, and we draw on it habitually and often unthinkingly, Hutton suggests it was a failure on Halbwachs's part that he sought to keep memory and history separate, by "ignoring the interconnections between the two" (Hutton 76). Hutton says that this may have stemmed from Halbwachs's academic view that history was a science, while memory was subjective. Nonetheless, Halbwachs's work is useful for considering Morris's work because of his exploration of the ways in which social structures affect the shape of collective or social memory, and vice versa, and therefore compel acting in a certain way. Halbwachs's belief is that it is only through social structures such as our relationships with other people, and buildings to which we attach various

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<sup>16</sup> As a supporting example, Hutton cites Elaine Paget's *The Gnostic Gospels*, "which deals with the politics of early Christianity. The unearthing of a host of Gnostic texts reveals the significance of a forgotten tradition and confirms Halbwachs's belief that a creed cannot be sustained without the supporting structures of collective memory. Here ... the notion of Christianity as a culture of pristine simplicity vanishes once the conflicts among competing contemporaneous local traditions have been revealed. The formation of the early Church, Paget argues, was the outcome of a political struggle in which an official memory of the meaning of the life of Christ was imposed by the Church. Without the support of an institutional structure to sustain their memory, alternative Gnostic conceptions were easily suppressed" (Hutton 89).

meanings – meanings that then determine how we behave there, for example, in churches, banks, our homes – that memories are formed and recollected.<sup>17</sup>

My thesis does not explore the phenomenological aspects of memory, or the neuro-cognitive, but rather its evocative and transformative power as it appears in Morris's work.<sup>18</sup> I think this evocative power is akin to the dialectical space that Belsey describes, as well as to the imaginative space that Verene takes from Vico, and crucially, is linked to Morris's medievalism, which itself represents a reconstructive negotiation between past and present, through textual and other cultural forms. The threads of memory I trace weave a picture of Morris's awareness that changing society involves changing the conditions within which individual memory is shaped. *News from Nowhere*, for example, provides almost a blueprint for Halbwachs's theories, as well, I think, the seeds of critical theoretical approaches such as post-structuralism and audience reception that have influenced academic disciplines since the First World War. *News from Nowhere* is shaped by Morris's close understanding of the ways in which we remember, or choose to forget, the past, as reflected in the cultural artefacts we produce, in architectural forms such as museums, literary forms such as poetry, autobiographical practices, story-telling, language. Memory implies "both remembering and forgetting; it implies a choice, a discrimination between items

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<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, Halbwachs's work has been criticised since it posits "the idea of an unattached individual, totally free from external influences, [a]s an abstract concept that does not exist in reality" (Halfdanarson 87).

<sup>18</sup> New understanding of and research into the relationship between memory and history are discussed from both a methodological and historiographical perspective by Kansteiner, who concludes that the value of the 'memory wave' in the humanities must lie in the recognition that "three important conceptual perspectives meet at the moment of reception when potential memories are turned into actual collective memories, when a selection of the large stock of standard narratives and images about the past is produced and embraced: the moment of historical consciousness" (196). Furthermore, there is a need to "further collective memory studies by focusing on the communications among memory makers, memory users, and the visual and discursive objects and traditions of representations" (197). (This all implies the sort of dialogue that shapes Belsey's critical practice.) Kansteiner concludes that the value of such an approach lies in the possibilities it offers for "distinguish[ing] between the vast surplus of potential collective memories on the one hand and the relatively few instances of successful memory construction on the other" (197).

which will be preserved and those which will be suppressed” (Petrov 78). To take an obvious example, the Houses of Parliament in Nowhere represent for Morris an imperialistic and aggressive monument to the history of a society and social structure he abhors; tellingly, Nowherians use the building for storing manure.

With the development of the so-called memory wave (Kansteiner 179) in the humanities, ‘History’ has developed negative connotations, being implicated in what has been silenced and suppressed, while memory is seen far more positively, and specifically as having “the capacity to destabilise the authority of the ‘grand narratives’ with which History has become associated” (Radstone 10).<sup>19</sup> The ‘grand narrative’ of history “now is dismissed as a spurious project to endow our lives in the present with meaning” (Tosh 2000 13). It is this type of History that Morris seeks to subvert in *News from Nowhere*. And yet, without history we can have no sense of identity, since without a past to remember, or re-imagine, our memory loses its evocative and life-enriching power. The questions historians such as Tosh are now debating are anticipated by Morris’s own ambivalence about history, which in its “newness” he found to be both positive and yet concerning. Nowherians certainly worry about the connection between memory and history, and this worry forms the focus of my discussion of *News from Nowhere*, as memory and history become interwoven with politics, heritage, and identity. Morris’s view of the relationship between memory and history is best expressed in his own words: “History (so-called) has remembered the kings because they destroyed; Art has remembered the people because they created”

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<sup>19</sup> Memory, of course, can be manipulated as easily as history, as Hutton reveals in his discussion of opposing portrayals of the French Revolution, in which the exact same portentous events were used to portray and support vastly differing positions. pp 124-153.

(“The Art of the People” 521);<sup>20</sup> thus is created what Morris calls “another history – the history of Art” (521).

Following the threads of memory, then, is the key to understanding exactly how Morris sought to effect social change. Memory becomes connected incrementally to history as his works progress, as well as to an evolving connection between his medievalism and his socialism, already apparent in the first two works, but explored more fully in *News from Nowhere*. The evolution of this process in Morris’s thought must be tied to his cognisance of the fact that “‘historical awareness’ is not the same thing as social memory ... [and that] how the past is known and how it is applied to present need are open to widely varying approaches” (Tosh 2002 2). Understanding that history and memory must necessarily converge, and that the boundaries between the two are fluid and contingent, is essential to any new ontological awareness, as Tosh illustrates:

Our memories serve as both a data bank and as a means of making sense of an unfolding life story. We know that we cannot understand a situation without some perception of where it fits into a continuing process or whether it has happened before. The same holds true of our lives as social beings. All societies have a collective memory, a storehouse of experience which is drawn on for a sense of identity and a sense of direction. (Tosh 2002 1)

Further,

Because our species depends more on experience than instinct, life cannot be lived without the consciousness of a personal past ... as individuals we draw on our experience in all sorts of different ways ....as a means of affirming

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<sup>20</sup> In our time, this is a problematic statement considering that art history is implicated in the ruptures between history, memory, and subjectivity. See John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) for a visual and textual analysis of the role of art in establishing such a perspective.

our identity, as a clue to our potential, as the basis for our impression of others, and as some indication of the possibilities that lie ahead. (Tosh 2002 1)

From this it appears evident that our individual subjectivity is formed within the social circumstances from which stem the convergences of history and memory. Clearly it is difficult to extricate memory from history and vice versa and this was not, I think, Morris's intention, not least since the academic discipline of history was a relatively new discipline during his day, and one whose use he believed might help in changing subjective awareness and, by extension, wider society. Morris could see history's potential for helping to see the world anew. In order to read differently from our prevailing ideology, though, *how* must one read? More pertinently, how must Morris write?

Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (2002) proposes a mode of reading that allows for a plurality of meanings. She discusses the ways in which the changing focus, development, and concerns of literary criticism – driven in turn by changes in the social order – over the last several decades, have called into question not only the notion that there is any single, correct, “common sense” way of reading literary texts, but also whether there is a transcendent, authoritative voice to be found within the text, whether that be the author's voice, or the reader's understanding of it. Belsey amalgamates the critical approaches defined by poststructuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan, whose theories served to displace and disrupt “the authority of common sense itself, the collective and timeless wisdom whose unquestioned presence seems to be the source and guarantee of everything we take for granted” (3). She amalgamates these theorists because each have their

own perspective and thus obscure or elide issues that are not their own particular area of concern. She states that while “both Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis may contribute to an understanding of the role of literature and the possibilities for literary criticism”, if taken in isolation neither is able to “offer an adequate account of the work of literature ... [since] Lacan apparently leaves little room for history, while Althusser’s theory of subjectivity leaves little room for change” (50-51).

Belsey describes her amalgamated critical approach as being based on post-Saussurean linguistics – rather than the post-structuralism from which she draws – in order to “emphasize its line of descent from the radical elements in the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure” (3). (The effect of de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* is I think similar to the challenges raised in Vico’s *New Science* to the origins of social structures.) It is in this context that “the notion of a text which tells a (or the) truth, as perceived by an individual subject (the author), whose insights are the source of the text’s single and authoritative meaning, is not only untenable, but literally unthinkable, because the problematic which supported it, the framework of assumptions and knowledges, ways of thinking, probing and analysing that it was based on, no longer stands” (3). Along with literature’s being open to a plurality of readings, Belsey’s critical practice she says is built upon an unfamiliar conceptual understanding of the term ‘ideology’ which she associates with common sense, rather than with “a set of doctrines or coherent system of beliefs” (4). From this perspective, in contrast to commonly held notions, ideology is not “an optional extra, deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals (‘Conservative party ideology’, for instance)” (4-5). Rather, ideology is literally part of what we are born into, is part of us, embodied



in the language we use, and the ways in which we think, speak, and experience our lives. Belsey attributes her usage of the term to Althusser, for whom ideology represented “the very condition of our experience of the world, *unconscious* precisely in that it is unquestioned, taken for granted” (4-5). In this way ideology “works in conjunction with political practice and economic practice to constitute the *social formation*, a term designed to promote a more complex and radical analysis than the familiar term ‘society’” (5). This redefinition prevents the habitual and perhaps lazy thought processing of language that would normally associate the word ‘society’ with “a single homogeneous mass or ... a loosely connected group of autonomous individuals” and instead causes the reader to think anew.

If, then, our subjectivity is so ingrained in our ideological positioning, is so intrinsic to our sense of self, how then might we challenge or even change it? Belsey’s approach seems to suggest that the key questions are Who holds power? Who does the status quo serve? In particular, in what are the modes of transmission through which that power maintained? Her focus is on the language of literature, and on identifying approaches to the literary canon which have traditionally worked to maintain the dominant ideology. Briefly, these include the ‘common sense’ approach to reading literature, described as the ‘expressive realist text’, an approach supplanted by the ‘classic realist text’ – in rejection of the idea that the text reflects reality, but must itself be rejected because of the illusionism that helps create a single meaning by virtue of the familiarity of the world portrayed in the text. Belsey proposes instead an interrogative approach to reading (based on Benveniste’s sentence types) which essentially opens up any text to a plurality of meanings, by asking questions that look beyond and challenge the

familiar, which is familiar only when what is portrayed seems natural and part of the real world. The interrogative approach helps reveal that what is *actually* represented in ideology is “not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but [rather] the *imaginary* relation of those individuals to the *real* relations in which they live” (Althusser qtd. in Belsey 53) (emphases mine).

Belsey’s critical approach exposes the often unconscious connections we make between literature, subjectivity, and ideology. Understanding the arbitrary and random nature of language – that there is no fixed nomenclature, and that any nomenclature changes according to social phenomena – is the first step in understanding the ideological positions into which we are born. Belsey uses a simple but telling example to illustrate this: while men were simply referred to as Mr, married or unmarried, the terms Miss and Mrs were used to differentiate whether a woman was available for marriage or not, and the introduction of the title ‘Ms.’ reveals how language is informed by changes in the social structure, and not the reverse. The interrogative approach thus works to “unfix the subject”, in the process undoing the “work of ideology” (83), and in the process “refus[ing] a single point of view” (85).

But our subjectivity is not formed by language alone, as Belsey acknowledges, and to address how subjectivity is formed in other ways I draw on Paul Connerton’s *How Societies Remember*. Connerton discusses, for example, the ways in which corporeal authority, or lack thereof, is expressed through bodily mnemonics, such as upright postures, eye contact, forelock touching, which project meaning that is “least susceptible to willed modification” (90). The most fascinating example Connerton employs to describe how such bodily mnemonics

are established and maintained is drawn from Erasmus's sixteenth century treatise *De Civilitate Morum Peurilium* (1530). Here, Erasmus "specifies maxims of conduct with respect to what he calls 'outward' bodily propriety; such 'outward' proprieties, of bodily carriage, gesture, posture, facial expression, and dress, being seen as the expression of the 'inner' person" (82). In aiming to give "new precision centrality to the concept of *civilitas*" Erasmus also proffered advice on table manners and the correct way to eat, rather than devour, food (82). The rules were arbitrary, but the impact of Erasmus's work was "immediate, wide, and lasting" says Connerton, although "nothing in modern Western table manners is self-evident or the expression of a 'natural' feeling of delicacy or simply 'reasonable'; if they have become all that it is by virtue of being a set of particular practices built up slowly in a historical process of long duration" (83). Connerton continues: "What is being remembered is a set of rules defining 'proper' behaviour; the control of appetite becomes part of "a much wider process, which will appear, depending on our vantage point, either as a structure of feeling or as a pattern of institutional control" (83). Connerton, quoting from Norbert Elias's *The Civilising Process*, commends Elias's recognition of the fact that

these vantage points are reciprocally enlightening since the whole process has to be understood as occurring at two interlocking levels. There is the formation of a type of person whose sensibility is attuned to the more exacting and meticulous promptings of decorum; and there is the formation of a type of society whose control over its members is more stratified and centralised. (83)

Intriguingly, the body is seen "as the point of linkage between these two

levels”, an example of the “precarious sway of culture over nature – celebrated by making the meal an occasion for the demonstration of taste” (83). As Pierre Bourdieu notes, this resulted in “the denying of the primary function of consumption ... to satisfy a common need, by making the meal an occasion for the celebration of artistic refinement and ethical value” (qtd. in Connerton 84).<sup>21</sup> The role of bodily mnemonics in forming subjectivity must therefore inform the discussion of this thesis. It is from within this blended methodology that I consider the role of memory and history in shaping Morris’s works.

The first work discussed, “The Defence of Guenevere”, is the title poem in Morris’s first major publication, *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858). In this intense dramatic monologue, Guenevere’s memory threatens to damn her physically, at the same time as it uplifts her psychically. Aware that her past is questionable, but unable to accept that it should be so, Guenevere’s ‘slippery’ language seems to draw her back into the medieval era to which she mythologically belongs, while still seeming intensely modern. The reader’s reaction to this conflict is to be more mindful of the dilemma of a woman’s role in Morris’s society, as well as to note Morris’s latent feminist sympathies, and his aversion to the mores which constricted the feminine. Guenevere’s imaginative reconstruction of her past is so powerful it literally projects the reader’s imagination out of the confines of the present and into her imaginary past, and away from the apparently hard facts of her ‘case’, into an emotional space fraught with the sensation of her desperation and feelings of loss, and a compulsion to question the social structures shaping her distress. While Morris is clearly

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<sup>21</sup> While I focus on Connerton’s discussion of bodily mnemonics, I should note here that he also discusses the “alphabet ... as an inscribing practice” such that the acts of reading and writing “become an unconscious reflex” and thus have “decisive ontogenetic significance” (75).

sympathetic to Guenevere, he is interested, too, in the power he has over words, and of the power of poetry to force us to suspend belief, and enter an imaginary world, from which position we see our own world anew.

The second work, *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876), is Morris's poetic re-working of his prose redaction of *Volsunga Saga*, published in 1870. He believed the saga to be as important to the English race as the story of Troy had been to the Greeks. I discuss this work less as saga than as Morris's exploration of the influence of the epic and heroic in shaping the social order. I also consider the importance of the sagas and myths to Morris's era generally, and reflect on the importance he allocates to memory and story-telling throughout the poem. The thematic range of the sagas are as rich and nuanced as the human race, dealing with such issues as aristocratic privileges, old and new money, vengeful relationships, political naivety, political chicanery, gods, heroes, and men (Andersson *passim*). They deal, too, with vicious and sickening brutality, disguised under a cloak of glory and valour. Morris's reshaping of the saga I see as anti-myth, since his Sigurd appears less as a martial, heroic individual, than an individual whose goodness and bravery are an integral part of the relationships and actions that shape his life.

In the third work, *News from Nowhere* (1891), Morris weaves memory and history, and their modes of transmission, throughout his prose romance, in which he projects an idealized medieval social order into an imagined future. *News from Nowhere* synthesizes much that Morris held dear, essentially all those things from which we as a society construct our memories, and around which we shape our lives: relationships, customs, work, clothes, crafts, books, landscapes, art, buildings. In this idealized world, however, these take on a completely different

role to those they played in the Victorian world, and are deployed to reshape integral social structures such as schooling. Nowherian education is best described as freely chosen, even wild, in stark contrast to what the protagonist William Guest describes as the “boy farms” (78)<sup>22</sup> of his youth, which provided the sort of education intended to produce more leaders to keep the capitalist system and the empire working.

While my overall focus is to trace Morris’s use of memory, and history, as a transformative path for social change, at a certain point in my research a sub-theme seemed to write itself into the thesis, namely that Morris was suffering from culture shock. This stemmed from the sense of alienation evoked in the strong statement Morris makes in “How I Became a Socialist”: “Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation.” (381) Culture shock was first described in 1960 by the anthropologist Kalervo Oberg; briefly, a person suffering from culture shock experiences three main stages when experiencing shifts in social experience from the familiar to the new. The first is a feeling of alienation from a culture to which one’s own is juxtaposed; in the second stage, attempts are made to find workable connections between the two; the third stage represents if not integration of the two, at least a way of reaffirming one’s own culture to the extent that one no longer feels alienated.<sup>23</sup> If the violence and alienation of “The Defence of Guenevere” are seen as representing the first stage; the questioning of the epic heroic form (as transmitter of social memory) in *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall*

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<sup>22</sup> All page references are to the Arata 2003 edition of *News from Nowhere*, unless specified otherwise.

<sup>23</sup> Culture shock and nostalgia seem to be closely related. In the introduction to his edition of *News from Nowhere*, James Redmond sees nostalgia as the “main motive in Morris’s work” (xix), especially in its utopian idealism. See also the introduction to Ann Colley’s *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (1998) pp 1-11. I prefer the term ‘culture shock’ for Oberg’s description of its transformative third stage, which I do not think is so evident in these discussions of nostalgia.

*of the Niblungs*, coupled with its vast difference in style and content, might be seen as the second stage; then the more liberated consciousness apparent in *News from Nowhere* represents not only a possible space for the third stage of integration (although Guest ultimately returns to his own world) but perhaps also a transformative stage, since there is the seed of an idea that cultural shock may be avoidable in the first place.

It seems to me that Morris's work articulates the dilemma of living as an individual, in a world largely controlled by ideological forces which shape the collective memory but over which the individual has little control. It is this dilemma that Morris seeks to address. Just as he returned time and again to the three dimensional patterns and forms he loved in architecture, and the equally rich two dimensional patterns of colour and line that shaped his wallpapers, stained glass, fabrics, tapestry – patterns which he described as 'being soothing to the soul' – so too did he constantly probe repetitive patterns of memory in shaping the loves and lives of his literary works. The pattern that surfaces most of all is his compassionate love of humanity, and a voice that asserts the right of the individual to live in a world in which the experience of life is formed freely, rather than imposed. His art is informed, and transformed, by his medievalism and socialism, revealing in the process a poetics of life that is timeless and deeply concerned with the universal human experience.

## “The Defence of Guenevere”

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*The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858)<sup>24</sup>, William Morris’s first major publication, was also the first ever publication of Pre-Raphaelite verse, making Morris “a leading figure of the Pre-Raphaelite movement” (Latham 2007a 7). Displaying “psychological originality” as well as a “deeply empathetic attention to the imagined problems of unrecorded struggles and unrequited loss” (Boos 1996 48), the poems collected in the volume are composed of stark textual evocations of grief, betrayal, love, and war. They reveal Morris’s “preoccupation with rejected lovers and fatal women” (Silver 1982 17), as well as his passion for Arthurian legend and characters. The poems were influenced too by the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite group of artists Morris had recently been introduced to by his friend and fellow artist Edward Burne-Jones, especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti (to whom, as noted in the introduction, Morris dedicated the work, but removed the dedication from later editions). The Pre-Raphaelites saw their work as pulling against the wretchedness of industrial life, and as “an escape from the constricting drabness of the contemporary world” (Welland 38-39). The artists of this group sought to reestablish a link between art and society “something more than purely moral ... aesthetic and yet practical.” (Welland 41-42). These particular ideals are identified more with the second wave of Pre-Raphaelitism of 1857 rather than its 1848 founding stage, and were fed in part by telling stories, both visual and literary, about society.

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<sup>24</sup> Hereafter *The Defence* for the volume and “Guenevere” for the title poem.



The first four poems in *The Defence* are inspired by Arthurian romance, and are often described as the Malorian sequence.<sup>25</sup> A number of poems are based on Froissart's *Chronicles*, including *The Haystack in the Floods*, in which Morris's depiction of the harsh reality of the Hundred Years War brutally severs doomed lovers such as the French Jehane and English Robert from each other and life. Diane Sadoff describes the Froissartian poems as an exploration of the ways in which "violence and death displace and destroy frail human desires for sexual and interpersonal fulfillment" (26).<sup>26</sup> Sadoff also identifies the ways in which layers of "pastness" serve to "undercut history" (26), connecting the reader more closely with the poet's present concerns about mortality and being remembered after death. The remaining poems depict the haunted and fractured psyches of men and women constrained by fate to erotically charged but unfulfilled lives of pain and loss, from which only memory and the imagination, or death, offer any form of escape. For Florence Boos "The world of the *Defence* poems is decaying and war torn ... inhabited by lonely men and suffering women, who often seek consolation in edenic memories of childhood and fantasies of visionary reunion with nature in the moment of death" (Boos 1990 84). The over-arching theme, however, is Morris's unending preoccupation with love – sexual, erotic, unrequited, spiritual – and the power of its attendant frustrations, anxieties and ecstasies to shape the human psyche.

This theme is especially the case in "Guenevere" the title poem and the subject of this chapter. Morris's source of inspiration for the poem was Robert Southey's

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<sup>25</sup> "Guenevere" is followed by a companion piece "King Arthur's Tomb", and Silver notes that these in turn are followed by two other poems again based on Malory, "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" and "The Chapel in Lyonesse" which "examine the tensions between earthly and heavenly love" (Silver 1982 18).

<sup>26</sup> Sadoff identifies "The Haystack in the Floods", "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" and "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire" as the Froissart poems, but notes that Ralph Berry "counts eleven vaguely Froissartian poems" in *The Defence* (p12).

1822 edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Malory's *Morte* was important for introducing the legend of Arthur and the Fellowship of the Round Table into English. According to Kenneth Hodges, the work reveals Malory's preoccupation with the chivalric code whose limits were being defined in the dynastic wars of fifteenth century England. He notes how these "wars encouraged swirls of different kinds of chivalry" largely because they had to accommodate the fact that "the great lords led large affinities, and individual knights could belong to more than one, creating tangles of loyalties to the king and several of the great lords" (3). This was further complicated by social changes which saw the "gap between the great lords and knights ... widening, creating an ever-greater gulf that shared chivalric ideals had to bridge" (3). Morris narrows his own perspective to the great love Guenevere has for Launcelot, contrasting this "with Arthur's little love".

The opening lines of the poem suggest that Queen Guenevere has apparently been summoned before a court to answer a charge of adultery, a treasonous act that ostensibly causes the downfall of Arthur's court, and the destruction of the Fellowship of the Round Table. The charge itself is never made explicit, but if found guilty, Guenevere will burn at the stake. Her vehement denial of the charge rests on a technicality: she was not guilty of adultery on the night in question and therefore, technically, is innocent. Her defence is complicated by the fact that she *was* in an adulterous relationship with Launcelot, and therefore has been guilty of the crime on other occasions. The charge is further complicated by the fact that it resulted from an entrapment instigated by the knights and half-brothers Agravaine and Mordred – the former being Arthur's nephew, the latter being both son and nephew to Arthur, through his incestuous and adulterous relationship with

Margawse, sister to Arthur's mother Igrayne. Much of the early scholarship pivots on the assumption that Guenevere is guilty, but Morris's title for both volume and opening poem, and the opening adversative conjunction 'but', suggests an alternative view is being posed to what seems obvious; there is a sense that we have burst in upon a scene already underway, leaving us slightly off balance, almost immediately in a similar situation to the Queen, a feeling that her speech act helps prolong until the closing lines.<sup>27</sup>

Guenevere's brilliant speech act challenges any single defining conclusion. This is especially the case since the apparent court scene in Morris's poem does not take place in Malory's text – Guenevere is simply taken straight to the stake. Further, Gauwaine, the knight who in Morris's version seems to refuse his Queen's plea for help, is in Malory a loyal and loving knight who refuses to have anything to do with any accusation against her honour. I think Gauwaine's apparent silence here (if indeed he is present – he does not say a word, and we know only of his presence through Guenevere's speech and actions) shows Morris's early interest in the importance of the individual to a stable social order. I say this because while Gauwaine is not implicated in the entrapment of Malory's Queen, he is later guilty of an almost blind, albeit grief-stricken, vengeance against Launcelot, leading to all out war, a war that does indeed destroy the Fellowship. Comparing Gauwaine's blind and destructive vengeance in Malory with Guenevere's superb verbal skill in Morris, highlights her brilliant evocation of the power of words to deter violent action, at least long enough for Launcelot to arrive, and save her from Arthur's "she shall have the law" (Malory 682-683).

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<sup>27</sup> Definitions for the various categories and aims of the illocutionary act appear in John Searle's *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969) 22-25, and David Crystal's *A First Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (1980) 328.

Her speech act in Morris vindicates her also from his source's not entirely impartial treatment of her love, in comparison to Launcelot's, since Malory sometimes portrays Guenevere as fickle and unreasonably jealous; and indeed she is, especially when, after the discovery of the reason for the Fair Maid of Astolat's suicide, the Queen admonishes her loyal Launcelot with "ye might have shewed hir som bownte and jantilnes whych myght have preserved hir lyff". The depth of Launcelot's love is revealed in his response: "I love nat to be constrayned to love, for love muste only aryse of the harte selff, and nat by none constraynte" (Malory 641); it is this intensity that shapes the love Morris portrays in his own Queen.<sup>28</sup> My focus therefore is on the performance of Guenevere's speech act and on the linguistic clues that suggest a plurality of meanings, not the least of which is that while the opening lines seem to suggest Guenevere is appearing before a court of great lords to address the charge against her, it is equally possible that it is the court itself – King Arthur's court, or the chivalric order on which it is based – that is under scrutiny.

Such a plurality of interpretations informs much of the scholarship on the poem. Laurence Perrine believes in Guenevere's guilt, but qualifies that belief by suggesting Morris argues "for a larger moral frame of reference than that which obtains in Camelot" (238). Carole Silver suggests that we are "forced to recognize that the adultery is less meaningful than the love itself" and that Guenevere's testimony, as well as Morris's "is to the formidable power of erotic passion which can dissolve all other values in it" (Silver 1982 24-25), but that while "our sympathy remains with Guenevere" hers is in the end "a great but guilty love" (1969 702). Frederick Kirchoff asserts that Guenevere's words and actions

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<sup>28</sup> All references to Malory's *Morte Darthur* are to the Viniver edition of 1971, unless otherwise stated.

reflect her “inability to imagine anything beyond her own immediate sensual gratification” (1996 10) and that what she feels is “not guilt, but the fear of punishment.”<sup>29</sup> Robert Stallman, in contrast, suggests it is only the depth of her love that saves both Guenevere and Launcelot from damnation (667). Charlotte Oberg posits the view that Morris is not interested in Guenevere’s guilt at all – “neither she nor her creator, Morris, is concerned overmuch with her sin” – rather, it is “Guenevere’s memories of past love [that] dominate” the poem (Oberg 157). Florence Boos’s words acknowledge the agony of experiencing love in a world governed by a complex chivalric code: the poem’s “powerful evocations of stress, rupture, and violence reverberate in a world of stark, ethical imperatives” (1990 83). David Reide sees in “Guenevere” Morris’s awareness that “the age of naive romance was over” (86), and that the success of the poems collected in *The Defence*, when contrasted with what Reide describes as the “comparative lameness of *The Earthly Paradise*” (published a decade later) “demonstrate[s], among other things, that modernity and commitment have little to do with subject matter and everything to do with the struggle with and against the poetic tradition and the limitations of poetic form” (Reide 105). Reide’s comments are elucidated further by more recent scholarship, such as that of Karen Herbert, who sees the Queen’s position as reflecting the social constraints imposed by the language of a mythical past that no longer reflects present value systems (Herbert 313-315). In the same vein, Dennis Balch argues that Morris

realized that the Arthurian legends embodied a system of values contrary to the values he himself was developing which would depend on the central

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<sup>29</sup> Here he is commenting on her behaviour in the sequel poem, “King Arthur’s Tomb”.

importance of the individual sensual experience rather than a denial of man's nature. (Balch 70)

Katherine Helsinger discusses the “explorations of colour's power to disturb” in *The Defence* poems overall, where “colour appears repeatedly ... fixing a striking image to some powerful emotion ... and triggering the abrupt transition to a different state of consciousness” (2004 24). The tension and turning and twisting of the queen's body might be “linked to ... expressionistic aspects of early 1850s pre-Raphaelite art: the exaggeration and distortion of both colour and form (particularly the human figure) for expressive purposes which proved so unsettling to contemporary reviewers” (2004 20). As she recalls her love for Launcelot, Guenevere – already vulnerable as she “throws her wet hair backward from her brow, / Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek ... like one lame / She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head / Still lifted up;” (2-3, 7-9) – defends herself by saying she was “half mad with beauty on that day” (109). A few lines later she ‘sketches’ herself as a textual work of art:

I dared not think, as I was wont to do,  
 Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had  
 Held out my long hand up against the blue,  
 And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,  
 Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,  
 There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers,  
 Round by the edges; what should I have done,  
 If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,  
 And startling green drawn upward by the sun? (119-127)

The poem here is a defence of “the worship of Beauty, represented by the love of Guenevere and Launcelot” (Brantlinger 1973 20). Guenevere engages her audience by asking them to consider her lack of choice in the matter of loving Launcelot by relating the dream of the two cloths, the one red, the other blue. On being asked to choose between them, they would no doubt, as she did, choose blue, believing that to be the colour of heaven, of spirituality. In thus equating her love for Launcelot with the choice of the blue cloth, for them to damn her choice now “is like damning the man for choosing blue, for choosing what seemed to be heaven” (Hollow 448).<sup>30</sup> What, she asks, would they themselves have done when faced with a choice, even armed with this retrospective knowledge? Her love for Launcelot is so powerful that even now, looking back after so many years, she is unable to forget their first meeting:

No minute of that wild day ever slips

From out my memory; I hear thrushes sing,

And wheresoever I may be, straightway

Thoughts of it all come up with most fresh sting; (105-108)<sup>31</sup>

Her words “most fresh sting” may reflect a sense of guilt, but the unusual pairing of fresh – which calls up images of spring and new life – and sting I think rather suggests both the joy of new love and the physical pain she experiences at the thought of losing it. The contrast between beauty and art on the one hand and sin on the other is an impossible choice between “irreconcilable moral extremes” (Brantlinger 1975 21).

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<sup>30</sup> See also Dennis Balch’s more complicated and psychoanalytical reading in “Guenevere’s Fidelity to Arthur in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ and ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’ pp61-70, in which he associates blue with Arthur, and red with Launcelot, suggesting that Guenevere’s choice of blue indicates a submission to prevailing norms.

<sup>31</sup> All line references are to the 1981 edition, edited by Margaret Lourie.

Guenevere's silences and evasive language – she denies the charge, knowing that while in this particular instance she has not been adulterous, she has in the past – prevent her from being totally convincing and are yet the strongest part of her defence, since we empathise with her state, as she tries to engage the court in considering the lack of choice that led to her predicament. As John Hollow says: “Morris’ Guenevere does not deny adultery, she denies Gauwaine’s claim to know God’s judgment of her” (Hollow 447). No matter how sympathetic we are to Guenevere, it cannot be denied that within Hollow’s statement lies the crux of Guenevere’s evasive silence – she will tell them only so much, and furthermore, it will be what she chooses to tell, as opposed to answering the charge. Throughout the poem Guenevere’s body seems physically constricted, as when she speaks “with passionate twisting of her body there” (60). Karen Herbert relates the sense of entrapment and constriction revealed within “Guenevere’s monologue, with its verbal and gestural intensity ... and [her] shaping of memory” as being also “a shaping of truth into a personally relevant form”. Herbert notes that Guenevere’s bodily contortions do not indicate “as Sternberg believes, [that Guenevere is] chained to the stake” (Herbert 326 n8), since Morris tells us “She walked away from Gauwaine ...” (8). In defending love against the laws of man, Guenevere’s “monologue questions the very issue of ‘false or true’ in a society which forfeits its right to judgment by adhering to inoperative values, reified truths, and a facile morality” (Herbert 319). Quoting Marcuse, Herbert sees Guenevere’s defence as “linguistic therapy – that is, the effort to free words (and thereby concepts) ... [and to demand] the transfer of moral standards ... from the Establishment to the revolt against it” (Herbert 319).



While my understanding of *Guenevere* has been shaped by this scholarship, my own focus is on the way Guenevere's memory shapes her speech act – its immediacy, its intensity, its cadences, its truths, its silences, its equivocations. As Guenevere addresses her audience her cadence varies from cajoling pleas to distracted moans, from plaintive tones to shrill shrieks: “Her voice was low at first, being full of tears, / But as it cleared, it grew full loud and shrill, Growing a windy shriek in all men's ears, / A ringing in their startled brains ...” (49-52). The poem is shaped by such “auditory images” (Silver 1982 14) as much as it is by the visual images Guenevere's memory projects into our imaginary space. Her almost hallucinatory words are destabilising for her and for the reader since we know only that “they would have her speak”. Her love for Launcelot she depicts in terms of a walled, flowered garden, an image that suggests first of all a concentration of beauty and emotion, and secondarily, a sense of the constricted space within which love might survive. The intensity of the image stems I think from what Burke – in discussing the transmission of memories through various media – describes as “the ‘schema’, associated with the tendency to represent (or indeed to remember) one event or one person in terms of another” (1989 102).<sup>32</sup> This kaleidoscopic process of transmission, which connects a present event with past memories, is part of the process through which myths continue over time and space<sup>33</sup>, and part of why Guenevere's performance is so mesmerizing, especially when delivered through the dramatic monologue, to which her speech more or less conforms. The dramatic monologue is a literary form which “invite[s] the

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<sup>32</sup> Burke notes that this process is common in oral transmission, but written media too, quoting the example of the First World War, which “was also perceived in terms of schemata ... the recurrence of imagery from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, especially the Slough of Despond and the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

<sup>33</sup> It occurs to me that such a ‘schema’ underlies Leslie Workman's description of how “the consciousness of the Middle Ages as a field of study” and his establishment of “Studies in Medievalism”, was fed in part by Wallace Ferguson's *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (1948) “which showed how the Renaissance had created the Middle Ages as the villain ...” (Utz and Shippey, 439).

reader to make judgements and draw conclusions not available to the speaker” (Belsey 72). Belsey quotes Robert Langbaum’s interpretation of this form:

It can be said of the dramatic monologue generally that there is at work in it a consciousness, whether intellectual or historical, beyond what the speaker can lay claim to. This consciousness is the mark of the poet’s projection into the poem; and it is also the pole which attracts our projection, since we find in it the counterpart of our own consciousness. (qtd in Belsey 72)

Stallman suggests that his use of the dramatic monologue “affords Morris a means of vitalizing the figures who represented the lost medieval ideals he and his friends admired”, specifically, through the figure of Guenevere, “a steadfastness of love that grows beyond the limitations of carnality to an understanding that finally saves both Guenevere and Launcelot from damnation” (Stallman 658). That there is no consensus about Guenevere’s guilt or innocence was intentional, Boos seems to suggest, since “much of the density and subtlety of Morris’s early work emerges in the passionate rhetorical indirection he used as a mode of expression for an unusual clarity of vision” (1990 84).

In contrast to Malory’s somewhat dismissive treatment of Guenevere’s love – she refuses, for example, to acknowledge the truth of Bors’s assertion that Launcelot is “at all tymys ... a trew knyght” (Malory 637) – Morris crafts Guenevere’s speech to an extent that it is almost mesmerizing, as its cadences rise, dip, and rise again, as she remembers her first meeting with Launcelot. Her love is so all-consuming, even as she remembers it, that she appears at times to have little power to control her words, almost admitting her guilt. She entrances with descriptions of her beauty, and the inevitability of her love for Launcelot – entwining art and love. In the face of such love, Arthur’s “little love” in Morris

(83) pales in comparison, especially when read against the “little word, scarce ever meant at all”. Launcelot’s own impassioned defence of love (quoted earlier) draws from Arthur the response that “with many knyghtes love ys fre in hymselffe, and never wolle be bonde; for where he ys bonden he lowsith hymselff” (Malory 641).<sup>34</sup> That Arthur would rather lose his Queen than his knights suggests that “the little word, scarce ever meant at all” might be attributed to Arthur as much as Guenevere.

When ‘but’ is considered against the conjunction “Nevertheless” which opens the refrains at lines 46, 142, and 283 wider social doubts are raised, and reiterated, about the nature of the charge leveled at Guenevere, as she attempts to redirect her audience’s attention from her own to Gauwaine’s actions or words:

Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
 Whatever may have happened through these years,  
 God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie. (46-48)

Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
 Whatever happened on through all those years,  
 God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie. (142-44)

Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
 Whatever may have happen’d these long years,  
 God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie! (283-85)

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<sup>34</sup> Boos notes that Morris and other Pre-Raphaelite artists did not support “that great Victorian codification of the double standard, the Divorce Law of 1857, which permitted men but not women to sue for divorce on grounds of adultery” (1990 89).

Her words here seem both to deny and to admit guilt, a slipperiness of meaning that might be contained in the omitted definite article ‘the’; saying “I speak truth” as opposed to “I speak *the* truth” constitutes an evasive speech act that might implicate Guenevere, having the opposite intention to that which she desires. There is ambiguity too in the second refrain which, as Silver notes, occurs after Guenevere has confessed her love for Launcelot – and “is no longer conditional” (1982 21). On looking at the words as if they were an image on the page, however, Guenevere’s “truth” is linked closely to the name of God, at the beginning of the third line of each stanza, contrasting sharply with the visual proximity of Gauwaine’s name to the word “lie”, thus positing a quite different interpretation. The visual image is reinforced by the aural, since on reading the words out loud the monosyllabic strength of “God knows I speak truth” drowns out the weaker vowel sounds of “O Sir Gauwaine”. Guenevere then, rather than responding to the charge of adultery, is denying “Gauwaine’s claim to know God’s judgment of her” (Hollow 447), since only God can know that.

Stallman suggests that the poem is in two parts (659) and that the first part ends just before Guenevere utters the first refrain. Gauwaine’s “betrayal” of Guenevere is followed by the narrator’s voice for the next four verses, and he, or she, clearly sympathises with Guenevere.<sup>35</sup> So, in the first instance, we know only that Guenevere was standing close to Gauwaine. After the second refrain, Guenevere describes how such a great lady as she could not possibly cry tears if her words were untrue, followed by an appeal and a threat:

Gauwaine be friends now, speak me lovingly.

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<sup>35</sup> Stallman suggests Morris’s narrator may have been the knight in Malory sent by Launcelot “for to espy what time the queen should go unto her death” (Stallman 659).

Do I not see how God's dear pity creeps  
 All through your frame, and trembles in your mouth?  
 Remember in what grave your mother sleeps,  
 Buried in some place far down in the south,  
 Men are forgetting as I speak to you;  
 By her head sever'd in that awful drouth.  
 Of pity that drew Agravaine's fell blow,  
 I pray your pity! let me not scream out  
 For ever after, when the shrill winds blow. (150-159)

Her plea to Gauwaine's memory is to no avail, and her desperation increases with the realisation that other "men are forgetting" too, and in this collective forgetting, or refusal to remember, the Queen is betrayed not only by Gauwaine but by all of the knights of Arthur's court:

Ah! God of mercy how he turns away!  
 So, ever must I dress me to the fight,  
 So—let God's justice work! (164-166)

The small word 'ever' suggests not only a burden of both time and memory, but also Guenevere's belief that love is worth any battle, no matter how long it may take.

The knights' failure to protect their queen is pointed up by the increasing association of Guenevere with the courage and honour that they lack, and in that failing at the same time to honour the Pentecostal oath. In contrast, Guenevere's staunchness, and full understanding of the physicality of being a knight, is evident in her extended description of the battle between Launcelot and Mellyagraunce:

This very day, and you were judges here

Instead of God. Did you see Mellyagraunce  
 When Launcelot stood by him? what white fear  
 Curdled his blood, and how his teeth did dance,  
 His side sink in? as my knight cried and said,  
 Slayer of unarm'd men, here is a chance! (184-189)

...

The fight began, and to me they drew nigh;  
 Ever Sir Launcelot kept him on the right,  
 And traversed warily, and ever high  
 And fast leapt caitiff's sword, until my knight  
 Sudden threw up his sword to his left hand,  
 Caught it, and swung it; that was all the fight. (208-213)

Guenevere displays immense courage too in her ability to keep her wits about her enough to be able to hold their attention in the face of her own impending death. The last image of her is in fact as a knight, when, having finished her defence, she strains to hear any sign that Launcelot has arrived, and realizing that he has, she "Turn'd sideways; listening like a man who hears / His brother's trumpet sounding through the wood / Of his foes' lances...." (288-290)

As we hear Guenevere's defence, there are numerous references to love – erotic, brotherly, knightly, familial, spiritual – but all pale in comparison to the love Morris's Guenevere has for Launcelot. In contrast, Gauwaine's apparent love and care for Guenevere (else how would she expect he might "speak lovingly" to her) is here tainted since it is not strong enough to compel his coming to her defence, a knightly duty at the very least; his love for his brother is tainted by that brother's beheading of their mother for adultery, and his love of God is

questioned by his apparent sanctioning of murder, since he killed his mother's lover, Lamerok. Here the chivalric code itself appears to be if not corrupted, at the very least driven by conflicting loyalties, passions, and love. Guenevere's love in contrast, she manages to suggest, seems sanctioned by God. The third refrain "God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie!" is followed immediately by Guenevere's final words "All I have said is truth, by Christ's dear tears." (286) Is she saying Christ will forgive her for lying, because his forgiveness is endless? Perhaps this is the doubt that Morris wishes to raise, that a love whose shape and direction are dictated by men for economic or dynastic reasons can no way be compared with the love between Guenevere and Launcelot. The poem ends with Guenevere's realisation that Launcelot has arrived to save her, at which "joyfully her cheek grew crimson" (293); the close proximity of these words on the page to "Christ" and "God", contrasts with the opening lines when "her cheek burned so" (6) and serves to negate the shame the "great lords" (15) impute to her love. The circularity of images, colour and words all support Guenevere's right to defend her love in a world in which love has been corrupted. According to Stallman's extended interpretation of the image of the Queen "slipping down into the sea", Guenevere's love is so true and powerful it "transcends all laws and moral codes ... [and] becomes the union necessary for human life" (660).

Some allusion must also be made to the contrast between Guenevere's predicament, and that of Malory's Igrayne, Arthur's mother, who is also charged (this time falsely) with adultery. Guenevere's "So ever must I dress me to the fight" (165) contrasts with Igrayne's "I am a woman and I may not fight" (Malory 30). In this scene, Igrayne has been accused by Ulfius of adultery, even though he was present at and knew of the preternatural shape-shifting that had allowed Uther

to deceive and lie with Igrayne by appearing in the guise of her husband, the Duke of Cornwall. Morris's defence then is of Arthurian women, countering an over-valuing of the role of Arthurian knights, particularly the lords who not only fail their own code of honour by refusing to help their queen, but sin themselves, too, since as Guenevere says, contrary to their charge against her, they

Know quite well the story of that fray,  
How Launcelot still'd their bawling, the mad fit  
That caught up with Gauwaine — all, all, verily,  
But just that which would save me; these things flit.

In the strong fighting metaphor through which Morris has Guenevere warn Gauwaine “Gauwaine, I say, See me hew down your proofs:...” (166-67), there is a marked difference between Morris's Guenevere and Malory's Igrayne. Morris reveals, then, strong feminist sympathies in this, “his first joust” against the age (Thompson 61).

To return to Guenevere's ‘proofs’ briefly; Morris not only does not offer any explanation of them, he also substitutes Gauwaine for Mordred in bringing the charge against the queen.<sup>36</sup> There are in Malory at least three occasions when Gauwaine may have lied to or about Guenevere, occasions which when considered against “through these years”, “on through all these years” and “these long years” seem to outweigh, or offset, any guilt Guenevere may be expected to feel. The first instance, mentioned earlier, involves Gauwaine's erroneous belief that Guenevere attempted to poison him at the dinner party to which she had invited him and a number of other knights. The second occasion relates to Elayne,

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<sup>36</sup> Hollow says the substitution is because Gauwaine's mother Margawse was guilty of adultery (448), which is somewhat confusing since Mordred is also Margawse's illegitimate son by Arthur, her half brother.



the Fair Maid of Astolat, who commits suicide, heartbroken after Launcelot refuses her love. She had earlier told Gauwaine “Yee truly ... my love ys he. God wolde that I were hys love!” (Malory 631). Gauwaine relates the story to Arthur and the whole court, before Launcelot has returned. Guenevere, having heard that Launcelot had worn “the rede slyve of the Fayre Maydyn of Astolat ... was nygh ought of her mynde for wratthe” (Malory 632). She proceeds angrily to quiz Launcelot’s kinsman, Sir Bors: “I harde sir Gawayne say before my lorde Arthure that hit were mervayle to telle the grete love that ys between the Fayre Maydyn of Astolat and hym” (632).<sup>37</sup> The third occasion refers to the plotting of Agravaine and Mordred to ambush Guenevere and Launcelot in the Queen’s bedchamber, in order to prove to Arthur that his wife was an adulterer, and therefore should be burned at the stake. In Malory, Gauwaine emphatically refuses to have anything to do with the ambush, for Arthur’s sake, but especially out of loyalty to Launcelot, since he knows they would all have “bene full colde at the harte-roote had nat sir Launcelot bene bettir than we” (673). Gauwaine reminds his brothers how Launcelot “rescowed you bothe and three score and two frome Sir Tarquyne. And therefore, brother, methynkis suche noble dedis and kyndnes shulde be remembirde” (674). Gauwaine in Malory knows that to expose the adultery would lead to an intolerable collision between the public and private spheres, and would surely lead to the destruction of the Fellowship, as his words reveal: “Alas! ... now is thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled.” (Malory 674)

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<sup>37</sup> It occurs to me here that this incident may have suggested to Morris the “parable” of the red and blue cloths in his own poem. Launcelot was most reluctant to wear the red sleeve and yet the ramifications of his doing so include Guenevere’s great anger (and surely great heartbreak) as well as further cracks in the chivalric order.

Malory's Guenevere is described as being "a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende" (649) although he does not specify to whom she was true. While Malory's Launcelot never wavers in his love for Guenevere, he obfuscates with his words, spoken at least twice that "in ryght other in wronge" (620) he will always remain true. These words, first spoken to Arthur, after Launcelot has rescued Guenevere from burning at the stake for the poisoned apple episode, "emphasise his dual allegiance to Arthur and to Guinevere" (Waite 1995 166). Hence there is evidence in Malory for a plethora of 'buts' regarding Guenevere's defence, and also for love's indefinable boundaries.

Guenevere is vastly different to Tennyson's more biddable and restricted heroine, and is far more like Chaucer's Criseyde, who as a medieval heroine, Pearsall claims, is "given a completely new depth and complexity as a woman of richly realized independent subjectivity, who tries to play the few cards she has ... so as to preserve her reputation and independence and yet not be left out of the blissful 'game' of romantic love" (Pearsall 2006 20). Pearsall applauds Chaucer's exploration of

the nature – or even the possibility – of human agency and free will, as a woman finds herself so compromised by inner conflicts and so brutally constrained by circumstance that acquiescence in the choicelessness of the socially determined self seems almost a necessity. (Pearsall 20)

Morris's Guenevere, too, is saved by his newly-imagined poetic. Unlike Criseyde, however, who despite her efforts still seems trapped, Guenevere is a woman whose belief in her love enables her to transcend any externally imposed limits on that love. As Guenevere recalls the depth of her love for Launcelot, she lapses almost into an hallucinatory state, which threatens to damn her – since her

memory of love is so strong it causes her to forget momentarily where she is and why – but at the same time it sustains her, as the sheer power of her memory of love drives her fabulous personal projection, leaving her audience enthralled. Here Morris veers far away from his source by focusing on the inner world of Guenevere's love, and Launcelot's constancy, rather than the battles and adventures that engage Malory's pen. Morris's focus is not on purely sexual or gratuitous love, but rather a love that encompasses the human condition more fully, connecting it with morality, spirituality, caring, kindness and selflessness. There is evidence for this in Guenevere's behaviour in the companion poem, "King Arthur's Tomb". Here it becomes clear that Morris understands love's power to be deep and enduring enough to survive even the agony inflicted on oneself by denying that very love, as Guenevere does when she, desperate to save Launcelot from what Stallman calls his stubborn moral blindness (667), inflicts on herself terrible physical and mental stress, so that she may save Launcelot's soul, and her own. This takes the literal idea of the public intrusion into the private sphere much further and suggests Morris's belief that for society to be its best, depends on individual integrity in both arenas.

Morris's "Guenevere" addresses the moral hypocrisy prevailing in the Victorian world: it represents Morris's "defence of female passion and sexuality, against ... the social hierarchies and emotional suffocation they depict" (Boos 1985 181). Karen Herbert describes the unenviable position of Victorian women as portrayed in the poem, which "explores not the integrity of Guenevere but the integrity of language itself" (318) indicating through her words that memory and language are crucial factors in addressing and challenging such imposed positions. The poem clearly represents, too, Morris's early interest in the conflicting

relationship between memory and history as he probes the divergences “between the individual’s interpretation of experience and the interpretation offered by society” (Herbert, K 313), and exposes and addresses the “social fragmentation [caused] by the incoherencies between public and private ideologies.” (Herbert 314). Guenevere’s glorious imagining – “in Summer I grew white with flame” (70) – of what true love might be like, was sacrificed long before she met Launcelot:

Belonging to the time ere I was bought  
 By Arthur’s great name and his little love,  
 Must I give up for ever then, I thought,  
 That which I deemed would ever round me move  
 Glorifying all things; for a little word,  
 Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove  
 Stone-cold for ever? (82-88)

While Silver notes that the “little word” represents Guenevere’s marriage oath, she says nothing of the oath that Arthur made to Guenevere.

In aiming for a better society, Morris knew that change must come first from the individual, but was aware that having power to make change depended first on actually having power. Morris had social and financial power, but still felt unable to act, and it was only through connecting his ideals to the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelites that he was able to see, through his art, a way of at least attempting to make positive change. The later Pre-Raphaelites’ revolutionary approach to art as a means of addressing social ills opened up for Morris a new way of thinking, and a new language, through which to articulate those ills. Katherine Helsinger, in her recent work *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelites: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William*

*Morris* (2008) suggests the interaction between poetry and painting was an important aspect of this movement since it enabled “insights for the poet into the nature of the aesthetic experience”, in effect, a new perspective that combines “a mode of perception (with the power to criticise and alter social conditions) and the historically and culturally located experience of producing and consuming poetry or other kinds of art” (Helsing 1).<sup>38</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites reconnected art and poetry through “patterns of attention, repetition, and translation” (2-4). According to Helsing, by refocusing attention these artists developed new ways of thinking about and seeing a world in which vision and life had been dulled by industrial capitalism; by acts of artistic repetition they were able to “generate formal experimentation and resistant play with the inevitable progressions of both historical and personal time” (2). It is in repetitions, Helsing argues, “that they most closely engage with the condition of modern life” (2). Finally, through translation, “these poets opened to their successors the prospect of poetry that would sound, look and create meaning differently” (2-3). This new aesthetic, of attention, repetition and translation, pointed up more clearly “the tightly focused, goal-oriented, concentration demanded in much Victorian prescriptive writing, of modern workers and of middle class men and women alike, as the means for social, educational, and economic success” (3-4). At the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, then, was a recognition of the difference between a “specifically aesthetic consciousness from that consciousness compelled or demanded by modern urban life ... with its barrage of sensory demands (from speed and noise and dirt to competitive advertising and display) ... and its

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<sup>38</sup> For the title poem, Rossetti made two drawings – *The Tune of Seven Towers* and *The Blue Closet* (Boos 1996 52 n6) – and Morris similarly based the second poem in *The Defence* on Rossetti’s painting *King Arthur’s Tomb*.

numbing, specialized, concentrated, often repetitive activity” (3).<sup>39</sup> This view is supported by Megan Ward’s intriguing description of Morris’s “conditional moment” which she sees as shaping the poem. Ward argues that *Guenevere* “creates a poetic historical consciousness that weighs the cost of memorialisation for the present day”, and suggests that it allows a “way of thinking through history, not just back upon it.” *Guenevere* thus “stages a myth that is itself about the complexity of representing or knowing origins.” (4)<sup>40</sup>

Morris thus creates a new poetic sensibility, shaped by a desire to affect social circumstances. Morris refashions medieval ideals and figures, and evocations of love, through the scenes he chooses from Malory, through the language he uses, and the images he evokes, in effect marrying his medievalism with Pre-Raphaelite artistic and idealistic goals, to reveal what his medieval source elided, thus opening up new interpretations of the past. Love is very much what is being defended, or released, from restrictive, patriarchal social structures, but specifically the freedom for women to choose. Guenevere’s love seems more noble and true than Uther Pendragon’s desire for Igrayne; and also more noble than Arthur’s own affairs. Guenevere is powerfully human – fragile, evasive, passionate, and one must say honest in that she fully believes in her love. Even though Morris gives Guenevere a voice, however, it is still constricted because

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<sup>39</sup> Helsinger states that at the time Morris was writing *The Defence*, the Great Exhibition, with its vast stock of products and wares had introduced into the Victorian psyche “the unsettling fluidity of things”. It is interesting to note an echo of this in Zygmunt Bauman’s *Identity* (2002). Dolan Cummings’s review of Bauman’s book encapsulates some of the problems associated with subjectivity in our own world, and which the zeitgeist of Morris’s time seems to capture. Bauman’s book, states Cummings, “discusses the question of identity in the context of what he calls ‘liquid modernity’ [and] Bauman’s thesis ... is that we have moved from a solid to a fluid phase of modernity, in which nothing keeps its shape, and social forms are constantly changing at great speed, radically transforming the experience of being human. ‘The peculiar ‘liquidity’ of our times may be less the consequence of structural change than intellectual exhaustion, the failure of the great ideologies of the twentieth century to bring about change on a scale that really would transform what it means to be human. Bauman rightly warns against attempts to seek refuge in the identities of the past, but in his lament at the passing of lasting values, he perhaps underestimates the possibilities for self-assured human beings unencumbered by the past, and brave enough to face the future.” Web. 15 May 2010

<sup>40</sup> Numbers refer to numbered paragraphs in this online article.

she is only able to rely on her memory of love, at this terrible time: “No minute of that wild day ever slips / From out my memory” (105-106), sustaining her at the same time as she remembers that it may damn her, with the words “I dare scarce talk of the remember’d bliss” (135). Morris in the end does not pass judgment on Guenevere, calling her “glorious lady fair”. And in a world of conflicting and fluctuating identities, shaped by unwieldy chivalric structures, Morris sees it is up to the glorious and the fair to defend and assert the need for love, and art, in our daily lives.

*Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*

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*The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876)<sup>41</sup> is an important transitional work in Morris's oeuvre, representing as it does a significant change in the poet's art and in his life. Artistically, *Sigurd* represents his turning from the world of Arthurian romance, with its focus on the individual figure of Guenevere, to the much broader frame of social reference that the saga material offered him. In the process, Morris creates an epic, but one imbued with elements of romance that demand the poem be read and understood from a broadened, and changed perspective, and not as 'pure' epic. To Morris personally, the poem's importance is reflected in changes he made in his life following its publication, which becomes charged thereafter with a life-long desire to effect radical change in the social circumstances within which he lived and worked.<sup>42</sup> This change is manifested most significantly in his newly forged commitment to socialism, and especially in his founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

In this chapter I consider Morris's awareness of the importance, as well as the limits, of the epic form in shaping viable social structures, bearing in mind the 'illusionism' of the 'classic realist text' and the way such texts serve to maintain the dominant social order. Applying Belsey's critical methodology allows me to focus on two relatively minor characters, Regin and Grimhild, in order to explore the importance Morris allots memory and history in shaping individual

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<sup>41</sup> Hereafter *Sigurd*. All page references are to the 1994 version introduced by Jane Ennis.

<sup>42</sup> Dentith states that Morris was "still only an 'advanced liberal' when he wrote the poem, but later "is a convert to revolutionary socialism" (76).



subjectivity and, by extension, the stability of the wider social structure which is his overall concern. Morris did not believe in any system being able to save society, and I view the epic here as being representative of such a system, and Morris's re-shaping of it as anti-epic.

I consider also the ways in which Morris's medievalism shapes the poem, through the many allusions to weaving, forging, welding, and shape-shifting he employs, all of which drive the poetic action. Questions of identity and subjectivity are revealed through these crafts, symbolic I think of the search for identity in the Victorian world, since for Morris the loss of such crafts and skills represents a loss of freedom, and bondage to the capitalist system.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Morris's "use of the building as ethnic symbol" (Cumming 407) reveals his awareness of the loss of such important signifiers of memory in his own world, because he believes these to be "sacred monuments of the nation's growth and hope" (qtd. in Henderson 86), associating buildings with identity, memory and history.

While Morris had admired and translated many other Icelandic sagas, he seems to have been especially drawn to the love story of the legendary Sigurd and Brynhild, which Theodore Andersson describes as the "central myth of the Norse heroic tradition" (139). A few years earlier, while Morris had been translating the *Volsunga Saga* (1870), he described his feelings about the work in a letter to his friend, Charles Elliot Norton:

The scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever met with in

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<sup>43</sup> The hero of Morris's *Pilgrims of Hope* suffers such a loss when he has to sell his tools, and is thereafter at the mercy of the labour system.

literature; there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained, all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in two pages of print. In short, it is to the full meaning of the word inspired. (Kelvin 1: 99)

These spare but haunting words reveal how much the story of the Volsung hero and Valkyrie heroine moved him.<sup>44</sup> In the same letter, Morris also suggests that while his friend may have “read abstracts of the story” these would have given him “little idea of the depth and intensity of the work” because of the disjointedness stemming from its “having been put together from varying versions of the same song” (Kelvin 1: 98-99). So as well as indicating his appreciation of the deep humanity of the sagas, I think the letter hints too at Morris’s wish to make the story more coherent, in effect to reshape the legend of Sigurd and Brynhild, thereby making it more human and less heroic, more about the social community in which the hero lives, than the martial world in which he is the central figure. Recreating and reshaping of the social order are thus central to Morris’s redaction, reflected in the attention he allots to individual behaviour in shaping stable and admirable social structures. He felt some ambivalence about recreating the story though, as evidenced by his comments in an earlier letter that he had in mind to make an epic of the tale, but felt that not even epic could do the

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<sup>44</sup> Frederick Kirchhoff states Morris’s response to the saga led to “a profound influence on his own narrative prose” (1979 99). I interpret Kirchhoff to mean that *Sigurd* redirected Morris’s attention to a different kind of writing, and clearly, following the publication of *Sigurd*, he turns from the sagas and begins to write what Charlotte Oberg, quoting May Morris, describes as ‘historical romance’, for example, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), and then the late ‘fantasy romances’ which May Morris in the *Collected Works* suggests “lead us into the radiance of fairyland” (quoted in Oberg 101). I think Andrew Wawn’s argument that “the dreamlike quality of romance proved more suited to Morris’s speculations on the nature of mankind than the hyper-realistic narrative mode of the sagas” (quoted in Spinozza 195) expresses a sound reason for the change Kirchhoff notes. Certainly from *Sigurd* onwards, Morris’s over-riding concern seems to be with the ways in which admirable and stable social structures might best be brought into being, as attested to by his lectures as well as his prose romances.

love story justice. In fact, though, that is exactly the genre he selects, although subverting the epic by refusing to favour one history, or one memory, over another.

At a period when the dominant literary form was the realist novel, Morris clearly believed only the epic would enable him to convey his empathy for the “strange imagination” he found in Icelandic sagas.<sup>45</sup> In *Imagination and Power: A Study of Poetry on Public Themes*, Thomas R. Edwards “discusses the ‘complicated self-awareness’ that epic induces. ‘It associates us gratifyingly with past greatness, with heroes who are *our* heroes; yet it also reminds us soberingly that it all is past, that we are less than our heritage’” (qtd. in Tucker 2008 3n5). Further, the epic “allows us an imaginative association with greatness even as it makes us recognize that we are ordinary men – and it allows us some comfort in this rueful understanding” (qtd. in Tucker 3n5). Tucker goes on to suggest that “the ambivalence that epic prompted in Romantic and Victorian minds [i]s a syndrome in which we still participate” (2008 3). I think the dilemma Tucker articulates was already apparent to Morris at the time he was writing *Sigurd*, hence his initial dismissal, but final choice, of the epic form for Sigurd.

Of the epic form, Tucker argues that we “bring to the very idea of epic a rash of doubts that are not only similar to those presented in the nineteenth century but continuous with them, for reasons rooted in the modernity that our moment shares with that not so very bygone time” (2008 3). Tucker’s purpose is to reclaim a literary space for the epic form, arguing that its apparent generic supersession by the novel is to be lamented, since the former offers a sort of comfort that the

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<sup>45</sup> Morris was writing to Edith Maria Store, who supplied him with vellum for his manuscripts (qtd. in Kelvin 1: 132).

latter, in its realism, does not. His goal is hampered though by a multi-faceted critical ambivalence to the epic form: “Like the Romantics and Victorians we want to belong to the sort of unified community that once embraced epic as its own; and yet, that is not what we want at all. We endorse, and we discredit, the thought that our lives acquire meaning through participation in a large, whole and absorbing history whose collective dimension has an importance that as modern individuals we both covet and mistrust” (Tucker 2008 3). The duality all this implies is identified too in Simon Dentith’s *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth Century Britain* (2006) in which he suggests that the price that had to be paid for modernity was the loss of epic’s soothing and reassuring power. Morris’s own sensibility to such conflicting feelings is evident in an earlier wish, made around the time he was working on his prose translation of the *Volsung Saga*, to compose a work around the central love story but resisting it because he couldn’t imagine any literary creation could adequately convey its human essence. Ultimately he does of course and manages, through what Tucker describes as Morris’s utter commitment to the tale itself, to create an epic that “vindicates a commonwealth of story that lives clear of any one version containing it” (Tucker 1996 374). Thus Morris’s treatment of the epic helps us, and perhaps Morris himself, make sense of the unavoidability of “grief, death, and the evil day ... by shaping pain into meaning” (Tucker 1996 375).

While Morris was composing *Sigurd* a “new spirit [was] animating historical study” (Grennan 7), a spirit which was beginning to have an impact on daily life, as manifested in a preference for the past over present times: “In the nineteenth century, with the development of historical studies ... the Present ... dwindled in the contemplation of the Past” (Grennan 1). This interest in the past can be traced

to what amounts to an identity crisis in the collective Victorian psyche, which Denis Balch says was thought to stem from “an increasing alienation of individuals from ‘community structures’” to the extent that it “represented a major crisis in nineteenth-century British life” (1978 91). Evidence for such a rupture lies in claims on the one hand for the supremacy of the legacy of the Roman world, and on the other for the values of the Norse world (Grennan 7). Richard Frith notes that Andrew Wawn’s *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain* (2000) demonstrated that interest in the old north “was widespread, and ... an important element of the many-sided phenomenon that is the Medieval Revival” (Frith 117).<sup>46</sup> One side of that phenomenon is revealed in Morris’s concern for what the future held for humanity if things continued in the sorry state he believed to obtain in his own time. In effect, Grennan asserts, Morris and his contemporaries believed “History must be rewritten” (7) since “the inevitability of a new world haunt[ed] rather than sustain[ed] them ... their intuitions concerning the needs of the future driv[ing] them to seek the answers in the past” (6-7). (While Morris may have wished to rewrite history at some stage, I think *Sigurd* gives the lie to that, since the saga ends with the destruction of all social orders within it.) Further complicating these concerns was the preference of some parts of society for what was thought to be a more organic quality to life, in opposition to the mechanical element brought in with the industrial revolution, a split that Grennan describes as the conflict between: “the concept of the ‘machine of the universe’ ... challenged by the symbol of the Life-Tree Igdrasil” (Grennan 1).

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<sup>46</sup> The complexity of the phenomenon is evident in Margaret Clunies Ross’s review which seems to suggest that Wawn’s *The Vikings and the Victorians* as “a pioneer work of medievalism” links the Victorians’ love of the North’s values with those that upheld Empire (2001).

For Morris, the Norse world was far more attractive than the Roman, which he believed to have been the “great curse of the ancient world” (Oberg 102-3).<sup>47</sup> Morris was especially drawn to the world of the Icelanders, whose social structures he had come to know and admire even as early as his university days in the late 1850s (Grennan 52). He was attracted particularly to the stoicism and courage portrayed in the sagas, qualities which he believed offered a great “corrective to the maundering side of medievalism” (Kelvin 2: 229). May Morris affirms Morris’s love for the sagas, which he as “poet and craftsman so keenly appreciated ... [finding its] terse Norse phrase, bare of decoration ... more effective for purposes of dramatic story-telling” (*Sigurd* vi). It is as if the sagas, especially the romance and love relations portrayed in them, suggested to him a new kind of sensibility, one that would later help him reshape his own life practically, as he reshaped the *Sigurd* poetically. Romance is central to the poem, and of romance Morris says:

As for romance, what does romance mean? I have heard people miscalled for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present. (qtd. in Thompson 809)

Morris’s turn to the sagas – in contrast, say, to his earlier use of Greek myths in *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, where the latter is dominated by the sentiment of “the idle singer of an empty day”, and the hero of the former continuously “looks backward” (85) – seems to attest to his belief in history as a transformative power, since the saga characters are future oriented (Oberg 86). Unhappy as he was with the state of his own society, the sagas

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<sup>47</sup> All references to Oberg refer to Charlotte Oberg, unless otherwise stated.

provided him with “a means of putting into practice those [socialist] ideals he had come to believe in” (Oberg 93). The attraction of the sagas must also have stemmed partly from the fact that they were part of the past, and therefore able to be coherently re-shaped, since “the past had also the attraction of offering a society which could be inspected and evaluated as a whole ... [and which] seemed to contain more real humanity, in which better personal relations were possible than in the age of the ‘cash nexus’” (Chapman 13).

*Sigurd* is a love story, but one that is enmeshed and interwoven with other complex elements such as power, trickery, witchcraft, foresight, dynastic control, treasure, honour, bravery and courage, and with the role individuals must play to ensure greater social harmony, specifically those who have the power to influence the social order. Memory and history are central to the unfolding and ultimate destruction of, the love between Sigurd and Brynhild, and there are as well numerous instances where the future is foretold, such “precise foreknowledge of events” (Ellison 173-74) a feature already present in the sagas. Some examples of such foreknowledge include when King Elf prophesies, at Regin’s request, the manner of his death; when Gripir reveals to Sigurd the whole of his life from birth to death; when Brynhild foretells the future of her rival, Gudrun, by interpreting her dream, and most spectacularly, when she weaves Sigurd’s life story into a piece of golden fabric. These instances beg the question why, with such foreknowledge, there is no attempt to avoid, in the case of Regin for example, his death at the hands of Sigurd; I think this might represent the fluctuating boundaries between the influence individuals have in shaping their world and the collective social forces over which they have little or no influence, as well as the vagaries of fate.

Of central importance too are the instances where memory is manipulated, for example in Regin's attempts to manipulate Sigurd's noble qualities for less than noble ends; and through the more malevolent shape-shifting brought on by the hubristic Queen Grimhild's poisoned potions. Grimhild, later Sigurd's mother-in-law, along with Regin, Sigurd's foster father, are two secondary but important contrasting characters – in a poem whose structure depends on contrasts. My contention is that they serve as ciphers for history and memory in Morris's redaction of the saga, helping him probe the place of history in shaping a better present, and at the same time serving as a warning of sorts against our very human desire to know what the future holds. Through Regin first and then later Grimhild, Morris begins to question a purely linear conception of history, as well as of time as a purely linear process, and the manner in which these subsume the human condition through limitations that are imposed rather than natural. In the process I hope to show that Morris's treatment of memory and history in *Sigurd* is intended to help articulate a new subjectivity, a new ontological awareness.

Margaret Grennan asserts that the Morris who was a “shaper’ of poems” was the same William Morris who tried to be the “shaper’ of a new society” (49). Foregrounding the shape-changing scenes in the *Sigurd* will help in understanding Morris's intention in this regard, since these scenes “point to changes in the social order ... to Ragnarok ... the final world convulsion” which will bring about the destruction of the old and regenerate a new and transformed world, when “all the dross will be consumed and the gold refined” (Oberg 89). Important here Oberg says is the “Norse concept of man's dual nature”, the spirit or soul, and the physical body (88), and to note, moreover, that Sigurd is the only one who is connected to all known realms – to the underworld, through Regin, the material



world as hero and man, and to the spiritual or heavenly world as one of the blessed Volsung race and a favourite of Odin. Sigurd's subjective insights are part of his heroic character. Thus while Sigurd's eventual death is tragic on a human scale, it "becomes an emblem of cosmic unity" (90). The change in understanding and belief Morris wanted to generate must have stemmed in part from the "subtle yet profound and basic difference in ontological outlook ..." (Oberg 86) he found in the saga material, and which he "has conveyed this in his characterisations" (86). Thompson also suggests that Morris had had much earlier a 'sense of a whole alternative way of life', stemming from his passionate response to his first sight of medieval Rouen cathedral, whose arches "represented aspiration fulfilled" (808).

In contrast to the interiority and psychological intensity of the "Guenevere" – with its over-arching focus on the psyche and personal qualities of the individual, embroiled in defending a guilt-ridden love, revealed largely through Guenevere's memory of that love – the perspective in *Sigurd* shifts to encompass a much wider span of memory. This shift is achieved in large part through the overall structure of the poem, the shape of which functions too as an element in the tale, along with the parallel episodes and recurring images that shape the poem. It will help therefore to outline the structure, and some of the episodes and images, before discussing the poem itself.

*Sigurd* is divided into four books or sections entitled, 'Sigmund', 'Regin', 'Brynhild', and 'Gudrun'. That Morris names one of the four after Regin, while Sigurd's name, in contrast, appears only in the subtitles, introduces immediately a question, less about the role of Sigurd as hero (since his name appears in many of the subtitles within each book) than about the heroic generally. The structure has

clearly influenced interpretations of the work since one scholar suggests there is “no central event or single figure to unify the saga” (Kirchhoff 101), while another believes the first book should have been excluded entirely (Mackail 1: 331). It is my contention that the structure is part of Morris’s intention to show how patterns of behaviour are revealed only over time, and understanding how these patterns evolve is necessary to instigating any change. This view is supported by Oberg (87) as well as Boos, who notes that although the four books are self-contained “their interrelations of scene, plot, and motif reverberate with ironic, iconic, and prophetic significance” (Boos 2000 23). Important in establishing the idea of cycles and patterns of behaviour are the “parallel episodes ... [and] settings ... [that] connect the four separate books” (Silver 1982 113). These parallel episodes include, for example, the vengeful deaths which befall so many of the characters, King Volsung, Siggeir, Signy and Sigmund in Book I, Regin in Book II, Sigurd and Brynhild in Book III, and Gudrun and all of the Niblung clan in Book IV, in a final conflagration that destroys Gudrun’s second husband, the avaricious King Atli, bringing to an end all of the social orders in this saga world.<sup>48</sup> The codes of honour broken throughout the four books are structural parts of the patterns in the saga, but are also symbolic of the greater social collapse. The first oath broken is prompted by King Siggeir’s humiliation at the hands of Sigmund, who is able to draw the sword from the Branstock tree, while Siggeir is unable to budge it. His humiliation leads him to ambush the Volsung family of his wife Signy, leading in turn to Signy’s torching of their marital home; this is followed by the Niblungs breaking their blood brother bond

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<sup>48</sup> See Cumming for a full discussion of the structural features of *Sigurd*, as well as “Morris’ use of book divisions and of repeated patterns of action” (404).

with Sigurd, stemming from their greed for his elf gold; and finally, there is the double treachery of Gudrun, who first goads King Atli (her second and hated husband) into ambushing her own Niblung brothers to avenge their ambush and murder of her first husband Sigurd. Gudrun's final act is to torch Atli's home with him in it. Broken codes of honour, combined with the "repetition of the empty hall image build into a powerful symbol" of destruction, through which it becomes apparent that pure "self interest has important social consequences" namely, "the collapse of the social order" (Balch 96). When Gudrun curses Gunnar for Sigurd's death with the words "Be this land as waste as the troth plight that the lips of fools have sworn" (*Sigurd* 237) Morris seems to attach "honour to place as well as person", while social order is symbolized by architectural structures as "the poet's lament employs the empty hall as an image of social ruin" (Balch 95-98).<sup>49</sup> The title of the work itself, suggests Herbert Tucker, if read as poetry, "discloses the *Fall* that is already humming in *Volsung's* first syllable, while a vowel rhyme of *Sigurd* with *Niblungs* suggests something of the analogical design that will frame the hero's life (books 2 and 3) with its fraught Volsung foretale (book I) and catastrophic Niblung sequel (book 4). It is as if merely to know the story by name is to be involved in the spell of its unfolding" (2008 515).

Much of the story unfolds through the actions of Regin and Grimhild, two characters who seem at first glance to be less important than the two sets of lovers around whom the story revolves. Considering, however, the impact they exert on both memory and history and the ways in which they influence the lives not only

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<sup>49</sup> It is pertinent that soon after Sigurd Morris starts a new movement, SPAB, (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings). Morris is clearly displaying his debt to Ruskin here, and his idea that a society can be understood through its architecture, and that architectural landscape should offer comfort for the loss of the changed landscape attendant on the industrial revolution.

of Sigurd and Brynhild, but all of the social orders in which they participate, it becomes clear their manipulative behaviour, their point of view, brings on the destruction of the social structures they attempt to control, and thus they are central to the destructive patterns of memory and love relationships which are the subject of the legend and of Morris's poem.

Morris's Regin is a more important, more complex and more appealing character than he is in Snorri Sturluson's version in the *Prose Edda*, where Regin appears in only four relatively short paragraphs (110-113). He is mentioned in the first paragraph as the son of the powerful Reidmar, who has just demanded gold from the gods for their killing of his son Otter; in the second Regin helps his brother Fafnir kill their father for the gold and, when Regin asks for his share, he is told by Fafnir to go away or else face the same fate as their father; in the third paragraph Regin becomes smithy to King Hjalprek, adopts Sigurd as his foster son, forges a sword for Sigurd and then eggs him on to kill Fafnir for the gold; and finally, in the fourth, he is killed by Sigurd, who has already received a supernatural warning from the birds whose language he can now understand. Snorri's brevity is transformed by Morris's allowing Regin some of the most haunting verses in the poem, forcing a reconsideration of the story from a perspective other than that of the heroic. It must be granted that Snorri is just as economical in relaying the story of Sigurd and Brynhild, and indeed other characters in the saga, but Regin, as an avaricious "contriver of evil" elicits little sympathy in Snorri. He thus represents an unusual character for Morris to focus on, and from this perspective, Regin, 'Master of Masters', is one of the most troubling and thought-provoking characters in *Sigurd*. As a smithy and talented craftsman, and as part of a very long-lived race, Regin suggests both the idea of

the shaping or forging of history, since his life spans generations and thus also memory. Regin is also a seer but despite his ability to see the future, he still loses love, loses fame, loses wealth, and most of all, is not himself remembered by the humans who have benefited so much from his skills. It is through Regin first, and his relationship with Sigurd, that questions and doubts begin to surface about power, whether in the shape of a hero, of wealth, gold, or wisdom, and the role power plays in shaping the human psyche, and more specifically, the role memory plays as a counter balance to that power.

There is some ambiguity as to whether Regin is a dwarf or a man, or even either of these. Morris initially describes him as “a certain man, beardless and low of stature” (*Sigurd* 62), as does Snorri, who also states that Regin’s father, Reidmar, is a farmer, “a powerful man with much skill in magic” (110). Yet, when Morris’s Regin begins to tell his story to Sigurd, he says he comes “of the Dwarfs departed” (75). I think there is the suggestion that Regin represents history as being irrevocably past, and yet, there in the present. The downfall of Regin’s race came with the arrival of “Gods amongst us” (84), and the seeds of change accompanying their arrival ultimately led to destruction rather than growth. Kirchhoff describes the Dwarfs as aborigines who had at one time been the dominant race, until the coming of the Gods, who “undermined the power of the dwarves by teaching them the ‘hope and fear’ of imaginative perception” (103). This new perception changed their lives, as, unhappy “with their lot and tormented by their new-found sense of guilt ... the dwarves developed the arts of civilisation, but at length were corrupted by their greed for wealth and power” (Kirchhoff 103). For this reason Kirchhoff sees “lying behind the events of the poem ... a mythic representation of Morris’s own ambivalence toward historical

progress” (104). Equally, *Sigurd* may reflect Morris’s desire to explicate the formative patterns shaping life in order to effect change, rather than merely to record history’s progress. The many ways in which the past is remembered within the poem, through songs, weaving, story-telling, indicate Morris’s belief that history is plural, and because history in the past has usually told the story of the victor, Regin’s sense of loss is representative of all those who have had their roots displaced as the “losers” in the battle of history and for whom “collective memories then become so much more important” (Burke 1989 106).

Regin regrets the passing of a simpler life, which had disappeared once the new race of Gods came on the earth. In their earlier state, untroubled by imagination, “the dwarves [could] live happy but uninspired lives. With it, they are destroyed by the boundlessness of their desire and the torments of their anxiety over things to come” (Kirchhoff 104). Regin’s regret over this is apparent in his impassioned reflections on the past, as he relates his history to Sigurd:

And how were we worse than the Gods, though maybe we lived  
not as long?

Yet no weight of memory maimed us, nor aught we knew of wrong;

What felt our souls of shaming, what knew our hearts of love?

We did and undid at pleasure, and repented nought thereof. (75)

As a dwarf Regin is doubly challenged, then, not only by the fact of being part of a previously powerful, but now usurped race, but also – thanks to their newly-acquired faculty – the terrible weight of a memory that “maims”. The word “maim”, attached to memory, is loaded with meaning, leaving us with the sense that Regin is trapped, as well as debilitated by a memory that not only regrets an innocent and now lost past, but, with his ability to see, and fear, the future – when

he knows he will die at the hand of Sigurd – there can be no hope left in Regin’s life. He is torn too, or scarred, by the memory of his father’s defiant words to the gods, which Regin recalls when he tells Sigurd about his past:

It was better in times past over, when we prayed for nought at all,  
When no love taught us beseeching, and we had no troth to recall. (80)

Through Regin, Morris highlights how closely woven together are memory and the past, pain and love. For Regin, his pain stems from the loss of a simpler past – perhaps a distant past he had never experienced – when hearts that knew nothing of love meant the dwarves led pleasurable lives, without guilt and without shame. Morris’s pain goes much deeper, as he yearns for a past in which love had not yet turned into a mere “semblance” of itself, into a love “that fails of the heart’s desire”, into the sort of love that weighs down the spirit with searing pain and loss, the sort of love too heart-breaking to acknowledge in reality, and from which only poetry or art offers any release. Thus Morris gives some of the most moving words in the poem to Regin, when he relates the dubious inheritance bestowed on him by his father, Reidmar, “a covetous man and a king”:

And to me the least and the youngest, what gift for the slaying of ease? Save  
the grief that remembers the past, and the fear that the future sees; And the  
hammer and fashioning-iron, and the living coal of fire;  
And the craft that createth a semblance, and fails of the heart’s desire;  
And the toil that each dawning quickens, and the task that is never done;  
And the heart that will longeth ever, nor will look to the deed that is won.  
(75)

There is a world of irony and heartache in the description of something that brings the “slaying of ease” as a gift, an irony compounded many times by the hurt and

depths of despair suggested by the following line – “the grief that remembers the past, and the fear that the future sees”. As Burke says, “victors can afford to forget, while the losers of battles are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been” (1989 106). This is especially true since Regin knows his fate, and thus “the craft that createth a semblance, and fails of the heart’s desire” suggests a mind and soul being forced, or forcing itself, to face a known and dreaded future, even as it must cope with the burden of a past filled with grief, feelings that take on greater depth if they are seen in light of Morris’s own troubled life. As Regin relates his past to Sigurd, “Yea we were exceeding mighty – bear with me yet my son; for whiles can I scarcely think it that our days are wholly done” (75) he echoes the earlier words of Sigurd’s own father, Sigmund, whose great sorrow was to die before his son was born. His dying words “And the joy for his days that shall be hath pierced my heart to the root” (55), similarly call up heart-wrenching emotions associated with memories of the past on the one hand, and, since Sigmund is dying, the fear and dread that must be associated with that knowledge. At the same time he must bear the agony that he will never see his son, to all of which, according to his Volsung code of ethics, he must submit unflinchingly. Authorial intention or not, it is difficult not to feel the intense personal pain coming through these words; Morris lost his own father at a crucial stage in his life, while still only thirteen years old. The words he gives Regin, then, suggest a double loss, of a parent he never had enough time with, and with whom he has no hope of being reconciled, in this life at least, and of the apparent loss of the love of his wife. Such a loss is hard fully to contemplate, especially knowing that there can never be any more memory or history created around that relationship, and especially considering the elusiveness of that other



most crucial love, of a soul mate with whom to share one's life.

As Sigurd's foster father, Regin is a complex figure, since although he is subservient to men, yet his great wisdom and skills mean he is appointed as foster father to a future king and hero, who will be better than all other men before him (*Sigurd* 67). Regin is admonished to ensure he teaches Sigurd everything he knows, the extent of which "three men's lives thrice over thy wisdom might not learn" (*Sigurd* 67). Three men's lives thrice over, based on a life span of seventy years, amounts to approximately six hundred years, and thus takes us back to the Middle Ages. Morris's idealized vision of this age is reflected in the things that Regin teaches Sigurd, such as "smithying ... carving runes ... tongues of many countries ... soft speech for men's delight ... the dealing with the harp strings ... winding ways of song ..." (68), in essence, the literary, artistic and linguistic memory markers of the past. So while Sigurd is the hero, all the understanding, knowledge, diplomacy and training he needs to make him fit for this role in fact comes from Regin's teaching; in contrast, the 'skill' of murder and battle comes from the world of men, whose ignorance of the past six hundred years means they have only this skill to teach their heroes.

One of the most striking and concrete heroic images in the book of Regin is the reforging of Sigmund's sword. Sigurd asks Regin for a gift, and Regin says movingly there is nothing Sigurd might ask for that Regin would not get for him: "The world might be wide indeed / If my hand may not reach across it for aught thine heart may need" (90). Sigurd says he wishes for a sword, and Regin, after two failed attempts, finally forges together the broken shards of Sigurd's father's sword, the shards which Hiordis, Sigurd's mother, had collected from the battlefield on which Sigmund died. The reforging of the sword is thus both a

symbolic and a material link between past and present – Sigmund has held the sword in the past, and his son now holds it in his hands. Both men are linked through the sword to Regin since it was he who originally made the sword for Sigmund, as Regin reveals:

But Regin cried to his harps strings: Before the days of men  
I smithied the Wrath of Sigurd, and now is it smithied again;  
And my hand alone hath done it, and my heart alone hath dared  
To bid that man to the mountain, and behold his glory bared. (95)

Bound up in the sword as a material object is Sigurd's only connection with his past, as well as the knowledge we are given that Regin is fated to die by Sigurd's hand. Bound up in the sword, too, are other images of the destruction it might wreak:

Then Sigurd saw it lying on the ashes slaked and pale,  
Like the sun and the lightning mingled mid the even's cloudy bale,  
For ruddy and great were the hilts, and the edges fine and wan,  
And all adown to the blood-point a very flame there ran  
That swallowed the runes of wisdom wherewith its sides were scored. (95)

The idea of the flame causing the disappearance of wisdom harks back, through the death the sword will inflict, to the fact that men are only able to teach their sons the skill of battle. It harks back also to an earlier image, to when Regin's brother Fafnir, in the semblance of a serpent, sits atop the great treasure of gold, not sharing either it or his great wisdom with the human race, thus rendering both useless.

Part of Regin's fostering of Sigurd includes passing on the memory and history contained in story-telling about his own past, but with a dual purpose; to relate the

past as history but also to reveal its effect on him in the present, as he describes the pain he suffers at being forgotten by those very people with whom he has shared his skills and knowledge, those humans who, having learned from Regin's many skills very quickly forget where their knowledge came from. He tells how he taught the first generation skills such as reaping and sowing; then to the next generation the craft of metal-working, sailing the seas, taming horses, yoke-beasts husbandry, and the building of houses; and after that another generation came along and he taught them needlework and weaving. Finally, he teaches them, "the tales of old, and fair songs fashioned and true, and their speech grew into music, of measured time and due" (87). These "songs of measured time and due" represent the last link in their memory of Regin, hence the importance for him in telling the tale is that at least through those tales he might be remembered. Of course one can interpret Regin in many ways, but my view is that he is a pivotal character for Morris, since it becomes clear through Regin that Morris recognizes that essentially as individuals we are alone in this world, and that if we are able to come to terms with the enormity of this awareness, then we may help contribute to the social order more meaningfully and significantly. Regin challenges us to challenge our own subjectivity.

Regin has another and ulterior motive with the story telling, which is intended to goad Sigurd into an interest in the great deeds he has been born to do in the future, the first of which is to win back for Regin the treasure and great knowledge for which he and his brother Fafnir murdered their father. Thus Regin's story-telling evokes memories of the past, thereby helping Sigurd understand and fulfill his destiny, but at the same he treacherously eggs his foster-son on to commit murder for Regin's own ends, thwarting the nobility that is part

of Sigurd's destiny. In effect, Regin repeats the sins of his own father, who urged his sons to "be evil and wise, that his will through them might be wrought" (75). Sigurd, though, in maturity, will break the pattern of revenge and thus act as a regenerative rather than cyclically destructive force.

Regin's selfishness is redeemed by his love for his foster son and, recognizing his own duplicity, Regin warns Sigurd to "trust not thy life in my hands in the day when most I seem, Like the Dwarfs that are long departed, and most of my kindred I dream" (75) a compassionate gesture (because he knows his own fate is sealed) from foster-father to son. Kirchhoff wonders whether Regin's duality stems from the gift of imaginative perception bestowed on the dwarves by the gods, a dubious gift that compels a "lust for power [that] has its origin in the 'hope and fear' of the future". While "Regin may be a self deceiver ... he seems genuinely to believe that the power he craves is power to undo the harm the gods have wrought" (Kirchhoff 104). This is so because if Regin does get his hands on the treasure his intention is

To thaw his winter away and the fruitful tide to bring.

It shall grow, it shall grow into summer, and I shall be he that wrought,

And my deeds shall be remembered, and my name that once was nought;

Yea I shall be Frey, and Thor, and Freyia, and Bragi in one:

Yea the God of all that is, – and no deed in the wide world done,

But the deed that my heart would fashion: and the songs of the freed from  
the yoke

Shall bear to my house in the heavens the love and the longing of folk.

And there shall be no more dying, and the sea shall be as the land

And the world forever and ever shall be young beneath my hand. (88-89)

Regin desires power then, but it is the power to do good, to introduce freedom, and to help 'bear' both the love and the longing of humanity. While we may not remember Regin in the dynastic conflagrations that ruin the saga world, we will remember that it was Regin, with his desire to remember the past, who fostered Sigurd, and helped make him the hero he became, a hero who ensured the cycle of vengeance was broken.

Regin's balancing counterpart is clearly Grimhild, and her dynastic scheming and poisonous potions leave little doubt that we are not intended to feel sympathy for her machinations, since her hubristic nature leads her to believe she is more powerful than the gods, and therefore can control fate (166-67). Where Regin warns Sigurd to be wary of him, Grimhild in contrast deceives Sigurd with false words that hide her calculating nature. *Sigurd* is filled with images related to shape-changing, changes which not only reveal the qualities and desires of the characters, but also represent the conflicting forces of good and evil that shape the story, whether by design or fate. The glory and honour of the Volsung name, for example, with which the poem opens, are surely corrupted when the only way they can be retained is through the incestuous relationship between Signy and her brother Sigmund in the first book, after she has swapped appearances with a beautiful witch. Sigurd's heroic stature seems somewhat dimmed, too, as Oberg points out, once he has been tricked into swallowing Grimhild's potion, which causes him to forget he is betrothed to Brynhild and is therefore free to marry Gudrun. Gunnar's weakness and vanity are revealed when he agrees to swap shapes with Sigurd so that he might win Brynhild as Gunnar's bride, since Gunnar is not heroic enough to get through the ring of fire surrounding Brynhild, a feat Sigurd has already accomplished.

A less obvious facet of the shape shifting, but of equal importance to the idea of patterns of behaviour, and subjectivity, lies in the unpredictability of the protagonists' responses once they become aware that they have been fooled. Brynhild's horror and utter dismay when she discovers Sigurd's apparent duplicity are encapsulated in her response to his offer to leave Gudrun, a gesture she refuses with the words: "I will not wed thee, Sigurd, nor any man alive" (224) transmutes horrifyingly quickly into feelings that are both vicious and vengeful, based on her own inviolable code of honour, but stemming ever more from the depth of her love for Sigurd. While we surely feel sympathy for Brynhild, it still remains that both Sigurd and Gunnar were tricked in the first place by Grimhild's potion. Her words as she hands them the potion are specific and controlling – she will give them the power of shape-changing only so long as it takes to win over Brynhild, specifically, a day, a night, and a morning:

Be wise and mighty, O Kings, and look in mine heart and behold  
 The craft that prevaieth o'er semblance, and the treasured wisdom of old!  
 I hallow you thus for the day, and I hallow you thus for the night,  
 And I hallow you thus for the dawning with my fathers' hidden might.  
 Go now, for ye bear my will while I sit in the hall and spin;  
 And tonight shall be the weaving, and tomorn the web shall ye win. (185)

As Ennis notes, "shape-changing is unnatural" and there is something ominously portentous in Grimhild's imagining that she has the power to disturb and upset "the balance of nature". Ennis presents an argument for Grimhild's spinning as being akin to witchcraft, which "occurs first at the point at which she is preparing the spell to enable Gunnar and Sigurd to deceive Brynhild" (16) as a reminder of "the age-old association of spinning and witchcraft", and suggests that Morris

intends both connotations to be understood as “metaphors for deception” (17) although this cannot refer to Brynhild’s weaving, which is described in terms of gold and glowing light. While it could be argued that Grimhild is working for her family, she is in fact working for dynastic control of all the social orders of the saga world, as evidenced by her refusal to listen, after Sigurd’s death, to Gudrun’s pleas not to be married off to Atli. Grimhild’s folly is to miss in Gudrun’s response the “deadly anger to her brow unknitted rise” (251) or “the hate in her soul swift-growing or the rage of her misery” (252). Instead, Grimhild, thinking only of the mighty Niblung name, about to be married literally to Atli’s wealth, is prepared to sacrifice her daughter’s happiness:

And she Cried out blind with anger: “Though all we die on one day,  
 Though we live for ever in sorrow, yet shalt thou be given away  
 To Atli the King of the mighty, high lord of the Eastland gold:  
 Drink now, that my love and my wisdom may thaw  
 thine heart grown cold;  
 And take those great gifts of our giving, the cities long builded for thee,  
 The wine-burgs digged for thy pleasure, the fateful wealthy lea,  
 The darkling woods of the deer, the courts of mighty lords,  
 The hosts of men war-shielded, the groves of fallow swords!” (252)

Gudrun’s apparent final acceptance belies her inner feelings, and Grimhild is oblivious to the destructive force she has set in motion with her shape-changing.

Evidence that Grimhild’s actions may contain the seeds of her own destruction is apparent earlier in Book II, when Gudrun seeks advice about her dreams but chooses not to go to her mother since: “Wise too is my mother Grimhild, but I fear her guileful mood, Lest she love me overmuch, and fashion all dreams to ill”

(133). It is a cruel irony, however, that she turns to Brynhild for advice, linking her, Brynhild and Sigurd in a triangular relationship that seems pre-destined. But with Gudrun's wariness of her mother's guileful mood she knows that she cannot depend on her mother's interpretation of the dream. Certainly, when Grimhild finally does meet Sigurd, who she deems "mighty of men, and a king for the queen-folk meet", (meaning Gudrun) and later gives him the poisoned potion which will make him fall in love with Gudrun, there is a predatory and repellant quality to her realisation "that her will had abased the valiant, and filled the faithful with lies" (166), as well as an arrogance that allows her to elevate her self belief to the extent that she feels "her hand a wonder of wonders to withstand the deeds of Fate" (166). Oberg suggests Sigurd's heroic demeanour seems to be lessened once he has drunk the potion, but this is obvious only to the reader, since if we compare his oath to Gudrun on their marriage – "I will wade the flood and the fire, and the waste of war forlorn, To look on the Niblung dwelling, and the house where thou wert born" – he offers, under the potion's spell, almost verbatim the oath he earlier made to Brynhild, suggesting his honesty and nobility are to some extent intact (174).

The implacable jealousy thrown up between Brynhild and Gudrun as the fallout of Grimhild's potion starts to foment, seems to dim the golden light that earlier shone on Sigurd and Brynhild, a metaphor for "blighting peoples' lives" (Ennis 18). Both women love Sigurd passionately, and both, in different ways, have been cheated of his love; Brynhild because she is fooled into marrying Gunnar, and Gudrun because she becomes Sigurd's bride only by default. Feelings of love are then reshaped into a seething jealousy between the two women, leading ultimately to Sigurd's death in an awful cycle of vengeance and



revenge. The cycle of death is precipitated by the possession each takes of the gold ring, which was stolen along with the rest of the elf Andvari's treasure, by the god Loki, and which was taken from Loki in turn by Reidmar, Regin's father. Before handing his treasure over, Andvari curses the gold saying

But for men a curse thou bearest: entangled in my gold,  
 Amid my woe abideth another woe untold.  
 Two brethren and a father, eight kings my grief shall slay;  
 And the hearts of queens shall be broken, and their eyes  
 shall loathe the day" (83).

The ring is "the Ransom's utmost grain; / For it shone on the midmost gold-heap like the first star set in the sky" (118) and is the same ring that Sigurd "wins from Fafnir, gives ... to Brynhild, later (while disguised as Gunnar) receives ... again from Brynhild, and finally gives ... to Gudrun" (Balch 1978 96). Gudrun, insecure and vulnerable in the face of Brynhild's great beauty, wisdom and composure, flashes the ring before Brynhild's eyes, taunting her with the proof that her husband Gunnar was not the one who rode through the fire to win her hand. Thereafter, "Gunnar's need to avenge his wife's insult brings to the surface longings that he has scarcely dared admit to himself" (Balch 1978 96), namely the desire to steal the elf treasure won by Sigurd. "Thus" says Balch "are the themes of love and greed entwined in the central love complication of the poem" (96).

Grimhild's witchcraft helps empty Sigurd's mind of any thought of Brynhild – who until then had been constantly at its forefront – ignoring the almost cosmic love they have for each other, so that Grimhild can pursue her own dynastic goals. Grimhild is first introduced in *Sigurd* in connection with her husband, King Giuki, as the "queen with the glittering eyes" (156), "a possible ... association with the

eyes of snakes, that glitter as they seize their prey” Ennis asserts (14). She also notes that Morris’s earlier translation of the *Volsunga Saga* opens with ‘but’: “But Giuki had married Grimhild the Wise-wife” (Ennis 13), suggesting that “everything is going well for Giuki’s family, except for the fact that he has married Grimhild” (13). In *Sigurd* Morris gives Grimhild a role of “vital importance ... [one] only hinted at in the *Volsunga Saga*” (Ennis 13). When Grimhild is teaching her son Gunnar and Sigurd how to take on each other’s appearance in order to fool Brynhild into accepting Gunnar as a husband, she utters the words “the craft that prevaleth over semblance and the treasured wisdom of old” (185), lending the word ‘craft’ an ominous sense, as in witchcraft, in contrast to the appeal of the crafts associated with Regin.

It is telling that Gunnar, like Gudrun, does not fully trust his mother, as is evident when he fails to cross the fire to reach Brynhild, and, feeling shamed, demands angrily, not knowing who to trust

Who mocketh the King of the Niblungs in the desert land forlorn?

Is it thou, O Sigurd the Stranger? Is it thou, or younger-born?

Dost thou laugh in the hall, O Mother? dost thou spin, and laugh at the tale

That has drawn thy son and thine eldest to the sword and

the blaze of the bale? (187)

Gunnar reveals here his suspicion, and perhaps jealousy too, of Sigurd, as well as a suspicion about his mother’s real intent in the shape shifting, indicating that he too cannot trust her. Sigurd, in contrast, is stoic, angrily answering Gunnar that he will help him achieve what they have set out to do, even though Sigurd now too seems aware that the evil Grimhild’s machinations have brought them here:

Nay strengthen thine hand for the work, for the gift that

thy manhood awaits,  
 For I give thee a gift, O Niblung, that shall overload the Fates;  
 And how may a King sustain it? But forbear with the dark to strive;  
 For thy mother spinneth and worketh, and her craft is awake and alive.

(187)

Finally, in the fourth book, Grimhild, whose devious and manipulative role as shape shifter has visited emotional chaos and physical devastation on the lives of the four lovers, ends up bringing about not only the destruction of her entire family, but a total collapse of societies that stretch from the mountainous home of the Niblungs, right back to the golden candle-lit hall of the Volsungs with which the story opened.

Images of gold are used throughout the poem in many contexts and with different associations, depending on whom and with what it is associated. Sigurd and Brynhild are described in terms of radiant colour and sparkling light this golden quality being dimmed only when they come in contact with Grimhild, quite literally, when she blots the sun out as she moves between them, leaving the hearts of those around them suffering a feeling of unexplained dread “And men look round and shudder, so Grimhild came between, / The silent golden Sigurd and the eyes of the mighty Queen“ (200). With her foresight Brynhild seems to know of the evil Grimhild has wrought, and her greeting is couched in words that appear to wish only good things for the Niblung clan but which in fact foretell all that Grimhild and her family will now lose as a result of her arrogant scheming:

O Mother of the Niblungs, such hap be on thine head,  
 As thy love for me, the stranger, was past the pain of words!  
 Mayst thou see thy son’s sons glorious in the meeting of the swords!

Mayst thou sleep and doubt thee nothing of the fortunes of thy race!

Mayst thou hear folk call yon high-seat the earth's most happy place! (200)

Morris is interested to show that gold can be used for good as well as evil. Andvari's gold, which Sigurd does not covet but lesser men do, becomes a curse. It curses Andvari, since his greed and love for it destroys his wisdom (Ennis 22), and hidden away as it is "behind a waterfall near a desert of dread in the uttermost part of the world [it is] gold in a negative environment" (Ennis 22), nothing worthwhile ever comes of the possibility it has for good. Dorothy Hoare's comment that "the original passionate motivations of the characters have been softened, and in their place greed and the lust for gold have been raised to be the main motivating force of the tragedy" (qtd. in Thompson 190) may refer to Grimhild but cannot be applied to the actions of Sigurd and Brynhild.

Morris's constant use of words and expressions related to story-telling, such as 'tales', 'deeds', 'fame's increase', are almost a verbal set of worry beads, as he frets over the importance of story telling, of history, to life and to art, as Kirchhoff seems to indicate when he says: "In his poetry and imaginative prose [Morris displays] an instinctive ability to submerge himself in a literary genre and work through it in such a way that its conventional themes and characters become the expression of his own deepest concerns" (Kirchhoff 165). The character of Regin is essential to this process, as Morris's exploration of the dwarf's troubled past, haunting memories, and all too human weaknesses and strengths, help charge Morris with the courage to face his own personal problems, as well as to making a broader social commitment through his socialism.

Hence, the saga ends with the cycle of destruction broken by the actions of Sigurd, and by Brynhild's refusal to corrupt their love. Morris understands in the

end that he cannot change history; after all, “Sigurd’s first independent act is to slay his plotting foster parent Regin for meddling with the drift of things” (Tucker 2008 519). He did not return to the epic form again, but his creation of *Sigurd* led him to make substantial changes in his own life after its publication. *Sigurd* effected “a synthesis in his mind between history and heroic literature, and his growing apprehension of the hero as a figure of destiny clearly out of the ordinary run of mankind” (Oberg 99). It helped him develop a plan of action to face the future, a way to reshape his own life, and commit to society in a new and more active way. For Margaret Grennan “*Sigurd* marks the end of the comparative retirement of the artist happy in his own work and the craftsman successful in the narrower field” (45). After *Sigurd* Morris proves indefatigable in devoting endless hours to the socialist movement, and to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, attending meetings, writing and presenting lectures, always seeking “ways to appeal to audiences broader and less formally-educated than the readers of the *Fortnightly Review* or the *Athenaeum*” (Boos 2000 31). In his literary work after *Sigurd* he seeks to address a “literate ‘popular’ audience” creating a “new aesthetic, one that might express the harmonies of a better social order, and encourage forms of affection wider than individual and familial ‘love’” (Boos 2000 31).

## *News from Nowhere*

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*News from Nowhere* was published in 1891, well over a decade after the publication of *Sigurd*, and three decades after the publication of “Guenevere”. It represents, therefore, Morris’s mature views on his ideal society, and especially of the importance of art to its creation. Written as a prose romance, and first serialized in the socialist magazine *Commonweal* between January and October 1890, *News from Nowhere*<sup>50</sup> is a rich textual tapestry depicting Morris’s fullest exploration of the ways in which memory and history converge to shape our understanding of our space in the world, or to use Catherine Belsey’s term, our subjectivity. Using great clarity and simplicity of style, Morris exposes, by noting their absence, social relationships that constrain; education and books that obfuscate; labour that is drudgery rather than pleasure, and despoliation of the visual landscape for profit-driven ends. He points thereby to the social changes he saw as crucial to achieving the fairer, happier and more appealing social conditions he believed should be available to all.

Morris’s views are revealed through his nineteenth century protagonist, William Guest, who travels into the future, into the egalitarian and idyllic world enjoyed by Nowherians. As Guest talks with his new friends, the conversations revolve around their memories of the past, the buildings and landscape in which those memories took place, and how those memories have helped shape their present. Guest is especially interested in how Nowherians educate their children;

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<sup>50</sup> Hereafter *Nowhere* for the text, and Nowhere for the place depicted in the work. All page references are to the 2003 Arata edition.

how the new society structures its relationships – amatory, familial, platonic, social, labour; how it manages the landscape, and, most of all, the relationship between art and labour, the social conditions on which we all draw to shape our lives. Guest comes to know all of this, though, less through question and answer sessions than through intensely experienced human relationships. The most enlightening insights come through his association with Dick the young boat rower, old Hammond, Dick’s great-grandfather, and especially with Ellen, with whom Guest connects intellectually, emotionally, and erotically, but without consummation. (While the work is clearly utopian as much as romance, my own focus limits my commentary to noting that the work’s utopianism most resembles Plato’s cave analogy, since Guest, despite his heartfelt misgivings, knows that he must return to his own world in order to share the knowledge he has gained.)

The convergences of memory and history, the imaginative reconstruction of the past – of places, people, events, landscapes – are central to this work, and I therefore revisit briefly some of the ways in which individual memory becomes the collective memory, or history, that a society draws on for its sense of identity. Collective memory is almost an oxymoron, since memory is an individual rather than collective faculty, and without the individual memory there can be no collective memory. As noted in the introduction, history and memory are both malleable and selective, and it is perhaps more important, as the cultural historian Peter Burke notes, rather than determining the difference between them, to consider the “principles of selection” guiding their shape, and “to note how they vary from group to group, place to place, and how they change over time” (1989 100). Burke asserts as well the need to be aware not only of “the modes of transmission ... and the uses [made] of memories”, but also of how these change

over time (100). Just as important, is to note “what uses [are made] of oblivion” (100). Collective memories – Burke prefers the term “social history of remembering” (100) – are affected too “by the social organisation of transmission” and he highlights five: oral traditions, written records, images, actions, and spatial (100-101).

All of these modes of transmission appear in *Nowhere*, but a particularly good example of the transmission of the past is to be found in the revolutionary song sung by the pretty young girls dancing around the maypole. At the time of its creation, one could no doubt connect it to the idea that “Men die for Memory, or one of her daughters, poetry or song” (Butler 4). But now, generations later, old Hammond suggests the song must be meaningless to them. I find this a very interesting observation since it represents both sides of the memory coin that Kansteiner describes as “actual memory” and “potential memory” (196-197). As the song becomes less relevant to Nowherian society, and more remote from the events the song commemorates, chances are it will be forgotten. According to Kansteiner’s methodology, though, if the song is recorded elsewhere, it can simply lie dormant until such time as it serves a social need by being re-remembered. I think Morris recognises the malleability, and the fallibility, of historical sources since his love for the new discipline of history is tempered by his ambivalence about it too. The prose romance format allows him to fully explore the sources of both the malleability and fallibility of history, the differences between “collective memory and written history” (Burke 98). *Nowhere* is a rich palimpsest of the social, artistic and political discourses shaping the present of Morris’s own world, at the same time as it affords prescient insights into how these may continue to shape our own. The work articulates a position



within which Morris's "politics, history, and art refused to remain isolated – [becoming] threads that formed a single web" the "clearest expression [of which] is found in his words of imagination" (Grennan 45, 48), becoming in effect what Burke describes as a "social history of remembering" (100).

*Nowhere* also therefore represents a change in Morris's use of the medieval, as he combines not only artistic and literary registers, but a historicism that is now more politically aware, and which seems to resist any chronological, linear or temporal imperatives. Dick, the waterman, for example, has the freedom to choose to absent himself from his work in order to act as Guest's guide on the journey up the Thames to Kelmscott Manor, Morris's home in real life. Frederick Kirchhoff sees this journey as one of "historical recovery, in which a central figure returns in some way to a cultural past" (Kirchhoff 2007 174). In recovering the past in this way, Kirchhoff suggests, "travel becomes a trope for history", the geographical replacing the historical, and so "time loses its power to dominate human activity" (Kirchhoff 2007 179). Nowherians' daily lives are driven instead by other rhythms, such as their own bodily desires and interests and events of the changing seasons, such as haymaking or corn harvesting. In experimenting with the utopian format in this way,<sup>51</sup> Morris disrupts the standard fictional utopianism of the period, which, according to Beaumont, "scarcely found expression in experimental literary forms" since the form relied instead on "narrative structures that reflected a view of history as a successive process" (Beaumont 2007 120). Michael Lowy (reviewing Beaumont's work) expresses the belief that *Nowhere* reveals Morris's conviction that "the utopian novel was a site of cultural struggle

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<sup>51</sup> On Morris's utopianism, Krishan Kumar states that while *Nowhere* as a place is clearly utopian, it was the revivifying nature of "medievalism, far more than dreams of the ideal city, [that] filled [Morris's] thoughts" (xii) around the time he was writing *Nowhere*. See also A. L. Morton on Morris's utopianism and Grennan on G. D. H. Cole and the guild movement of the 1920s.

within the socialist movement. His concrete utopianism ... fulfils a dialectical function ... to introduce reality into utopia and utopia into reality” (2006 not numbered.)

Throughout there is a focus on flux and change, stemming largely from the conversations the protagonist William Guest has with Nowherians, as he learns of the social and ideological differences between his own world and theirs. Language is clearly crucial to any conversation, is crucial in fact to thinking – aloud or otherwise – and especially to beginning to think differently. Guest is aware of the many contradictions between the conditions prevailing in his own society and those in Nowhere, and he seeks to understand the differences structuring the respective societies. To recall Belsey’s critical approach, any change in the social structure stems from contradictory positions (her examples drew on the status of women, and the class structure) and, more importantly, from the fact that “deliberate change” in the social structure is at least possible. Guest therefore fulfils this contradictory function in Nowhere. Since it is possible for us to change as individuals, it is possible to change society, but any change “stems from a dialectical relationship between ... individuals and the language in which their subjectivity is constructed” (66). Belsey asserts that it is because “subjectivity is is not fixed that literary texts can have an important function” (61).

It is worth noting here that Morris not only refused the Poet Laureateship on the death of Tennyson (Mackail 1: 287), but also objected to the establishment of a chair of literature at Oxford University, stating that had it been a chair of philology he might have agreed. His objection stemmed from his suspicion that “to professionalize literary study would inevitably make the writing and reading

of literature simply a set of tasks imposed by the dominant culture for its own purposes and ends” (Arata 2004 202-203). This is not to suggest that literature must always have a didactic function (although it might), still less that “literature alone could precipitate a crisis in the social formation” (Belsey 66). It does suggest, however, “that literature as one of the most persuasive uses of language may have an important influence on the ways in which people grasp themselves and their relation to the real relationships in which they live” (66). Belsey further notes that while literary texts may actually reinforce the social status quo, it is also true that “certain literary modes could be seen to challenge these concepts” (66).

The idea of power is inherent in all of Belsey’s statements, as is a concern with identifying how power is established and maintained. Whatever theoretical term is applied to the acquiring and application of power – such as hegemony, or interpellation, or discourse – there is a common purpose in the process itself, whether it be “Gramsci’s ‘hegemony’, Althusser’s ‘interpellation’ [or] Foucault’s ‘discursive practices’, since all of these concern the way power is internalised by those whom it disempowers, so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally” (Barry 177). So, while Morris wrote *Nowhere* as a response to the controlling mechanistic power shaping the utopian society espoused in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), I believe in the final analysis it transcends this initial reactive position. The overall effect and appeal of *Nowhere* seems more akin to what Edward Said describes in his work on the novel form, *Beginnings* (1975), as “a form of discovery” (82). Such a discovery has the effect of “making the familiar world appear new to us” (Barry 162), a newness which in *Nowhere* is so vastly different to our own world that it leads us to ponder the central question that Stephen Coleman believes Morris raises in the work, “how far humans can

go in re-fashioning our social behaviour. What, if any, are the limits of human nature?" (Coleman 77)

Morris's imaginary world and the subjectivities of Guest and Nowherians are mediated by memory, and by the hold the past sometimes exerts over the present, as for example with Ellen's grandfather, the old grumbler, who constantly asks Guest and the others would they not rather be living in the old days of competition and capitalism. Comments such as these reveal a resistance, or uncertainty, in some characters to the new shape of life in Nowhere, as Morris has Guest probe his new companions' understanding or awareness of the possibility of thinking anew. The old grumbler's agitation stems I think from the bodily mnemonics described by Connerton, since it appears that the patterns and habits of the old world are sedimented within the old man's body, and thus he is still to some extent trapped in old behavioural patterns because of that subjective space. Memory is seen by Morris as having the ability to project at least the idea of a new space for existence, a space which might be likened to that evocatively described by Bill Schwarz as a fourth dimension: "a fourth discrete dimension of historical time: a conception of time of the inner life, of the mnemonic self" (Schwarz 139). Constituted by memory, this dimension suggested itself to Schwarz while he was considering the expansion of the boundaries of the academic discipline of history to include recognition of, for example, feminist and post-colonialist histories. Schwarz suggests that broadening the discipline still further by including considerations of memory must similarly enrich our understanding of the human condition.<sup>52</sup> It is such a dimension as Schwarz

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<sup>52</sup> Belsey in contrast, admittedly in a different context, suggests that the isms of feminism and post-colonialism, and other isms, threaten to fragment critical practice in a negative manner, and that meaning is to

suggests that I think shapes *Nowhere*, since it too evokes a new mode of understanding, and of working and living in the world. It is a state that seems initially – for psyches attuned to the demands of limitless production and ever-advancing progress – to be one of stasis, but ultimately emerges as one of healing. As Stephen Arata argues in his critical essay “On Not Paying Attention” (2004) Morris was partly addressing in *Nowhere* “the issue of sensory overload: too many images, too much noise, way too much information, all of it too often resulting in nervous collapse, neurosis, dysfunctions of various kinds” (2004 198). Arata’s discussion reveals how “a wholly functionalist commitment to mental organisation ... was ... driven by the need to produce a certain kind of worker” (199) for whom pleasure and work could then only be diametrically opposed concepts and acts. Morris rejects wholesale the imposition of such a meagre existence. While my focus is on memory rather than attention, Arata’s essay is useful since he suggests Morris “encourages us to reimagine attention as a more dispersed and decentred phenomenon, one capable of inducing that ecstatic stupor” that relieves the mind, seeming to reinforce Schwarz’s description of a fourth dimension that might be shaped by memory.

Matthew Beaumont, in quoting Lukacs’ ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, also affirms that the mechanised nature of labour that upholds the capitalist system “breaks up the labour process and corrodes the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker” (2007 123). In such a fragmented state “the worker’s activity becomes more and more *contemplative*” leading to a state in which “time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into

an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable ‘things’”. Trapped in such ‘desiccated conditions’ the worker is unable to ‘intellectually transcend society’ (Beaumont 123). Within the interrogative space in which Morris sets his characters, he reveals how such desiccated conditions might be transcended, by introducing characters whose level of awareness of their world stretches along a continuum from simply being in the present (Annie), to a somewhat more questioning role in which present happiness and joy are marred by some indefinable wish located in past art (Clara), and finally to Ellen’s position, in which she is fully aware of the conditions of the past that have shaped her present and so is able to engage as she wishes with the future. Ellen illustrates Belsey’s claim that there is “no way of grasping the present without a knowledge of history, of the present as part of the process of history” (142), and there is no way of grasping either of these fully without an awareness of the ideological conditions from within which they are created. Such an awareness is encapsulated in the “redemptive ontology” that Matthew Beaumont states *Nowhere* proposes.

There is an interesting sleight of authorial hand in the opening chapter; the narrator says that the story was told to him by the friend of a friend, but that he is will relate it as if it happened to him. I view this as Morris’s awareness that no single ‘grand narrative’ can permanently subsume all other narratives within it. A real life analogy for this perspective is seen in the following anecdote, taken from Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Thompson is describing the relationship between the ruling class and the working class communities they were seeking to regulate, and shows how power may appear to reside in the ruling class, but in reality rests to some degree in the hands of those they rule: “Like uncomprehending travelers, the magistrates ... were at the mercy

of their informants [in the working class communities]... Here we find one solemnly passing on to the Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding the gossip which his barber had brought that morning.... And there we find a Methodist minister writing to the Duke of Portland about a Grand Association of revolutionaries ... *the story having come from a 'confidential friend' who got it from the 'leader of the Methodist Singers' ... who in turn got it from someone else"* [my emphasis] (487-488). The degrees of separation between the various interlocutors indicate both dispersal and subversion of power, even though at the same time acknowledging that power.<sup>53</sup>

Issues of power, and the need for new ways of thinking, are immediately evident in the opening pages of *Nowhere*, as Guest is introduced as having attended a loud, fractious and ultimately futile socialist meeting. Having endured the filth of the underground railway on his journey home, Guest then falls into a disgruntled sleep, regretful and angry at his inability to summon his own counter-arguments while the meeting was taking place. This introduces early on a sense that positive relationships depend on more than merely a present temporal dimension, highlighting a need for space to reflect and ponder. Upon waking the next morning, Guest is amazed, and delighted, to find himself in a transformed environment, where he quickly discovers that the polluted River Thames and surrounding landscape have been restored to pristine beauty. During the river journey that Guest takes with his new friends, they row from Morris's own home in Hammersmith to his second, Kelmscott Manor in Lechlade. The intensity and clarity of the scenery as revealed through Guest's, Ellen's and the others' relation

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<sup>53</sup> Thompson takes his anecdote from "the Fitzwilliam papers, F.44 (a), 45 (d); R. F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working-Class Movements of England, 1800-1850*, p.60."

to it, acknowledge Morris's own deep need for such a landscape. There is almost a religious quality to his belief in its goodness for the human psyche and soul as he has Guest baptise himself in the Thames at the beginning and end of his journey. As the group of friends progress on their journey, places of memory and history are made part of the story, such as their stop at Runnymede, for example, where the Magna Carta was signed. It becomes clear that Morris sees the land as providing a means of human connection. As Guest meets various members of the community, the story follows the common utopian format of contrasting the old world with the new through questions and answers (Kumar xviii), but Morris has Guest focus less on the actual differences between the two worlds than on the ways in which those differences shape relationships and daily life.

*Nowhere* advocates the forging of a reconnection between life and work, a separation between the two having been "a common response to the difficulties of industrialism" (Williams *Culture and Society* 211). For Morris, this connection is literally revivifying as his imagination and literary output act as antidotes to his feeling of alienation, and thus his medievalism becomes a transformative force as he imagines a world that is post-capitalist and post-industrialist. Guest displays this sense of alienation, but in reverse: he wishes to be part of Nowherian society, but fears his Victorian self will expose him as not being worthy of living in their world. For example, when he tries to pay Dick for ferrying him across the river, he feels gauche and ashamed when the boatman explains they no longer offer each other "dirty coins" as payment because there seems little point in it (60). Rather, their incentive for choosing the work they do is simply that they enjoy it, knowing that other members of the community do the same in other areas, such as road-digging, or weaving, or building. Nowherians' freedom to choose their work



resists, as Arata notes, a model of work in which the need to pay attention becomes ever more narrowly focused, paradoxically killing attention (Arata 2004 197) at the same time. The type of work Nowherians choose allows a state of mind that luxuriates in and connects with the physical act, purely in an aesthetic as opposed to purpose-driven manner. We are so attuned to the idea of making something in order to earn money, that it comes as a shock to read, when Guest tries to pay a young shop-keeper for the beautiful ornamental pipe she offers him, “carved out of some hard wood very elaborately, and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems” (86) that not only is no payment required, but also that he need not fear losing the pipe since whoever finds it will likely experience the same pleasure in its beauty. The idea of the exchange and enjoyment of beauty offers a stark contrast to the economy of endless production driving the Victorian market. This early incident reveals the manner in which commodity fetishism, which was perhaps partly responsible for the rupture in the Victorian psyche, has been dislodged from Nowherian memory. Here, the focus is on the aesthetic nature and satisfaction inherent in ‘useful toil’ – to use Morris’s term – rather than on meretricious and soulless production for profit. I will return to the pipe incident in the discussion on the relationship between art and labour later in this chapter.

Guest’s astonishment over the jewelled pipe incident, and we share his amazement, makes it clear that Morris understands the power of past experience to shape present understanding, behaviours, and thought processes. Such thought processes are mediated through memory, which in turn is mediated through personal history, by whatever we have had access to or been denied access to. But memory itself must be mediated through some sort of beginning – and it is that beginning point with which Morris is concerned. Seeking out and defining the

contributory processes shaping Nowherian thoughts, or beliefs, or actions, helps make it possible for Guest to free up a conceptual space that engages with the past but is not limited or constrained by it. Memory is formed from our personal experiences, the people and groups to whom we relate, the books we read, the education we receive, and our place in society. In turn, these are influenced by the dominant discourse of the day, a discourse limiting the parameters of the social framework within which memory may be constructed. But memory may be constructed too through the body, corporeally, as noted earlier. The ability to swim, for example, once mastered becomes “sedimented” within the body, and so too must gestures of submission or dominance be equally sedimented. The corporeal reminders of Erasmus’s treatise on table manners, for example, have filtered down through the centuries, resulting in the absurd mnemonic affliction that in certain circumstances still causes anxiety for those of us not sure which knife or fork to select – so many from which to choose! It seems to me that this mnemonics of the body is also integral to our ideological positioning, and I therefore consider the bodily mnemonics displayed by Nowherians. The invisibility, because of its sedimentation, of the bodily mnemonics described by Connerton makes it even more difficult – and more critical to defining a redemptive ontology – to recognise how such mnemonics may determine the ideological space we inhabit. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the ways memory and history have shaped Nowherian relationships, and on the traces of a corporeal mnemonics remaining from the past, most particularly in the figures of Clara and the old grumbler. Through Guest’s developing relationships with Nowherians, Morris probes the self-defining and group-defining dialectic between memory and history during Victorian times, as well as whether memory might be

conceived as a burden, “where it is neither commemorative nor a source of inspiration” (Hutton 143). This raises the question of whether it is possible to live a full life, if one is unable to recall and reconstruct a coherent or meaningful past. Understanding the fluctuating relationship between history and memory, between what Burke describes as “written history and collective memory” (1989 98) is crucial, then, to understanding Morris’s achievements and goals in this prose romance.

But the boundaries between memory and history are blurred. Halbwachs’s theories point to a belief that history must be scientific, objective and factual, while memory is more subjective and personal. Hutton differentiates between the two in the following way:

Memory confirms similarities between past and present. There is a magic about memory that is appealing because it conveys a sense of the past coming alive once more. History, by contrast, establishes the differences between past and present. It reconstructs the past from a critical distance and strives to convey the sense that its connections with the present are devoid of emotional commitment. (76)

In contrasting Halbwachs’s theory with his own, Hutton states that “despite his [Halbwachs’s] great insight of the relationship between history and memory, he never reflected sufficiently on their interconnections, circumspect as he was about what historians might consider their field of scholarly endeavour” (77). It seems clear from this that history and memory are very closely connected, but the connections are complex. In some ways, that complexity is reflected and explained more clearly by considering the history of historiography. Compare for example the approach to history of the early nineteenth century historian Leopold

Von Ranke, who believed history to be factual – dates, documents – with the far richer view of the *Les Annales* historians, such as Fernand Braudel, who, writing in the 1960s, believed his greatest insight as a historian did not relate to facts and documents but rather that he had attempted “to show that time moves at different speeds, and he identified three: geographical time – which moved at glacial speed; the time of social structures such as states, societies, civilisations; and individual time, or the time of events” (Schwarz 135). For Braudel, von Ranke’s approach was limited since it dealt only with the ‘surface ripples’ of events, kings and queens, as opposed to the deep history of time reflected in the great sweeps and movements of humanity, over millennia (Schwarz 136). Hutton states that the great insight of the Annales school was to ‘consider human hopes and dreams, that realm of the human imagination that deals in possibilities” (77). One historian in particular, Lucien Febvre, was especially interested in memory and “pointed to the need for understanding habits of mind as the building blocks of thought, and encouraged research to investigate the inertial power of such habits in the shaping of culture” (Hutton 77). The very term ‘collective’ though, is problematic, since any collective memory must be drawn, in fact, from the memories of the individuals who make up that collective group. While for Halbwachs history was made up of apparently scientific, concrete elements such as facts, figures, and documents, he does not account for the actual process of selection of those criteria over others, a selection which must have been carried out by individuals. The distinction between individual memory and collective memory as both stemming from and creating the idea of history, is a dynamic best described for the purpose of this thesis by Peter Burke’s definition of the process as being the “history of

social memory” (99), a term which seems more closely to reflect contemporary scholarly research in this area.

Morris’s focus on Nowherians’ and Guest’s differing memories of the past, the one distant, the other close – reveals how the process of unravelling the threads shaping the dialectic between memory and history was crucial to effecting any social change. Morris was not unusual in turning to history to solve what he believed to be the worst social ills of his age. The Victorian age generally “turned again and again to history, ancient, biblical, and European, for some answer to the pressing questions of a growing and changing world” (Grennan 23). It was in the medieval revival, however, that the concerns of the Victorians were pointed up most clearly, as seen in their “faith in the earnest search for spiritual truths in traditional forms; [their] need for beauty in the appreciation of primitives and of Gothic; [their] inner restlessness and uncertainty, never far beneath the seemingly calm surface of national complacency, in the persistent return to the past to recapture the lost responsibility of man to man. Of this last, William Morris, medievalist and revolutionary, is the fitting symbol” (Grennan 23). Grennan describes Morris’s medievalism as being understood “through [the era’s] art rather than through its political systems” (37). But by the time he wrote *Nowhere*, his medievalism had evolved into something much more politically, and historically, aware.

Much of the inspiration for the pace of life, and themes of memory and history, in *Nowhere* stem from Morris’s socialist lectures, which he began delivering in 1879, as well as from his daily life. These themes include the restructuring of social relationships, re-education of the relationship between art and labour, the abolition of class, and the forging of new radical social structures that might effect

a complete change in the relationships between men and women, and society generally. Through his lectures, Morris toiled for well over a decade to change established patterns of thought and behaviour, aware that it is only through such a re-education that the current course of history might be altered, since those most affected had not had an education that permitted them to enter such a battle. His medievalism was central to the ideas raised in *Nowhere*, which essentially was for a re-education of society, one that ‘allowed for the education of desire – or the desire to desire’ (Abensour qtd. in Thompson 798). David Latham, too, (2007b 6) states that lazy thinking led to lack of desire to action. Thus, exploring how to change habitual patterns of thought was Morris’s prime goal in writing *Nowhere*. Such changes necessarily involved a sustained attack on much of Victorian society: its class structure; industrial capitalism; the complex mix of hypocrisy and capitalism shaping sexual and marriage mores; and an education system designed to maintain the status quo. For such radical change it would not be enough simply to know that the shaping of memory and history, of collective memory, “is a complex process of cultural production and cultural consumption” but also that the contributory factors included: “the persistence of cultural traditions; the ingenuity of memory makers; the subversive interests of memory consumers” (Kansteiner 179).

The three most important characters in *Nowhere*, aside from Guest, are Dick, the waterman, Old Hammond historian and minder of the British Museum, and Ellen, the most complex and appealing of all Nowherians. Dick and old Hammond are clearly intended as representations of Morris: the younger man is skilled in some of those crafts Morris revived in real life, while old Hammond – 150 years old – is clearly intended to represent an older version of Morris, as we

discover when Guest says he feels he has seen Hammond's face before, "in a looking glass it might be" (101). As Guest moves through *Nowhere*, interacting most of all with these three, there is a sense that they represent the past, present, and future. Where then does this leave Guest? Guest's interactions with old Hammond, Dick, and Ellen, posit the idea that he may be seen as the fluctuating horizon between memory and history, between past and present, present and possible future, seen in fact as the contradiction that Belsey says is required to challenge the dominant ideology. Pertinent to this view is Marcus Waithe's comment that "central to Morris's medievalism is the contention that bravery and beauty cannot be achieved without a measure of disorder" (Waithe 147). Hutton clarifies this dialectical complexity when he describes the limits of two influential approaches to the past: the archaeological nature of Foucault's discourse, which adheres in representations (such as monuments, buildings) and rhetoric, eliding the complexity of the traditions and values that inspired them, as well as the fact that the material from which he drew his insights were the writings of an intellectual elite; and second, Vico's approach, which allows for oral tradition and memory both, but is limited to the manuscriptal evidence from which Vico gained his insights. *Nowhere* seems to traverse this divide because of the sense of wholeness with which it is imbued. Morris's achievement in bridging this gap stems in part, I believe, from his belief in the social structures of the medieval world, particularly in relation to its arts. Morris turned to the fourteenth century, however, "not with the view of staying there, but of advancing from it, on what he conceived to be the true high road, out of which the arts had long wandered" (Mackail 2: 341). In *Nowhere* it is art, interchangeable with labour, that shapes society. There is no need for incentive to labour, because its close association with

art makes it so pleasurable, in contrast to the world in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Morris abhorred Bellamy's idea of social order, as his article in *Commonweal* in June 1889 reveals:

Mr Bellamy worries himself unnecessarily in seeking, with obvious failure, some incentive to labour to replace the fear of starvation, which is at present our only one: whereas it cannot be too often repeated that the true incentive to useful and happy labour is, and must be, pleasure in the work itself" (qtd. in Mackail 2: 244).

For Morris, "[t]he true incentive to true and happy labour is, and must be, pleasure in the work itself" (qtd. in Mackail 2: 244). As far as Morris was concerned "that single sentence contains the sum of his belief in politics, in economics, in art." (Mackail 2: 244).

Morris's statement reveals the continuing influence in his life of Ruskin, although he had little time for Ruskin's belief in the need for a hierarchical (no matter how benevolent) structure to society, as evidenced in the laws by which Nowherians choose to be governed. For Morris, the only healthy society was a classless one. By freedom from class, though, was meant not simply a mindless freedom – which could result only in anarchy – but rather a freedom constrained by a real sense of responsibility towards one's fellow human beings. Nowhere is a place where there is that "ideal organisation of life ... in which the names of rich and poor ... disappear ... [and where] art as the single high source of pleasure [i]s the informing soul [of society]" (Mackail 2: 244).

One of the most vivid, and vivifying, transformations relates to work, which in Nowhere has been transformed into an art form, a pleasurable activity – a transformation that Morris describes as occurring when "useless work" becomes



“useful toil” (Arata 2003 26-27) forging a reconnection between life and work, work and art. Such re-organisation took time, old Hammond informs Guest, since the more powerful class sought to retain that power in the face of revolt from the oppressed class, now aggrieved enough to take physical action, as described by old Hammond. Implicit here are Vichian ideas not only of cyclical change, but also that the change came from below, and change from below could only come when those suffering under social structures felt enough pain to challenge entrenched positions. In the serialised version of *Nowhere*, printed in *Commonweal* during 1890, Morris dates the great change as occurring in 1952, but revises that to the year 2100 (Kumar xix) in the book version, perhaps aware that change would take far more than one generation to occur.<sup>54</sup>

Morris attacks of course the destruction he believed capitalism to have wrought on social structures, but early in the new society capitalism does in fact have one small advantage, as Guest learns from an old man who shares part of the carriage journey into Bloomsbury with him and Dick. The old man explains that after the great change came it was decided that shops in Nowhere should be run by rich people who in the old world forced others to work for them, “the people, you know, who are called slave-holders or employers of labour in the history books” (88) but who post-revolution were made to work as shop-keepers so that they might be “cured of their idleness” (88). Peter Burke describes the way historical perspective depends on one’s position as either victor or loser, citing Ireland as an example: “In the South of Ireland, people still resent what the English did to them in Cromwell’s time as if it were yesterday” (1989 105). For this reason, “victors

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<sup>54</sup> Morris is perhaps recalling Vico’s cycles of change, in which once equality is reached, in the Age of Men, society begins to disintegrate again. This disintegration occurs, however, because the social structure Vico is describing is hierarchical, whereas Morris’s *Nowhere* is shaped by a ‘flattened’ social organisation.

can afford to forget” (106) since their subjectivity has not been dominated, whereas those on the losing side of history “are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been” (106). Morris’s concern extended to the wider world, since he was well aware of some of the ill effects of the capitalist system on other countries around the globe, especially through the linked imperialist policies, which he believed to be “the inevitable and most vicious outcome of the ‘Century of Commerce’” (Thompson 260). The far-reaching effects of imperialist and capitalist policies are outlined in the art lectures he gave in 1879, in which he proclaimed:

While we are met here in Birmingham to further the spread of education in art, Englishmen in India are ... actively destroying the very sources of that education – jewellery, metal-work, pottery, calico-printing, brocade-weaving, carpet-making – all the famous and historical arts of the great peninsula have been ... thrust aside for the advantage of any paltry scrap of so-called commerce ... I begin to doubt if civilization itself may not be sometimes so much adulterated as scarcely to be worth the carrying – anyhow, it cannot be worth much, when it is necessary to kill a man in order to make him accept it. (qtd. in Thompson 260)

What enraged Morris even more was the lack of humanity in such a system since it had proved itself to be

[so] woeful [as to be] scarcely comprehensible, if we ... think of it as men, and not as machines, that, after all the progress of civilization, it should be so easy for a little official talk, a few lines on a sheet of paper, to set a terrible engine to work, which without any trouble on our part will slay ten thousand men ... and it lies light enough on the conscience of all of us;

while if it is a question of striking a blow at grievous and crushing evils which lie at our own doors ... not only is there no national machinery for dealing with them ... but any hint that such a thing may be possible is [sacrificed to the] rights of property, the necessities of morality, the interests of religion – these are the sacramental words of cowardice that silence us! (qtd. in Thompson 256)

Politicians and parliaments of this ilk have no place in *Nowhere*, as Morris does away with what he saw as the biggest impediment to social change, using the buildings of parliament to store manure. Northrop Frye, in his critical essay, notes that “the verbal dungheap has become a literal one” (Frye 307). This allows room for *Nowherians* to practise the self-direction that Morris believed had been repressed by nineteenth-century parliamentary policies, and education and social mores. *Nowherian* society, no longer forced to conform to parliamentary strictures, has been decentralised, its smaller size allowing for closer connections between people, inducing a natural sense of responsibility for maintaining that society and working together to make life amenable to as many as possible. Certainly, when one *Nowherian* commits manslaughter, in self-defence, and is distraught over the action, he is not incarcerated, but is assisted by friends and neighbours to deal with his guilt and grief as best he can. As readers, we seem to be asked to accept the fairness of this judgment, but it is hard to do so without a sense of deep unease. We are used, after all, to incarcerating anyone who takes the life of another. This single incident suggests both the difficulty and the possibility of this idealised social structure. Morris too wonders about this: “What puzzles me most” says Guest, “is how it all came about” (148). “How the Change came” is the pivotal and central chapter in *Nowhere*, as old Hammond and Guest discuss

the historical circumstances in which the revolution in society took place. He tells Guest that while Nowherians do not always agree on how to resolve issues of public concern, it is the fact that they are reasonable enough now to prefer consensus to conflict, to keeping things working, and a general belief in majority rule, that has helped create their egalitarian society.

Morris doesn't see history as an isolated and contained subject either, as the following exchange between Hammond and Dick reveals. Hammond has just asked for quiet because Guest has not finished asking his questions, and Dick responds "Well, I should suppose so ... you have only been three hours and a half together, and it isn't to be hoped that the history of two centuries could be told in three hours and a half: let alone that, for all I know, you may have been wandering into the realms of geography and craftsmanship" (144), indicating I think Morris's awareness that history does not exist in isolation from other cultural constructs.

An interesting exchange takes place between Dick and Guest in the hall of the Bloomsbury market, the walls of which are richly decorated with "wall pictures ... [whose] subjects were taken from queer old-world myths and imaginations which in yesterday's world only about half a dozen people in the country knew anything about" (145). When Guest remarks to old Hammond that he finds it "strange to see such subjects here", Hammond is surprised: "Why? I don't see why you should be surprised: everybody knows the tales; and they are graceful and pleasant subjects, not too tragic for a place where people mostly eat and drink and amuse themselves, and yet full of incident" (145). But Dick is cross at Guest's amusement over the paintings, and recalls the enormous pleasure they gave him in childhood and still give now. He seeks reassurance from Clara, who

responds to the paintings, or rather the tales from which they are drawn, in a more complex manner. Why, she asks, when their own life is so interesting, do their own poets and writers “seldom deal with our modern life, or if they do, take good care to make their poems or pictures unlike that life?” (147). In wondering whether they are not good enough to paint or write about themselves, she questions why the “dreadful times of the past are so interesting to us – in pictures and poetry?” Clara seems to display a wavering subjectivity, since she is aware that she leads a happy life, but knows too that it is not worthy of being recorded, either in poetry or painting – as if it is only in this external record that her life can have real meaning. Hammond explains “it was always this way and always will be” (146). He goes on to suggest, however, that this perspective stemmed from a nineteenth century “theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so ... [since] the author always took care ... to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealize ... or make it strange” (147) and thus had no recognisable relation to real life. Neither Dick nor Clara is able to come to any understanding about their feelings, Dick retreating into his memories of childish love of the stories, and Clara rather petulantly repeating her wish that they were “interesting enough to be written or painted about” (147). Both seem to believe that their lives lack something – perhaps an affirmation from Guest – but yet they are incapable of identifying what this might be. In this enlightened society, however, as Brantlinger so eloquently expresses, there is no need to escape into fantasy because the boundaries between art and work in the real world have now been demolished. Clara’s unease suggests that subjectivity cannot be changed overnight, or at will. While the imaginary world provided the only means of escape for some from the Victorian world, Nowherians no longer need this

escape, since “their life is too pleasurable to need much of the vicarious pleasure provided by literature.” (Brantlinger 40)

The importance of education in shaping understanding, and revealing paths to subjective change, is made clear early in the chapter describing how the great change occurred. Old Hammond explains that the reason for the failure of the early stage of the revolution lay in the fact that “it involved the making of a machinery by those who didn’t know what they wanted the machines to do” (150). While the workers were feeling their repression badly enough to push for change, they were as yet without the necessary education to understand how they might work together to bring about that change. Here, Morris explores his deep aversion to a system that educated largely for a crude progressivism, an aversion which stemmed back to early adulthood when he and other friends felt “a vague sentiment of repulsion to the triumph of civilisation but we[re] ... coerced into silence by what seemed the near universal worship of progress in the culture at large” (Henderson 85). The education Morris idealises in *Nowhere* is not unlike the one he experienced himself, with its remarkable freedom to wander at will through Epping Forest as a child, and later at Marlborough, where the lack of class-room learning seemingly had little effect on what came to be known as his encyclopaedic knowledge of many things. In their discussion on schooling, Old Hammond denounces to Guest the old system of education:

But of course I understand your point of view about education, which is that of times past, when the ‘struggle for life,’ as men used to phrase it (*i.e.*, the struggle for a slave’s rations on one side, and for a bouncing share of the slaveholders’ privilege on the other), pinched ‘education’ for most people into a niggardly dole of not very accurate information; something to be

swallowed by the beginner in the art of living whether he liked it or not, and was hungry for it or not: and which had been chewed and digested over and over again by people who didn't care about it in order to serve it out to other people who didn't care about it." (111)

Not surprisingly, then, absent from Nowherian society are books and schools, and children receive no education except that which is naturally acquired, or which they themselves request. Morris clearly abhorred the idea of repressing rich imaginations with the sort of education system obtaining in his world. He wanted no schooling in *Nowhere* since, notwithstanding the great freedom described above, his experience of school was as a place where he "learned next to nothing, for indeed next to nothing was taught" (Henderson 185). Dickens's Mr Gradgrind, who wanted his schoolmaster to "teach these boys and girls nothing but facts" appeared when Morris had just gone up to Oxford in 1854 (Thompson 8). Morris's revolutionary ideas around education for the children in *Nowhere* may have been influenced too by the work of Robert Owen, whose new infant schools at Lanarkshire (1816) represented "so great a positive achievement as to be virtually incredible" (Williams 1987 28). These new schools were based on a system of education that was "original enough in ... educational techniques, but ... far more innovating in [its] humanity and kindness" (Williams 1987 28). Owen's intention with the new schools was to reshape society in order to "dispel those habits which are the offspring of trade, manufactures, and commerce" (Williams 1987 27-29). Mackail notes that Morris, writing in a private diary during 1883-84, "praised Owen immensely" (2: 97). If it is true, as the historian Lucien Febvre suggested, that natural habits of mind lead to cultural inertia, then the education Morris suggests seems doubly crucial, as it highlights the need to

actively work to halt habitual paths of thinking. In Nowhere, children are first taught the skills they need to survive in the natural world, and those who desire it – since some are ‘bookish’ – are given as much access to books as they wish. But the academic is not valued over the physical – both are valued in and of themselves. While it is true that great importance is given to such practical skills as weaving and thatching, at the same time children in Nowhere are taught languages, such as French “which is the nearest language talked on the other side of the water; and ... German ... which is talked by a huge number of communes and colleges on the mainland” (79). French and German are just two of the languages, along with Welsh or Irish, that children “pick up very quickly” – often before they can read – from their elders, or by mixing with the children of guests visiting from overseas (79). Children also learn “the older languages” Greek and Latin from a young age, thus being exposed to the richness of other languages and cultures that in Morris’s day would have been the preserve of only the well to do. While the lack of a recognisable structure to Morris’s educational beliefs seems revolutionary, according to Belsey the school is exactly where change must be introduced, central as it was in purveying the dominant ideology. Morris was not attacking cultivation of the mind per se, but rather the sort of cultivation that suppressed and stunted the imagination. As well, without such a revised education, there could be no “real working-class leaders to make conscious the ‘vague discontent and spirit of revenge’ of the workers” (qtd. in Thompson 262-263), since even the most well-intentioned reformer might be drawn back, unwittingly, into the system, its very familiarity easier to cope with, as opposed to pulling against the system as an individual. Thompson notes this did occur with one colleague, Broadhurst, a stone mason, who “suffered the disaster of being



elected to Parliament” (Thompson 262) and became overwhelmed at being treated “like an old chum” when the Prince of Wales joined him for a drink at the local village pub (262). Morris’s kindly and insightful response to this was: “But you see when a man has gifts for that kind of thing he finds himself tending to rise out of his class before he has begun to think of class politics as a matter of principle, and too often he is just simply ‘got at’ by the governing classes, not formally but by circumstances” (Thompson 262-3).

From the beginning of *Nowhere* Morris focuses the reader’s attention on the landscape and nature, a focus that continues for much of the story as his characters row along the sparkling waters of the Thames, slowly enjoying the passing scenery and enjoying each other’s company. Morris, through Guest’s passionate love for the land, induces a feeling of being reconnected to place and nature, rather than time, and ever-advancing technology – with which much of past history has been engrossed. Nowherians instead are focused on the harvest, on the moods of the river and the land. The pace of life and cadences of language allows for a “special kind of thought that has been liberated from the modern consciousness of time” (Kirchhoff 2007 180-1). By focusing on the idyllic landscape, rather than the historical, Morris raises the notion that quality of life may be enhanced by movements other than merely linear and progressive. Hence his focus on landscape in *Nowhere* is on the fresh outdoors, and its natural beauty is soothing and appealing, in contrast to the psychological landscape of *Guenevere*, and the forbidding halls of *Sigurd*. When Guest wakes on the first morning in *Nowhere*, he notices immediately the dramatic changes in the landscape: the heavily polluted Thames River and banks have been transformed into a pastoral and pristine landscape and waterway. Morris is ever “acutely

conscious of the beauty of the earth, both inherent and man-made”, displaying always “an infectious delight in landscape and the detail of the buildings in a landscape” (McCarthy 143). If the landscape is well-cared for and respected, then it follows for Morris that society will be the best it can be, since all those ills in society that he so abhorred he believed to be reflected first and foremost in landscape. As McCarthy notes, Morris’s earlier poems in *The Defence* showed “traces of the uneasiness that accumulated later to make Morris so ferocious a protestor against the despoliation of the landscape and so passionate a critic of what he came to see as the social iniquities behind that despoliation ... [evoked by an] enormous tension deriving from beauty under threat” (McCarthy 143). Like Ruskin, who described the natural world as belonging to everyone, poor and rich alike, Morris was alert to the fact that private ownership of land – originally a common and universal inheritance – was partly responsible for the great fracturing of society, notwithstanding his own privileged position.

Morality and the landscape for Morris cannot be separated then, as Guest makes clear in his outburst to Ellen’s grandfather suggesting he is wrong to still admire and wish for the big old houses along the river, buildings that he believed made “England an important place in those days” (198). Guest contradicts him, saying that Nowhereians are much more admirable since they have ensured that everyone can enjoy the beautiful river bank, not just the wealthy, who he asserts were “a few damned thieves only ... who, as to this lovely river, destroyed its beauty morally, and had almost destroyed it physically, when they were thrown out of it.” (198) Supporting this idea is Ellen’s impassioned avowal that the life they lead is far richer than any book they could ever read about life. Ellen believes that instead of more books, it is far better to “find work to do in the beautiful

buildings that we raise up all over the country (and I know there was nothing like them in past times), wherein a man can put forth whatever is in him, and make his hands set forth his mind and his soul” (192). Later, at the point where the relationship between Ellen and Guest is consummated spiritually rather than physically, Ellen declares the symbiotic relationship Nowherians have with their buildings and the earth on which these sit. At this point they are at Morris’s beloved Kelmscott Manor:

She led me close to the house, and laid her shapely sun-browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, “O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it,—as this has done!” I could not answer her, or say a word. Her exultation and pleasure were so keen and so exquisite, and her beauty, so delicate, and yet so interfused with energy, expressed it so fully, that any added word would have been commonplace and futile. I dreaded lest the others should come in suddenly and break the spell she had cast about me; but we stood there a while by the corner of the big gable of the house, and no one came.” (240-241)

The poignancy of the moment, Guest’s wish for it not to end, knowing in his heart he cannot remain and must return to his own world, is almost too much to bear. Certainly, it is hard to bear Guest’s pain when, emerging from his contemplative reverie a little later, Ellen looks closely at him and, rightly guesses that he “has begun again [his] never-ending contrast between the past and this present. Is it not so?” (242) Guest must admit that is so, and especially that he had been worrying about the sort of life Ellen might have experienced, and that even now “when all is won and has been for a long time, my heart is sickened with

thinking of all the waste of life that has gone on for so many years” (242). Just before they leave “the jewel of a house” (243) Ellen speaks caringly to Guest, “Let me tell you, my friend ... you are too apt to fall into mere dreamy musing: no doubt because you are not yet used to our life of repose amidst energy: of work which is pleasure and pleasure which is work”, revealing both Guest and Morris’s heartache at what they must forego.

The only trouble that threatens to invade this paradise, is lack of work, a possibility because people work only on tasks that are enjoyable and useful – not simply to produce things for sale. This is a far cry from the Victorian world, in which Morris believed that those who had servants were actually made slaves of by the system too. No longer are workers engaged in an endless cycle of producing goods for an insatiable market, which left the “whole community ... cast into the jaws of this ravening monster” (139). Guest asks Hammond to tell him more about what they think of work, since of all the changes made “this change from the conditions of the older world seems ... far greater and more important than all the other changes ... as to crime, politics, property, marriage” (137). Hammond replies that Guest is right in thinking this, and in fact “you may say rather that it is this change [in work] which makes all the others possible” (137). The reason Hammond knows so much about it is because his persona is that of Morris’s grandson: “there are traditions – nay real histories – in our family about it: my grandfather was one of its victims. If you know something about it you will understand what he suffered when I tell you that he was in those days a genuine artist, a man of genius, and a revolutionist” (142). These words speak I think to Morris’s desire to be remembered, and especially to be remembered for having made a difference to his society.

One of the most engaging scenes describing how work and art are now reconnected is when Dick explains to Guest that he is able to damascene his own belt, and Guest is impressed with such skill. The weaver and others are starving for work, not food – just as art is always more important than food for Morris. A little later, art literally becomes work, when Guest and Dick come across a gang of workmen laying drains. Ray Watkinson suggests the scene pays homage to Ford Madox Brown’s painting, *Work* (1852-63) (Watkinson 95), as well as to the older man’s kindness to Morris in the early days when he was working under Rossetti’s influence. Like Morris, Madox Brown had also married a working class woman, and spent time discussing socialist issues with the younger man. In turn, this work allows Morris to pay homage also to Carlyle, one of the aristocratic figures in the painting, and whose *Past & Present* had a huge influence on Morris in its portrayal of the plight of unemployed Irish immigrants (Watkinson 95-96).<sup>55</sup>

A great sense of the joy meaningful work contains is further expressed by the stone masons, whom Morris calls the obstinate refusers, who are so in tune with and connected to the building on which they are working, they can hardly bear to tear themselves away. One in particular, Philippa, is desperate to continue chiselling away “on a carving in low relief of flowers and figures” (215). She thanks Dick and Guest for coming to see them but is sure “they won’t think she is unkind if [she] goes on with her work, especially when I tell you I was ill and unable to do anything all through April and May; and this open-air and the sun and the work together, and my feeling well again too, make a mere delight of

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<sup>55</sup> Raymond Williams notes that in painting *Work*, Madox Brown was asked by his patron to paint in the figures of Carlyle and Kingsley. Williams discusses the changing position of the artist in society, as it moved from one of pure creativity, then to patronage, and finally to one defined by market forces (1981 44-51). See also Welland (51-58) for Madox Brown’s detailed catalogue description of *Work*, which effectively closes the work to alternative interpretations. See also Gregory Dart’s “The Reworking of *Work*” for a full discussion of the subversive element in the work, esp. 76-80.

every hour to me; and excuse me, I must go on” (214). Buildings built in this manner are organic, and seem to have an almost animated connection to Nowherian society, in a way that seems to enhance their identity.<sup>56</sup>

There are dichotomies in Nowhere, though, not the least of which is the contrast between Morris’s hatred of capitalism in the real world, and its presence in the utopian one: Guest is entranced by the exquisitely carved pipe he receives from the young girl looking after a shop he visits. There is a difference in Nowhere, however, in the conditions under which the pipe has been produced and, tellingly, given – not sold. No-one is a slave to anyone else, money is obsolete, and there is immense pleasure in the work that produced the pipe, and it, like all other products, is manufactured only as needed – not manufactured with the aim of compelling a false need or want. While Guest worries about losing the exquisite pipe, he is told by the young girl that it will simply pass into someone else’s hands, who will then have the pleasure of it, and he himself can always get another one. The simplicity behind this, and the lack of monetary exchange for what is essentially an object of art, is a radical departure from reality, since Morris’s decorating business depended on exactly such monetary exchange for his survival. It attests, however, to his belief that goods produced merely as part of a cash nexus were part of what kept the capitalist system going, creating a false need around which to organise society. Organisation in Nowhere is driven by human desires and needs rather than capitalist-driven quotas. Hence, what sounds at first like a shocking exchange – because the pipe has been described as a work of art and is being given without any money exchanging hands – is one of the

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<sup>56</sup> On this particular subject, see Niamh Moore’s *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity*, for discussion of the ways in which the “malleability [of] heritage and its relationship to landscape ... derives in part from the dialectical relationship between memory and history’ (21).

earliest and telling moments of change in Nowherian society, and one that remains in the mind.

Morris was always aware of being a member of the dominant class against which he rails, and which Hammond describes as the enemy. This dichotomy is I believe part of the origin of his feeling of alienation. Morris addresses the difficulty of this position, and the bravery of continuing to battle under the daily, grinding nature of such conditions, during the discussion between Guest and Hammond (148). In defence of his privileged position in the Victorian world, he has Hammond say “many were involved in bringing change and suffered hugely, while the sun rose and set as normal for others” (148). This highlights the difficulties inherent in attempting to put radical new ideas into action: it requires a recognition of Vico’s cycles, and especially a recognition of the fact that any individual, and indeed any society, may be anywhere on his continuum from gods through heroes through men, and that it is our responsibility to attempt to at least understand the process, and understanding comes, as Vico noted, from going back to the beginning, a space that is posited in *Nowhere*.

*Nowhere*, then, revolves around those aspects of daily life from which our common history is created – the work we do, the art we create and value, the laws we impose, the books we read, the buildings we erect, and, most of all, the manner in which we give and receive love. *Nowhere* is not about the details that make up history; it rather poses questions about the why of that history and not another; more specifically, why not another that would make life more equal for more people. It is Morris’s medievalism, in particular, through which he poses such questions, since this allows him a different historical perspective, one that moves “backward from the present to a vantage point at which the real future can

be more clearly seen” (Frye 317). Guest often experiences a sense of unease as he moves through *Nowhere*, which stems from Morris’s worry about history: “Morris as well as Guest, is ambivalent about the innocence of history and has Ellen worry about it too”. (Arata 2003 43). This worry is especially apparent in those moments when Guest is most aware of his precarious position, a subliminal and poignant suggestion that through Guest Morris is glimpsing into his own future, and despite knowing that he may never see this place in reality, is aware that he can do nothing other than strive towards achieving it. Even at this late stage of his life, Morris is yet able to demonstrate an intense humanism that has not been dulled in any way by the times against which he railed for so long. He leaves the reader with a sense of hope – or perhaps rather the need to keep reaching after such an ideal, to keep hoping rather than fearing. Morris’s work not only portrays the need for a new ontology, it also reveals the framework and the processes necessary for its attainment:

a whole structure of values and perspectives which must emerge in the conscious mind in order to assert the inner truth of that actuality and give man the knowledge of his own participation in the historical process which dissolves that actuality. (qtd. in Brantlinger 1973 23)

*Nowhere*, then, may be seen as Morris’s literary palliative, staving off what he saw as the illness of his civilisation and at the same time identifying the crucial ingredients needed for its cure. It is a textual synthesis of everything Morris believed in and worked towards all his adult life: his revival of lost artisanal skills and his conviction that the earlier period’s social structures, specifically its crafts guilds, were superior; his anti-industrialism and anti-capitalism; his active socialism; and, linking all of these together, his belief in a joyful connection



between art and labour as crucial to a life well-lived. Within the pages of *Nowhere* Morris reveals and challenges those forces which had shaped the civilisation he hated so much; social relationships that constrain; education/books that obfuscate; manipulation and despoliation of the landscape. In *Nowhere* he reveals that it is only by defining and understanding the ideological forces shaping our memory and history, and understanding too that through language – whether through text or image – we might find the way to articulating a new sense of self – individual and collective.

Two startling images appear just before the end of the tale: the first describes a simple little church with windows which were

mostly of the graceful Oxfordshire fourteenth century type. There was no modern architectural decoration in it; it looked, indeed, as if none had been attempted since the Puritans whitewashed the medieval saints and histories on the wall. (247)

While the church was dressed with festoons of flowers stretching between its three round arches, and great pitchers of flowers standing about on the floor

its best ornament was the crowd of handsome, happy-looking men and women that were set down to table, and who, with their bright faces and rich hair over their gay holiday raiment, looked, as the Persian poet puts it, like a bed of tulips in the sun. (247)

In the first quotation, history has ‘removed’ the medieval paintings from the walls, but they have not been erased from memory. The second image is an “illusion to the *Shahnameh*, an eleventh-century epic poem ... a portion of verse 387 describes a bridal procession in which the row of escorts looks as if ‘heaven has planted tulips in the earth’” (Arata 247). It is the memory of people, closely

connected to art, to labour, and to each other, with which Morris ends his tale. The novel closes with the words of Guest, an individual, whose experiences in Nowherian society have helped shape for him a new ontological awareness, from within which he believes he might make a difference to his own society: “Yes, surely! And if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.” (249) While these are the closing, and often quoted, words of the book, I return instead to the words of old Hammond, representative of both memory and history, and transmitter, through his words, of Morris’s memory:

[T]here are traditions - nay real histories – in our family about it: my grandfather was one of its victims If you know something about it, you will understand what he suffered when I tell you that he was in those days a genuine artist, a man of genius, and a revolutionist. (142)

Finally, I turn to the words of Thomas Malory, Morris’s inspiration, to acknowledge the inspiring echoes of the literary art of both poets, the one from five hundred years past, the other almost a century and a half ago, and yet still imaginatively alive in our present time:

I praye you all jentylmen and jentylwymmen that redeth this book of Arthur and his knyghtes from the begynnyng to the endynge, praye for me whyle I am on lyve that God sende me good delyveraunce. And whan I am deed, I praye you all praye for my soule....” (Malory 726).

## Conclusion

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Tempting as it might have been for Morris to let Guest remain in the idyllic world of Nowhere, by sending him back to the nineteenth century he reveals his understanding that while he cannot reshape life, he *can* continue to strive to change the conditions which shape it.

Tracing the themes of memory and history in Morris's work reveals the ways in which our subjectivity becomes sedimented through language as well as bodily mnemonics. As well, that our subjectivity is shaped not only by our own lived experience but also through an historical consciousness that we experience as extending back perhaps no further than our grandparents' generation, but which in reality reaches back into a past that remains open to interpretation, and re-interpretation, depending who is doing the remembering, and for what purpose. Thus our ontological awareness is not fixed, since not only is there a discursive and negotiable space before history actually "becomes history", there is too a space in which memory is individual before it becomes collective. Engaging with the layers of discourse and images that shape both – through literature, art, our reactions to life, the rituals and traditions we honour, our imprint on the landscape – is crucial to changing any ontological awareness.

Tracing the themes of memory and history in Morris's works reveals, too, his ambivalence about a purely progressive and linear view of history, with its power to compel the shape of the lived experience. His work posits a redemptive ontology. In the twisted and contorted bodily mnemonics of Guenevere, saved by her "conditional moment"; in the troubled figure of Regin, and the manipulative

and hubristic Grimhild, and, finally, in the serene self-containment of Ellen, who knows the value of “not paying attention” to a past in which she would be old before her time and in which her time would not be her own, Morris reveals a deep passion, affinity and love for the human condition, and a reverence for those who seek to better that condition, however limited a role they may enjoy.

Morris’s imagination and his vision of the need to create a new and redemptive ontology are shaped largely by his medievalism, mediated through his literary and artistic pursuits, and through a choice of genre that changes with his recognition that in educating “the desire to desire” to live in an egalitarian world, to share all life’s riches, he must address first those who are excluded from those pleasures. He does that by showing how memory and history are entwined, while his medievalism represents the essential humanity we all share.

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