
The Planetary in Morris's Late Romances

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In *The Sundering Flood*, the eponymous river that divides the protagonist from his beloved is for many ‘no sunderer but a uniter’. ‘The folk of the City and its lands’ say that:

[the flood] joined land to land and shore to shore; that it had peopled the wilderness and made the waste places blossom, and that no highway for wheels and beasts in all the land was so full of blessings and joys as was their own wet Highway of the Flood.¹

The metaphor of the wet highway, which Morris had rehearsed in the *Water of the Wondrous Isles* prior to its appearance in *The Sundering Flood*, ascribes to the flood the qualities associated with an artifice. The flood functions more effectively than its human-made counterpart, the road. In this description, connection to distant lands appears as natural as the rivers, seas and oceans themselves – it does not have to be mediated by technological developments that are shaped by the capitalist mode of production. Morris’s approach here resonates with today’s discourse on planetarity, which focuses on ecological networks that rival capitalist globalisation. As Amy Elias and Christian Morale write, the planetary indicates ‘a historically unprecedented web of relations among peoples, cultures, locales’ that have an ecological basis.² This essay argues that William Morris’s late prose romances construe the planetary, and that, for Morris, such webs have a primeval character rather than constituting a recent development.

Morris’s planetary approach is rooted in his critique of both nationalism and capitalism. In ‘the Manifesto of the Socialist League’ (1885), Morris wrote that ‘we seek a change in the basis of Society – a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities’.³ A vestige of capitalism, nationhood would disappear if

economic transformation took place. Elsewhere, Morris called the nation ‘a sham community’ and insisted that ‘we might live utterly without national rivalries’. The architect of international conflict, for Morris, is capitalism, which makes global harmony impossible: ‘it is this war of the firms which hinders the peace between nations’.⁴ Literary critics have paid much attention to Morris’s cosmopolitanism, which by definition transcends ‘national limitations or attachments’ (OED). According to Regenia Gagnier, Morris’s socialist internationalism intertwined with his ‘love of the land’, which made him a ‘situated’ cosmopolitan.⁵ His sense of belonging to a worldwide community of human beings did not imply deracination. Tanya Agathocleous similarly emphasises his ability to connect the local to the global as she discusses the way in which London became ‘an integral part of a unified world’ in *News from Nowhere*.⁶ In this paper, rather than focusing on the cosmopolitanism of urban environments characterised by ethnic and other kinds of diversity, I turn to that which is inspired by geographical formations and manifests itself as a longing for mobility across them, in order to contend that Morris’s passion for thinking and writing about natural environments informs his cosmopolitanism.

Morris’s ecological commitments, too, have been discussed in depth by literary critics. Many scholars from Patrick O’Sullivan to Florence Boos have positioned him as a precursor to today’s environmentalists. Boos writes: ‘[h]is conviction that spoliation of natural beauty leads straight to other forms of deprivation made him an important predecessor of late twentieth-century environmentalism’.⁷ His political writing laments that ‘mankind, in striving to attain to a complete mastery over Nature [...] destroy[s] her simplest and widest-spread gifts’, as he put it in ‘The Beauty of Life’ (1880).⁸ The precariousness of the living world and the harm carried out by industrial development troubled him, as he pondered in ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’ (1881) our responsibility ‘to posterity for what may befall the fairness of the earth in our own days, for what we have done’.⁹ Morris’s thought reflects an awareness of the impact of what we now call the Anthropocene, and it ‘exhibit[s] a prescient eco-socialist analysis of extraction capitalism’.¹⁰ Of course, Morris could be utopian as well as critical: like others in late nineteenth-century Britain, he explored what would happen if humans ceased to dominate nature, especially in *News from Nowhere*.¹¹

While Morris’s cosmopolitanism and environmentalism have received much attention, the intersection of the two in his work has not. Eddy Kent, in his exploration of Morris’s ‘green cosmopolitanism’, has argued that Morris imagined forms of camaraderie not just between people around the world, but also between ‘humans and nature’. According to Kent, nature’s ‘reciprocal relationship’ with humans in Morris’s work offers a mode of cosmopolitanism in which interdependence with

nature is central.¹² In this essay, I seek to go beyond a consideration of eco-cosmopolitanism as an instance of harmony with nature, and to explore the ways in which moving across natural environments introduces alterity, demanding that we step with the characters into the unfamiliar. Drawn to worlds beyond their own, protagonists in Morris's late romances encounter strange and peculiar customs and peoples as they traverse mountains, rivers and seas. Situated as Morris's late prose romances are in particular locales, their settings shift with great pace, spanning large stretches of land and water. As Timothy Clark writes, it is the Anthropocene which necessitates that we 'think of human life at much broader scales of space', and Morris's late prose romances allow us to meet that challenge in that his characters move into and out of multiple realms that lie beyond their own, overcoming the limits set by geographical and human obstacles.¹³

In presenting a version of the planetary, Morris provides insights that are as useful from a twenty-first-century perspective as from a nineteenth-century one. Ursula Heise articulates a challenge in environmentalist thinking today: how do we 'shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet?'.¹⁴ The late romances, where settings catalogue unfamiliar human and geographical environments, present us with cognitive tools that would help overcome the challenge that Heise outlines. If, as Heise proposes, we must find a way out of the impasse between 'total unity' and 'plurality and individuality', Morris's ecological imagination is helpful in that it offers a sense of expanse while recognising its heterogeneous constituent elements.¹⁵ The insight implicit in Morris's work is useful today: ecology involves a distinct sense of place, but it is unthinkable without a sense of large-scale networks.

To be sure, the worlds of the late romances are far from being utopian in every way. Heroines live in fear of rape; thralldom is a threat for men and women; warriors harm one another; murder deprives family members of their loved ones. To locate the planetary amidst such plot developments need not involve a contradiction. Morris's medievalism as a whole manifests a similar dynamic, in which the presence of evil does not suffice to negate the laudable:

Do not misunderstand me; I am not a mere praiser of past times. I know that in those days of which I speak life was often rough and evil enough, beset by violence, superstition, ignorance, slavery; yet I cannot help thinking that sorely as poor folk needed a solace, they did not altogether lack one, and that solace was pleasure in their work.¹⁶

If the medieval period, as Morris acknowledges here in 'Art and the Beauty of the

Earth' (1881), is worth our attention because of the desirable modes of artistic production it offers, the fictional, quasi-medieval worlds of the romances also host a version of the planetary that presents a way out of the impasse between insularity, on the one hand, and capitalist globalisation on the other.

In comparison to *News from Nowhere*, Morris's late prose romances have attracted the attention of relatively few critics, who have in the past decades dispelled the former conviction that these works are escapist.¹⁷ Before exploring the ways in which these works formulate a green cosmopolitanism, this essay first dwells on the possibility of tracing our own approaches to the environment back to the nineteenth century, specifically historicising the planetary as a mode of global interconnection beyond human control. In the following sections, individual readings focus on five romances – *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1891), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897) and *The Sundering Flood* (1897) – and discuss a variety of techniques that capture the planetary, including the trope of transgressing geographical limits, the use of panoramic perspectives and the embedding of the local in larger networks. The final section forges an affinity between romance as a mode and the planetary as a political goal as it posits that the interplay between the alien and the familiar characterises both.

I. The Planetary and Its Temporalities

'Chiefly eco-cosmological', the term planetary 'advocates an urgent conceptual shift away from globalization [...] toward planet as world ecology'. Elias and Moraru write that the planet appears 'as a living organism, as a shared ecology, and as an incrementally integrated system' when the emphasis falls on world ecology. The globe in globalisation is a 'financial-technocratic system', whereas the word planet implies ties that burgeon outside, and alongside, capitalist networks.¹⁸ Under the category of the planetary, systemic forces create networks in which the local never loses its peculiarity, but remains attached to the rest of the world. What Morris offers through the cosmos of his late romances resonates with these visions of the planetary, as these works' multicentric worlds reflect the diversity and size of both nonhuman and human environments and present interconnection as possible outside capitalist and industrial developments. The pre-capitalist worlds of these romances conjure up bygone times in part through their peculiar use of the English language. As Carole Silver writes, Morris

utilizes the complex and archaic vocabulary he associates with Anglo-Saxon poetry, Icelandic saga, and the work of Chaucer [...]. Initially difficult to comprehend, [Morris's unique language] pulls the reader away from the words

and objects of a modern, commercial society, gradually drawing him into the remote world of which it is a manifestation.¹⁹

The archaic character of these romances does not undermine the planetary perspective they offer. At a time when inventions based on the steam engine or new communications technologies usually inspired in subjects the feeling that they inhabited a shrinking world, Morris manages to offer a sense of scale based on ecology.

If Morris offers, as I argue, a version of the planetary, he does so *avant-la-lettre* by approximately a century or so. In his seminal ‘Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diversity, and Totality’, Masao Miyoshi boldly asserts that ‘literature and literary studies now have one basis and goal: to nurture our common bonds to the planet – to replace the imaginaries of exclusionist familialism, communitarianism, nationhood, ethnic culture, regionalism, “globalization”, or even humanism, with the ideal of planetarianism’. The planetary consciousness is to take as its point of departure the sense that we share a single planet, cultivated by our awareness of world-scale ecological crisis. Miyoshi highlights the presentism of the planetary movement: ‘for the first time in human history’, he writes, ‘one single commonality involves all those living on the planet: environmental deterioration as a result of the human consumption of natural resources’.²⁰ A similar mindset governs Heise’s approach: ‘while [...] a globalist consciousness has forcefully been taking shape ever since space flight first enabled the views of Planet Earth from outer space in the 1960s, it has only now become a core concern of social and cultural theory’.²¹ Here, she indicates by ‘globalist’ those tendencies that other scholars discuss under the category of the planetary. To be sure, wide-scale climate change alongside ubiquitous blue marble images cultivate the sense that we share a single planet, but my position in this paper is that planetary consciousness precedes that current moment. Science fiction, for instance, offered views of the planetary world in such works as Jules Verne’s *Autour de la Lune* (1870; translated as *Around the Moon* [1873]), which enlarged the characters’ and readers’ sense of scale by describing the Earth as an object whose ‘expanse [is] [...] enormous’, though elsewhere in the same genre the view from space rendered parts of the world all the more colonisable: ‘[t]he whole of Africa in the field of vision as once!’, comments a character on the moon in Paschal Grousset’s *Les Exilés de la Terre* (1887; translated as *The Conquest of the Moon* [1889]).²² A proto-planetary vision is not limited to Morris, co-extensive as it is with ‘the nineteenth-century nexus of new ideas about deep time and global weather systems, of expanding fossil fuel-based energy systems’.²³ Located in such a milieu, Morris offers his own variant of the planetary, in which ‘here’ always coexists with ‘there’, and neither loses its peculiarity.

II. Stepping into the Beyond

As Phillipa Bennett notes, the late prose romances often present locations, which, ‘residing “beyond” or at the “end”’, are ‘both in and out of the world’.²⁴ Ultimately, though, these narratives show that it is indeed possible to go beyond or bypass geographical limits and, upon doing so, to enter new realms with laws of their own. In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Hallblithe, who, in search of his betrothed, looks for a way out of the Glittering Plain where people remain young, hears of ‘the very edge of the land’.²⁵ Once he finds himself outside these margins, to survive he must go back in with the three travellers whom he has just met, this time confronting ‘a sheer wall of pale stone over which nothing must go save the fowl flying’ (p. 110). Yet the team manages to traverse the mountains by travelling through a cave, and Hallblithe, later moving to the woods by the seaside, builds a skiff and sails off, ‘los[ing] sight of the Glittering Plain and the mountains thereof’ (p. 131). After a period in which there is ‘nought but sea all round about him’, he arrives at the Isle of Ransom, where, to his welcome, the rules of the land he left behind, such as prolonged youth, no longer apply (p. 131). The confinement that the mountains impose contrasts with the extensive mobility that the residents of the Isle of Ransom – the Vikings – enjoy as they roam the seas.

This trope of overcoming limits finds its mature form in *The Well at the World’s End*, which traces the adventures of Ralph, the youngest son of King Peter. The landscape in *The Well*, for which Morris’s inspiration was his Icelandic journeys, marks the border between what is the everyday, familiar way of life and that which is unusual, bizarre and fantastic. In his quest for the well that restores and prolongs youth, Ralph comes across ‘the topmost head of the mountain ridge which men call the Wall of the World’.²⁶ Yet even that wall turns out to be a border rather than a terminal fixture: The Well at the World’s End ‘lieth beyond it’ (*ibid.*). Further, when Ralph and Ursula, the maiden whom he loves, reach the well, their destination becomes not so much the endpoint of a quest as a point of departure signalling a new life, a confirmation of their union and an extension of their strength. The mountains thus mark the border between what lies here and what extends beyond. The self hovers on physical borderlines, moves into alterity, and thence, having changed, revisits the home that was the point of departure.

In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, geographical and human limits to the protagonist’s mobility both oppress her and allow her to attach herself to the land where she lives. The initial chapters of this romance portray her as a child who, kidnapped by a witch, comes to live with her beyond the bounds of human settlement. The witch’s abode lies on the inaccessible side of a ‘measureless’ wood.²⁷ Completely cut-off from human contact, the child, called Birdalone, grows up by a lake, its islands

and the surrounding woods. Later, in retrospect, she will call herself ‘a wild creature of the woods’, emphasising her commonality with the other living beings around her (p. 252). There is no opposition between wilderness and civility for Morris. There is instead the entanglement of living beings, human and non-human, with the wilderness. Representing that entanglement in this tale is Habundia, who, ‘[a]s a nature spirit [...] teaches Birdalone the lore of the earth’; Habundia serves ‘eco-feminist myth-making’, and, bound as she is to the woods, it is tempting to associate her with the emphasis that some strands of environmentalism place on location and belonging today.²⁸ Yet this romance’s coverage of the peculiarity of place intertwines with a longing for circulation.

The eponymous water is the key that unlocks the wide world beyond the lake and the woods. One day, swimming by the small eyots, Birdalone senses how she will overcome her thrallodom: ‘[t]hen she communed with herself, and found that she was thinking: If I might only swim all the water and be free’ (p. 23). The water stretches too far for her to escape by swimming, but Birdalone will soon find a magical boat and discover how to operate it. At that moment, the water, which had hitherto limited her freedom, will become the channel for exploring a vast world of interconnected realms. Fittingly, when Birdalone finally gets a hold of the Sending Boat and ventures on her journey out from ‘the House of Captivity’ (p. 50), she is completely naked, an element of nature rather than an entity who seeks to master it. To venture beyond boundaries and become part and parcel of the multifarious, alien natural environments one encounters on the way is an experience of the planetary.

Human limits are like their geological counterparts in that overcoming them unlocks new domains of experience. While Birdalone, confined to a castle, waits for the three champions who have gone to rescue the women they love, the vastness of the land and the waters motivate her to exit that human-made environment. ‘I was reared amidst the woods and the meadows, and with the burning of the sun, and the buffets of the wind; and now for lack of some deal of that I am waxing white and faint’ (p. 133), complains Birdalone to the castellan. Her desire to wander follows from her connection to living beings and other elements of the ecosystem. When she finally leaves the castle behind and voyages to the mountains, the view elicits from her the response, ‘Oh! But thou art beautiful, O earth, thou art beautiful!’ (p. 158). Beauty, rather than applying only to individual elements of the Earth, marks it in its entirety. Of course, the beauty of the Earth often made an appearance in Morris’s nonfiction and shaped his philosophy of art. In ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’, he writes: ‘it is this reasonable share in the beauty of the earth that I claim as the right of every man who will earn it by due labour’, and treats that beauty as the key to the production of art.²⁹ For Birdalone, to notice the beauty of the earth is to assign

aesthetic value to the whole as well as its parts. In her exclamation, she is able to grasp the earth as a totality – and address it in the second person, highlighting a personal relationship to it – precisely because she is focused on its beauty.

III. The Panoramic Gaze

In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, as in *The Well at the World's End*, mountains both mark the limits of the present world and promise the possibility of surpassing it. Once restored to the wilderness, Birdalone looks around to absorb it: ‘they came forth on to a wide green plain, all un-builded, so far as their eyes could see, and beyond it the ridges of the hills and blue mountains rising high beyond them’ (p. 138). The gesture of looking past one’s current surroundings often involves a panoramic gaze spanning a large territory.

In *The Wood Beyond the World*, Golden Walter, who travels extensively after his wife proves unfaithful to him, comes across the opportunity to pass from his world to the space beyond it. He transitions from one to the other by going through a shard in a cliff. The nonhuman environment through which Walter enters Bear-country lends itself to a panoramic survey:

he stopped to take breath, and raised his head and looked, and lo! he was verily on the brow of the great mountain-neck, and down below him was the hanging of the great hill-slopes, which fell down, not slowly, as those he had been those days a-mounting, but speedily enough, though with little of broken places or sheer cliffs. But beyond this last of the desert there was before him a lovely land of wooded hills, green plains, and little valleys, stretching out far and wide, till it ended at last in great blue mountains and white snowy peaks beyond them.³⁰

The aesthetic here ranges from the picturesque to the sublime. The eye moves from one landscape to another adjacent to it, a long list of landscapes accumulating for as long as the survey lasts. There is always the next landscape, offering an expansive sense of space. Self-contained environments are subsumed into a larger serial structure, coming before or after something else. As expansive as space is, our attention turns to limits within it. Each landscape is limited in scope, replaced by another as our eyes move toward the horizon. The plurality of parts, each limited within its own contours, is precisely what communicates the sense of scale.

This conglomeration of limited parts is the aesthetic that the romances abide by, not just in the landscape panoramas they often offer us, but also in portraying multiple ‘worlds’ each with its own order. From the woods where the evil Mistress resides and

the Bear-country to equally alien ‘land of Stark-Wall’ and the familiar world from which Walter originates, the realms of the romance serially pile up to offer a cosmos teeming with difference (p. 110). The plot structure of the romances similarly consists of self-contained episodes that follow one another to form a much larger arc. As adventures accumulate, plot becomes part of a serial aesthetic in which inexhaustible heterogeneity triumphs and resists the centralised energy of organic, tightly-structured teleology. Each of the Wonder Isles that Birdalone visits as she voyages through the Great Water exemplifies this aesthetic. There is always a new realm about to unfold, to merge through the horizon as other worlds recede into the background. The plurality of these episodes matches the panoramic approach to the landscape.

During the course of Walter’s adventures, panoramic visions include human-made environments that blend with non-human ones. Upon leaving the woods where the evil Mistress executes her designs, Walter, now accompanied by the lovely Maid, sees a stretch of land where a human settlement greets them:

[they] went their ways through the pass; and it soon became stormy again, as they mounted the bent which went up from out the dale. And when they came to the brown of the said bent, they had a sight of the open country lying fair and joyous in the sunshine, and amidst of it, against the blue hills, the walls and towers of a great city. (p. 104)

The diversity of parts becomes the measure of the grandeur of the whole. Once again, each landscape is neatly delineated by what lies adjacent to it, integrated into a totality. Morris, who sought a ‘fundamental readjustment between humanity and nature, based on “fellowship”’, turns the city-scape, with its towers rising alongside blue hills, into an element of a hybrid panorama.³¹ The aesthetic that marks such designs as *The Strawberry Thief*, in which we find ‘harmony and symmetry amongst abundance and diversity’, governs the description of the scene here.³² Morris’s ability to sacrifice neither the part nor the whole takes its cue from natural environments that lend themselves to panoramic surveys. The cognitive and visual tools that Morris deploys for reconciling wholeness with multiplicity revolve around landscapes and the living beings that inhabit them.

Panoramic descriptions in *The Wood* complement an existing tradition of urban panoramas, which, in turn, developed out of the ‘Romantic landscape painting tradition’, as Tanya Agathocleous explains. She writes that ‘[p]erhaps the most innovative and fashionable subject of panoramas [...] was the city, for the panoramic spectacle itself was an urban phenomenon’, and adds that ‘panoramic paintings – giant 360-degree canvasses that were popular public spectacles from the late

eighteenth-century though the nineteenth – were designed to provide an all-encompassing overview of the urban landscape'. For Agathocleous, the panoramic form flattens the world by detracting from the confusion that cities inspire and the unknowability that they offer: '[v]iewers [...] were able to take in every aspect of the "world"' enclosed by the panoramic space and thus to participate in the illusion that foreign lands might be apprehended at a glance'.³³ By contrast, in Morris's fictional panoramas, the elements in one's field of vision unfold one by one, creating a seriality which, in turn, suggests an inexhaustible heterogeneity. As space opens up in these descriptions, it is impossible to perceive all details simultaneously, in part because the medium is linguistic rather than visual. Time elapses as words accumulate. Morris assigns to nonhuman landscapes the level of detail and depth that urban panoramas located in human environments, yet he resists the urge to have the viewer or reader absorb the scene all at once. With their prolonged temporality, panoramic descriptions of human and natural environments in the late romances resist the imperial urge to master space even as they convey large-scale composites.

IV. The Local and the 'Wideness of the World'

As the prominence of the panoramic gaze indicates, Morris stresses how places belong to larger wholes. In the late romances, one can arrive at what Heise calls a 'sense of planet' only by way of connecting to living beings that are rooted in a particular locale – and vice versa. For instance, in *The Well at the World's End*, the hope of universal belonging is never separate from the particularity of place. When, at the end of the quest, Ursula says: 'I think, my dear, that I have no country, nor any house to welcome me', Ralph replies: '[a]ll lands, any land thou mayst come to, shall welcome thee'.³⁴ The slippage between 'all lands' and 'any land' is telling: thinking about the universal requires one to think back about the particular. The personification of the land evokes a totality that includes, but is not limited to, human activity. In this episode, Ursula dreams: 'well will it be in those days if I love the folk then as well as I now love these trees and the wild things whose house they are'.³⁵ Living beings in the non-human world cultivate a cosmopolitanism whose endpoint is the kinship with humans. Homes find their meaning in their similarity to wild nests. Indeed, Ursula's connection to Ralph is mediated through her love of the living world: 'she [...] threw her arms about the oak-bole and kissed its ruggedness, while Ralph as he lay kissed the sleekness of her feet'.³⁶ This tree-hugging episode precipitates an awareness of the world as a totality that accompanies the desire for kinship: eventually, when they are at the well, Ralph cries out: '[t]o the Earth, and the World of Manfolk'.³⁷ In regard to the episode of drinking of the well, Carole Silver claims that 'Ralph knowingly assumes a responsibility to society'; indeed, the scope of that society is so large that it is nothing

less than a ‘world’.³⁸ Further, it is not only to human communities, but the ‘Earth’ as a totality that Ralph pledges his allegiance. This episode is not just an indication of Ralph’s ‘harmony with nature’, but a reminder that only by embedding one’s self in a certain place can one experience a sense of the world as a totality.³⁹

The Sundering Flood similarly presents connection to distant parts as necessary for thriving in a particular locale. The titular river of *The Sundering Flood* may provide a safe haven for ships where it meets the sea, but in the immediate setting of the romance it separates Osberne from his beloved Elfhild. ‘What sunders us, this mighty Flood [...] shall be to the end’, laments Elfhild, trapped in the West, while Osberne is on the Eastern side of the river (p. 39). In Morris’s final romance, the other has migrated from distant mountains and the far reaches of the sea to the very site of home: the banks of the river are not far apart, but one side remains alien to the other, as it is impossible to cross this body of water. The home is fractured.

The key to undoing fragmentation at home is recovering a sense of expanse, building a familiarity with neighbouring regions that stretch across the realm. To unite, Osberne and Elfhild must circumvent the gap that separates them, discovering their surroundings in the process. Only by awakening to a sense of vastness can they overcome that gap. For Osberne, large-scale thinking is a byproduct of war: ‘[m]ust I not take the chancehap and war by the hand and follow where they lead, that I may learn the wideness of the world, and compass earth and sea till I have gone about the Sundering Flood and found thy [Elfhild’s] little body somewhere in the said wide world?’ (pp. 80-81). Discovering the ‘wideness’ of the world is the only way to overcome the fracture within a particular locale. The plot is set up such that local lives, initially isolated and seemingly self-sufficient, must open up to a larger realm if they are to prove fulfilling. As one character assures Osberne: ‘the only way to bridge the Sundering Flood is for one of you, or both, to wander wide in the world’ (p. 133). For this purpose, after Elfhild is kidnapped by the strong-thieves, Osberne ‘carr[ies] [his] trouble to the lands of the aliens’, ‘wander[s] about the world’, and ‘seek[s] adventures’ where the river ‘sunders nought, but joins rather’, in order to find her (pp. 133, 142, 144, 145). The river is both a local fixture and a reminder of the need to step outside one’s immediate surroundings. As in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, here the natural environment is neither a self-contained place nor just an overarching highway leading outside, but both. If Morris’s late romances are full of ventures into the unfamiliar, this characteristic is in part due to the genre in which he is working. As the next section turns to examine, the interplay between the familiar and the alien is a generic characteristic of the romance, which Morris plays up through his use of medieval diction and syntax and his depiction of quasi-medieval settings.

V. Romance and the Planetary

Reflecting on her childhood in the introduction to her father's *Journal of Travel in Iceland*, 1871, May Morris wrote: 'we certainly had good material for dreaming ourselves into another life than our own'.⁴⁰ She links imaginative freedom to alterity: cognitive processes allow the subject to overstep the bounds of one's own life. Yet access to otherness is not just imaginative for the Morris family. In a letter to his wife dated 1871, Morris writes of his journey to Iceland: 'I have seen nothing out of a dream so strange as our coming out of the last narrow sound into the Atlantic'. The country was 'quite up to [his] utmost expectations as to strangeness'.⁴¹ Yet if, for Morris, Iceland was a strange land, it was one whose material traces were incorporated into everyday life back in England in the form of artifacts such as 'silver-work and embroideries'.⁴² Considering Morris's use of Icelandic materials at home, Wendy Parkins writes that the 'presence [of traces of Icelandic culture] in his own home was a daily reminder of alterity in the midst of the everyday'.⁴³ As the home comes to bear resemblance to Iceland, and conversely, Icelandic materials are integrated into the home, the familiar and the alien coexist and transmute into one another. In a similar vein, Bennett writes, 'the topographies of the last romances [...] consistently bring the reader back from fantastic and faraway lands to the features of more familiar domains'.⁴⁴ This back-and-forth motion, which is key to Morris's construal of the planetary, is also foregrounded by the genre in which Morris worked: romance.

Patrick Brantlinger's designation of Morris's romances as 'anti-novel' draws attention to the possibilities that open up through his choice of genre. Brantlinger notes that to write *New from Nowhere*, Morris certainly could not have turned to the genre employed by, say, Charles Dickens, because '[t]he novel as a form, Morris suggests, is based on bourgeois individualism with its cult of personality and massive blindness to the larger workings of history and to the larger interests of society'.⁴⁵ Morris's choice of genre is also fitting insofar as it lends itself to the expression of a green cosmopolitanism, especially of the kind that Morris pursued as he based the imagination of alterity on depictions of landscapes. Gillian Beer notes a characteristic of the romance: it 'invokes the past or the socially remote', but 'its remote sources are domesticated and brought close to present experience'.⁴⁶ The romance thus familiarises the alien through its refurbishing of source materials. What Regenia Gagnier writes of *The Earthly Paradise* is true of the late romances as well: they are retellings of 'pagan, medieval, and Norse myth and legend'.⁴⁷ Morris famously offers tales that introduce temporally and geographically distant sources of material into the reading experience of a modern audience. The past and present coexist in the romances insofar as the audiences and the settings diverge in their temporality.

The romance tendency to recycle stories partakes in an urge to forge connections between distant entities – the past and the present, the remote and the close by. Inviting us to enter alien worlds, romance bridges our immediate surroundings with the world beyond. Consider, for example, what *The Wood Beyond the World* calls ‘the far land’, ‘the strange land’, and ‘the Bear-country’, where the immediate danger confronting Walter is that ‘big men’ could ‘offer [him] up as a blood-offering to that woman, who is their Mawmet [a foreshortened Anglo-Norman version of Mahumet, or Muhammad; the noun mammet, or mawmet, can also refer to a false god, or idol]’ (p. 23). Islam here becomes the relatively familiar entity that renders the outlandish customs of another land comprehensible. Yet the alterity in the late romances is not just a function of the diversity of custom. In alien realms, the natural rules that govern everyday life are different, as in Birdalone witnessing plentiful growth at the ‘Isle of Increase Unsought’. In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, the land of the immortals is a realm in which simulacra have taken over the real, with images in the King’s daughter’s book replacing their real-life counterparts. Such realms invert not just the reality that the characters experience, but the actual worlds the readers inhabit.

Depicting alternate universes, the late romances resonate with the kind of planetarity that Gayatri Spivak has recently described. She explores the role of alterity in the constitution of the planetary, by contrasting it with globalisation, which is ‘achieved by the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere’. For Spivak, the latter emerges ‘in the gridwork of electronic capital’. ‘The globe’, notes Spivak, ‘is on our computers. It is the logo of the World Bank’. She thus captures the intertwining of the digital with the economic in her polemical engagement with globalisation. In contrast, Spivak posits that ‘the planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system’.⁴⁸ The planetary is characterised by an uncanny mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this dance of self and other, the subject is awakened to the existence of that from which it differs. This orientation toward the other is the motor that drives the plots of the romances, taking us to a past beyond our grasp, as well as to lands whose outlandishness is typical of the genre.

The medieval was for Morris an embodiment of otherness as was the Icelandic culture that inspired the romances.⁴⁹ The importation of the past into the present moment introduces a curious mix, as modern audiences read these romances that rely on medieval syntax and diction.

In the experience of the reading mind and body, the present moment meets the past. In his lecture on ‘The Hopes of Civilization’ (1885), Morris writes:

Indeed, I confess that it is with a strange emotion that I recall these times and try to realize the life of our forefathers, men who were named like ourselves,

spoke nearly the same tongue, lived on the same spots of the earth, and therewithal were as different from us in manners, habits, and ways of life and thought as though they lived on another planet.⁵⁰

Medieval English is already itself on the boundary of the familiar and the distant. It is English, and thus like the language that Morris and his contemporaries spoke. Yet, as Norman Talbot notes, in reading these romances ‘we experience a delightful and total immersion in a language not our own’.⁵¹ Turning its medieval inspiration into late-nineteenth-century romances, Morris introduces the unfamiliar into the familiar, and, in the act of doing so, gives us a taste of planetary scope, conceived not just through geographical span, but temporal depth.

While, for many Britons in the Victorian period, a number of recent developments in capitalist modernity from railway travel to the Great Exhibition were marked by the shrinking of distances, Morris preserves spatial expanse and temporal depth in his vision of the planetary.⁵² The compression of time and space is directly tied to the operation of capital in Marx’s account: ‘while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another’.⁵³ Capital needs distance in the sense that it must be invested in foreign markets, but it simultaneously conquers distance, which is to say that, under the rule of capitalism, places do not remain distant from one another for long. Morris’s planetary worlds, which exist outside such capitalist globalization, offer an alternative to time-space compression through their temporal structure, panoramic perspective, and invitation to imagine the ‘wideness of the world’.

NOTES

1. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910-15), XXI, p. I. (Afterwards Morris, CW).
2. Amy J. Elias and Christian Mararu, *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), p. xii. (Afterwards Elias and Mararu).
3. William Morris, *Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal 1885-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 3-8 (3).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 96; Morris, CW, XXIII, pp. 7, 10.
5. Regenia Gagnier, ‘Good Europeans and Neo-Liberal Cosmopolitans: Ethics and Politics in Late Victorian and Contemporary Cosmopolitanism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38: 2 (2010), 591-614 (603). (Afterwards Gagnier).
6. Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 145. (Afterwards Agathocleous).
7. Florence Boos, ‘An Aesthetic Ecocommunist: Morris the Red and Morris the Green’, *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: The University of Exeter Press,

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- 1999), pp. 21-46 (22). (Afterwards Boos).
8. Morris, CW, XXII, p. 52.
 9. *Ibid.*, XXII, p. 121.
 10. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, 'William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface', *Victorian Studies*, 57: 3 (2015), 395-404 (395).
 11. See Jed Mayer, 'William Morris and the Greening of Science', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 17 (Fall 2008), 56-76. (Afterwards Mayer).
 12. Eddy Kent, 'William Morris's Green Cosmopolitanism', JWMS, 20: 1 (2011), 64-78 (66).
 13. Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 13.
 14. Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: the Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 56. (Afterwards Heise).
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 16. Morris, CW, XXII, p. 163.
 17. Phillipa Bennett, for instance, argues that the 'act of wondering', so prominent in the last romances, 'engenders what John Goode calls "a revolutionary consciousness"'; Anna Vaninskaya proposes that, unlike the individualist romances that were popular at the time, those of William Morris conjured up questions of community; Carole Silver argues that Morris, in the late romances, 'synthesizes elements derived from his own psyche, the romance tradition, myth and its study, and socialist doctrine'; for Amanda Hodgson, the romances are political in that they show 'individualism flourishes when nurtured by a suitably strong communal organization'. Phillipa Bennett, *Wonderlands: The Last Romances of William Morris* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 135. (Afterwards Bennett). Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History, and Propaganda 1880-1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010). Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 170. (Afterwards Silver). Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 162. (Afterwards Hodgson).
 18. Elias and Moraru, p. xvi.
 19. Silver, p. 160.
 20. Masao Miyoshi, 'Turn to the Planet: Literature, Diversity, and Totality', *Comparative Literature*, 53: 4 (2001), 283-97 (295).
 21. Heise, p. 4.
 22. André Laurie [Paschal Grousset], *The Conquest of the Moon: A Story of the Bayouda* (London: Sampson Low, 1889), p. 186; *Works of Jules Verne*, ed. by Charles F. Horne, 15 vols (New York: V. Parke and Company, 1911), III, p. 262; Grousset, p. 288. The French originals state: 'son volume restait encore énorme' (Jules Verne, *Autour de la Lune* [Paris: J. Hetzel, 1966], p. 45), and 'L'Afrique entière dans le champ de votre vue' (André Laurie, *Les Exilés de la Terre*: Selene-Company Limited (Paris: J. Hetzel, [1888]), p. 327).
 23. Benjamin Morgan, 'Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets', *Victorian Studies*, 58: 1 (2016), 609-35 (609).
 24. Bennett, p. 53.
 25. William Morris, *The Story of the Glittering Plain: Which Has Been Also Called the Land of Living Men or the Acre of the Undying* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1904), 97. Subsequent citations are to this edition and appear parenthetically by page number within the body of the text.
 26. Morris, CW, XVIII, p. 285.
 27. William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), p. 1. Subsequent citations are to this edition and appear parenthetically by page number within the body of the text.
 28. Boos, p. 42.
 29. Morris, CW, XXII, p. 170.
 30. William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World* (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2001), pp. 17, 31. Subsequent citations are to this edition and appear parenthetically by page number within the body of the text.

31. Patrick O'Sullivan, “‘Morris the Red, Morris the Green’ – A Partial Review”, *JWMS* 19: 3 (2011), 22–38 (23).
32. Mayer, p. 70.
33. Agathocleous, pp. 87–89, 69.
34. Morris, *CW*, XIX, p. 50.
35. *Ibid.*, XIX, p. 68.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, XIX, p. 83.
38. Silver, p. 179.
39. Hodgson, p. 191.
40. Morris, *CW*, VIII, p. xxviii.
41. *Ibid.*, VIII, p. xvii.
42. Wendy Parkins, “‘Almost as Good as Iceland on a Small Scale’: William Morris’s ‘Icelandic Imaginary’ at Home”, *JWMS*, 21: 1 (2014), 9–21 (14).
43. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
44. Bennett, p. 56.
45. Patrick Brantlinger, “‘News From Nowhere’: Morris’s Socialist Anti-Novel”, *Victorian Studies*, 19: 1 (1975), 35–49 (41).
46. Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (London: Methuen and Co., 1970), p. 2.
47. Gagnier, p. 22.
48. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Imperative to Re-Imagine the Planet’, in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 335–349 (338).
49. While the otherness of Icelandic culture – its difference from the modern English way of life – was important to Morris, Norse literature was also ‘familiar’, because of an assumed racial affinity. In the preface to his translation of the *Völsunga Saga*, for instance, Morris wrote, ‘[f]or this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks’ (*CW*, VII, p. 286).
50. Morris, *CW*, XXIII, p. 61.
51. Norman Talbot, “‘Whilom as Tells the Tale’: the Language of the Prose Romances”, *JWMS*, 8: 2 (1989), 16–26 (18).
52. Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition: The Victorian New World Order* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2009), p. 110.
53. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 529.