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"To See Bigly and Kindly": Dialogue and Dialectic in the Political Discourse of William Morris[1]

The reputation of William Morris as Victorian England's "idle singer of an empty day" has finally been refuted by a wide-range of cross-disciplinary scholarship. His relevance to our own era's concern with social, environmental, and aesthetic issues has already been demonstrated by his adherents. Far less attention has been given, however, to his sensitive understanding of, and attention to, the nature of political discourse as a communicative process.

Although Morris's political writings have emerged from the shadows of critical opprobrium, aided no doubt by academia's general privileging of the Left and by critical theory's redefining of the literary text, critics have considered few texts beyond the works more consciously construed as literary, *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*. The challenge of reconsidering Morris's socialist writings for their estimable aesthetic qualities has been initiated by Florence Boos's and Carole Silver's *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris* (1990). Their project has been a more recent validation of two early assessments of Morris's political writings; one from the infamously hyperbolic G. B. Shaw, who claimed in 1936 that "Morris's writings about Socialism. . .really called up all his mental reserves for the first time" ("Morris as I Knew Him," *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist,* xxxvi), and one from Raymond Williams remarking in 1961 that "Morris is a fine political writer. . .and it is on that, finally, that his reputation will rest" (*Culture and Society*, 156).

Such assessments can only be verified by continued consideration of all Morris's political writings between 1883 and his death in 1896. The goal of such an enterprise need not be merely to reshape the Morris canon. It should stimulate more attentive and open analyses of the kinds of rhetorical strategies Morris employed in his role as a political rhetorician, foregrounding Morris's knowledge of the rhetorical process, as well as establishing the potential artistic and literary value of many of these politically persuasive texts.

Morris's lectures constitute a large portion of such texts, but little attention has been given to other more "literary" vehicles Morris utilized for his rhetorical purposes. Morris wrote, for example, a "socialist interlude," entitled *The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened*, an early form of agit-prop. The play reveals an uncharacteristically light and satiric vein in Morris's prose. Through it, nonetheless, he rearticulated his characteristic critique of capitalism with its ironic sense of justice as well as his utopian vision of socialist society (Wiens, 16-21). But the dramatic entertainment was not Morris's only alternative mode of persuasion.

In November of 1887 and January of 1889, the Socialist League's journal, *The Commonweal*, printed two "Dialogues by William Morris." These dialogues propose the intriguing possibility that Morris's discursive strategies in the cause of British socialism were—despite what readers may expect of politically persuasive prose—not wholly eristic. In choosing the dialogue as a frame for the arguments he articulates in the first case against monopoly as theft and in the second against Whiggery as ineffective politics, Morris demonstrated a sensitivity to the social function of discourse. His choices affirmed, like social constructionists after him, the basic cooperative nature of all communication.

The generic label of these two texts raises particular methodological concerns. The words "dialogue" and "dialogic" are unfortunately loaded in current critical practice, often connoting the kind of multi-vocal discourse described in the heavily exercised works of Mikhail Bakhtin. Given a broader rhetorical context, however, the dialogue implies a *method* of discourse which constitutes "an ongoing exchange of inherently