

PART IV

NECESSITY AND DESIRE



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#### *I The Interpreters*

MR R PAGE ARNOT opened his *Vindication* of William Morris (1934) with Lenin's words.

"During the lifetime of great revolutionaries the oppressing classes have invariably meted out to them relentless persecution and received their teaching with the most savage hostility, most furious hatred and a ruthless campaign of slanders. After their death, however, attempts are usually made to turn them into harmless saints, canonizing them, as it were, and investing their name with a certain halo while at the same time emasculating and vulgarizing the real essence of their revolutionary theories and blunting their revolutionary edge"<sup>1</sup>

Morris, during his lifetime, had been the victim of every kind of sneer and attack. His speeches had been suppressed and misquoted. He had been accused of half-heartedness ("We believe that Mr Morris contributes 1s a week towards enlightening the world as to the aims of the Social-Democratic Federation . . . Not much is to be apprehended from contributions of these amounts . . .")<sup>2</sup> and of carrying the movement in his pocket. He had been accused of insincerity in remaining a "capitalist", and of unpractical idealism—an innocent among dangerous men ("He has allied himself with a body with the aims of which, we must charitably suppose, he is only in imperfect sympathy. . . . He has pitched his theories of life too high"<sup>3</sup>) After the first year or two, he allowed these attacks to pass in silence, unless some public principle was involved. "Thanks", he wrote wearily to Walter Crane, who had drawn a particularly venomous onslaught to his attention, "but I'm afraid it is not worth the wear and tear, as I am so busy, to answer. Ignorance of this very gross sort defeats itself; one would have to begin with

<sup>1</sup> Lenin, *State and Revolution*, Chapter I

<sup>2</sup> *Echo*, October 8th, 1884.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, October 1st, 1884.

protoplasms in order to argue with it."<sup>1</sup> While he was alive, his example gave the lie to the direct falsehoods, his activity dispelled the deliberate silence. But, once his life had ended, Lenin's words received striking confirmation.

Already, in 1894, when Aymer Vallance approached him for permission to write his biography (and expressed a desire to avoid polemic), Morris had stipulated that no account could be satisfactory that did not give prominence to his Socialist views.<sup>2</sup> Vallance kept to his promise, and when he published his biography in 1897 he included a chapter, fair and outspoken, on Morris's work in the movement. Moreover, he pointed out the character of the first "Morris myth"—fostered by the orthodox middle-class philistines—as it was exemplified in the obituary notices in the English Press.

"They . . . might . . . be divided into two main classes, viz, those who for hatred of his Socialism would not allow William Morris any particular credit, but affected a high disdain of the man and his work in general, and those . . . who kept the unpalatable fact as far as they could in the background, referring to it as a mere episode . . . a weakness to which he unfortunately succumbed . . . who was otherwise a very excellent and gifted man."<sup>3</sup>

The characterization is accurate. Vallance's words might be strengthened, but they cannot be questioned.

Thereafter the "interpretation" of William Morris has taken many forms. The articles, books and pamphlets written around his name in the past fifty-odd years run into several hundreds. In 1899 Dr J. W. Mackail published the standard biography. It is a solid, late-Victorian work, built to last—free from most of the vices of a "shoddy age", and with genuine insight and humanity. In some ways Morris was fortunate. A very much poorer biography might well have been written, and there can be no doubt that Mackail had a profound admiration for Morris's genius. As the son-in-law of "Georgie" Burne-Jones he was the "official" biographer, and he had access to family papers and to the correspondence of Morris with "Georgie" which now is destroyed. Unfortunately, Mackail's virtues blinded two generations of readers to his weaknesses. His hostility to revolutionary

<sup>1</sup> Walter Crane, *An Artist's Reminiscences* (1907), p. 253

<sup>2</sup> Vallance, *op cit*, p. 305

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*



Socialism was so great that he was not above mild tampering with quotations when it suited him (see Appendix IV, p. 886). He tended to present Morris's Socialism as a rather mild educational form of the disease, and he gave form to the "personality" interpretation of the "Split," and to the view that Morris turned his back on militant Socialism after leaving the League. On the other hand—and despite these lapses—Mackail's honesty, his readiness to allow Morris to speak for himself, should put several contemporary biographers to shame. His book deserved to stand the test of time, and will never be completely replaced.

After Mackail, the deluge. Writing in the year of his book's publication two of Morris's younger acquaintances in the artistic movement, Robert Steele and W. R. Lethaby,<sup>1</sup> pronounced

"There was . . . nothing modern or scientific about Morris's Socialism. He turned to the Middle Ages, because what he detested did not then exist, but he never formulated a scientific scheme of Socialism. Indeed, it is doubtful if he can be called a Socialist at all . . ." <sup>2</sup>

With a flourish of the pen, Morris's long hours of study, his painstaking lectures and articles, are made to vanish into thin air! Morris, they discovered, was *really* an individualist. The bourgeoisie could almost be heard to breathe a collectivist sigh of relief. If *that* was all he was, then it was safe to keep his books in the drawing-room—especially the ones with nice bindings. By 1919 Max Beer was able (in his *History of British Socialism*) to find Morris's influence "still active", not only among Guild Socialists, but in "the Church Socialist League, and literary men who are inclined towards Socialism, like Clutton Brock and John Drinkwater".<sup>3</sup> G. K. Chesterton next discovered that Morris was "a very great Distributist. There seems to be a curious idea prevalent that he was a Socialist. Indeed, it was so prevalent that he was partly deceived by it himself."<sup>4</sup> Fair enough—Chesterton's tongue was in his cheek. But, with two

<sup>1</sup> Morris was associated with W. R. Lethaby, the architect, in the "Anti-Scrape." Robert Steele was a medieval scholar, and Morris wrote a Preface to his *Medieval Lore*, an edition of Bartholomew's *Property of Things*.

<sup>2</sup> *Quarterly Review*, October, 1899.

<sup>3</sup> Max Beer, *History of British Socialism* (1940 Edn.), p. 258.

<sup>4</sup> In *Appreciations*, published by the Walthamstow Antiquarian Society on the occasion of the Morris Centenary, 1934.

or three little-noticed exceptions, no one took the trouble to come forward, with Morris's own writings in hand, to show what he really *was*. The true picture of Morris was fading as fast as his own murals on the walls of the Oxford Union had done before.

By 1934, the Centenary of his birth, it was possible to bury him with full political honours. Indeed, judging from the number of public men who associated themselves with the celebration, he might almost have *been* a Buluwayo Burglar. Stanley Baldwin himself delivered the funeral oration. Morris had been a "great, glorious, jolly human being", said Baldwin, and he had left a "legacy of beauty".<sup>1</sup> Many another public throat distended to utter the same public platitudes. As William Blake had once put it—

"He smiles with condescension, he talks of Benevolence and Virtue,  
And those who act with Benevolence and Virtue they murder time  
on time "

Indeed, there can have been little surprise when, in 1936, Morris published his last book. It was entitled "*From Heavenly Spheres* A book written by Inspiration from William Morris, Poet, Socialist and Idealist". In forty years of heavenly meditation, Morris's views had undergone some modification. The book included advice for the movement ("Never start a meeting of any kind without prayer for guidance"), some very free verse, and—above all—Morris's considered views on "The True Socialism".

"Try smiling at the ones who need a smile. Those who cover their own sorrow by giving out sympathy to others are the only ones who dare call themselves Socialist in the eyes of God. Never wear a frown, for when on your face a light doth shine, oft it lifts a soul to God. A smile means everything. ."<sup>2</sup>

## *II Mr Attlee's Prophet*

Morris's memory had, meanwhile, passed through many vicissitudes in the Socialist and Labour movement. So great was the love for him among every section of the movement on his death,

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, February 10th, 1934

<sup>2</sup> *From Heavenly Spheres, etc*, written through the medium, May Hughes (Rider & Co, 1936)

that it was only natural that tributes should come from every side, and that efforts should be made to keep his inspiration alive. The first "William Morris Labour Church" was founded, on the initiative of the architect Larnier Sugden, in Leek, Staffordshire (where Morris had studied dyeing in 1876), in the year after his death. Others were soon to follow. Blatchford's Clarion Fellowship paid honour to his memory, and the phrase from *The Dream of John Ball*—"Fellowship is Life and the lack of Fellowship is Death"—was ever to the fore in the early I.L.P. Later, the Socialist Sunday School movement sang Morris's Chants, gave readings from *News from Nowhere*, and prepared special lesson notes on his life.

The thousands who took part in these activities paid tributes which were sincere and deeply felt. And yet, at times, their tributes were abused. Bruce Glasier, in the 1900s, was touring the country in a battered hat and old cloak, the self-appointed disciple of William Morris—the prophet, the idealist, the man who saw Visions. Glasier and other reformist leaders of the I.L.P. subtracted from Morris his *Commonweal* writings, his political lectures, *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*—in a word, all his revolutionary theory—and then held up a thing which they called "Fellowship" made up of some good anecdotes and a hasty reading of *News from Nowhere* and his poems. Certainly, there was real moral fervour among the rank and file of the I.L.P. and early Labour Party, and its fire was often kindled by Morris's writings. But when men like Glasier and Philip Snowden spoke of "Fellowship" they implied that moral fervour (under their leadership) was *enough*, that Morris's "Fellowship" and Marx's scientific theory must somehow be *opposed* to each other and incompatible.<sup>1</sup> When they spoke of Morris's influence as being "British", or "empirical", or "humanitarian", their intention was to distract attention from Morris's real principles, the real sources of his moral indignation—his understanding of the class struggle, his hatred of imperialism and war. And by leading the movement into the paths of class-collaboration, they both turned their

<sup>1</sup> See P. Snowden, *An Autobiography* (1934), p. 63. Snowden quotes Glasier's anecdote of Morris and "Marx's theory of value," and concludes complacently "The early Socialist Movement derived its inspiration far more from the Sermon on the Mount than from the teachings of the economists."

backs upon Morris and went the speediest way to corrupt the very "Fellowship" that was on their lips

Meanwhile other sections of the movement had paid their tributes. On his death the S.D.F. claimed Morris's memory with most justice but Hyndman, when reprinting his *Justice* article for May Day, 1896, excised the passages which struck most directly at imperialism, and later, as might have been expected, he cooked up a story which was a complete travesty of the Split.<sup>1</sup> It was also to be expected that the Anarchists would stake a claim.<sup>2</sup> It was *not* to be expected that the Fabians would do so—certainly not until a decent period had elapsed and yet Shaw, only a week after Morris's death, shamelessly caricatured the Socialist League, and claimed without a blush that Morris "practically adopted the views of the Fabian Society as to how the change would come about."<sup>3</sup> But none of these claims were pressed with persistency or vigour. Hyndman had his own reasons for neglecting Morris's memory, and Bax, who had become—by 1900—a staunch Hyndmanite, put up little resistance. The Anarchists and Fabians, equally, knew that they were on unsteady ground. And by 1910, when the tide of revolutionary Socialism was rising once again, many of the younger militants knew little of Morris's revolutionary theory, and while they honoured his example they were ignorant of the storehouse of English Marxism in his work. At the end of the First Great War Bruce Glasier's I.L.P. myth was in possession of the field.

In the years between the wars Morris became ticketed and fell quietly into place in the card-index of the public mind. "Victorian", "Pre-Raphaelite", "the Firm", "wall-paper", "espoused the cause of the people"—these phrases "placed" him. His Socialism was generally understood to be little more than advanced democratic sentiments, given unusually practical

<sup>1</sup> *How I Became a Socialist, etc.*, by William Morris, with *Some Account of His Connection with the Social-Democratic Federation* by H. M. Hyndman (1896), Hyndman, *Record of an Adventurous Life* (1911), pp. 358–60.

<sup>2</sup> See *Freedom*, October, 1896, *The Spur*, January, 1916

<sup>3</sup> *Clarion*, October 10th, 1896. Shaw, referring to the Socialist League, described Morris as "letting himself be sponged upon unmercifully by all sorts of futile people, from drunken tinkers, dramatically conscious of themselves as victims of society, to revolutionary young men sowing their political wild oats."

expression, combined with medieval nostalgia and a Ruskinian hang-over <sup>1</sup> The *Commonweal* became a collector's item, and its pages began to turn yellow in libraries visited only by the research student. The way was clear for the resurrection of Morris in the guise of an innocent and rather boring angel

Many hands have taken part in this work of resurrection. But one recent portrait of Morris is so thorough and "authoritative" that it cannot be passed over without particular mention. Here is the finished effect

"The common view of Morris is that he was a great and noble poet and craftsman overflowing with humanity, a fine gentleman who loved the meanest labourers . . . a man who gave from his own funds to those who were in need, and who spent the best years of his life in organizing the workers of Britain for the time when they might know 'equality of condition' This is true of him and his Socialism. But to many modern workers he has been made to appear as a man who was in active and violent revolt against the capitalistic government, a man who, had the Revolution occurred, would have been found marching in the vanguard of the revolutionists, among the red flags and the clubs and the bayonets of the proletariat . . . a man who favoured action and violence, a man who believed that the State—that all-powerful capitalistic factotum—owed to the workers the satisfaction of all their economic wants . . . else there would be no equality. These latter views . . . are not true "

On the contrary, this is what Morris *really* meant by Socialism .

"It was, in brief, a doctrine of give and take—of sportsmanship and of fellowship—that Morris urged upon the workers of Britain. Morris was a Socialist only in the etymological sense of believing that man must become a social animal. Yet social-mindedness did not exclude, in his system, individual qualities. Rather, he felt, individual qualities would tend to be encouraged by freedom of enterprise in working for the common weal, especially with sportsmanlike praise and friendly rivalry serving as the incentive to make men face work gladly . . . This is why he advocated a basic but gradual revolution in the very foundations of society . . . looking towards a Golden Age to

<sup>1</sup> See G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century and After* (1937), p. 403. "The idealism which was abhorrent to the true Marxian materialist was upheld by the poet and artist William Morris, whose Socialism in the pleasant *News from Nowhere* was partly a continuation of Ruskin, partly an imaginary vision of what the Middle Ages might have been like without the Church. It is a rebellion hardly more against capitalism than against the ugliness of modern city life. It looks as much backwards as forwards, as much to art and beauty as to politics."

come when emphasis would be placed upon good, honest work, beauty, simplicity, romance, fellowship, and equality for men"

This portrait comes at the end of a volume originally put together by an American student, Mr. Lloyd Eric Grey, for a doctorate at Princeton University, and first published in England in 1949 under the title *William Morris Prophet of England's New Order*<sup>1</sup> Although there are still survivals to-day of the old myth which virtually ignores the importance of Morris's Socialism while showing genuine love for his work as designer,<sup>2</sup> Mr. Grey's book, coinciding with the arrival of the "Welfare State", signalized the establishment of a watery version of the I L P. myth as the official myth of the land. "Class struggle was abhorrent to Morris", writes Mr Grey.<sup>3</sup> "He held a strong aversion to all Eastern influences", and a "preference for Western . . . culture".<sup>4</sup> "Morris's ideas were innately English . . . Hyndman, on the other hand, wanted Marxism."<sup>5</sup> Morris's interpretation of history was "similar" to that of Benedetto Croce—Morris believing that "artistic causes and effects" took "precedence over all others".<sup>6</sup> Morris's *Commonweal* writings, which Mackail had previously dismissed as exhibiting "the vices of journalism", Mr. Grey sums up in one paragraph which is a devastating revelation either of ignorance or of dishonesty.

"The important thing is that Morris did not, in any of these writings, attempt to define Social Revolution in words other than those employed by him in 'How We Live and How We Might Live' . . . in which he said . . . it means 'a change in the basis of society' that will make of individual and social needs a co-operative enterprise with the machinery both of industry and of government decentralized for the attainment of a happier, a more equitable and more beautiful world, with all development programmes based upon sound historical knowledge and healthy mental and physical programmes"

Morris, we discover, was a kind of low-powered Babbitt

Enquiries initiated by Mr. Grey in 1936 had elicited a rather startled reply from Mr. J S. Middleton, then Secretary of the

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in New York (Scribner's, 1940), under the title *A Victorian Rebel The Life of William Morris*, by Lloyd Wendell Eshleemann

<sup>2</sup> See Esther Meynell, *Portrait of William Morris* (1947)

<sup>3</sup> L E Grey, *op cit*, p 254

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 322

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p 226

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p 175

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p 255

Labour Party, in which he had given a green light for this official canonization of William Morris. Mr. Middleton wrote that,

"while he 'had never associated Morris's activities with those of Transport House', nevertheless he could find himself 'able to suppose' that 'we [i.e. Transport House and the Labour Party] are historical heirs to his activities'."<sup>1</sup>

His confidence in Mr. Grey was not misplaced. His book represents the fruition of two generations of the "explaining-away" of Morris's evolutionary standpoint. In his own voluminous bibliography, Mr. Grey has occasion to note of one work that it is "One of the most pretentious and least accurate studies ever made under the guise of scholarly procedure", and of another that it is "not only unsound at the core, but illustrates almost every vice of superficial scholarship". It is unfortunate that Mr. Grey did not reflect upon these words before bringing his own book before the public.

Mr. Grey's book might be dismissed as just another American doctorate hacked up for publication and tailored to meet the climate of cold war had it not been given such an uncritical welcome in sections of the British Press, had it not found its way into most public libraries as a "definitive" work on Morris's Socialism, and had it not been so well suited to the platform performances of Mr. Attlee. "Mr. Grey", declared *The Times Literary Supplement*, "leaves nothing material unnoticed. . . . He has perceived Morris's rare and splendid wholeness."<sup>2</sup> But there was no excuse for this uncritical reception of a book which could only travesty the facts by belittling Mackail<sup>3</sup> and by rejecting all the canons of scholarship. In 1934 Mr. Page Arnot had published his *Vindication*, which in thirty masterly pages pointed to the main sources and revealed the essentials of Morris's revolutionary position. In the same year Professor

<sup>1</sup> L. E. Grey, *op cit*, p. 356. For a fuller discussion of Mr. Grey and the "Morris myth", see my article, "The Murder of William Morris", *Arena*, April-May, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, October 14th, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> In his bibliography, Mr. Grey cites the biography of Dr. J. W. Mackail, and comments "Which, by the way, is valuable mainly for its treatment of Morris's classical translations and his travels."

G. D. H. Cole edited the *Nonesuch* edition of Morris's writings, making available to a wide audience a selection of Morris's more important lectures on art and Socialism while in 1936 May Morris's supplementary volume to the *Collected Works* and (1946) the late Mr Holbrook Jackson's further selection of lectures *On Art and Socialism* left the serious reader no room for doubt as to the bases of Morris's outlook. Finally, in 1950, there has been published Mr Philip Henderson's selection from Morris's letters which (despite misunderstandings in the Introduction) has brought the real man back before a wide public.

Notwithstanding all this, the "Morris myth" still flourishes to-day as vigorously as ever. Morris is too great a man to ignore. somehow he must be explained away, excused, or made use of by the reformists for their purposes. To-day there are three distinct attitudes to Morris which are widely prevalent. First, there is the old school, comprised in the main of persons of artistic attainments in the older generation who show genuine respect for his memory, and who seek loyally to further his work in the decorative arts and in the preservation of our architectural heritage, but who keep all reference to his revolutionary convictions (except in the most generalized and sentimental way) in the background. For this school Morris always had some sympathy in his lifetime, and—so long as its members show genuine hatred of philistinism and continue their defence of our artistic heritage—they are carrying on a part of Morris's work.

A second "school", among younger intellectuals, regard Morris with bored condescension or even open contempt. His "poems were like wallpapers",<sup>1</sup> and his wall-papers were "Victorian". His medievalism was ridiculous, and his Socialism was medieval. He is a period study and his ideas were child-like and offer no aid in the intellectual conflicts of to-day. In part, this attitude results from superficial knowledge, combined with the legitimate contemporary reaction against the later phases of romanticism; in part it is generated by that "Manichean hatred

<sup>1</sup> When this comment was first made by G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1920), p. 197, it was witty and to the point. It has since been worked to death by many who have scarcely read Morris's poetry. For examples of contemporary attitudes to Morris, see John Heath Stubbs, *The Darkling Plain* (1950), P. N. Furbank, *Samuel Butler* (1948), pp. 85-8, and R. D. Macleod, *Morris Without Mackail* (1954).



of the world" which Morris saw arising as early as 1881 (see p. 278), that preoccupation with "guilt" and "sin" and intellectual self-questionings, that lack of confidence in man's life and in human ambitions which has become a part of the intellectual climate of a class in decline—"the enemies of beauty and the slaves of necessity". This attitude represents less a conscious criticism of Morris than the instinctive negative reaction of a dying culture, with its eclecticism, barren complexities, and fear of life. It is an attitude which cannot usefully be met either with argument or denunciations. It must be met with a positive antidote, a rebirth of "hope". And what better antidote is there than the real message of Morris himself in his last years?

For the third school, however, there can be nothing but exposure and contempt. It is the school of ignorant carpet-baggers and hypocrites—the school of those who *use* Morris's name for their own purposes, when those purposes are such as would have aroused his own unmeasured opposition. It is made up of men who either have not bothered to read Morris's writings, or who—having read them—consciously suppress their content. We have met the theorist of the school in Mr. Lloyd Eric Grey. Its apostles include all the pillars of Transport House. But its leading disciple is Mr. Clement Attlee himself. He has adopted this role, it seems, less because he calls himself a "Socialist" than because he is connected with Walthamstow, where Morris was born. In the last few years in the House of Commons, at official ceremonies, on the public platform in many parts of the country, Mr. Attlee has never ceased from invoking Morris's name. The heckler, the disquieted audience, the rising movement of the rank and file—throw William Morris and a word on "Fellowship" to them as a sop, and then perhaps the moment of danger will pass. Critics of reformism are "materialists". remember William Morris's "visions". Those who uphold international solidarity are "foreign agents" remember the "English Socialism" of William Morris. So Morris's memory has been reduced to a stock cliché in the politicians' repertoire, until in the place of the real man in his blue serge and with his craftsman's hands, patiently explaining the class struggle to a group in the Sunday street, we are faced with such visions as that of Mr. Attlee, in the ceremonial evening uniform of the capitalist class (a uniform which

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Morris so much detested<sup>1</sup>), explaining at a banquet of the same Royal Academy which Morris despised—that the Labour Party “owes more” to Morris than to Marx

If Mr Attlee has been allowed to continue in this way unchallenged by scholars and historians, his behaviour has not passed entirely unnoticed. For example, in June, 1950, after he had been telling the usual story in Walthamstow itself, a letter appeared in the local Press.

“Mr Attlee’s statement about William Morris and the Labour Party will not bear a moment’s examination. Will Mr Attlee tell us the difference between Socialism and Communism? Morris knew of none, they were the same to him. Morris writes ‘Between complete Socialism and Communism there is no difference whatever in my mind. Communism is in fact the completion of Socialism, when that ceases to be militant and becomes triumphant, it will be Communism.’”<sup>2</sup>

Not only did this writer take the unusual course of actually quoting from Morris’s neglected writings—he had another claim to authority as well. His name was Mr. Ambrose Barker—a founder of the Stratford Dialectical Association in 1881 (see p. 330), and a founder-member of the Socialist League, still, at the age of ninety-one, vigorous of mind and loyal to Morris’s memory. “I doubt whether Mr Attlee has read any of Morris’s Socialist writings”, continued Mr Barker. “I knew Morris fairly intimately from the early ’eighties down to within a year or so before his death. His contempt for the careerist politician was great.”

Mr. Attlee (as might have been expected) was too busy at his public work to reply to this letter. After all, it is fine to arouse a glow of loyalty by invoking “the pioneers” from the platform—and inconsiderate of them not to be dead!

### *III Architecture, Machinery and Socialism*

Not all the interpreters of Morris have been of the calibre of Mr. Lloyd Eric Grey. There has been a minority who have studied Morris’s writings carefully, and have set forward more serious criticisms of his theories. It has been suggested, for example, that

<sup>1</sup> Almost the only occasion when Morris wore a dress suit in his last years was at a reception at Walter Crane’s

<sup>2</sup> *Walthamstow Guardian*, June 9th, 1950

Morris never shook free from the errors of Pre-Raphaelitism in his artistic theories, that his medievalism must be corrected in the light of more recent historical and architectural research; and that he had an Utopian hatred of machinery and love of handicrafts which vitiates his Socialist thinking. Such serious objections as these can only be considered within the context of his theories as a whole.

First, it should be said that Morris, while capable of severe intellectual discipline, was unfamiliar with the development of European philosophy, and weak in analytic logic. The bases of his theories are revealed in the process of historical and descriptive exposition, rather than schematically in any single book or lecture, and they must be reconstructed from many scattered references. We have already seen (see p. 64 f.) how profoundly Morris was influenced as a young man by John Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic", and how he was later forced to develop Ruskin's theories to justify his own actions in the early years of the Anti-Scrape (pp. 273). These theories were brought to their conclusion in 1883 or 1884, after his reading of *Capital* and his active participation in the Socialist movement, and—in the several dozen lectures and articles written from that time to his death—he altered them in no important principle.

These theories were developed, from origin to conclusion, in relation to the architectural and associated arts (among which Morris sometimes included the art of painting, as well as the lesser decorative arts), and Morris scarcely attempted to apply them in detail to the "intellectual" arts. Unless this point is born in mind throughout, serious misunderstanding results. Morris himself was often at pains to make this distinction. "Art" meant, to him, the *visual* arts, and the popular arts "might all be summed up in that one word Architecture"

"They are all parts of that great whole, and the art of house-building begins it all: if we did not know how to dye or to weave, if we had neither gold, nor silver, nor silk, and no pigments to paint with . . . we might yet frame a worthy art that would lead to everything, if we had but timber, stone, and lime, and a few cutting tools to make these common things not only shelter us from wind and weather, but also express the thoughts and aspirations that stir in us. Architecture would lead us to all the arts . . ."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The Beauty of Life", *Works*, XXII, pp. 73-4.

In a more general sense, he distinguished the Intellectual and the Decorative arts. the first "addresses itself wholly to our mental needs", the second is always "but a part of things which are intended primarily for the service of the body".

"In all times when the arts were in a healthy condition there was an intimate connexion between the two kinds of art. The highest intellectual art was meant to please the eye as well as to excite the emotions and train the intellect. It appealed to all men, and to all the faculties of a man. On the other hand, the humblest of the ornamental art shared in the meaning and emotion of the intellectual. the best artist was a workman still, the humblest workman was an artist. This is not the case now—"

and the sharp division between the professional "artist" and the wage-earning workman was one of the sources of his ever-welling indignation against industrial capitalism <sup>1</sup>

His theory of the architectural arts was firmly based upon those sections of "The Nature of Gothic" which described the relationship of the medieval craftsman to his society and to the tradition. Modern scholars, in questioning the view widely held in the mid-nineteenth century of the "anonymity" of medieval architecture, have sometimes claimed to have undermined the position of Ruskin and Morris. In fact, they have only shorn their theory of certain romantic overtones, while leaving the essential position unchallenged. "A man at work", wrote Morris—

"making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the men of past ages guide his hands; and, as a part of the human race, he creates. If we work thus we shall be men, and our days will be happy and eventful" <sup>2</sup>

Not only does he create "as a part of the human race", but as a member of a definite society, with its own local traditions, its own conditions of labour and social commands, and we have seen how Morris, in successive lectures to the Anti-Scrape, examined these conditions in medieval society, and the gradual destruction of the creative initiative of the craftsman in the architectural arts, first in the profit-making workshop, second in developed industrial capitalism (pp. 276 f.). It must be emphasized (since

<sup>1</sup> "Art Under Plutocracy", *ibid*, XXIII, pp. 165-6

<sup>2</sup> "Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil", *Signs of Change*, p. 144

Morris's own repeated emphasis has been ignored or misunderstood by so many commentators) that he did not indict industrialism *as such* for degrading the craftsman to a machine, but capitalism, the production of goods *primarily for profit and not for use*. Indeed, in more than one lecture he referred to the eighteenth-century workshop system as being a blacker and more degrading period for the workman than the factory system of the nineteenth century which at least provided the possibility of the lightening of toil which production for profit, specialization and repetition-work had already rendered hateful and mechanical.

Although based in the first place upon Ruskin, it is untrue to suggest (as a recent critic does) that Morris's views are in the main "the orthodox Ruskinian view of the history of architecture", reiterated without significant development.<sup>1</sup> Rather, we have in the best of these articles and lectures a fusion of Ruskin's finest moments of moral-artistic insight, of Morris's lifetime of historical study, and of the economic and social analysis of Marx. Where Ruskin had jabbed an indignant finger at capitalism and had often (guided by Carlyle's wrath at the "cash-nexus") indicated, in the worship of Mammon, the source of its degradation and horror, Morris was able in page after page of coherent and detailed historical exposition to reveal in the very processes of production, the common economic root both of capitalist exploitation and of the corruption of art. Where Ruskin had proceeded by intuition, and had made his points by means of metaphor and contrast, Morris was able to lay bare the actual truth.

Morris knew perfectly well that there had been exploitation of a vicious kind in feudal, as well as in capitalist, society. Therefore, he was at pains to explain (with great attention to the details of the productive process) how it was that feudal society was compatible with the "freedom" of the craftsman *as craftsman*, and with the flourishing of the architectural arts. "The ancient buildings of the Middle Ages", he wrote many times, were "the work of the associated labour and thought of the *people*, the result of a chain of tradition unbroken from the earliest ages".<sup>2</sup> "There is not an ancient city in the East or West", he declared.

<sup>1</sup> Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (1949), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> May Morris, I, p. 189.

"that does not bear some token of their grief, and joy, and hope. From Ispahan to Northumberland, there is no building built between the seventh and seventeenth centuries that does not show the influence of the labour of that oppressed and neglected herd of men. No one of them, indeed, rose high above his fellows. There was no Plato, or Shakespeare, or Michael Angelo amongst them. Yet scattered as it was among many men, how strong their thought was, how long it abided, how far it travelled!"<sup>1</sup>

The State, then as now, was based on robbery, which "was carried out quite crudely, without any concealment or excuse, by arbitrary taxation or open violence".<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, he suggested, the medieval craftsmen—

"worked shorter hours than we do . . . and had more holidays. They worked deliberately and thoughtfully as all artists do. The unspoiled country came up to their very doors. All their work depended on their own skill of hand and invention, and never failed to show signs of that in its beauty and fitness."<sup>3</sup>

Like Carlyle he stressed that feudal bonds were "theoretically at least, personal rights and personal duties" and not the impersonal bonds of the commercial market. More of the co-operative ethic was to be found in feudal society than in capitalist, and (again in theory) usury, forestalling, and regrating were offences against the law.<sup>4</sup>

Under such conditions the labour of the mason, weaver and smith was a source of interest and pleasure to himself, and the product of his labour was fitting and beautiful. With capitalist production,

"the creation of surplus value being the one aim of the employers of labour, they cannot for a moment trouble themselves as to whether the work which creates that surplus value is pleasurable to the worker or not. In fact in order to get the greatest amount possible of surplus value out of the work . . . it is absolutely necessary that it should be done under such conditions as make . . . a mere burden which nobody would endure unless upon compulsion."<sup>5</sup>

The system of wage-slavery, crowned by the industrial revolution,

<sup>1</sup> "The Art of the People", *Works*, XXII, pp. 31-2

<sup>2</sup> "The Hopes of Civilization", *Signs of Change*, p. 86

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, May Supplement, 1885

<sup>4</sup> *Signs of Change*, pp. 86 f

<sup>5</sup> *Commonweal*, June Supplement, 1885

destroyed both the attractiveness of labour for the craftsman and the beauty of the product,

"by lengthening the hours of labour by intensifying the labour during its continuance, by the forcing of the workmen into noisy, dirty crowded factories, by the aggregation of the population into cities and manufacturing districts . . . by the levelling of all intelligence and excellence of workmanship by means of machinery . . . All this is the exact contrary of the conditions under which the spontaneous art of past ages was produced"<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, by destroying the attractiveness of labour, capitalism lays on the backs of the workers one more burden too intolerable to be borne. It was necessary that the medieval craftsmen, struggling against their oppressors, "should struggle upwards till they formed a middle-class and created commerce with its proletariat doomed to ceaseless unattractive dull labour. . . . Nevertheless, it is that proletariat only that can make good the claim of workmen to their share of art, without which no art can live long" "The price which commercialism will have to pay for depriving the worker of his share of art will be its own death"<sup>2</sup>

Upon this central historical argument, developed with a wealth of illustration, there hung a hundred further lines of thought. The Renaissance appeared to Morris as the watershed. being at one and the same time the period of the flowering of individual genius from the traditions of the past, and the beginning of the degeneration of that tradition in the architectural arts, and of the division between the workman and the professional artist, the article of use and the "work of art".<sup>3</sup> Fundamental to his outlook, was his view that "neutrality is impossible in man's handiwork". a product must either be actively beautiful or actively ugly; "a house, a knife, a cup, a steam engine . . . anything that is made by man and has form, must either be a work of art or destructive to art".<sup>4</sup> He hated the "utilitarian" economy, not because its products were *useful*, but because "the word instead expresses . . . a quality pretty nearly the opposite of useful, and means something which is useful for nothing save squeezing money out of other people's necessities"<sup>5</sup> The "utilitarian" he saw, in capitalist

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, May Supplement, 1885      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, May Supplement, 1885

<sup>3</sup> See May Morris, II, pp 629-30, I, p 281, *Works*, XXII, pp 56, 389

<sup>4</sup> "The Socialist Ideal in Art", *Works*, XXIII, p 255.

<sup>5</sup> "Makeshift", May Morris, II, p. 474

society, as always the ally of "Makeshift"—the production of shoddy, substitute, *ersatz*; and also of the useless and debased "luxury" articles, stimulated by advertising and an artificially fostered demand. The vast majority of the products of modern industry he placed within one or the other category, with the exception of the machines ("for the making of makeshifts") and "instruments made for the destruction of wealth and the slaughter of man, on which indeed wonderful ingenuity almost amounting to genius is expended" <sup>1</sup>

For Morris, who found both his rest and his satisfaction in his own work, the reduction of labour by capitalism to hateful drudgery appeared as a culminating horror. From Daniel Defoe he borrowed a quotation which he prefixed to one of his lectures:

"And the men of labour spent their strength in daily struggling for bread to maintain the vital strength they labour with so living in a daily circulation of sorrow, living but to work, and working but to live, as if daily bread were the only end of a wearisome life, and a wearisome life the only occasion of daily bread."

He broke sharply with Carlyle's doctrine that "all labour is noble". "It has become an article of the creed of modern morality", he wrote—with a side-glance at the parsons and publicists of "Self-Help"—"that all labour is good in itself—a convenient belief to those who live on the labour of others."<sup>2</sup> "If I were to work ten hours a day at work I despised and hated, I should spend my leisure I hope in political agitation, but I fear—in drinking."<sup>3</sup> From his study of the architectural arts in the Middle Ages he drew his most famous "precepts". First, "Art is Man's expression of his joy in labour".<sup>4</sup> Second, "Nothing should be made by man's labour which is not worth making, or which must be made by labour degrading to the makers".<sup>5</sup> Third, that the only healthy art is "an art which is to be made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user".<sup>6</sup> "I have

<sup>1</sup> "Makeshift", p. 475.

<sup>2</sup> "Useful Work versus Useless Toil", *Signs of Change*, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> "Making the Best of It", *Works*, XXII, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> "Art under Plutocracy", *ibid*, XXIII, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> "Art and Socialism", *ibid*, p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> "The Art of the People", *ibid*, XXII, p. 47.



looked at this claim by the light of history and my own conscience", he declared in one of his best-known passages—

"and it seems to me . . . a most just claim, and that resistance to it means nothing short of the denial of the hope of civilization. This then is the claim *It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do, and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious*. Turn that claim about as I may. I cannot find that it is an exorbitant claim, yet . . . if Society would or could admit it, the face of the world would be changed"<sup>1</sup>

But such a claim, as Morris had discovered several years before he read Marx, was revolutionary: it could not be granted by capitalism. However high-sounding the appeals to "progress" and the "public welfare", Morris detected under each fresh advance of industrial capitalism one sole motive—the extraction of fresh profit, with the accompanying destruction of the beauty of nature and the treasures of the past. "No man of sense and feeling", he wrote, "would dare to regret such losses if they had been paid for by new life, and happiness for the people. But there is the people still as it was before, still facing for its part the monster who destroyed all that beauty, and whose name is Commercial Profit".<sup>2</sup> Opposing the railway to the Lake District, he said "as things go now . . . [it] is not a question of the convenience of the Amblesiders, or the pleasure of the world in general, but the profit of a knot of persons leagued together against the public . . . under the name of a railway company".<sup>3</sup> The slums of Glasgow he described as "a most woeful abode of man, crying out from each miserable court and squalid, crowded house for the abolition of the tyranny of exploitation"<sup>4</sup> So long as the search for profit dominated economic life, so long would that beauty be desecrated which Morris regarded as one of the sources of artistic inspiration:

"Until the contrast is less disgraceful between the fields where beasts live and the streets where men live, I suppose that the practice of the arts must be mainly kept in the hands of a few highly cultivated men . . ."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Art and Socialism", *ibid*, XXIII, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> "The Aims of Art", *Signs of Change*, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, February 25th, 1887.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, July 10th, 1886.

<sup>5</sup> "The Lesser Arts", *Works*, XXII, p. 25.

It might be possible to alleviate the present, to "make the best of it", to restrain and check the ravages of commercialism. A public demand for simple and solid craftsmanship might be fostered even within capitalist society, according to his often-repeated precept: "Have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful."<sup>1</sup> But the tendency of modern commercialism would persist to make, on the one hand, self-conscious objects of ornament for display and not for use too expensive for the working-class to buy without conscious sacrifice: and, on the other hand, to confine those articles of genuine fitness and beauty, produced more by accident than design, to the kitchen. The claim, when phrased in positive terms—

"Every man willing to work should be ensured First, Honourable and fitting work, Second, A healthy and beautiful house, Third, Full leisure for rest of mind and body",<sup>2</sup>

could only be achieved in a Socialist society.

So much of Morris's theories are generally understood: since his death they have had some influence upon middle-class taste and even, to a slight degree, upon industrial design. although this effective influence (in terms of results) is sometimes grossly exaggerated, and as far as the majority of articles consumed by the working class is concerned—from jerry-built houses, to plastic nick-nacks—the indictment, of shoddy, "makeshift" and active ugliness can be justified to the letter. On the other hand, Morris's theories of the future of the architectural and industrial arts in a Socialist society are scarcely understood at all to-day, and must be explained with care.

There is a very widespread opinion, both among those who approve and those who oppose Morris's views, that he was an uncompromising enemy of all machinery as such, and that his chief motive in becoming a Socialist lay in an Utopian desire to return to a society of handicraftsmen—a feudal society, with social equality somehow replacing the feudal hierarchy of class. This view has been fostered in many minds by a reading of *News from Nowhere* unrelated to the conditions of its creation

<sup>1</sup> "The Beauty of Life", *ibid*, p. 76 f

<sup>2</sup> "Art and Socialism", *ibid*, XXIII, p. 210

(see p 802) and to the specific statements on this issue in Morris's other writings.

In fact, Morris makes his views on this matter perfectly clear in his lectures *Capitalism*, not machinery, had reduced the workman to "an appendage of profit-grinding", reducing the mill-hand, for example, to being "as much a part of the factory where he works as any cog-wheel or piece of shafting is". The horror, for Morris, was not in the factory system itself, but in its subjugation to profit-grinding in its working conditions and social organization "The socialization of labour which ought to have been a blessing to the community has been turned into a curse by the appropriation of the products of its labours by individuals."<sup>1</sup> "Our epoch", he said, "has invented machines which would have appeared wild dreams to the men of past ages, and of those machines we have as yet *made no use*."<sup>2</sup> The real *human* use to which machines ought to be put is in the saving of labour. capitalism uses them "to reduce the skilled labourer to the ranks of the unskilled . . . to intensify the labour of those who serve the machines", and to create a growing army of unemployed.<sup>3</sup>

With Socialism the role of machinery is transformed.

"The manufacture of useless goods, whether harmful luxuries for the rich or disgraceful makeshifts for the poor, having come to an end, [we shall still be] in possession of the machines once used for mere profit-grinding but now used for saving human labour."<sup>4</sup>

"In short, we should be the masters of our machines and not their slaves"

"It is not this or that tangible steel and brass machine which we want to get rid of, but the great intangible machine of commercial tyranny which oppresses the lives of all of us"<sup>5</sup>

Not only will machinery be useful in alleviating those forms of heavy and unattractive labour (such as coal-mining) to which (at the time Morris was writing) it had scarcely been seriously

<sup>1</sup> "A Factory as It Might Be", May Morris, II, pp 136 f

<sup>2</sup> "Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil", *Signs of Change*, p 169

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> "A Factory as It Might Be", May Morris, II, pp 136 f.

<sup>5</sup> "Art and Its Producers", *Works*, XXII, p 352

applied, on the grounds that it did not "*pay*": but it will also prove to be the essential instrument for the realization of the new society. In Morris's words, it will,

"when the worker-class, the proletariat, is full grown be the instrument which will make socialism possible by making possible the equalisation of labour as applied to the necessities of life, and will thereby leave open to men the higher field of intellectual effort"<sup>1</sup>

When we are equal, he wrote in one of his last articles, "there will be no fear then of our doing nothing but dry utilitarian work".

"Have we not our wonderful machines to do that for us? . . . What are the said machines about now that the mass of the people should toil and toil without pleasure? They are making profits for their owners, and have no time to save the people from drudgery. When the people are their owners—then we shall see"<sup>2</sup>

Not only would the role of machinery be transformed in Socialist society, but the factory itself

"This very factory system, under a reasonable order of things (though to my mind there might still be drawbacks to it), would at least offer opportunities for a full and eager social life surrounded by many pleasures"

The factory would be a "centre of intellectual activity",<sup>3</sup> and,

"besides turning out goods useful to the community, will provide for its own workers work light in duration, and not oppressive in kind, education in childhood and youth, serious occupation, amusing relaxation . . . leisure . . . beauty of surroundings, and the power of producing beauty which are sure to be claimed by those who have leisure, education and serious occupation"<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, "it may be allowable for an artist, that is one whose ordinary work is pleasant and not slavish, to hope that in no factory will all the work . . . be mere machine-tending".<sup>5</sup> There must be variety of labour as well as leisure.

<sup>1</sup> Lecture at Oldham on "The Depression in Trade" (1885), Brit. Mus. Add. MSS 45330

<sup>2</sup> "As to Bribing Excellence", *Liberty*, May, 1895

<sup>3</sup> "Useful Work versus Useless Toil", *Signs of Change*, p. 166

<sup>4</sup> "A Factory as It Might Be", *May Morris*, II, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

"If the work be specially rough and exhausting . . . I must take turns in doing it with other people; I mean I mustn't, for instance, be expected to spend all my working hours always at the bottom of a coal-pit"<sup>1</sup>

Even repetitive labour would be "made attractive by the consciousness of usefulness":

"It is most certain that labour may be so arranged that no social relations could be more delightful than communion in hopeful work; love, friendship, family affection, might all be quickened by it, joy increased, and grief lightened by it"<sup>2</sup>

But the arduous or boring character of the labour should be born in mind in assessing the social value of the product: and if the product was an inessential and the cost in wearisome labour high, then society would have to do without it. The doing away of "all antagonism between town and country" Morris thought a necessary consequence of Socialism, though the actual way in which this would happen would rest with the future.<sup>3</sup> The factory itself, surrounded by gardens and of pleasant and fitting architecture, would provide facilities not only for technical and liberal education, but for the pursuit of music, drama, and the fine arts. With the death of competition, "no new process, no details of improvements in machinery, would be hidden from the first enquirer", and the high technical knowledge of the workers "would foster a general interest in work and in the realities of life, which would surely tend to elevate labour and create a standard of excellence in manufacture".<sup>4</sup> Finally, it went without saying that a Socialist society would employ its scientific genius in finding means of eliminating smoke and filth, in disposing of rubbish and waste, and in preventing industry from blackening and despoiling the countryside.

This, then, is an exact statement of the position as Morris saw it when he set forward the matter carefully in his political lectures. But he made no bones about the fact that by temperament he had a strong dislike to all machinery, except those primitive kinds which could not perform their work unless the craftsman's

<sup>1</sup> "How We Live and How We Might Live", *Signs of Change*, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> "Why Not?", *Justice*, April 12th, 1884

<sup>3</sup> *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, p. 316

<sup>4</sup> "A Factory as It Might Be", *May Morris*, II, pp. 137 f

"hand was thinking" The intricacies of machinery, the great constructional achievements of the nineteenth century, evoked little response in him, he was not excited by a sense of power or wonder at their potentialities. That this was, in part, a matter of his own background and temperament he recognized.<sup>1</sup> In part, the source of his objection was more profound. As he once declared, "I believe machines can do everything—except make works of art".<sup>2</sup> This reservation he always kept to the fore:

"I believe that the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of men's energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum"<sup>3</sup>

He thought it likely that in the transitional stage of Socialism machinery would be greatly developed: "the reflex of the terror of starvation, which so oppresses us now, would drive us into excesses of utilitarianism".<sup>4</sup>

"For the consolation of artists I will say that I believe indeed that a state of social order would probably lead at first to a great development of machinery for really useful purposes but after a while [people] will find that there is not so much work to do as they expected, and then they will have leisure to reconsider the whole subject, and if it seems to them that a certain industry would be carried on more pleasantly as regards the worker, and more effectually as regards the goods, by using hand-work rather than machinery, they will certainly get rid of their machinery, because it will be possible for them to do so"<sup>5</sup>

In sum, when men have mastered their material needs, "they will doubtless turn themselves and begin to find out what it is they really want to do".<sup>6</sup>

Morris never posed this question as one of practical theoretical importance. He knew perfectly well (despite the persistent misstatements of critics)<sup>7</sup> that.

<sup>1</sup> Lecture, "What Is What Should be What Will Be" (1893) "The most obvious way of using machinery . . . would seem to be to use it for the prevention of drudgery and not otherwise I have a kind of an idea that the time will come when people will rather overdo their hatred of machinery, as perhaps I do now" Brit. Mus Add MSS 45330

<sup>2</sup> "Art and the Beauty of the Earth", *Works*, XXII, p. 166

<sup>3</sup> Review of *Looking Backward*, *Commonweal*, June 22nd, 1889

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Comrade Blackwell, *ibid*, May 18th, 1889

<sup>5</sup> "How We Live and How We Might Live", *Signs of Change*, p. 33

<sup>6</sup> "The Aims of Art", *ibid*, pp. 132 f

<sup>7</sup> For a recent example, see Hough, *op cit*, pp. 102-13

"We cannot turn our people back into Catholic English peasants and Guild craftsmen, or into heathen Norse bonders, much as may be said for such conditions of life"<sup>1</sup>

He saw the matter as a choice to be made after the transitional stage of Socialism, when men might either work greatly reduced hours with improved machinery and satisfy their creative faculties in their *leisure*;<sup>2</sup> or might decide to return to handcrafts in certain fields—textiles, pottery, metal-work, and possibly agriculture<sup>3</sup>—for the pleasure of creating art in their daily labour. When that choice came (as it had already come in *News from Nowhere*) he hoped that men would choose "to keep life simple, to forgo some of the power over nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical, and willing to sacrifice something to this end".<sup>4</sup> Machinery would then be used "for the prevention of drudgery and not otherwise"<sup>5</sup> In no case would it altogether disappear. One is reminded of Shaw's story of accompanying Morris through the Merton Abbey works. Directing attention to a dull and mechanical task he "dared to say". "You should get a machine to do that" "I've ordered one", was Morris's reply.<sup>6</sup>

For true health in the architectural and industrial arts, and for the true satisfaction of the workers, Morris saw no alternative to "the most direct communication between a man's hand and his brain".<sup>7</sup> The machine might produce beautiful and serviceable articles, but they would always remain a "makeshift" for the genuine thing. It may be true that he was too much the pupil of Ruskin, and the child of the Romantic Revolt, to understand the

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 206

<sup>2</sup> This appears to have been Morris's view in his last years. See, for example, his article in *Liberty*, February, 1894, "Why I am a Communist" "A Communal Society would bring about a condition of things in which we should be really wealthy, because we should have all we produced, and should know what we wanted to produce, that we should have so much leisure from the production of what are called 'utilities', that any group of people would have leisure to satisfy its cravings for what are usually looked on as superfluities, such as works of art, research into facts, literature, the unspoiled beauty of nature, matters that to my mind are utilities also."

<sup>3</sup> See "The Aims of Art", *Signs of Change*, p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> "The Society of the Future", May Morris, II, p. 466.

<sup>5</sup> Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45330

<sup>6</sup> *Observer*, November 6th, 1949

<sup>7</sup> "The Aims of Art", *Signs of Change*, p. 136

craftsmanship of (for example) the skilled engineer in modern industry, nor did he envisage to the full the excitement of collective industrial creation, the great construction projects of Socialism. But, once this is granted, we should be foolhardy to dismiss as "romantic" Morris's emphasis upon handicrafts. History in these days moves fast, and has an uncomfortable habit of proving the idealists true and laughing in the face of the cynics and the scoffers. In Britain it seems that the traditions of peasant art are dead—nothing could revive them—short of revolution. But in Asiatic Russia, in China, in all Eastern Europe we are witnessing a popular art that is cherished by the people, and that is reviving and strengthening its hold alongside of the advance of Socialist industry. Twenty years ago even among Socialists and Communists, many must have regarded Morris's picture of "A Factory as It Might Be" as an impractical poet's dream. to-day visitors return from the Soviet Union with stories of the poet's dream already fulfilled<sup>1</sup> Yesterday, in the Soviet Union, the Communists were struggling against every difficulty to build up their industry to the level of the leading capitalist powers to-day they have before them Stalin's blue-print of the advance to Communism

"It is necessary to ensure such a cultural advancement of society as will secure for all members of society the all-round development of their physical and mental abilities, so that the members of society may be in a position to receive an education sufficient to enable them to be active agents of social development, and in a position freely to choose their occupations and not to be tied all their lives, owing to the existing division of labour, to some one occupation . . .

"For this, it is necessary, first of all, to shorten the working day at least to six, and subsequently to five hours. This is needed in order that the members of society might have the necessary free time to receive an all-round education . . . It is likewise necessary that housing conditions should be radically improved . . .

"Only after all these preliminary conditions are satisfied in their entirety may it be hoped that work will be converted in the eyes of the members of society from a nuisance into 'life's prime want' (Marx), that 'labour will become a pleasure instead of a burden' (Engels)"<sup>2</sup>

Thus have the "claims" (see p. 754) of William Morris, the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the article by Mr Andrew Rothstein, "Culture in the Soviet Factory," *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, Spring, 1951

<sup>2</sup> Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U S S R*.



"unpractical" poet, been promised fulfilment' As to the form of labour in Communist society, we may leave the men and women of the future to make that choice, in the confidence that the writings of our great English revolutionary will not be neglected when they make their decisions

#### IV *Theories of Art*

So far we have been concerned with Morris's theories in so far as they relate to the practice of the architectural and allied arts, and the labour of the workman Before leaving these theories, we must enquire how far Morris fashioned a coherent aesthetic—a theory of the nature of art and of its value among other human activities Moreover, we have still to examine his attitude to the "intellectual" arts—painting, literature, drama and music—and to the creative problems of the individual artist

Morris found it difficult to ask himself seriously the question, "Does art have any value?" His own pleasure in creative work was so intense, his appreciation of the work of past ages so great, that he found it difficult to conceive of anyone without an artistic sense. It was, to him, like eyesight, hearing, touch; and the deprivation of thousands of workers of the full development of this sense filled him with rage.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the question was forced upon him, and he attempted to answer it, by describing his own feelings, and by interpreting the past.

On the one hand, there was the Ruskinian formula, "Art is the expression of man's joy in labour" Viewed from this aspect (the satisfaction of the artist or craftsman) Morris regarded art (but the lesser decorative arts in particular) as the pleasurable exercise of physical, intellectual and emotional faculties. He drew a parallel directly from nature.

"The horse in his natural state delights in running, and the dog in hunting, while in the elementary conditions of savage human life, certain ceremonies, and adornments of weapons . . . point to a sense of pleasure and dignity even in the process of the acquisition of food . . . It was from this turning of a necessary work into amusement that definite art was finally born."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Commonweal*, May Supplement, 1885 "For my part, having regard to the general happiness of the race, I say without shrinking that the bloodiest of violent revolutions would be a light price to pay for the righting of this wrong"

<sup>2</sup> *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, pp. 301-2.

As "Barbarism began to give place to early Civilization, this solace of labour fell asunder into duality . . . and art became incidental and accessory on the one side and independent and primary on the other"<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the relationship between the two kinds of art will always persist, and neither can be sick for long without affecting the other

On the other hand, Morris viewed art from a different aspect On several occasions he described the "Reverence for the Life of Man . . . [as] the foundation of all art". On another,

"Art is man's embodied expression of interest in the life of man, it springs from man's pleasure in his life; pleasure we must call it, taking all human life together, however much it may be broken by the grief and trouble of individuals . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Again, he speaks of "the sense of beauty in the external world, of interest in the life of man as a drama, and the desire of communicating this . . . to our fellows" as "an essential part of the humanity of man"<sup>3</sup> The arts "are man's expression of the value of life, and also the production of them makes his life of value"<sup>4</sup> "Eager life while we live . . . is above all things the Aim of Art", he wrote in another place.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, then, Morris appears to have regarded the arts (and in particular the "intellectual" arts) as a special form of the realization of the consciousness of life, evoking a heightening of this consciousness in the audience or beholder. It was implicit in his view that the arts had an enobling influence, a potent moral influence, in relation to man's social progress:

"Stories that tell of men's aspirations for more than material life can give them, their struggles for the future welfare of their race, their unselfish love, their unrequited service things like this are the subjects for the best art. . ."<sup>6</sup>

And, writing in a descriptive manner, he declared:

"I will say, without pretending to give a definition, that what I mean by an art is some creation of man which appeals to his emotions and his intellect by means of his senses All the greater arts appeal

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, p 168, and *Works*, XXII, p 151

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, April Supplement, 1885

<sup>3</sup> May Morris, II, p 408

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, pp 266-7

<sup>5</sup> "The Aims of Art", *Signs of Change*, p 140

<sup>6</sup> "Some Hints on Pattern-designing", *Works*, XXII, p 176

directly to that intricate combination of intuitive perceptions, feelings, experience, and memory which is called imagination. All artists have these qualities superabundantly, and have them balanced in such exquisite order that they can use them for purposes of creation."<sup>1</sup>

Such a description as this last does not take us very far towards a definition, although the terms used to describe imagination show that Morris had given the matter much thought and was aware of the complexity of the artistic process. It is true, and in a profound sense, that "all worthy schools of art . . . [are] the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the beauty and true pleasure of life".<sup>2</sup> But such words as "beauty", "pleasure", and "aspiration" are signposts only to further assumptions which Morris never discussed. He was a practical artist, turned revolutionary, and he described his own experience of the matter in the words that came to hand: he laid no claims to be a philosopher.

Nevertheless, it may be suggested that in some ways this two-sided theory is insufficient to explain the complexity of life. In the first place, Morris leant too heavily upon arguments derived from the decorative arts when dealing with art as a whole. He knew little or nothing about recent discoveries as to the active social agency of certain arts in the life of primitive peoples: the carving on the bone handle of a knife cannot explain to us the function and meaning of the ritual dance. Moreover, in the second part of his descriptive definition, he erred by divorcing art from the historical process as a whole. One is tempted to exclaim, "*Art would have been* this had it not been for class society, *Art will be* this with the abolition of classes." But Morris has not emphasized sufficiently the *ideological* role of art, its active agency in *changing* human beings and society as a whole, its agency in man's class-divided history. It is true that these considerations are never absent when Morris treats the history of architecture or pattern-designing in detail. But in the "intellectual" arts he did not see the matter so clearly.

It is perhaps too extreme a judgement to say (as one sympathetic critic has written) that Morris's aesthetics "were of the standard Pre-Raphaelite brand".<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to point to any such

<sup>1</sup> "The Lesser Arts of Life", *ibid*, pp. 235-6

<sup>2</sup> "The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle" *Letters*, pp. 355-7

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Eric Hobsbawm in *Our Time*, October, 1947.

"standard brand", and Morris, with his great historical understanding, could not be confined within it. But several of his favourite terms—and, in particular, "beauty" and "pleasure"—carry the associations gained in Morris's early romantic revolt. In this one aspect of artistic theory the illusions of his youth clung most closely and were the hardest to shake off. His view of "beauty" was coloured to the end by the romantic search for the "ideal": art must be either epic or heroic, or "beautiful" in the sense of sweet, easeful, decorative, soothing. He stoutly maintained the view that it was impossible for the painter to create this "beauty" without beautiful models in the life and society around him,<sup>1</sup> and therefore—

"those only among our painters do work worth considering, whose minds have managed to leap back across the intervening years, across the waste of gathering commercialism, into the later Middle Ages . . . Anyone who wants beauty to be produced at the present day in any branch of the fine arts, I care not what, must be always crying out 'Look back! look back!'"<sup>2</sup>

This was in part a reflection of his own practice in the arts. From the time of the writing of *The Defence of Guenevere* to his *Sigurd the Volsung*, he had abandoned the struggle to master his own life, to interpret and evaluate the world, in his own art (see p. 226). *The Earthly Paradise*, *Love Is Enough*, even *Sigurd the Volsung* itself, show little of that imaginative and intellectual contest with reality which marks the greatest creative achievements. "Pleasure"—the word Morris had borrowed from Ruskin—was a deceptive doctrine, especially when applied to the "intellectual" arts. He carried the analogy between the pleasing exercise of the craftsman's energies further than it can be justified in the arts of literature and painting. While he shook off the romantic concept of "inspiration", he tended to assume that all worth-while art had an easy and almost spontaneous birth, whatever problems of execution might later intervene. The creative toils of a Flaubert would have left him bewildered.

Some illustration of his attitude may be found in his own

<sup>1</sup> See May Morris, I, p. 305, Lecture on "The English Pre-Raphaelites", where he argues that the artist's imagination must naturally take "the raiment of some period in which the surroundings of life were not ugly but beautiful"

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 239-40.

literary and artistic taste. Here he maintained a strong predisposition towards late medieval art on the one hand, and Saga and epic on the other. He could never forget that the Renaissance was the time "when Europe first opened its mouth wide to fill its belly with the east wind of commercialism".<sup>1</sup> "The great men who lived and glorified the practice of art in those days were the fruit of the old, not the seed of the new order of things", he declared,<sup>2</sup> thereby denying by implication that bourgeois individualism could make any contribution to man's consciousness. Because the Renaissance marked in his view the beginning of the degeneration of the architectural arts, he attempted to fit the "intellectual" arts into the same pattern of interpretation. The literature of the eighteenth century, he held, "lacks all imaginative qualities", and its painting reveals little but "cleverness, readiness and confidence", while its verses which "insult the name of poetry" were filled with a "hatred of imagination and humanity".<sup>3</sup> Always he returned with relief to the architecture and art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. "the loveliest, brightest, and gayest of all the creations of the human mind and hand".<sup>4</sup>

Although Morris made token references to the great artists and writers of the past four hundred years, his references were without warmth "Shakespeare", Shaw remarks, "was not in the Morris movement, which was strongly anti-rhetorical."<sup>5</sup> When he was invited, in 1885, to set down his "Best Hundred Books", he selected fifty-four the first thirty-seven were made up of ancient and traditional writing, the sagas, and a few classical and medieval works; in the remaining seventeen he included six English poets—Shakespeare, Blake ("the part of him which a mortal can understand"), Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron, seven novelists—Bunyan, Defoe, Scott, Dumas, Victor Hugo, Dickens and George Borrow—and the works of Ruskin and Carlyle. The omissions are significant—Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Milton ("the union in his works of cold classicism with Puritanism (the two things which I hate most in the world) repels me so that I cannot read him"), the eighteenth-century novelists, Wordsworth (whom, Shaw says, he hated for his piety), let alone

<sup>1</sup> "Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century", *Works*, XXII, p. 389

<sup>2</sup> "The Beauty of Life", *ibid*, p. 56

<sup>3</sup> May Morris, II, p. 631.

<sup>4</sup> "Feudal England", *Signs of Change*, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> May Morris, II, p. xxxiii

the major European novelists and poets.<sup>1</sup> He was aware of the greatness of Balzac and Tolstoy, but he seems to have read them with difficulty—even distaste. He was moved to fury by the attempt to ban Zola for “obscenity”. *Germinal* he thought to be “part of a true picture of the life which our civilization forces on labouring men”, but he clearly did not regard this as a fit subject for “art”.<sup>2</sup> He praised Ibsen’s *Doll’s House* as “a piece of the truth about modern society clearly and forcibly put”, and jeered at the horror of “the respectable critics”<sup>3</sup>: indeed, he found in Ibsen “another token of the new dawn”. But, for all that, it is clear that he felt little real enthusiasm. Henry James, like Meredith, aroused in him little but impatience. he was “the clever historian of the deadliest corruption of society, the laureat of the flirts, sneaks, and empty fools of which that society is mostly composed, and into whose hearts (?) he can see so clearly”<sup>4</sup> He accused him of total insensitivity to the people he looked on the “working-classes as an useful machine”, and “has not imagination enough to realize the fact that the said machine is composed of millions of men, women, and children who are living in misery” The Impressionists Morris considered to be openly at enmity with beauty, and “drifting into the domain of empirical science”. nevertheless, he recognized their honesty and eagerness of purpose—“the public would be quite wrong in supposing them to be swayed by mere affectation”<sup>5</sup> In sum, he was out of sympathy with many of those trends in the arts in his own time which now command our sympathy or respect.

Morris tried his hand at formal literary criticism only once or twice in his life, and it must be counted a misfortune that he did not make more effort to order and discipline his responses than he did. He recognised this weakness in himself, and expressed it in 1877, when refusing nomination to the Chair of Poetry at Oxford University.

“It seems to me that the *practice* of any art rather narrows the artist in regard to the *theory* of it, and I think I come more than most men under this condemnation . . . I have a peculiar inaptitude for expressing myself except in the one way that my gift lies. Also I have a lurking doubt as to whether the Chair of Poetry is more than an ornamental

<sup>1</sup> See May Morris’s Introduction to *Works*, XXII

<sup>2</sup> See *Commonweal*, August 25th, 1888

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, December 15th, 1888

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, June 22nd, 1889.

<sup>5</sup> May Morris, I, p 243

one, and whether the Professor of a wholly incommunicable art is not rather in a false position "1

Almost the only continuous exposition of his critical views which survives is to be found in the rapidly-written letters to Fred Henderson, the young Norwich Leaguer (see Appendix III). When due allowance has been made for the circumstances in which they were written (Morris's expression of his views is coloured throughout by his desire, on the one hand, to prevent his young friend from embarking upon what he feels will be a disillusioning and unprofitable career as a professional writer, and, on the other, by his desire to give a firm opinion with the minimum of offence) these letters reveal a surprising medley of profound social insights alongside half-expressed and half-realized assumptions surviving from Morris's earlier years. The objective understanding of the source of poetic inspiration ("the voice through which mankind speaks"—a view more closely akin to Shelley's views than to those of Keats or of the later Romantics), and the objective criterion of value ("feelings . . . come to the point of expression . . . to produce in someone else the mood which you yourself were in . . .") lie side by side with the subjective criterion that the *true* poet "knows perfectly well" the worth of his own work, with the unsubstantiated elevation of rhyme over blank verse (which reveals a good deal about Morris's own poetic practice), and with the sweeping dismissal of Shakespearian drama. And underlying all there is Morris's understanding of the pervasive corrupting influence of his time, which will destroy all but the most determined and talented artist, and his pessimistic forecast of the immediate future.

"Society is rotten to the core and only waits for Revolution to sweep it away. in the new society only lies the hope for the Arts "

As Morris stressed, "I never set up for a critic": and his contribution was more to the sociology of the arts than to the theory of aesthetics or to practical criticism. From his passing judgements and his letters to Mr. Henderson no general critical theory can be reconstructed. but it is possible to reveal a pattern in his responses which should be borne in mind when assessing his theories of art as a social activity. His feeling that art should be a "solace", an expression of "pleasure", led him to underestimate the role of

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p 85.

art as an *agent* in human history. This was paralleled in his responses by a lack of enthusiasm for the painful, the tragic (unless in terms of epic and saga), and a definite dislike of introspective and subjective art.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that he evaded suffering and tragedy in his life. his actions must disprove this. It did mean that he avoided the contemplation of suffering in art he had a surfeit of it in his daily experience, and tended to turn to art for repose or even for escape. It would be after some painful experience, some sordid exposure in the law courts during the propaganda, that (Shaw relates) Morris would return home and lose himself in the pages of Dumas or Dickens or *Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>2</sup> In general, Morris was blind towards the great achievements of bourgeois realism. He knew these works existed, he recognized that they were great, but they moved no enthusiasm in him. and this blind-spot robs his general theory of the arts of some of its value.

An interesting parallel can be seen between Morris's weaknesses in political theory in the 1880s, and his blind-spots in the appreciation and understanding of the arts. Both sprang from the very vehemence of his revolt against capitalist society, his utter disgust at the values of his own class. The "hatred of modern civilization" which had been part of his early Pre-Raphaeite revolt had impelled him on his way to Socialism, and saved him from becoming enmeshed in many illusions from which other sincere artists of his time could not escape. On the other hand, it imbued him with a hostility to the individualist ethic of capitalist society which appears to have deadened in him all positive response to many great artistic achievements in the previous three hundred years.

<sup>1</sup> See *Letters*, p. 280. Morris, writing to "Georgie" Burne-Jones, comments on his reading of *War and Peace*, and is clearly comparing it in his mind with Stepniak's tales of the Russian nihilists and revolutionaries. "There seems to be a consensus of opinion in these Russian novels as to the curious, undecided turn of the intellectual persons there. Hamlet . . . should have been a Russian, not a Dane. This throws some light on the determination and straightforwardness of the revolutionary heroes and heroines there, as if they said, 'Russians must be always shilly-shally, letting I dare wait upon I would, must they? Look here then, we will throw all that aside and walk straight to death.' " See Sergius Stepniak, *Underground Russia*.

<sup>2</sup> See Shaw's Introduction to May Morris, II, and *Observer*, November 6th, 1949.



This blindness was not only loss. It fostered in him an acute response to those periods of history when the people participate most in the practice of the arts. Moreover, it helped him to view the problem of the relation of the artist to his society from a social, rather than an individualist, standpoint. It is here that some of his most telling judgements on the arts were made. Repeatedly he declared that art could not thrive in the hands of a few highly cultivated men within an utilitarian and hostile society. Rather—

“it will be always but the blossom of all the half-conscious work below it, the fulfilment of the shortcomings of less complete minds; it will waste much of its power, and have much less influence on men’s minds, unless it be surrounded by abundance of that commoner work in which all men once shared.”<sup>1</sup>

The divorce of the artist from “the general sympathy of simple people weighs very heavily on him, and makes his work feverish and dreamy, or crabbed and perverse.”<sup>2</sup> The argument that Socialism should be opposed because it would not encourage genius, received from him short shrift.

“Do you think, as some do, that it is not ill that a hundred thousand harmless people should be boiled down on the fire of misery to make one single glorious great man? I honestly believe that there are people who are fools enough to think that. I answer plainly, great men are nourished on no such soup, though prigs may be, it is the happiness of the people that produces the blossom of genius. But even if it were so, I would rather have a hundred thousand happy persons than one genius made up of murder.”<sup>3</sup>

The relation between the artist, or the craftsman, and his society was the theme of many lectures. He looked upon the history of the arts, not—as did many of his contemporaries—as the record of individual geniuses, each “inspired” and each influencing each other, but as part of wider social processes. In his first lecture (in 1877) he described the development of the arts as a natural process. “Like all growth, it was good and fruitful for awhile, like all fruitful growth, it grew into decay; like all decay of what was once fruitful, it will grow into something new.”<sup>4</sup> Already in

<sup>1</sup> “The Beauty of Life”, *Works*, XXII, p. 55

<sup>2</sup> “Art and the Beauty of the Earth”, *ibid.*, p. 164

<sup>3</sup> May Morris, II, p. 203      <sup>4</sup> “The Lesser Arts”, *Works*, XXII, pp. 9–11

1880, three years before reading *Capital*, he sensed the dialectical movement of history:

"Ancient civilization was chained to slavery and exclusiveness, and it fell, the barbarism that took its place has delivered us from slavery and grown into modern civilization, and that in its turn has before it the choice of never-ceasing growth, or destruction by that which has in it the seeds of higher growth"<sup>1</sup>

But, while this dialectical understanding of change, growth and decay, was ever-present in his writing, he saw man's economic and social development always as the master-process, and tended to suggest that the arts were passively dependent upon social change. In the 1880s he suggested more than once that the arts must "die" with capitalist society, and could only be re-born when Socialist society had for many years been established "The old art is no longer fertile," he wrote—

"no longer yields us anything save elegantly poetical regrets, being barren it has but to die, and the matter of moment now is, how it shall die, *with hope*, or *without it*"<sup>2</sup> "Once again I warn you against supposing, you who may specially love art, that you will do any good by attempting to revivify art by dealing with its dead exterior"<sup>3</sup> "For my part I believe that if we try to realize the aims of art without much troubling ourselves what the aspect of the art itself shall be, we shall find we shall have what we want at last, whether it is to be called art or not, it will at least be *life*, and, after all, that is what we want"<sup>4</sup>

We can see how Ruskin's challenge in *Unto This Last* (see p 237) was still echoing in his mind—"There is no Wealth but Life." If the source of art was "pleasure" in labour, then Socialism seemed to him the necessary precondition of its rebirth "It is possible", he wrote,

"that all the old superstitions and conventionalities of art have got to be swept away before art can be born again, that before that new birth we shall have to be left bare of everything that has been called art, that we shall have nothing left us but the materials of art, that is the human race with its aspirations and passions and its home, the earth, on which materials we shall have to use these tools, leisure and desire"<sup>5</sup>

And so he still viewed the matter in one of his last and clearest statements

<sup>1</sup> "The Beauty of Life", *ibid*, p 65

<sup>2</sup> "The Aims of Art", *Signs of Change*, p 134

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p 140    <sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 133    <sup>5</sup> *Commonweal*, April Supplement, 1885

"I do not believe in the possibility of keeping art vigorously alive by the action, however energetic, of a few groups of specially gifted men and their small circle of admirers amidst a general public incapable of understanding and enjoying their work. I hold firmly to the opinion that all worthy schools of art must be in the future, as they have been in the past, the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the beauty and true pleasure of life. These aspirations of the people towards beauty can only be born from a condition of practical equality. I am so confident that this equality will be gained, that I am prepared to accept as a consequence of the process of that gain, the seeming disappearance of what art is now left us, because I am sure that that will be but a temporary loss, to be followed by a genuine new birth of art, which will be the spontaneous expression of the pleasure of life innate in the whole people."<sup>1</sup>

"Any one who professes to think that the question of art and cultivation must go before that of the knife and fork . . . does not understand what art means", he wrote.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century this was one of the most important lessons which an artist of his stature—and one, moreover, who had been brought to Socialism in part for the sake of art itself—could voice abroad. Morris's lectures tore down the precious veils before the Palace of Art, challenged the late romantic postures of self-conceit and self-dramatization, revealed the enormous reserves of creative energy in the people, and stimulated the discussion of cultural problems within the working-class movement. Moreover, Morris did not fall into the error of supposing that the working class could enter upon their heritage in the arts without arduous struggle to master the best traditions of the past, and to cast out the inferior traditions of commercialized culture:

"People sometimes talk as though the ordinary man in the street is the proper person to apply to for a judgement on Works of Art. They say he is unsophisticated, and so on. Now, just let us look the facts in the face. As a matter of fact, he is not unsophisticated. On the contrary he is steeped in the mere dregs of all the Arts that are current at the time he lives. Is not that absolutely and positively the state of the case? I am perfectly certain that in the Art of Music what the 'unsophisticated' person takes to is not the fine works of Art, but the ordinary, commonplace, *banal* tunes which are drummed into his

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, pp. 355-7 (November 10th, 1893). This important letter, "The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle", addressed to the *Daily Chronicle*, was later reprinted as a handbill by the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

<sup>2</sup> "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice*, June 16th, 1894.

ears at every street corner That is natural There is a tendency for all people to fall under the domination of tradition of some sort, and the fine tradition, the higher tradition, having disappeared, men will certainly fall into the power of the lower and inferior tradition Therefore let us once for all get rid of the idea of the mass of the people having an intuitive idea of Art, unless they are in immediate connection with the great traditions of times past "1

But, while he understood the dialectical movement of man's history, he failed to understand the active role of the "intellectual" arts within the greater process Only on rare occasions did he glimpse the possibility that the *revolutionary* working class (as opposed to the "ordinary man" in the capitalist street) might itself be the creator of new traditions and a new art

"May we not hope that we shall not have to wait for the new birth of art till we attain the peace of the realized New Order? Is it not at least possible that what will give the death-blow to the vulgarity of life which enwraps us all now will be the great tragedy of Social Revolution, and that the worker will then once more begin to have a share in art, when he begins to see his aim clear before him—his aim of a share of real life for all men—and when his struggle for that aim has begun? It is not the excitement of battling for a great and worthy end which is the foe to art, but the dead weight of sordid, unrelieved anxiety, the anxiety for the daily earning of a wretched pittance by labour degrading at once to body and mind "2

This was as far as his understanding reached and only too often he fell back upon Ruskin, and upon his own deductions from the decorative arts, and regarded the likelihood of the transitional stage of Socialism proving to be a "blank" in the arts, until the people should "take up the chain where it fell from the hands of the craft-guilds of the fifteenth century" 3 Indeed, despite his own Socialist poetry, and the importance he laid upon cultural activity in the Socialist movement, Morris paid next to no attention in his lectures to the role of the arts in the fight to win Socialism—their power to inspire and change people in the struggle. It is true that in Communist society, when the extreme conflict and suffering of class-divided society are no longer present, Morris's views of "pleasure", "beauty" and joy in labour

1 "The English Pre-Raphaelite School", May Morris, I, pp 307-8

2 *Commonweal*, April Supplement, 1885

3 "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy", May Morris, I, p 241 (from *To-day*, July, 1884)

may assume more significance than they do now <sup>1</sup> But it cannot be maintained for this reason that Morris succeeded in constructing a theory both consistent with a materialist conception of history, and adequate to explain the active part of the artist in the ideological struggles of his time.

Despite this very serious weakness, Morris's writings upon art and society are among his great achievements. His grafting of Ruskin to the stem of Marx (even if he did not, in the process, cast out all Ruskin's errors), his partial understanding of the place of the arts within the wider social process, his detailed application of this theory to architecture and to the decorative arts in particular—these will remain as original contributions to our thought. If there were confusions in his treatment of the "intellectual" arts, yet his writings were studded with insights which will continue to stimulate others for years to come. Writing of Swinburne, in 1882, he expressed the feeling that his poems were "founded on literature, not on nature," and continued

"In these days the issue between art, that is, the godlike part of man, and mere bestiality, is so momentous, and the surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful, that nothing can take serious hold of people, or should do so, but that which is rooted deepest in reality and is quite at first hand there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man of deep feeling, because of its innate strength and vision.

"In all this I may be quite wrong I only state my opinion, I don't defend it, still less do I my own poetry" <sup>2</sup>

The root of the matter is there <sup>1</sup>

#### V Chants for Socialists and The Pilgrims of Hope

Morris's creative writing, after he joined the Socialist movement, falls into three groupings. First, the occasional propagandist poems—published as *Chants for Socialists*, in the main written for *Justice* or *Commonweal* between 1883 and 1886, and the long narrative poem, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, written for *Commonweal* in instalments in 1885. Second, *The Dream of John Ball* (1886) and *News from Nowhere* (1890), also written in instalments for *Commonweal*. And third, the late prose romances, beginning with *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and concluding with *The Sundering Flood*

<sup>1</sup> Cf "Making the Best of It", *Works*, XXII, p 117

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, pp 158-9.

—finished a few days before Morris's death. In the light of this work—a great part of it written in brief intervals of the propaganda—can it be said that Morris was the pioneer of a new kind of art in his practice?

Morris did not write the *Chants* for the critics, or even for posterity, but simply for the day-to-day needs of the movement—for Hyndman's debate with Bradlaugh, for a Socialist League entertainment, for the funeral of Linnell. If they served the occasion for which they were written, then they had done the job which he intended them to do. And they *did* do this job to such a degree that it is as part of the history of the early Socialist movement that they must be judged. Around them there has gathered a host of associations so that they have come to voice the spirit of the pioneering days "Sometimes in summer-time", recalled F. W. Jowett,

"the joint forces of Leeds and Bradford Socialism tramped together to spread the gospel by printed and spoken word in neighbouring villages  
And at eventide, on the way home, as we walked in country lanes or on river bank, we sang—

'What is this, the sound and rumour? What is this that all men hear,  
Like the wind in hollow valleys when the storm is drawing near,  
Like the rolling on of ocean in the eventide of fear?

'Tis the people marching on

And we believed they were!'"<sup>1</sup>

It is the tribute Morris would have desired—for it was his aim to inspire this belief.

Morris did not feel it to be the least an offence against his dignity, or the Purity of Art, that he should be asked to do this job. He could not understand the "art for art's sake" argument.<sup>2</sup> If verse written under these conditions should turn out to be ephemeral, this did not trouble him in the least. The Socialist movement stood for "life", and if his poems helped to feed this

<sup>1</sup> F. W. Jowett, *What Made Me a Socialist* (n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> See May Morris, I, p. 200. "True, we have all of us heard discussions as to whether art should be for art's sake, should itself be its own end, or be done for a purpose—most fruitless discussions they are, I must say, mere confusion of words. You may be sure both that a real artist does his work because he likes it, and that when done 'tis a blessing to his fellows. Every work of art is both a good thing in itself though nobody sees it, and if seen will influence the minds and lives of men, and lead to other things scarce guessed at by those who wrought it."

life, they found their immortality in the spirit of the movement which they helped to shape. He did not labour to create new forms, or to fashion a new kind of verse. He strove simply to do the best job he could with the materials which lay to hand.

"O why and for what are we waiting? while our brothers droop and die,  
And on every wind of the heavens a wasted life goes by

"How long shall they reproach us where crowd on crowd they dwell,  
Poor ghosts of the wicked city, the gold-crushed hungry hell?"

"Through squalid life they laboured, in sordid grief they died,  
Those sons of a mighty mother, those props of England's pride."

And the poems caught fire in the hearts of the comrades whose feelings were already high within them, and whose previous knowledge of romantic verse (whether deep or superficial) had accustomed them to the material which Morris used.

With all this it may be said—without either belittling the poems or condemning them for not being what they never were intended to be—that the *Chants* cannot be said to lay the foundations of a poetry of revolutionary realism. Look back at these verses and note both how moving and effective they are—how unquestionable in their sincerity, their horror at the waste beyond remedy, and also how much they rely upon words, images, rhythms coined in the romantic movement. The city is "wicked" and a "hell", like Shelley's "London"; the lives of the workers are "squalid" and "sordid", and they are "poor ghosts" who "droop and die". The sense of "crowds" as something oppressive is present. Morris rarely expresses any sense of *vitality* in the working class, but only in the Cause itself, the *hope* of the future. The hatred of industrialism as such is never absent for long.

*The Pilgrims of Hope* provides many examples of this. At its opening stands "The Message of the March Wind"—a remarkable poem, which is fully within the tradition of late romanticism. The setting of the poem is that of pastoral peace, with its increase and fruition, and its ancient associations—the ox-yard, the grey church, the grey homes of our fathers. Into this peace comes the "March wind", which we cannot help feeling is a close relation to Shelley's "West Wind"—the "destroyer and preserver". On the one hand it tells of the city, of "unrest" and "gold", and the "haggard and grim" life of the people. On the other it tells of the "hope of the people" and "strife". Where Shelley's

message is idealized to the point of abstraction—a hatred of tyranny, a generalized aspiration towards freedom—Morris’s accusation against the “great city”, London, commercialism, is far more specific. Its crime lies in the poverty and wearisome toil of the workers, their deprivation of any part in this pastoral beauty, and of the heritage of the arts. But the effect of the poem is not one of unmixed joy, of courage and decision in the awakened struggle. Rather, there is an undertow of regret at the passing of this peace. “Shall we be glad always?” the lovers ask. And the answer seems to come, “Hark, the wind in the elm-boughs!” This moment of love, poised before the entering of the struggle, is a sad moment foreshadowing the loss of rest, ease of mind, beauty, even of love. The slow-moving line, “This land we have loved in our love and our leisure”, scarcely conceals the nostalgia underneath. And then the sharp change of focus, to the interior so reminiscent of a scene from one of Hardy’s tales of the passing of rural England.

“Come back to the inn, love, and the lights and the fire,  
And the fiddler’s old tune and the shuffling of feet”

Here is a glimpse of a warm community, where the lovers are secure and at ease. Surely the poem leaves us not only with a sense of hope, but with the poignancy of loss? Surely it is no accident that it is to this idealized pastoral scene that the hero of the poem returns at last, with his love lost in the struggle, and “the half of life gone”:

“The forks shine white in the sun round the yellow red-wheeled wain,  
Where the mountain of hay grows fast, and now from out of the lane  
Comes the ox-team drawing another, comes the bailiff and the beer,  
And thump, thump, goes the farmer’s nag o’er the narrow bridge of  
the weir.”

“The Message of the March Wind” was written for the March number of *Commonweal* in 1885, at the time when Morris had thrust upon him by events the responsibility for the leadership of a section of the Socialist movement. It is perhaps not far-fetched to suggest that, apart from its own intrinsic value, it gives a moment of insight into the turmoil of Morris’s personal feelings at the time. It suggests to us how strong the grip of his will and his political convictions had to be over his inclinations—inclinations which rebelled at the daily struggle in the heart of



industrial capitalism, and which beckoned him back to Kelm-scott and the repose of his art. The poem reveals to us the measure of his victory.

Thereafter *The Pilgrims of Hope* seems to make several false starts, to be hesitant in plot and direction, until—half-way through—it finds in the Commune and the sundering of the lovers by the friend a theme which unifies it and carries it through to the end. The weaknesses are obvious and need cause no surprise. The poem was written hastily in monthly instalments for *Commonweal*, and Morris did not wish it to be re-published without considerable revision.<sup>1</sup> But, for all this, what magnificent passages it contains!—passages where the dramatic power overcomes the facility (which is sometimes downright slapdash) of the writing, and which are excellently suited for performance or public reading to-day. Among such are the famous “New Birth”—the conversion to Socialism—the brawl at an open-air meeting and arrest of the hero—the meeting with the bourgeois war-machine in Paris, and the fine “Sending to the War”, where the jingo military parade through London streets lined with poverty and unemployment gives place suddenly to the dream of the “deeds of another day”

“Far and far was I borne, away o’er the years to come,  
And again was the ordered march, and the thunder of the drum,  
And the bickering points of steel, and the horses shifting about  
’Neath the flashing swords of the captains—then the silence after the shout—

“Sun and wind in the street, familiar things made clear,  
Made strange by the breathless waiting for the deeds that are drawing  
a-near  
For woe had grown into will, and wrath was bared of its sheath,  
And stark in the streets of London stood the crop of the dragon’s teeth  
Where then in my dream were the poor and the wall of faces wan?  
Here and here by my side, shoulder to shoulder of man,  
Hope in the simple folk, hope in the hearts of the wise,  
For the happy life to follow, or death and the ending of lies,  
Hope is awake in the faces angerless now no more,  
Till the new peace dawn on the world, the fruit of the people’s  
war”

<sup>1</sup> See Buxton-Forman, *The Books of William Morris* (1897) “I could not persuade its author to reprint it, he considered it wanted more revision than he could give it at the time.”

The remarkable thing about *The Pilgrims of Hope* is not the weakness in construction, which might be expected, or the technical slackness bred of haste and lack of concentration, but the degree to which Morris succeeds in escaping from the limitations of middle-class experience and outlook. The poem contains a direct reference to these limitations:

"When the poor man thinks—and rebels, the whip lies ready anear,  
But he who is rebel and rich may live safe for many a year,  
While he warms his heart with pictures of all the glory to come  
There's the storm of the press and the critics maybe, but sweet is his  
home,  
There is meat in the morn and the even, and rest when the day is done,  
All is fair and orderly there as the rising and setting sun—  
And I know both the rich and the poor"

In many touches—the reduction of the hero to a wage-labourer, his humiliation by his employer, his sufferings in unemployment—Morris succeeds in presenting capitalist society with a realism which he does not attempt in any other of his creative writings

Moreover, Morris achieved something else of even greater importance. The best and most honest of the literature at the end of the nineteenth century is marked by profound disillusion, a searching for private reassurance, limited personal objectives, in the midst of a hostile social environment "Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul/When hot for certainties in this our life", Meredith had written, and the extinction of the passions and aspirations of life in the mull of bourgeois conventions and hypocrisies is the theme of more than one novelist and poet, from the clear-eyed muted honesty of "Mark Rutherford" to the compromised defeatism of Gissing's *Henry Ryecroft*. The wrath and humanity of Samuel Butler's revolt against his own class, in *The Way of All Flesh*, peters out into the confession of a defeated man who dares to risk neither love, nor his children, nor any disinterested ambition in a world which will taint these with its corruption "The truth is that I have never learnt to regard myself as a 'member of society'", Gissing wrote "For me, there have always been two entities—myself and the world, and the normal relation between these two has been hostile" And, in so writing, he expressed the essential truth of the writers of his

time the writers who cherished aspirations for a finer life than capitalism could offer, but were without *hope*

This period is marked, above all, by a total absence of the heroic. It is not too much to suggest that the only figures in the literature of the period who achieve, for a moment, heroic stature, are those in Thomas Hardy's great novel, *Jude the Obscure*. Jude Fawley, the self-educated stone-mason, and the "emancipated" Sue Bridehead, destroyed, not by their vices but by their virtues, their honesty and eagerness for life in a hostile world. "There is something external to us"—Sue cries out—"which says 'You shan't'." First it said, 'You shan't learn.' Then it said, 'You shan't labour.' Now it says, 'You shan't love.' " And the doctor, in the same novel, remarking on the suicide of the child, says, "It is the beginning of the universal wish not to live". Against this tide, Morris alone stood with full assurance, with conscious confidence in life. The rock he stood upon was his Socialist convictions, his scientific understanding of history. The name which he gave to this rock was "Hope".

In this context, the importance of *The Pilgrims of Hope* can be seen. It is romantic poetry with hope once again restored to it; aspiration no longer denied fulfilment in the real world but assured of fruition in the future.

"For we, we shall fight for no name, no blazon or banner or shield,  
But that man to man may hearken and the earth her increase yield,  
That never again in the world may be sights like we have seen,  
That never again in the world may be men like we have been,  
That never again like ours may be manhood spoilt and blurred."

Once again the heroic in life is rediscovered—not in the distant past of myth and legend, but in the everyday struggle of the revolutionary propaganda, in the open-air meeting, in the Commune. Even in the sad theme of the sundering of the lovers, with its obvious echoes of Morris's own life, there is a sense of dignity, an attitude of respect in particular for the woman's personality, which is alien to the late romantic conventions.

But new attitudes to life, new advances in human consciousness, cannot find their complete expression in the forms of the old. Just as Morris had failed in his translations and versions of Norse literature to realize the quality of the original—and of his own feelings—because of his romantic training, so *The Pilgrims of*

*Hope* points towards, but cannot be said to lay the foundations of the poetry of that Socialist realism into which the best traditions of romanticism must be transformed when men not only *desire* but are *acting* in the real world to fulfil that desire. In a letter of 1891 he remarked humorously of a poem he was writing. "My wig' but it is garrulous I can't help it, the short lines and my old recollections lead me on . . ." <sup>1</sup> "My old recollections . . ."—this is an exact description of the process by which Morris, in his hasty writing, fell into the rhythms, the associations, the vocabulary of his apprenticeship to poetry. Moreover, as we have seen, Morris still clung to his Pre-Raphaelite view that art, by definition, must be "a thing of beauty", and that beauty and realism in the nineteenth century must be incompatible. It was in the year in which he wrote *The Pilgrims of Hope* that he wrote to Fred Henderson

"Now language is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself before he can even begin his story he must elevate his means of expression from the daily jabber to which centuries of degradation have reduced it" (Appendix III, p. 879.)

But this special vocabulary of poetry had been fashioned by late romanticism (and most notably by Morris himself in his own middle period) to provide a dream-world of aspiration untarnished by the sordid realities, a "poetic" refuge from "the world". Clearly, it could not be adequate to give full expression to Morris's new experience when he had discovered that his aspirations need no longer be nourished in a world of art but could be consummated by human action in the world around him.

Once again, this is no condemnation of the poem, but a warning against accepting it for what it does not pretend to be—the first example of an altogether new and changed art. Morris's poetic disciple, W. B. Yeats, was to "put himself to school", wrestling with his art all his life, and was in the end to bring it more finely into tune with his mature experience than Morris ever succeeded in doing. Morris's road was different. He no longer saw his art as the central battlefield: if he could strike a blow there for the Cause, so much the better. The immediate task—as he saw it—was to change life itself: he was too old, too busy,

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 338.

too much a romantic bred and born, to concentrate his faculties at the end of his life upon transforming his art. There would be time enough for those who came after him to do that. In the 1880s and 1890s it was his example, his teaching, his leadership, his great moral criticism of society, which was most urgently called for. Meanwhile, in his *Pilgrims of Hope* he erected a bold sign-post pointing to the future and, even more, he helped to create the essential pre-condition for the re-birth of a new art by healing, in his life, the long division between the poet and the people. "If I can't be the Laureate of reading men", he remarked on one occasion, "I'll be the Laureate of sweating men." In the small Socialist movement he felt there was being built an audience of a new type, where labour and intellect, action and reflection, were no longer opposed, and where the poet (like the *scald* and *makar* of old) was regarded not as an eccentric or a fragile genius but as a craftsman with special gifts, of value to the community, exercising these gifts to please both himself and his fellows. A friend of his relates that once, in the Underground, a working man recognized Morris and accosted him. "They tell me you're a poet, Mr Morris? Well, I know nothing about poets or poetry, but I'm blooming well sure I know a *man*, and *you're* one, by God!" Morris was delighted, and said afterwards "That's the stuff I'm working for, and, mark you, that's the stuff, too, that in the long run I'm working for in prose and poetry as well."<sup>1</sup>

#### VI *The Prose Romances*

Between 1888 and the end of his life scarcely a year passed when Morris did not add one or more lengthy volume to his series of prose romances. Chief among them were *The House of the Wolfings*, and *The Roots of the Mountains*, written during the last years of the Socialist League and, in succeeding years, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, and *The Sundering Flood*. These romances appear to present a strange contrast to Morris's active political and intellectual life. To Shaw they were "a startling relapse into literary Pre-Raphaelitism"—"nothing more nor less than the

<sup>1</sup> William Sharp in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1896

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resuscitation of Don Quixote's burnt library"<sup>1</sup> Whatever judgement be made upon them, they certainly provide a striking example of the strange and unpredictable courses which the creative imagination will follow

From beginning to end, Morris's writing (with the exception of *The Pilgrims of Hope*) partakes of the nature of dream. We are taken out of the world we know into a world having its existence only in the writer's imagination, with its own inner consistency and its own laws, unlike those of the real world but related distantly to them. Into this world of dream Morris was driven by his "hatred of civilization" during his youthful revolt and ever after his imagination found its natural expression in this form. Ralph and Ursula, in *The Well at the World's End* are told by the Elder of the Innocent Folk

"For ye of the World beyond the Mountains are stronger and more godlike than we . . . and ye wear away your lives desiring that which ye may scarce get, and yet set your hearts on high things, desiring to be masters of the very Gods. Therefore ye know sickness and sorrow, and oft ye die before your time, so that ye must depart and leave undone things which ye deem ye were born to do, which to all men is grievous. And because of all this ye desire healing and thriving, whether good come of it, or ill. Therefore ye do but right to seek to the Well at the World's End, that ye may the better accomplish that which behoveth you, and that ye may serve your fellows and deliver them from the thralldom of those that be strong and unwise and unkind, of whom we have heard strange tales."

At the root of the dream lies this separation between the boundless desire of the heart and the poor or bitter realities of life, the thirst for waters at the world's end. But while this helps us to understand something of the character of the dream-form—the "poetic" vocabulary of *The Earthly Paradise*, the archaic diction, unworldly relationships, and leisurely hypnotic rhythms of the prose romances—it tells us by no means all.

The extraordinary thing about Morris's employment of dream lies in the wide variety of means to which he put it to use. At times he used dream to build a compensation-world to which he could escape, at other times he constructed a world with values and conditions totally unlike his own, only in order to be able to criticize and understand his own the better. We should not forget

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, p. xxviii.

that the dream was the form he chose for his realistic meditations, upon the meaning of man's history (*The Dream of John Ball*) and upon the quality of life in a Communist society (*News from Nowhere*). In his late years Morris consciously turned his predisposition towards dream into a means of liberating his imagination from the sordid restrictions of a society he hated. He was not ashamed of the romantic nature of his art, although he did not recommend others to imitate it. "The feeling for art in us artists is genuine", he wrote in 1893, "though we have to work in the midst of the ignorance of those whose whole life ought to be spent in the production of works of art." But the blossom of the art of the future, "I shall not see, therefore I may be excused if, in common with other artists, I try to express myself through the art of to-day, which seems to us to be only a survival of the organic art of the past . . ."<sup>1</sup>

The first two prose romances, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), employ the dream-form differently from the romances of his last four or five years. This makes them more acceptable than the others to the reader who approaches them with a literal mind. In certain respects they are more realistic where the supernatural intervenes it is more as a manifestation of the beliefs of the people than as an essential element of the plot. The narrative flows from the action of the characters, not primarily—as in the last romances—from the tricks of magic, wood-goddesses, witches, and weird

Nevertheless, these romances should *not* be read with a literal mind, or Morris's whole intention will be misunderstood. He knew perfectly well that he could not reconstruct with accurate detail the lives of the Germanic peoples at the dawn of the Middle Ages, although such detail as he did know—of craftsmanship, custom, and circumstance—he employed to construct the special atmosphere of these two dreams. He knew well that his "Folk of the Kindreds" and "woodland carles" would not really have conversed, made love and quarrelled with the melodious courtesy which he gave to them. His intention was quite different, and was expressed in a letter while he was working on *The House of the Wolfings*. "It is meant to illustrate the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes . . ."<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> "The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle", *Letters*, p. 357    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 302

dream-picture is quite consciously idealized.<sup>1</sup> Morris had long been fascinated by the contribution which the Germanic peoples had made toward the art and social structure of feudalism in Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> With his conversion to Socialism, this interest deepened and his knowledge of the life of the Germanic tribes was supplemented in his many discussions with Belfort Bax

In *Socialism its Growth and Outcome* Morris and Bax referred to the difference between the "impersonal state" and the "simple and limited kinship group".

"The difference between these opposing circumstances of society is, in fact, that between an organism and a mechanism. The earlier condition in which everything, art, science, law, industry, were personal, and aspects of a living body, is opposed to the civilised condition in which all these elements have become mechanical, uniting to build up mechanical life, and themselves the product of machines material and moral."<sup>3</sup>

It was Morris's intention in these two romances to recapture something of the organic and personal life of the tribe or folk and (as, later, in *News from Nowhere*) he was concerned not so much with the details as with the *quality* of life

*The House of the Wolfings* is marred by the unsuccessful combination of prose and verse, and by the intrusion of the Pre-Raphaelite maiden, the Hall-Sun. Morris is at his weakest in these two romances when treating intimate personal relationships. His strength is found always in his treatment of social relations, in the collective life of the folk, in the Hall, at the Folk-Mote, in their labour, their battles, their ceremonies. From the opening paragraphs, we are given that strong sense of *place*, of the relation between man and his environment in his struggle with nature, which recurs in all the last romances

"For many generations the folk that now dwelt there had learned the craft of iron-founding, so that they had no lack of wares of iron and steel, whether they were tools of handicraft or weapons for hunting and

<sup>1</sup> H. H. Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris, Master-Craftsman*, p. 50, recounts that when a German archaeologist wrote to Morris asking him what new sources of information he had used in writing *The House of the Wolfings*, Morris exclaimed "Doesn't the fool realize that it's a romance, a work of fiction—that it's all LIES!"

<sup>2</sup> Morris's hatred of the Roman Empire found frequent expression e.g. *Letters*, p. 265; *Commonweal*, May, 1886 ("Socialism from the Root Up," I)

<sup>3</sup> *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, p. 21



for war It was the men of the Folk, who coming adown by the river-side had made that clearing The tale tells not whence they came, but belike from the dales of the distant mountains, and from dales and mountains and plains further aloof and yet further "

Thiodolf's speech to the Wood-Sun is an expression of the values uniting the kindreds

"Mine eyes are cleared again, and I can see the kindieds as they are, and their desire of life and scorn of death, and this is what they have made me myself Now therefore shall they and I together earn the merry days to come, the winter hunting and the spring sowing, the summer haysel, the ingathering of harvest, the happy rest of midwinter, and Yuletide with the memory of the Fathers, wedded to the hope of the days to be Well may they bid me help them who have holpen me! Well may they bid me die who have made me live! . I have lived with them, and eaten and drunken with them, and toiled with them, and led them in battle and the place of wounds and slaughter, they are mine and I am theirs, and through them am I of the whole earth, and all the kindreds of it "

In this light it can be seen, not only that it is pointless to criticize Morris for using archaic or "Wardour Street" English in these tales, but that his vocabulary—with its emphasis upon antiquity and the *difference* between the values of the folk and those of to-day—is an essential part of his purpose As he becomes more sure of himself, in *The Roots of the Mountains*, the clumsy and self-conscious archaisms become less noticeable, and the vocabulary becomes melodious and consistent, sustaining the remote, impersonal and dream-like quality in which the values of the peoples can be shadowed forth Had he been content, in this second romance, to have limited his tale to the central theme of the reuniting of the kindreds and their resistance to the invaders, treating the whole in an aloof and impersonal manner, *The Roots of the Mountains* would have stood very high among his work Unfortunately he chose to weave in and out of it his romantic love themes (not, unfortunately, without Victorian overtones), which are incompatible with the more serious intention of the whole

Moreover, we are already aware in *The Roots of the Mountains* of the motive for writing which becomes dominant in the other late romances—that of pure self-indulgence in pleasurable reverie or dream, in which neither Morris's intellect nor his deeper feelings are seriously engaged. He had at first intended that the Bride

should die during the tale, but he changed his mind, marrying her to Folk-Might, with the rationalization, "it would be a very good alliance for the Burgdalers and the Silverdalers both, and I don't think sentiment ought to stand in the way"<sup>1</sup> Well and good but such repeated compromises rob the tale of its dignity and sombre interest, and reduce it to the level of wilful fantasy—like an imaginative child's day-dreams, set forth in noble prose, and shot through with a mature man's insight into history. The final fight for Silverdale is described with all of Morris's clear pictorial genius, but the issue is never in doubt, neither heroes nor heroines are ever seriously endangered, it is a mere skirmish beside the day-long fight by the ford in *The House of the Wolfings*. As one critic has shown, Morris had come to have a reluctance to "suffer imaginatively".<sup>2</sup> From the *Life and Death of Jason* onwards, his creative writing had tended to become facile—something which engaged only half of his attention—and he had met and engaged with his age on other grounds. No doubt when he started the romance he had proposed to carry forward the tale of the kindreds to a further point in history; but he had fallen victim to his desire to please himself, and if he was disappointed with the book's reception he had himself to blame.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> May Morris's Introduction to *The Roots of the Mountains*, Works, XV, p. xi. R. A. Muncey said that Morris told him that he had written the book on a train journey to Aberdeen and back (*The Leaguer*, October, 1907).

<sup>2</sup> D. Hoare, *op cit*, pp. 43 ff.

<sup>3</sup> According to one witness, Morris preferred *Sigurd* and *The Roots of the Mountains* above all his other writing, and was somewhat disappointed at the latter's reception. The *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewed it with a heavy leg-pull: "A goodly book in sooth it is which William the Hall-Bedecker, by some called the Folk-Fellowship Furtherer, and by others Will o' the Wildgoose-Chase, hath put forth in these days to gladden this our winter-tide withal. Many a blithesome even may ye while away by the ingle-nook, conning the deeds of the Dalesmen and the Woodland-Carles, and the kindred of the Wolf. Yet must the shameful truth be spoken that after the first three score leaves we did no longer fare steadfastly forth through the tale, as had been the bounden duty of the inwifful doomsman until at last we were quelled and overcome by an exceeding great drowsiness." The *Daily News* did the same, and then took Morris heavily to task. Morris wrote to Joynes, November 28th, 1889 (Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45345): "The chap in the *P. M. G.* (whose head I should like to punch) implies that it is like to send a body to sleep, so as you are still weak it will do you good." To Glasier he wrote (Glasier, p. 201): "I am truly glad that it pleases you. It is not popular, but I think some people read it and like it."

Thereafter came a series of romances *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (1890), *The Well at the World's End* (commenced 1892), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1895), and *The Sundering Flood* (1896); as well as several shorter tales and translations. In all these romances Morris's desire to pleasure himself is uppermost—just as the Kelmscott Press was no part of the earlier "warfare against the age" of the Firm but was a source of unashamed enjoyment to the designer. When a critic detected a Socialist allegory in *The Wood Beyond the World*, Morris was quick to disillusion him: "it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with nothing didactic about it"<sup>1</sup>

Approached with a mind earnestly seeking hidden truths and teaching, these romances would be unreadable. But if they are read in the same mood as that in which they were written, Morris's own pleasure is infectious. Here his mind and imagination are "free-wheeling", and his artistry in story-telling is given loose rein. All the tales (including *The Sundering Flood*, which—despite its Icelandic setting—has little in common with the spirit of saga) move in a vague medieval setting, peculiar to Morris's imagination. The intention of the tales is, above all, decorative. They are fairy-stories, legends, for which the belief of the active mind is not invited. Suffering, pain or death are passed over in a paragraph, while sensuous beauty or physical love are embroidered for whole chapters. Hero and heroine bear charmed lives, and the evil witch and baron are always worsted. If there are battles and blood, the scarlet threads look pleasant in the tapestry.

Had Morris gone soft in the head? Is this really a return to *The Earthly Paradise*, and the evasion and fear of life which lurked under it? Not in the least. Some element of relaxation, rather than refuge, from life is present—as also perhaps some element of compensation for what he had missed, as he embroidered lovers on his own regret. But the undertow of death, the sense of guilt, the oscillation between sensuous joy and horror that underlay *The Earthly Paradise* are vanquished. In only one romance is any really significant decision taken freely by hero or heroine—and that is when the hero in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* chooses to leave the Acre of the Undying and return to the land of mortality,

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p. 371

to his kindred and his love. Striving to enter the Acre of the Undying, across deserts and mountain passes, are men who resemble the restless and unsatisfied Wanderers of *The Earthly Paradise* and upon these the story turns its back.

In these curious fairy-stories there are echoes from all Morris's previous work.<sup>1</sup> But all are muted in the prevailing mood of calm and fulfilment. These are tales, not so much of desire unsatisfied, but of desire fulfilled. The water of the well at the world's end, which Ralph and Ursula drink, is not of immortality but of more abundant life. In each tale, hero and heroine start from a secure hearth and home in a society pictured with realistic detail, pass through adventures, trials and magic experiences, but return in the end once again to their homes. Most characteristic is *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, with its plot formed almost like a perfect figure of eight: the stealing of Birdalone as a child from the town by the wood, her growth to a young maiden in the cottage by the lakeside, tending the goats and hunting in the wood, her escape across the lake, with its magic isles which figure like a repeated decorative motif, her encounter with her lover; her retirement to the City of the Five Crafts, her return across the lake, the fulfilment of her love, without marriage rite or ceremony, in the cottage where she grew up as a girl, and final return with her lover to the town of her birth. Where, in *The Earthly Paradise*, pleasure had always seemed an uneasy dream on the edge of a bitter reality, here we are always on the edge of awakening to the freshness and fulfilment of life. Birdalone, in the City of the Five Crafts, has a troubling but not unhappy dream.

"In the midst thereof Birdalone awoke, and it was an early morning of later spring, and the sky was clear blue and the sun shining bright, and the birds singing in the garden of the house, and in the street was the sound of the early market-folk passing through the street with their wares, and all was fresh and lovely.

"She awoke sobbing, and the pillow wet with her tears, and yet she felt as if something strange and joyous were going to betide her, and for joy of the love of life the heart beat fast in her bosom.

"She arose all darling naked as she was, and went to the window

<sup>1</sup> For example, in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* note the parallel between the death of the evil knight who is Birdalone's suitor and the "Haystack in the Flood", also the image of the Kings and Queens struck dead in the postures of life which recurs in *The Earthly Paradise*.

and looked out on the beauty of the spring, while the sound of the market-wains brought to her mind the thought of the meads, and the streams of the river, and the wood-sides beyond the city, and she fell a-longing for them, as a while she knelt on the window-seat, half dreaming and asleep again, till the sun came round that way, and its beams fell upon her bosom and her arms, and she stood up and looked on the fairness of her body, and a great desire took hold of her heart that it might be loved as it deserved by him whom she desired. And thus she stood there till she became ashamed, and hastened to do on her raiment."

Or again—and here the contrast with *The Earthly Paradise* is too strong to be overlooked—Birdalone dreams:

"Somehow were they two, the witch and she, amidmost of the Isle of Nothing, and the witch drew close anigh her, and was just going to whisper into her ear something of measureless horror, when she awoke, and the sun was bright outside the shaded whiteness of her tent, the shadows of the leaves were dancing on the ground of it; the morning wind was rustling the tree-boughs, and the ripple of the stream was tinkling hard by."

This freshness, this sense of growth in the June English countryside, of the continuity of life, is the reality beneath the romance. This is the Morris whom Yeats knew and described as the "Happiest of Poets."<sup>1</sup> The mournful Pre-Raphaelite ladies of earlier days have given way, in these romances to maidens who can shoot with the bow, swim, ride and generally do most things, including making love, a good deal more capably than their young men, who weep for joy so often that it is a matter of surprise that their armour does not fall to pieces with rust. Perhaps this is a sign of Morris's Socialist views of the rights of women, or a cunning way of revenging himself on Belfort Bax. However that may be, ever and anon into these last strange romances there seems to come the figure of Ellen from *News from Nowhere*, saying "The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!" It may be that the world will be too busy for many years to turn back to these fairy stories: there is little in them from which it can learn. But they will remain, for those who follow Morris's life closely, as tokens of the way in which his re-born hope drove the "pestilence" from his romantic spirit and left serenity in its place.

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats on "The Happiest of the Poets" in *Collected Works* (1908), pp. 55-70.

VII *Political Theory*

Morris's claim to importance as a political theorist rests upon two grounds. First, he was one of the earliest, and remains one of the most original and creative thinkers within the Marxist tradition in England. Second, he was a pioneer of constructive thought as to the organization and manifestations of social life within Communist society.

No one familiar with Socialist theory can doubt that Morris stood squarely within the Marxist tradition, despite certain secondary circumstances which have clouded the issue (see Appendix IV, p. 895). The evidence is to be found, not in coloured reminiscences or second-hand opinions, but in Morris's own political writings. His approach to Socialism was not Utopian, but Scientific.

"Socialism is a theory of life", he wrote in the first of his four remarkable letters to the Rev. George Bantton (1888), "taking for its starting point the evolution of society . . . of man as a social being":

"Since man has certain material *necessities* as an animal, Society is founded on man's attempts to satisfy those necessities, and Socialism points out to him the way of doing so which will interfere least with the development of his specially human capacities . . . The foundation of Socialism, therefore, is economical."<sup>1</sup>

If his economic theory was faulty and he had imbibed (in his early days with Schen) Lassalle's doctrine of "the iron law of wages", his historical understanding was superior to that of any English contemporary. Always his teaching illustrated and directed attention to the essential discoveries of Scientific Socialism.

First, he was at pains to explain in every general discussion of theory the labour theory of value, the root source of capitalist exploitation. Let those who doubt this only read Chapters X and XI of *The Dream of John Ball*, and they cannot fail to be convinced. Or, if the imaginative dialogue confuses them, let them turn to any of Morris's basic lectures—such as "True and False Society", "Monopoly. or How Labour is Robbed", or "The Dawn of a New Epoch"<sup>2</sup>—or to *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, and they will receive a plain enough answer.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, pp. 282 f.

<sup>2</sup> See *Signs of Change*, p. 181, *Works*, XXIII, pp. 220-3, 247 f.

Second, the whole of Morris's Socialist writing is a rich storehouse of illustrations of the class struggle, both in past history and in his own time. This, indeed, was to him the point of prime importance, distinguishing revolutionary Socialism from mere Reformism. Referring directly to Sidney Webb and the Fabians, he wrote in 1889

"What is the real gate which will pull up these soft Socialists, who so long as they are allowed to steal the goose will not object to give the giblets to the poor? This is the barrier which they will not be able to pass, so long as they are in their present minds, the *acknowledgement of the class war*. The 'Socialists' of this kind are blind as to the essence of modern society. They hope for a revolution, which is not *the* Revolution, but a revolution which is to ignore the facts that have led up to it and will bring it about . . .

"It is most important that young Socialists should have this fact of the class-war always before them. It explains past history, and in the present gives us the only solid hope for the future. And it must be understood that it is only by the due working out of this class-war to its end, *the abolition of classes*, that Socialism can come about. The middle-class semi-Socialists, driven by class instinct, preach revolution without the class struggle, which is an absurdity and an impossibility."<sup>1</sup>

The bourgeois objection that the Socialists themselves create the class-war, he brushed aside with the contempt it deserves.

"Who or what sets class against class? The whole evolution of society. That is, the existence of the classes."<sup>2</sup>

It was in historical understanding, above all, that Morris excelled, and his theory was ever anchored to the class-struggle as to a rock.

"They are already beginning to stumble about with attempts at State Socialism. Let them make their experiments and blunders, and prepare the way for us by so doing. We—sect or party, or group of self-seekers, madmen, and poets, which you will—are at least the only set of people who have been able to see that there is and has been a great class-struggle going on. Further, we can see that this class-struggle cannot come to an end till the classes themselves do: one class must absorb the other. Which, then? Surely the useful one, the one that the world lives by, and on . . ."<sup>3</sup>

This was at the core of his teaching.

Third, Morris was never deluded for a moment with theories of the neutrality, the "supra-class" character, of the State, which

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, September 28th, 1889

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, December 22nd, 1888

<sup>3</sup> "Feudal England", *Signs of Change*, pp. 82-3

were later to lead Keir Hardie and his comrades into confusion <sup>1</sup> Look, for example, at Chapter XI ("Concerning Government") in *News from Nowhere*, or at the central arguments in "The Policy of Abstention" (see p 543) The privilege of the capitalist class, Morris never tired of repeating,

"is but the privilege of the robber by force of arms, is just the thing which it is the aim and end of our present organization to uphold, and all the formidable executive at the back of it, army, police, law courts, presided over by the judge as representing the executive, is directed towards this one end—to take care that the richest shall rule, and shall have full licence to injure the commonwealth to the full extent of his riches" <sup>2</sup>

His experience in the fight for free speech, and on "Bloody Sunday", rid him of any illusions (if he had any) as to the "impartiality" of capitalist justice, and his one Socialist play, *The Tables Turned or Nupkins Awakened*, is a bitter satire on the procedure of the courts in these cases—the difference in the treatment of rich and poor, the perjury of the police, the stupidity and prejudice of the judge Commenting on the aftermath of "Bloody Sunday", he wrote "Thus at one stroke vanishes the dream of bringing about peaceably and constitutionally the freedom which we long for" If the bourgeoisie were made really afraid by the rising movement, and not merely "a little alarmed", "then we shall see suppression of indoor meetings also suppression of association, Press prosecutions, and the like, and there is plenty of law for all that" <sup>3</sup>

"There is plenty of law for all that . . ."—the phrase rings with indignation at the sham and hypocrisy by which the exploitation of man by man is hallowed and sanctified We have already seen how Morris's greatest political error, his anti-parliamentary purism, sprang equally from this ever-present indignation and from his reactions against Hyndman's opportunism Enough has

<sup>1</sup> Cf the well-known statement of Keir Hardie "The State is simply a good old donkey that goes the way its driver wants it to go When the capitalists rule, of course, the State serves the capitalists When the workers get sense enough to stop sending capitalists [to Parliament], and send Socialists drawn from their own ranks, to represent them, then the State becomes your servant and not the servant of the capitalists"

<sup>2</sup> "The Socialist Ideal in Art", *Works*, XXIII, p 263

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, January 28th, 1888



already been said of the confusions into which this error led him between 1885 and 1892. On the other hand, it is important to recall Lenin's judgement, when he wrote in 1919

"I have no doubt at all that many workers who belong to the best, most honest and sincerely revolutionary representatives of the proletariat are enemies of parliamentarism and of any participation in parliament. The older capitalist culture and bourgeois democracy are in a given country, then the more comprehensible this is, since the bourgeoisie in old parliamentary countries has excellently learned the arts of hypocrisy and fooling the people in a thousand ways."

And he continued

"I am personally convinced that to renounce participation in the parliamentary elections is a mistake for the revolutionary workers of England, but better to make that mistake, than to delay the formation of a big workers' Communist Party."

<sup>1</sup>

It was Morris's thorough understanding of the force which lay behind the mask of hypocrisy, his passionate hatred of the hypocrisy itself, which led him into his error. Moreover, while his policies in the Socialist League might be criticized, his teaching on this question—his forcible and forthright exposure of the role played by the parliamentary illusion in dividing and misleading the workers—is among his most important contributions to our political thought, and one which would be of particular value if brought before the militant rank and file of the Labour Party to-day. Indeed, when Tom Mann at the end of his life paid Morris a notable tribute, it was this aspect of his teaching which he singled out for especial praise.

"Morris was the man who enabled me to get a really healthy contempt for parliamentary institutions and scheming politicians. Prior to this I saw clearly the need for a complete change from private ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, but this was to be done by parliamentary action on the basis of getting a majority of the voters to declare for it, and I was among the simples who thought it would then come off. I did not see that Parliament is an essentially capitalist institution and will perish with the capitalist system, as neither did I see that the ruling class was and will be ever ready to use their legislative institution on any hour on any day to change the Constitution to suit themselves."

<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lenin, Letter to Sylvia Pankhurst in *Lenin on Britain* (1941), p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> "Recollections of William Morris", *Daily Worker*, March 24th, 1934.

On these three fundamental points Morris's writings are absolutely clear and absolutely revolutionary in their standpoint—the labour theory of value, the class struggle and the theory of the State. These three points included, in his own manner of presentation, a fourth essential point, the dictatorship of the proletariat. "What I did that was new", Marx wrote to Weydemeyer in 1852,

"was to prove (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*, (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes and to a classless society*"

Morris thoroughly understood and repeatedly expounded the first and the last of Marx's three points and, while he did not employ Marx's terminology, the second point was implied every time he used the term "the Revolution", or described (as in "How the Change Came") the process of the revolutionary struggle

It was upon these foundations that he built his rich interpretation of history and of life. Nor did he shrink (like some who profess "Marxist" principles) from any of the revolutionary conclusions which flow from these principles. Above all, his writings and life reveal inflexible opposition to imperialism and chauvinism in any form. Regard, for example, his notes in *Commonweal* when war between Germany and France seemed possible

"If war really becomes imminent our duties as Socialists are clear enough, and do not differ from those we have to act on ordinarily. To further the spread of international feeling between the workers by all means possible, to point out to our own workmen that foreign competition and rivalry, or commercial war, culminating at last in open war, are necessities of the plundering classes, and that the race and commercial quarrels of these classes only concern us so far as we can use them as opportunities for fostering discontent and revolution, that the interests of the workmen are the same in all countries and they can never really be enemies of each other, that the men of our labouring classes, therefore, should turn a deaf ear to the recruiting sergeant, and refuse to allow themselves to be dressed up in red and be taught to form a part of the modern killing machine for the honour and glory of a country in which they have only the dog's share of many kicks and few halfpence,—all this we have to preach always, though in the event of imminent war we may have to preach it more emphatically"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, January 1st, 1887

As always, Morris was not contented with vague sentiments no one could doubt the meaning of his words

In one further point Morris's political writings and his practice anticipated the theory of this century—in his search for the best type of organization and leadership for the party of revolution. Here his views were worked out through trial and error, in passing notes and suggestions, rather than systematically. He tended to think in terms of a party of *cadres*, of convinced propagandists and agitators, drawn in the main from the working-class (see p 485), which would in the revolutionary period assume the leadership of the wider organizations of the working-class<sup>1</sup> Always he stressed the subordination of "individual whims" to the collective decisions of the party (see p. 353), and that the leadership of the party should not be made up of a "government and an opposition", but of those united in their theoretical outlook (see p 397) Should the party send representatives to Parliament or other bodies, it must be distinctly understood that they went not as individuals, but as the delegates of the party, "under good discipline" (see p 708) The role of theoretical education within the party he always placed high, and, moreover, he thought always of a party of comrades, of men and women changed in their outlook and in themselves, prepared for sacrifice, without any shade of false distinction or personal ambition among them, ready to criticize themselves frankly for their failures—in short, of men and women striving to create new values and new people even within the old society, enjoying both their struggles and their relaxations, conscious of their own comradeship, and therefore worthy of building the society of the future.

Were William Morris alive to-day, he would not look far to find the party of his choice.

### VIII *The Society of the Future*

Morris was well aware of the dangers of speculating about the form of future society. "It is impossible to build up a scheme for the society of the future", he wrote,

<sup>1</sup> The whole process is envisaged in the chapter, "How the Change Came", in *News from Nowhere*

•

"for no man can really think himself out of his own days, his palace of days to come can only be constructed from the aspirations forced upon him by his present surroundings, and from his dreams of the life of the past, which themselves cannot fail to be more or less unsubstantial imaginings"<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the 1880s and 1890s were rich with speculations of this kind, and Morris made many contributions to them—both through the necessity of the propaganda and through his own temperamental bent towards embodying his theories in clearly-seen situations and visions. And, since the Socialist pioneers did not have the satisfaction of living to see the fulfilment of their dreams, they seemed (as if by way of compensation) to have at times a particularly sharp and inspiring vision of the things to come.

Morris's picture of the future found twofold expression. first, in many scattered references and passages in his lectures and articles, and second in *News from Nowhere*. In both places he had no intention whatsoever to make cut-and-dried prophecies, but rather to make hints and suggestions. These suggestions are not always consistent with each other: the choices before men in a Communist society (he saw) were numerous, the manifestations of their social life would take many forms. For example, he made no pretence at consistency when speculating as to the architecture of Communism. In *News from Nowhere* he leaves the suggestion that the majority of the people live in detached villas and cottages, with here and there in the countryside a college of learning and manufacture. In other writings he dwelt more often on the idea of communal dwelling-houses, "with good public cooking and washing rooms . . . beautiful halls for the common meal . . . a pleasant and ample garden, and a good play-ground"<sup>2</sup>. Again he proposed (especially for London) tall blocks of flats "in what might be called vertical streets", with ample privacy for each family, common laundries and kitchens, and public rooms for social gatherings.<sup>3</sup> "Often when I have been sickened by the stupidity of the mean idiotic rabbit warrens that rich men build for themselves in Bayswater", he wrote,

"I console myself with visions of the noble communal hall of the

<sup>1</sup> *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, pp. 17-18

<sup>2</sup> *May Morris*, II, p. 129

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8

future, unsparing of materials, generous in worthy ornament, alive with the noblest thoughts of our time, and the past, embodied in the best art which a free and manly people could produce ”

“I can’t see why we should think it a hardship to eat with the people we work with, I am sure that as to many things, such as valuable books, pictures — we shall find it better to club our means together ”<sup>1</sup> In both *News from Nowhere* and the lectures, the emphasis is upon the *communal* life, which Morris could safely deduce from the common ownership of the means of production and the consequent change in social ethics but the degree of emphasis, the forms for its expression, are suggested in different terms This is important, because (as Morris never ceased to repeat) true individualism was only possible in a Communist society, which needed and valued the contribution of each individual to the common good, and, in a society which fostered true variety, he knew that different men would choose to live in different ways

Two general comments may be made upon his views First, Morris’s whole approach, whether in lectures or in the chapter “How the Change Came” in *News from Nowhere*, is scientific He never lost sight of the economic and social foundation of the society of the future As he wrote to the Rev George Bainton

“It is the Socialists only who can claim a measure which will realize a new basis of society, that measure is the *abolition of private ownership in the means of production* The land, factories, machinery, means of transit, and whatever wealth of any sort is used for the reproduction of wealth — must be *owned* by the nation only, to be *used* by the workers according to their capacity ”<sup>2</sup>

This truth underlay all his speculations

Second, with very few exceptions Morris tended, in his speculations, to leap over the transitional stage of Socialism, and come to rest in fully-established Communist society When Socialism “ceases to be militant and becomes triumphant”, he wrote, “it will be Communism”<sup>3</sup> Following Marx and Engels, he emphasized that “government” in a Socialist society would become increasingly rather “an administration of *things* than a

<sup>1</sup> “How We Live and How We Might Live”, *Signs of Change*, p 31

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, pp 283-4.

<sup>3</sup> “Communism”, *Works*, XXIII, p 271

government of *persons*”<sup>1</sup> Throughout his theoretical writings he made use of the contrast (first learned from Carlyle) of “false” and “true” society—of property relations and laws on the one hand, and really human relations and morality on the other

“That true society of loved and lover, parent and child, friend and friend, the society of well-wishers, of reasonable people conscious of the aspirations of humanity and of the duties we owe to it through one another—this society, I say, is held together and exists by its own inherent right and reason, in spite of what is usually thought to be the cement of society, arbitrary authority. ”

Thus Communist society implied the re-establishment of the personal and voluntary bonds of society and the disappearance of the impersonal and compulsive relations based on the ownership of property and the maintenance of class rule—the re-creation of the society of “the Wolfings” shorn of its barbarity and superstition, and enriched by the culture of past ages The “withering away of the state” assumed great importance to MORRIS, not (in the negative sense employed by some of his Anarchist-tinged colleagues) as the absence of all social bonds, but in the positive sense of the re-establishment at a higher level than known before of the truly human and personal bonds existing even within a class society

In this respect, he sought to distinguish his views from those of the Fabian State Socialists on the one hand, and the Anarchists on the other “Even some Socialists”, he wrote, “are apt to confuse . . . the co-operative machinery towards which modern life is tending with the essence of Socialism itself ”<sup>2</sup> From this there followed—

“the danger of the community falling into bureaucracy, the multiplication of boards and offices, and all the paraphernalia of official authority, which is, after all, a burden, even when it is exercised by the delegation of the whole people and in accordance with their wishes ”<sup>3</sup>

With Communism, he suggested, the central machinery of the State would disappear (except in so far as it was necessary in arranging matters of production and distribution), not because the citizens would have fewer public responsibilities, but because

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, p 287 See also *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, p 289

<sup>2</sup> “Communism”, *Works*, XXIII, p 275

<sup>3</sup> “True and False Society”, *ibid* , p 236

they would shoulder more themselves. He quarrelled with Bellamy's *Looking Backward* because it gave the impression that "the organization of life and necessary labour" would be dealt with in Socialist society "by a huge national centralization, working by a kind of magic for which no one feels himself irresponsible." On the contrary, he declared

"It will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them, that individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other. Variety of life is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition, and nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom."<sup>1</sup>

Writing on another occasion, he said

"To my mind in the new Society, we should form bodies like municipalities, county-boards and parishes, and almost all the practical work would be done by these bodies the members of whom would be working at a living by their ordinary work, and everybody who had any capacity for such work would have to do his share of it."<sup>2</sup>

Controversies in such a society would be more upon matters of *fact* than of conflicting interests. "Would this or that project benefit the community more?" And the existence of party spirit would be impossible or ridiculous. While the federal principle would tend to assert itself in national life, there would be (on the other hand) "the great council of the socialised world" which would have "the function of the administration of production in its wider sense".

"It would have to see to the collection and distribution of all information as to the wants of populations and the possibilities of supplying them. Also it would be its necessary duty to safeguard the then recognized principles of society, that is, to guard against any country, or place, or occupation reverting to methods or practices which would be destructive or harmful to the socialistic order, such as any form of the exploitation of labour."<sup>3</sup>

Such larger federal units would be staffed by delegates from the lower federal units.

<sup>1</sup> "Looking Backward", *Commonweal*, June 22nd, 1889

<sup>2</sup> "What Socialists Want", *Brit Mus Add MSS* 45330.

<sup>3</sup> *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, pp 291-2

Such a society, Morris well understood, could only be reached after the transition period of Socialism, "during which people would be getting rid of the habits of mind bred by the long ages of tyranny and commercial competition". The fundamental step was not the destruction of all personal property, but of the power for individuals to "turn it into an instrument for the oppression of others"<sup>1</sup> Above all, Morris constantly insisted that even the initial stages of Socialism would lead to an inconceivable transformation in *people*, in their values, relationships, and outlook

"It is not a small change in life that we advocate, but a very great one, Socialism will transform our lives and habits, and leave the greater part of the political social and religious controversies that we are now so hot about forgotten, useless and lifeless like wrecks stranded on a sea-shore"<sup>2</sup>

Education, whatever form it took (and few will agree wholeheartedly with the educational system in *News from Nowhere*), would itself be transformed, thus accelerating the change in people

"It must of necessity cease to be a preparation for a life of commercial success on the one hand, or of irresponsible labour on the other It will become rather a habit of making the best of the individual's powers in all directions to which he is led by his innate disposition, so that no man will ever 'finish' his education while he is alive."<sup>3</sup>

Everywhere the spirit of the *common* wealth—material, moral, spiritual—will become triumphant.

On one point, above all, Morris expressed himself with strong personal feeling The division between the intellectual and the worker, the man of "genius" and the people, the manual and "brain" worker, would be finally ended Although he cannot have read it, Morris reached in his intuitive way the most important statements of Marx in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*

"In a higher phase of Communist society, after the enslaving subordination of individuals under division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished, after labour has become not merely a means to live but has become itself the

<sup>1</sup> "True and False Society", *Works*, XXIII, p 236

<sup>2</sup> May Morris, II, p 199

<sup>3</sup> *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, p 317.



primary necessity of life, after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be fully left behind and society inscribe on its banners from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs ”

But for MORRIS these preconditions of Communism were in themselves primary objectives. He looked forward yearningly to that society where the intellectual—be he artist or scientist—was not put up on some pedestal,<sup>1</sup> but yet was valued and accepted by his fellow-men for his contribution to the richness of their social life. Moreover, this unity of thought and creative labour would find its realization, not only in the society as a whole, but in the life of every member of it.

“From this healthy freedom would spring up the pleasures of intellectual development, which the men of civilization so foolishly try to separate from sensuous life, and to glorify at its expense. Men would follow knowledge and the creation of beauty for their own sakes, and not for the enslavement of their fellows. The man who felt keenest the pleasure of lying on the hill-side among the sheep on a summer night, would be no less fit for the enjoyment of the great communal hall with all its splendours of arch and column, and vault and tracery ”<sup>2</sup>

Just as physical labour would no longer carry with it any indignity, but rather the reverse, so intellectual labour at the expense of the exercise of bodily faculties would appear as an abuse of the fullness of life.

MORRIS is only one of the latest in the tradition, reaching back to the ancient Greeks, where this ideal has found expression. But he was one of the first to show how it may at last be realized in a definite society. Of all the ideas which influenced and passed through the mind of his young friend W. B. Yeats, this alone took root firm and grew to its noble expression in his poem, “Among School Children”

“Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil

<sup>1</sup> See “The Reward of Genius”, *Commonweal*, September 25th, 1886

<sup>2</sup> “The Society of the Future”, *May Morris*, II, p. 467

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

### IX *News from Nowhere*

Most of these reflections about Socialist society were made by Morris at different dates between 1884 and 1889, and show clearly the way in which he was turning over the ideas which found their full expression in *News from Nowhere*, written in instalments for *Commonweal* in 1890

The writing of *News from Nowhere* strikes one with a sense of inevitability—it is such a characteristic expression of Morris's genius, springing so logically from his development both as creative artist and as political theorist. With unselfconscious artistry he drew, while writing, upon those personal experiences of his which lay ready to hand: the story begins with his awakening at his own house in Hammersmith, strangely transformed, it ends at his own house in Kelmscott, and the journey thither up the Thames was one which he had himself enjoyed.<sup>1</sup> When reading "How the Change Came" we are aware of Morris's experiences on "Bloody Sunday" (see p. 574). We are aware throughout of his enthusiasm for Gothic architecture and of his life-long practice of the decorative arts. We are aware of current debates between himself and the Fabians and Anarchists. We are aware of his interest in the writings of Fourier, his enthusiasm for More's *Utopia*, and his warm response to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*.<sup>2</sup> We are aware of the ever-present intention in Morris's mind to contrast the variety and simplicity of the life of "Nowhere" with the bureaucratic State Socialism (or "managerial revolution") of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which was then so much in vogue, and whose regimented labour battalions and tubular conveniences

<sup>1</sup> See Stirling, *op. cit.* p. 120 f.

<sup>2</sup> May Morris testifies in several places to her father's delight in *Erewhon*, and there seems to be a clear sign of Morris's indebtedness to it in the conclusion to Ch. IX ("Concerning Love") of *News from Nowhere*, where he envisages an improvement in the comeliness and beauty of the people in a Communist society. For an excellent study of the sources of *News from Nowhere*, see A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (1953).

Morris dubbed "a cockney paradise"<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we are aware that his opposition to *Looking Backward* led him to wilful exaggeration, more than once, on the other side Above all, we are aware of Morris's practical participation in the Socialist movement, his study of Marx, his understanding of the class struggle.

" 'Tell me one thing, if you can,' said I 'Did the change come peacefully?'"

" 'Peacefully?' said he 'What peace was there amongst those poor, confused wretches of the nineteenth century? It was war from beginning to end bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it. '"

What a world of personal feeling underlies such passages as this!

In sum, *News from Nowhere* seems to have grown spontaneously rather than to have been constructed with careful artifice We are aware of William Morris, writing fluently in his study in the intervals of propaganda or designing, drawing on the experience of both his public and his private life, making no attempt to disguise the intrusion of his own temperamental likes and dislikes into the narrative Indeed, he wrote on one occasion: "The only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author."<sup>2</sup> While this is a questionable statement when applied to utopias in general, it provides a signpost to the way in which he hoped his own "utopia" would be read, and forestalls those critics who have attempted to read it as a *literal* picture of Communist life Morris knew perfectly well that the quality of the life portrayed in his Communist society could no more rise above the level of his own experience (enriched by his study of the past) than water can rise higher than the level of its source, and by freeing his imagination from the inhibitions which would have been imposed upon it by an attempt at literal verisimilitude, he allowed it to move freely "It has amused me very much writing it", he remarked. And that is why it "amuses" the reader

Such a method of writing might produce an interesting political tract, or an imaginative hotchpotch, but not a work of art, unless it were unified by some compelling theme which engages the

<sup>1</sup> Glasier, p. 198 Another remark provoked by *Looking Backward* is recorded by May Morris (*Works*, XVI, p. xxviii) "If they brigaded me into a regiment of workers, I'd just lie on my back and kick."

<sup>2</sup> "Looking Backward", *Commonweal*, June 22nd, 1899

reader's feelings throughout *News from Nowhere* is a work of art and the key to its artistic power and unity lies in the fact that it is a *scientific utopia*. The contradiction implied by the coupling of these two words was intuitively perceived by Morris, and was quite deliberately turned into a fruitful source of tension, underlying the whole tale.

We have already noted that the characteristic form taken by Morris's imagination was that of dream. But here we do not have—as in *The Defence of Guenevere*, or *The Earthly Paradise*, or *The House of the Wolfings*—the dream-form employed to take us entirely out of our own world into a world that is strange. In both *News from Nowhere* and *The Dream of John Ball*, Morris breaks with his usual practice, and skilfully interweaves the dream and the conscious mind, counterposing realism and romance. In both, the narrative commences with humdrum everyday reality, described in a leisurely conversational way, passes into the dream of past or future, and returns at the end to the everyday world. But, unlike *The Eve of St Agnes* of his poetic master, Keats, where the bright illusion is made more poignant by the stormy and colourless reality surrounding it, reality is allowed to enter into the heart of the dream itself, in the person of Morris the narrator, and it is reality which is made more poignant by the dream when we come back to the real world at the end.

Never for long, in *News from Nowhere*, does Morris allow us to forget this sense of tension between the real and the "ideal". This is the role which he constructs for himself as narrator. As we visit London, listen to the conversations with old Hammond, hear the characters discuss problems of human morality, we do not relapse into dream—we are sometimes made uncomfortably awake. We are made to question continually our own society, our own values and lives. This is why the story engages our feelings, moves us and changes us, as all serious art must do. We cannot sit back as passive spectators, looking at a pretty never-never land. Always we are conscious of Morris's troubled brow, his sense of not being a part of the scenes through which he moves. He is the link between our experience and the future.

Observe with what skill Morris builds up this tension. If he had made his narrator fall into some Rip Van Winkle sleep, and enter the new world with full explanations all round, to be

conducted round by its inhabitants, if he had dispensed with the narrator altogether, and simply plunged us into the future, then all tension would have been lost. Instead, he allows an ambiguity to hang over the narrator throughout—he is troubled to understand how he is there himself, the other characters sense him as someone different, and this is a disturbing influence on their relationship, he has premonitions that he must return.

"I felt rather uncomfortable at this speech, for suddenly the picture of the sordid squabble, the dirty and miserable tragedy of the life I had left for a while, came before my eyes, and I had, as it were, a vision of all my longings for rest and peace in the past."

It is a complex feeling—a dream of a reality in which he dreamed—and yet it is convincing, and finds its compelling expression in his relationship with Ellen.

"She looked at me kindly, but as if she read me through and through. She said 'You have begun your never-ending contrast between the past and this present. Is it not so?'"

"'True,' said I. 'I was thinking of what you, with your capacity and intelligence, joined to your love of pleasure, and your impatience of unreasonable restraint—of what you would have been in that past. And 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.'"

"'So many centuries,' she said, 'so many ages!'"

This is romanticism inverted—instead of the unsatisfied aspirations rebelling against the poverty of the present, the fulfilled aspirations reveal the poverty of the past.

"'This present', 'that past', the 'never-ending contrast'—in truth this is a scientific utopia, which no one but Morris could write. The science lies not only in the wonderful description of "How the Change Came", the scientific mastery of historical process, the understanding of the economic and social basis of Communism, it is present also in the element of realism embodied in the artistic construction of the work itself, the manner in which the world of dream and the world of reality are re-united. And yet it is still an utopia, which only a writer nurtured in the romantic tradition could have conceived—a writer ever conscious of the contrast between the "ideal" and the "real". A writer imbued with the spirit of a new realism would find it impossible

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to employ the form of dream with such fluency and delight; a writer imbued with the spirit of romanticism, and without the re-born hope and understanding of Marxism, could never have employed the dream to illuminate reality in such a profound way.

At the same time, this emphasizes the fact that *News from Nowhere* must not be, and was never intended to be, read as a literal picture of Communist society. One half of its purpose is a criticism of capitalist society, the other half a revelation of the powers slumbering within men and women and distorted or denied in class society. The method demands a heightening, an idealization. Surely Morris makes this clear in his constant opposition between strife and peace? In the midst of the wasteful struggle of capitalist society he desires, above all, rest. The tale is sub-titled "An Epoch of Rest". It commences with the narrator hoping "for days of peace and rest, and cleanness and smiling goodwill". On awaking he finds his hope fulfilled. But, to complete the contrast with the "bitter war" of capitalism it is *over*-fulfilled. There is one thing lacking in "Nowhere" "I don't think my tales of the past interest them [the young people] much," says old Hammond.

"The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place, is history enough for them. It was different, I think, when I was a lad, when we were not so assured of peace and continuous plenty as we are now . . ."

Again, he says

"The spirit of the new days [is] . . . delight in the life of the world, intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells . . . The unceasing criticism, the boundless curiosity in the ways and thoughts of man, which was the mood of the ancient Greek . . . was gone past recovery . . ."

There it is! Morris deliberately draws attention to it. The lack of eager intellectual life, of stimulating national or international intercourse, is not only present in "Nowhere" but is underlined. Both Hammond and Ellen sense it. The "grumbler" is introduced to point it. The narrator murmurs, "Second childhood!" and the question hangs in the air, "What is to come after this?" And Ella's last look seems to say, "You belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you."

Of course Morris knew that life would not be exactly like this in any real society. But the artistic method, of contrast and dream, depended upon his projecting his desires within capitalist society—his thirst for peace, for an absence of anxiety and guilt—into the future

“Here I could enjoy everything without an afterthought of the injustice and miserable toil which made my leisure, the ignorance and dullness of life which went to make my keen appreciation of history, the tyranny and the struggle full of fear and mishap which went to make my romance ”

As Mr A L Morton writes.

“Morris’s is the first Utopia which is not Utopian. In all its predecessors it is the details which catch our attention, but here, while we may be dubious about this detail or that, the important things are the sense of historical development and *the human understanding of the quality of life in a classless society*,”<sup>1</sup>

and, we might add, the contrasting impoverishment of life within capitalism.

This is it—“the quality of life” Morris is not concerned with the mechanics of society but with the people—their relationships, their morality, their pleasure in the details of life. And how remarkable his insights are, whether dealing with love, or labour, or communal life

“ ‘This is the way to put it,’ said he ‘We have been living for a hundred and fifty years, at least, more or less in our present manner, and a tradition or habit of life has been growing on us, and that habit has become a habit of acting on the whole for the best. It is easy for us to live without robbing each other. It would be possible for us to contend with and rob each other, but it would be harder for us than refraining from strife and robbery. That is in short the foundation of our life and our happiness.’ ”

Upon this foundation, all the rest is constructed. Morris has given flesh and blood to the song with which he ended *The Tables Turned*

“What’s this that the days and the days have done?  
Man’s lordship over man hath gone

“How fares it, then, with high and low?  
Equal on earth, they thrive and grow

<sup>1</sup> A L Morton, *op cit*, p 164 (My italics)

"Bright is the sun for everyone,  
Dance we, dance we the Carmagnole

"How deal ye, then, with pleasure and pain?  
Alike we share and bear the twain

"And what's the craft whereby ye live?  
Earth and man's work to all men give

"How crown ye excellence of worth?  
With leave to serve all men on earth

"What gain that lordship's past and done?  
World's wealth for all and everyone "

One final comment should be made. To some readers, *News from Nowhere* is too "ideal" for their soured stomachs. Such neighbourliness, such sense of the common good, such general comradely goodwill and interest, are beyond reach of "human nature" Morris—simple pagan that he was—does not understand the darkneses of the human heart. Let us look 150 years, not forward, but backwards, to the young Samuel Bamford trudging the road between Montsorel and Loughborough.

"Towards evening, I met a company of women coming from the hayfield, they were disposed to be merry, and dancing and singing with their forks and rakes on their shoulders, they formed a ring around me. At length one of the youngest of them sung a snatch of a popular song

" 'I will be sure to return back again  
If I go ten thousand miles, my dear,  
If I go ten thousand miles ' "

"They next produced a keg and a basket, and the kind creatures made me sit down amidst them, and partake of their brown bread and hard cheese, which I did heartily, and quenched my thirst with a good draught of their home-brewed ale " <sup>1</sup>

Do we sometimes forget how savage has been the imprint of capitalist ethics upon the human heart in the past hundred years, and how, in all but the soundest centres of working-class life man has been made a stranger to man by fear, suspicion, selfishness and indifference, which colour his whole attitude to life? And is it possible that *News from Nowhere* is nearer to the truth of a fully Communist life than we are capable of understanding?

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Bamford, *Early Days* (1893 Edition), I, p. 217



X *Personality and Influence*

On April 8th, 1888, John Burns—still in his Socialist prime—lectured at the Kelmscott House Clubroom, and made a note in his diary about Morris

"His energy is tremendous, and without doubt the most unpretentious man I ever met. He is a Socialist and a Poet, but above all a man"<sup>1</sup>

Through all the comments on Morris there runs this refrain. Over and above his direct political and artistic influence, the influence which his personality exerted upon all who came into contact with him was enormous.

What kind of a man was William Morris? Scores of anecdotes surround his memory, humorous, full of honour, grave. Here he is seen in a "Curious Extract from *The Times* of 1st April, 1900" published in *To-day*, in April, 1888.

## "IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT"

## "House of Lords"

"The House assembled after dinner at a quarter past 14

"The BISHOP OF MERTON rose to move the second reading of the Bill for the quarterly renewal of the carpets in coal mines. He did not suppose it was necessary to trouble the house with a speech. He had designed the carpets himself, and thought they would look pretty well under the arc lights in the workings. Their manufacture would give employment to a few poor devils who— ('Order, order,' and interruption)

"The LORD CHANCELLOR, intervening, said that the expression was not in order coming from a spiritual lord.

"The BISHOP OF MERTON apologized, but added that he did not see the use of being a bishop if he could not get absolution for a profane word or two. In the good old times, when he was plain William Morris, nobody thought of objecting to his language except a few persons who pursued the now extinct profession of literary criticism. They only objected to his archaisms, not to his swearing. There was the Bill, anyhow. He had not read it, and did not intend to read it, but he supposed it was all right. If they did not approve of it, they might vote against it and be damned— (Uproar)"

Or, again, there is the story of the first performance of Morris's play, *The Tables Turned*, in the Socialist League hall in October, 1887. The play is a short topical extravaganza in two parts—the

<sup>1</sup> Brit Mus Add. MSS 46310.

first, showing the sentencing of a Socialist agitator for obstruction, with the Archbishop of Canterbury and Tennyson called as witnesses, and ending with the invasion of the courtroom by triumphant revolutionaries, the second, dealing with the "rehabilitation" of "Justice Nupkins" in Socialist society. For the part of Tennyson, Shaw relates

"Morris took a Socialist who happened to combine the right sort of beard with a melancholy temperament, and drilled him in a certain portentous incivility of speech which threw a light on Morris's opinion of Tennyson which was all the more instructive because he delighted in Tennyson's verse ."<sup>1</sup>

The part of the Archbishop he took himself, with a shovel-hat, clerical bands, and black stockings.

"The rest he did by obliterating his humour and intelligence, and presenting his own person to the audience like a lantern with the light blown out, with a dull absorption in his own dignity which several minutes of the wildest screaming laughter could not disturb."

According to another witness, the tension on the eve of the first performance was unbearable. The actors were packed into the wings of the small improvised stage, and—

"His Grace of Canterbury was packed in with the rest, in a high state of excitement . . . due, in part probably, to the fact that this was his first appearance as actor and dramatist, and also to his having 'delivered himself pretty straight' to the gentleman who was assuming the character of Justice Nupkins",

who had been taking this first night altogether too light-heartedly. The climax came, when—as Morris was making his entrance—Lord Tennyson fainted in the wings. The prompter struggled into his get-up, and Morris, aware of all that was going on, "got excited again", forgot his own part, and (with the prompter otherwise occupied) had to improvise something in the witness-box as best he could.<sup>2</sup>

Or there is the occasion when Morris lunched with Watts-Dunton in the Cock in Fleet Street, and the conversation got onto the Elizabethan dramatists, especially Tourneur, whom Morris denounced. "That was a loudish gent a-lunching with you yester-

<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Review*, October 10th, 1896

<sup>2</sup> "William Morris as a Playwright", by H. A. Barker, *Walthamstow Weekly Times and Echo*, November 15th, 1896

day", said the waiter next day to Watts-Dunton "I thought once you was a-coming to blows"<sup>1</sup> Or the occasion when Morris was worsted at Hammersmith, when a man started practising the cornet near his window At length Morris threw up the window and shouted out, "Fool!" The music continued Morris yelled "You're the Hammersmith Fool!" The cornet-player looked up and remarked, "Put yer 'ead in at that window" And Morris obeyed<sup>2</sup> Or the anecdotes of Morris's impatience with polite social intercourse, as when a curate button-holed him and remarked, "I suppose, Mr Morris, . you have seen a good deal of poor people?" Morris growled an assent

"Impervious to his growing restlessness, the curate pursued his sing song way Finally, he asked, 'May I ask you, Mr Morris, have you ever sat upon a Board of Guardians?' 'No, thank God!' thundered Morris"<sup>3</sup>

Or the occasion when he broke with his usual custom and attended a "literary afternoon" at Ford Madox Brown's, and a lion-hunter kept pestering him

" 'Ah, I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr Morris,' he began in a condescending voice. 'I don't read your prose, you know, but I'm a great admirer of *The Earthly Paradise*, and——' But here Morris broke in with 'But you *have* met me before, you were speaking to me in the studio a little ago And I'm really not interested in *The Earthly Paradise* and if you'll excuse me we'll drop the subject' "<sup>4</sup>

Or the other occasion, when Morris was being entertained to supper after giving a Socialist lecture in Leicester, and a clergyman, the Rev J. Page Hopps remarked "That's an impossible dream of yours, Mr Morris, such a Society would need God Almighty Himself to manage it"

"Morris got up and walked round his chair, then, going across to Mr Hopps and shaking his fist to emphasize his words, he said 'Well, damn it, man, you catch your God Almighty—we'll have Him!'"<sup>5</sup>

Certain characteristics reappear in many stories. We know of his surprising energy. "When I talked to him", wrote Watts-Dunton,

<sup>1</sup> *The Athenæum*, October 10th, 1896

<sup>2</sup> A Compton-Rickett, *William Morris A Study in Personality*, p 32

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p 28      <sup>4</sup> William Sharp in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1896

<sup>5</sup> May Morris, II, p 221

"of the peril of such a life of tension as his, he pooh-poohed the idea 'Look at Gladstone,' he would say, 'look at those wise owls your chancellors and your judges Don't they live all the longer for work? It is rust that kills men, not work'"<sup>1</sup>

Those who knew him well were astonished, above all, by his almost "Elizabethan" all-roundness, his ability to pass rapidly from one kind of work to another, the extent and depth of his interests, and his remarkable intellectual and imaginative fertility. His son-in-law, Halliday Sparling, close associate in his work both in the League and the Kelmscott Press, has left a picture of Morris in his study

"He would be standing at an easel or sitting with a sketchblock in front of him, charcoal, brush or pencil in hand, and all the while would be grumbling Homer's Greek under his breath—the design coming through in clear unhesitating strokes. Then the note of the grumbling changed, for the turn of the English had come. He was translating the *Odyssey* at this time and he would prow about the room, filling and lighting his pipe, halting to add a touch or two at one or other easel, still grumbling, go to his writing-table, snatch up his pen, and write furiously for a while—twenty, fifty, and one hundred or more lines, as the case might be—the speed of his hand would gradually slacken, his eye would wander to an easel, a sketch-block, or to some one of the manuscripts in progress, and that would have its turn. There was something well-nigh terrifying to a youthful onlooker in the deliberate ease with which he interchanged so many forms of creative work, taking up each one exactly at the point at which he had laid it aside, and never halting to recapture the thread of his thought"<sup>2</sup>

We are told by many witnesses of his capacity for total concentration, his almost child-like absorption in the immediate matter on hand, whether it were fishing, lecturing, or appearing as the Archbishop of Canterbury. We know of his ability to master even uncongenial work, once he had set his mind upon it. "Anyone can be a public speaker", he once said, "if he only pegs away sufficiently at it"<sup>3</sup>. We know of his physical impatience of restraint, his vigorous gestures, his perpetual pacing of the room,<sup>4</sup> his irritation at the trivialities of "polite" intercourse. His

<sup>1</sup> *The Athenæum*, October 10th, 1896

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Sparling, *op cit*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> A. Compton-Rickett, *op cit*, p. 233

<sup>4</sup> See Edward Carpenter in *Freedom*, December, 1896. "At meals even it would happen that he could not sit still, but, jumping up from the table and talking vehemently, would quarter-deck the room."

acquaintance, William Sharp, summed up these characteristics well "I never saw him at any of those literary gatherings where he might have been expected to put in an appearance", wrote Sharp.

"His method of enjoyment was 'to do something,' and it fretted him to sit long or listen long. Indeed, this physical impatience rendered him apparently more heedless to music, the theatre, lectures, than he really was, though when heart and brain were both under a spell, as when some speaker was urging in some new and vigorous way the claims of the people or when a friend was reading from the manuscript of a poem he would listen intently, leaning forward, with his vivid blue eyes gleaming out beneath his mass of upstanding and outstanding grizzled grey hair . . . so eagerly interested that it was possible to see the nervous life within him"<sup>1</sup>

It should not be supposed that he was a deliberate boor in general company habitually he was genial, cordial and courteous, provided that his time and patience were not tried too severely with banalities Beneath the bluff, self-critically humorous exterior, there persisted (says Sharp) "a curious kind of shyness" from his youthful years

His generosity, where his sympathies were engaged, is proverbial indeed, in his last years his feelings of guilt at his comfortable life in the midst of poverty, made him a target for imposters as well as honest men Several of his friends relate the constant trickle of refugees to his house, whom Morris helped in a prompt and liberal manner Over and above his unceasing assistance to the propaganda, he was often giving help privately where he could When a comrade in the Hammersmith League hurt his leg and was unemployed, Morris privately sent him £2 a week for six months until the wound was healed there must be a score of similar unrecorded incidents So great was his hatred of meanness that he sometimes went too far the other way, handing over money to the movement on occasions when it should have been a point of political principle for the comrades to find the money through activity But any flavour of "commercial" dealings pulled him up short A sculptor once asked to borrow £10 from him to buy some marble, and tactlessly offered interest "What?" answered Morris. "Do you think I'm a damned pawnbroker?"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1896

<sup>2</sup> R. A. Muncy in *The Leaguer*, October, 1907

A good deal has been written of Morris's famous "rages". Perhaps they were not so frequent as has sometimes been supposed, since Sir Sydney Cockerell, who was Secretary to the Kelmscott Press in Morris's last years, witnessed only "about half a dozen of them".

"They were startling at the moment, but they were over in a very few minutes, and when he became calm he was like a penitent child"<sup>1</sup>

Shaw, on the other hand, was convinced that his rages were "pathological"· they "left him shaken as men are shaken after a fit":

"Being a great man, Morris could face and bear great trials, but on some utterly negligible provocation anything might happen, from plucking hairs out of his moustache and growling, 'Damned fool, damned fool,' to kicking a panel out of a door."<sup>2</sup>

He was, says Shaw, "rich in the enormous patience of the greatest artists", but went "unprovided with the small change of that virtue which enables cooler men to suffer fools gladly". In open-air speaking he was at a disadvantage through his slowness at repartee when dealing with hecklers, and "the provocations and interruptions of debate . . . infuriated Morris, especially when they were trivial and offensive (he could bear with any serious and honest utterance like an angel), so that at last the comrades, when there was a debating job to be done, put it on me . . ."<sup>3</sup> When once in one of his rages, Morris was capable of a flow of language not customarily found in the vocabulary of a Victorian gentleman, and sometimes seems to have revelled in the artistry of a row for its own sake. Surely no one but an artist could have conceived of those "Homeric passages" on the upper Thames near Kelmscott, when Morris would encounter on the water some "salaried minion" of the hated Thames Conservancy Board, and, leaning out of their punts, they would engage each other in colourful invective and defamation of character until they drifted out of earshot on the quiet reaches.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Observer*, November 19th, 1950

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, November 6th, 1949

<sup>3</sup> May Morris II, p xxxix

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 620 On April 5th, 1890, he was writing to his wife "We met some Conservancy men going up the water in a big punt this morning which makes me uneasy, as I fear their bedevilling the river they are a crying example of the evils of bureaucratic centralization" (Brit Mus Add MSS 45338)

Morris was always impatient with what he considered to be "fads", especially when they seemed to direct the attention of comrades away from essentials in the Socialist movement. True, he was thought to be a faddist himself because of his unconventional simple blue serge suit, his refusal to dress like his class. But this was not only consistent with his whole attitude to the decorative arts<sup>1</sup> it was also a plain matter of convenience—he passed so rapidly from one type of work to another that he was forced to find fitting and workmanlike clothes—and almost without forethought he pioneered the saner fashions of our own century. But vegetarianism, teetotalism, "simple lifers", had little of his sympathy. "When we are a society of equals", he wrote, "we shall be able to consider all these niceties of life and to do what we think best."<sup>2</sup> When he was told that a young middle-class acquaintance had retired to the woods to lead a natural life, he only grinned and remarked "Let us know when she comes out."<sup>3</sup> To any form of asceticism he was firmly opposed, as every page of *News from Nowhere* reveals. Simplicity did not imply deprivation of the senses, but the clearing away of a clutter of inessentials. Lecturing on "The Society of the Future", he said:

"I demand a free and unfettered animal life for man first of all. I demand the utter extinction of all asceticism. If we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men. And you know civilization *does* bid us to be ashamed of all these moods and deeds, and as far as she can, begs us to conceal them, and where possible to get other people to do them for us."<sup>4</sup>

He could scarcely hide his disappointment if—after a public meeting—the comrades were all teetotal, and took him to have lemonade in some temperance hotel. "I'd like to ask you to have a drink", he would say to such friends. "And then he would add, as in despair 'But you won't drink.'"<sup>5</sup> No doubt Morris and

<sup>1</sup> See *Works*, XXII, p. 265

<sup>2</sup> *Commonweal*, October 6th, 1888

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, XXII, p. xxiv

<sup>4</sup> May Morris, II, p. 457

<sup>5</sup> Salt, *Seventy Years Among Savages*, p. 80. See also May Morris, I, p. 663. Mr. Fred Henderson has recalled (in a BBC feature, "A Prophet with Honour", produced on June 24th, 1952) "I remember very vividly the first time I met Morris and his intense indignation at being booked into a Temperance Hotel."

Engels would have found themselves in agreement here at least. With Yeats he found a congenial companion.

"I saw him once at Hammeismith, holding up a glass of claret towards the light, and saying, 'Why do people say it is prosaic to get inspiration out of wine? Is it not the sunlight and the sap in the leaves? Are not grapes made by the sunlight and the sap?'"<sup>1</sup>

In his attitude to problems of personal morality, Morris broke sharply with Victorian orthodoxy. He never attempted to disguise his disgust at Victorian Grundyism, with—

"its increasing sense of the value of moral purity among those whose surroundings forbid them to understand even the meaning of physical purity, its scent of indecency in Literature and Art, which would prevent the publication of any book written out of England or before the middle of the 19th century, and would reduce painting and sculpture to the production of petticoated dolls without bodies"<sup>2</sup>

His own life and Janey's had, perhaps, been "unconventional", and his experience led him to beware of dogmatizing on questions of personal and sexual morality, which might be standardized if they were considered as property relations but not if they were considered as relations of respect between equal human beings. The Socialist movement of the 'eighties and 'nineties, with its sense of sudden liberation from all bourgeois conventions, was a period rife both in speculation and in unconventional practice in sexual relations, naturally there were muddles and naiveties enough, but the atmosphere was healthy in so far as secretiveness and hypocrisy were replaced by open advocacy of unorthodox behaviour.

Morris did not identify himself with any "school" of thought with Edward Carpenter, or with Joseph Lane's Anarchist-Communist "free love" (see p. 527), nor did he bestow more than a chuckle upon Bax's solemn opinion that "many generations of rational social life" in a Socialist society would "modify" and "eradicate" "the coarser side of the sexual passion" by a gradual succession of inherited changes in the human organism through the medium of its social and economic surroundings".<sup>3</sup> His own views were set forward in public (but not pressed) in his

<sup>1</sup> *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1903

<sup>2</sup> *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, pp. 3-4

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, August 7th, 1886



Notes to the League Manifesto (Appendix I, p. 856), and in Chapter IX of *News from Nowhere*. The test, as he saw it, lay not in "mere theological views as to chastity", but in the happiness and fullness of life of the men and women of the future. Speaking at a League meeting in 1885 on the occasion of the *Pall Mall Gazette* exposures of prostitution in London he rounded upon the fluttering and pornographic Grundies of the Press

"Two things are to be noticed," he said "First, the children of the poor are always the victims. Second, the terrible and miserable unhappiness of the whole affair. There is much talk of immorality. Whatever is unhappy is immoral. It is unhappiness that must be got rid of. We have nothing to do with the mere immorality. We have to do with the causes that have *compelled* this unhappy way of living. There is the closest of relations between the prostitution of the body in the streets and of the body in the workshops. We desire that all should be free to earn their livelihood—with that freedom will come an end of these monstrosities, and true love between man and woman throughout society."<sup>1</sup>

In Socialist society, declared Note F to the Manifesto, "contracts between individuals would be voluntary and unenforced by the community." "Fancy a court for enforcing a contract of passion or sentiment!" exclaimed old Hammond in *News from Nowhere*, in the chapter which many will feel is one of the richest and most flexible in that great book. While the pattern revealed in "Nowhere" is one of enduring love and friendship between two individuals, it is shown that the pattern is not uniform, and does not necessarily exclude more transient relationships (both happy and unhappy) alongside marriage. Everywhere flexibility is the keynote, in that most difficult thing to regulate, human feeling.

"There is no unvarying conventional set of rules by which people are judged, no bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their minds and lives, no hypocritical excommunication which people are *forced* to pronounce."

Respect for the human personality, absence of deceit and constraint, are stressed

"There need be no pretext of unity when the reality of it is gone nor do we drive those who well know that they are incapable of it to

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, September, 1885

profess an undying sentiment which they cannot really feel thus it is that as that monstrosity of venal lust is no longer possible, so also it is no longer needed

Moreover, Socialism would effect a similar transformation in family relationships "in opposition to the bourgeois view, we hold that children are *persons*, not *property*, and so have a right to claim all the advantages which the community provides for every citizen".<sup>1</sup> The liberation of the woman from anxiety as to the livelihood of her children would provide the necessary pre-condition for true equality in social life

"Thus a new development of the family would take place, on the basis, not of a predetermined lifelong business arrangement, to be formally and nominally held to, irrespective of circumstances, but on mutual inclination and affection, an association terminable at the will of either party . The abhorrence of the oppression of the man by the woman or the woman by the man will certainly be an essential outcome of the ethics of the New Society "<sup>2</sup>

This was as far as Morris stated his views in public An insight into his private views is given in a long letter to his old friend, Faulkner, of October 16th, 1886

"My dear Charley,

"Thanks for your letter It is right to 'blow off' to a friend when one is exercised There is so much to be said on the subject of the family that I can not attempt to state the whole of my opinion, part of which of course is only *mine* and not necessarily doctrine But here goes for a hurried line or two.

"Copulation is worse than beastly unless it takes place as the outcome of natural desires and kindness on both sides so taking place there is even something sacred about it in spite of the grotesquery of the act, as was well felt by the early peoples in their phallic worship But further man has not been contented with leaving the matter there, mere animal on one side, inexplicably mysterious on the other, but has adorned the act variously as he has done the other grotesque act of eating and drinking, and in my opinion he will always do so Still if he were to leave off doing so, I don't think one ought to be shocked, there would still remain the decent animalism plus the human kindness, that would be infinitely better than the present system of venal prostitution which is the meaning of our marriage system on its legal side, though as in other matters, in order to prevent us stinking out of existence, real society asserts itself in the teeth of authority by forming genuine unions of passion and affection

<sup>1</sup> Glasier, p 185.

<sup>2</sup> *Socialism Its Growth and Outcome*, pp 299-300

"Clearly the present marriage system can only be kept up by the same means as the wages system is, i e the police & the army. When the wife can earn her living as a citizen, and the children are citizens with inalienable rights of livelihood there will be nothing to force people into legal prostitution or tempt them into irregular venal d°, which for the rest they couldn't have, as it is simply a form of ordinary market exploitation. Husband, wife and children would all be free.

"So far as this I think all Socialists go. I should further say that the economical freedom of the family would clear away the false sentiment with which we have gilded the chain, but to my mind there would still remain abundance of real sentiment which man has evolved from the mere animal arrangement, and that this would prevent indecencies, though as to the outward form or symbol that it would take I can make no prophecies.

"Here then is in brief my views

"1st The couple would be *free*,

"2 Being free, if unfortunately distaste arose between them they should make no pretence of its not having arisen.

"3 But I should hope that in most cases friendship would go along with desire, and would outlive it, and the couple would still remain together, but always as free people. In short artificial bolstering up of natural human relations is what I object to, though I admit that to make some ceremony or adornment of them is natural & human also.

"I think this is a reasonable view of the marriage question, & am prepared to defend it in public. Marson's view,<sup>1</sup> as far as I understand it, seems to be that once 2 people have committed themselves to one act of copulation they are to be tied together through life no matter how miserable it makes them, their children, or their children's children. That is a superstition which I have no doubt he is sincere in holding, under our present circumstances it does not burden men of the world at all since there are plenty of whores in the market owing to our system of industrial exploitation. I think though that it weighs heavily on sensitive people endowed with real sentiment, while it degrades poor people horribly since they *must* wriggle out of it somehow. But if property were abolished such a view would not be very harmful, simply because it could not possibly be the general view. Only those would hold it whom it suited, and public opinion would leave people free, though once more I believe that it would without violence and in some way that I cannot foresee, take care of the decencies, that it would adorn the subject in such a way as its knowledge of the great art of living would bid it.

"Well, I have written a longish letter after all but I thought it was only friendly to do so. As regards the policy of putting the matter forward, it is a ticklish subject, but one day or another we must face it.

<sup>1</sup> See article by the Rev C L Marson, "Socialists and Purity", in *The Christian Socialist*, September, 1886, also *Commonweal*, October 2nd, 1886.

We must not forget that the present iniquity like all iniquities weighs much heavier on the working classes than on us because they are cooped together like fowls going to market

"Please excuse haste, my dear fellow, as I am so hurried

"Yours affectionately,

"William Morris"<sup>1</sup>

Morris well knew that it was not advisable to meddle as a *movement* in such controversial matters and he was inclined to the view that the questions of personal morality, the family and religion were such hornet's nests that it might be best to let them alone even in the transitional state of Socialism.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, he could not remain altogether silent on these questions in an age when public Grundyism was used as a cloak to hide the vicious immorality of imperialism and exploitation nor could he tolerate the presentation of Socialism as a kind of paradise of economic well-being in which all men came to share the values and aspirations of the Victorian middle-class (see p 839). On questions of religious belief, he was (for the sake of the movement) even more reticent, and rarely made any public statement of a partisan nature. When he did so, he made it clear that he did not share the views of the "Christian Socialists", although he respected their position.

"Real (I should call it ideal) Christianity has never existed at all", he wrote in one *Commonweal* controversy "Christianity has developed in due historic sequence from the first, and has taken the various forms which social, political economic circumstances have forced on it, its last form moulded by the sordid commercialism of modern capitalism being the bundle of hypocrisies which Christian Socialists condemn. When this beggarly period has been supplanted by one in which Socialism is realized, will not the system of morality, the theory of life, be all-embracing, and can it be other than the Socialistic theory? Where then will be the Christian ethic?—*absorbed in Socialism*. No separate system of ethics will then be needed . . ."<sup>3</sup>

In private conversation he drove home the fact that organized religion was one of the strongest pillars of capitalist orthodoxy. "One night", recalled his acquaintance, Harry Lowerison,

"Shaw, Belfort Bax and I were chatting after a lecture in the old shed in the Mall. The churches were just then a little more intolerant and reactionary than usual, and I got angry and was damning them in good

<sup>1</sup> MSS in the Bodleian Library, Oxford

<sup>2</sup> See Glasier, p 185

<sup>3</sup> *Commonweal*, March 8th, 1890

set terms, when I was surprised to hear Bax, of all men, say 'You're flogging a very dead horse, Lowerison' Morris had come up behind me, and he met Bax on the rebound with 'Dead! the church! you mind its hoofs, Bax, and its teeth, neither end is safe' "1

We have strayed a little from the consideration of Morris's personality, and his personal influence, as contrasted with the influence of his ideas. But this account of his breach with the orthodoxies of Victorian morality will help us to understand the importance of his personal example in his breach with the even greater orthodoxy of *class*. True, Edward Carpenter and others had familiarized themselves with certain aspects of working-class life, while, at the time of the Dock Strike, middle-class "slumming" was almost respectable. But these facts re-emphasize how firmly demarked the social classes were at the end of the nineteenth century—revealing themselves not only in the class outlook of those who observed every social distinction, but also in the self-consciousness of those who deliberately ignored them. The attitude of middle-class men and women (including many of those who joined the Socialist ranks) to the working-class was viciated by half-conscious feelings—of fear, of guilt, of patronage, contempt, or even hatred. This was the weak point in Shaw's armour, which held him back from full comradeship in the movement. Hyndman was held back by the same inability to transcend his class background. In Cobden-Sanderson's *Journal* there are passages which reveal the great gulf dividing the workers from some of Morris's friends on the artistic edge of the movement.

"I am sitting at the small table in the bow window hot bright sunshine on the world outside. I am going to give an hour or two to Hyndman's *Historical Basis of Socialism*. Annie darling is outside sitting under the shade of a tree reading. Blue-bottles are buzzing, and white-winged butterflies flit by. Through the open window I look upon a wicket beyond, surmounted with jessamine. The wind flutters in the trees and blows refreshingly in gusts upon my cheeks. What a day! What a time! What perfection of quiet and happiness. How the world is beautiful! And now to the contrast offered in the pages of Hyndman, 'The Present Position of the City Workers'. It is too horrible. It is cryingly miserable. And yet here it is in tranquil print. Why do not the poor get up and cut the throats of all of us?"2

1 Address by Harry Lowerison at the Annual Supper of the Kelmscott Fellowship, March, 1932 (typescript copy in Mattison Collection)

2 *Journals of T. J. Cobden-Sanderson*, entry for August 2nd, 1884

Why not, indeed, when their sufferings are employed shamelessly to provide a bizarre sense of contrast, a novel and piquant experience to be savoured by Cob -S in his garden? Or, at another extreme, regard the animal fear of Gissing, caught off his guard in an early novel

"O, what a hell could I depict in the Whitecross Street of this Christmas Eve! Out of the very depths of human depravity bubbled up the foulest miasmata which the rottenness of the human heart can breed, usurping the dominion of the pure air of heaven, stifling a whole city with their infernal reek"<sup>1</sup>

Not the rottenness of the sanitation, of the landlords rack-renting the slums—but the rottenness of the slum-dwellers themselves. And this from a man who was, at the time, coquetting with Socialism!

Then, as now, there were middle-class men and women to whom Socialism was a form of Charity Organization Society, or a passing adventure, or an individualistic protest of an exhibitionist kind. There is no shade of this in Morris's attitude either to Socialism or to the working-class. On certain points of principle he broke deliberately with the customs of his class. "My dear", he wrote guiltily to one of his earnest young daughters, in 1888, "to confess and be hanged I went 2nd class to Kelmscott with your mother we did not like to be scrowdged"<sup>2</sup>—revealing in this passing manner that he (and the unhappy Jane) had been in the custom of travelling third class on their way to Kelmscott. But, in general, Morris's attitude to the working class was unself-conscious and free of inhibitions. He had a greater respect for craftsmanship than he had for academic learning, and he always felt that his own craftsmanship joined him to the working people, who could understand and respect his kind of work. Despite certain failures in communication (see p. 507), he always succeeded in impressing any working-class gathering which he addressed with his absolute honesty of purpose. "So convinced was he of the utility of open-air propaganda", recalled Frank Kitz,

"that he stood by my side on many a windy, inclement night at the

<sup>1</sup> Gissing, *Workers in the Dawn*

<sup>2</sup> Either to Jenny or May, September 2nd, 1888, Brit Mus Add MSS 45340

corner of some wretched East-End slum whilst I endeavoured to gain him an audience. He had no feeling of contempt for those who do the rough work of the movement. Although his audience were at first somewhat mystified by his method of delivering his message, for he was no great orator, they gradually grasped his meaning and as he preached to those toil-worn crowds in the gloomy East-End byways he would warm to his subject, and his audience would enter into the spirit of his address"<sup>1</sup>

This is a tribute indeed for Frank Kitz, hard-bitten revolutionary and East-End-er himself, with the strongest distrust of all middle-class elements in the movement, would have sensed at once, and taken offence at, the least patronage or sham in his relations with Morris. The fact that men like Kitz, Mainwaring and Lane not only addressed him as "Comrade Morris" but felt that he was indeed their comrade is among the highest of Morris's honours.

His comradeship in the Cause, and his remarkable capacity for straightforward companionship, without any shade of "the great man unbending", was a source of enrichment to many lives. Wilfred Scawen Blunt, who prided himself on being an accomplished philanderer, was astonished to find that Morris regarded women with the respect of equality.

"He was the only man I ever came in contact with who seemed absolutely independent of sex considerations. He would talk in precisely the same tone to a pretty woman as to a journeyman carpenter—that is to say, he would be interested if she had anything interesting to tell him, but not for a minute longer"<sup>2</sup>

With the comrades he was careful not to impose his views by force of his personal authority. Young James Leatham, of Aberdeen, was at that time a "gradualist", believing in "evolutionary Socialism", and Morris had opposed his view forcibly and with a certain sharpness of feeling then, checking himself,

"He added disarmingly, 'I say that, not because I'm an older man than you, but because I think it's right.' He must have thought he had sounded dogmatic"<sup>3</sup>

The letters to young Fred Henderson (Appendix Four) are themselves a commentary upon Morris's comradeship and lack of

<sup>1</sup> *Freedom*, May, 1916

<sup>2</sup> MS reminiscence in Brit Mus Add MSS 45350

<sup>3</sup> *The Gateway*, mid-January, 1941

patronage, while Bruce Glasier's book of reminiscences is full of accounts of Morris's unself-conscious part in the casual comradeship of the movement. For example, he describes the occasion when Morris was in Glasgow, and an afternoon open-air meeting was prevented by snow. Seven or eight comrades met, instead, in the Branch clubroom.

"Morris was evidently pleased to find himself in a smaller company, and especially so . . . on discovering that those present belonged to the working-class. He seemed . . . when in the company of strangers, to feel more at home and freer in his manner when among working men than when among men of his own class."

The afternoon passed informally. Morris questioned the comrades on the way in which each had found the road to Socialism, chatted about the Utopian Socialists and the submerged undercurrent of Communism in the Middle Ages, and then sat back with delight as two comrades sang Gaelic and Scottish songs. But even such a casual occasion as this seemed to bring inspiration to the movement. "What stories he told, what life he dragged out of the past, what largeness and certitude he gave us!" Glasier recalled. "This is the greatest day of my life, and I can never hope to see the like again", said one of the comrades, bidding Glasier good night. "If one can speak of a God amongst men, we can speak of William Morris as he has been with us this day in Glasgow."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Glasier has heightened the incident—and yet the same note recurs in many reminiscences. John Bedford Leno, the veteran Chartist poet, attended a lecture at Hammersmith, and was warmly welcomed by Morris: he later recalled with joy "this oasis in the desert of an old man's life."<sup>2</sup> Alf Mattison, the Leeds engineer and historian of the movement, cherished as a "priceless possession" his memory of calling at Kelmscott House in 1892. After Morris had paced with him up and down the garden, interrogating him on the movement in the North, he stayed to supper after the Sunday lecture:

"What a pleasant time we had! There was Morris at the head of the table, May Morris at my side, and about six or eight more comrades. Morris was in a hearty and jovial mood. Tales were told and songs were sung. Often since that time, when the Social outlook was

<sup>1</sup> Glasier, pp. 66–71

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Leno, *The Aftermath* (1892), p. 86



depressing and hope seemed fled, I have recalled that happy occasion, and under his manifold inspirations have again taken the road to Socialism—the earthly paradise of the toiling millions”<sup>1</sup>

For many comrades, these famous Sunday suppers seemed to open new windows on the wealth of life. One Hammersmith Leaguer recorded

“We first discussed a Socialist colony, and Morris went into every detail, with such zeal that he made us think it a project dear to his heart. He talked about the upper reaches of the Thames and about salmon fishing, about his country house, ‘Kelmscott’, about old folklore—and some of the doings when feasts used to take place *inside* the churches.”<sup>2</sup>

It was as if *News from Nowhere* was being unfolded before their eyes.

Nor should we forget the conscious efforts made by Morris to instill this spirit of comradeship into the movement, and to enrich the day-to-day struggle with an eager cultural life. His poems, his play, his readings from John Ball, Dickens, Sir Thomas More, his historical lectures, his careful exposition of historical development, his many depictions of the future, his lectures on art and society—all these assumed the greatest importance to him in creating a revolutionary spirit strong enough to sustain the inevitable set-backs and defeats he saw on the way. “It was William Morris’s great hope”, wrote Edward Carpenter,

“that these branches growing and spreading, would before long ‘reach hands’ to each other and form a network over the land—would constitute in fact ‘the New Society’ within the framework of the old.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes he described this spirit as the “Religion of Socialism”, using the word without any supernatural connotations.

“It has been seen over and over how a religion, a principle—whatever you may choose to call it—will transform poltroons into heroes, by forcing men to make the best of their better qualities, and making the excess of what they have got in them that is good, supply the defects of their lacking qualities. Let us remember that the Religion of Socialism calls upon us to be better than other people, since we owe ourselves to the Society which we have accepted as the hope of the future.”<sup>4</sup>

The revolutionary spirit, which Morris sought to instill into

<sup>1</sup> Mattison MSS

<sup>2</sup> R. A. Muncey in *The Leaguer*, October, 1907

<sup>3</sup> Carpenter, *op cit*, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Commonweal*, August 28th, 1886

himself and the wider movement, provides one more clue to John Burns's meaning when he wrote "He is . . . above all a man."

Here, then, are some aspects of the personality—humorous, brusque, shy, meditative, vehement, by turns—which so strongly impressed all who knew him, and which has left its permanent stamp upon the Socialist movement. So far from giving the impression of the "dreaming idealist", the impression gained by acquaintances was often the reverse. Margaret McMillan recalled his conversation

"He talked nearly all the time about material things, not theories or speculations, but concrete things, and failing these, news of the doings in the party. He had nothing of Hyndman's fire and storm, nothing of Hardie's mysticism. It seemed as if you could put his information in your pocket."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps if there is a dominant trait it is one of deep seriousness, combined with a total absence of affectation, a constant struggle to find the most direct honesty of expression. In one of his earlier lectures he said:

"It is good for a man who thinks seriously to face his fellows, and speak out whatever really burns in him, so that men may seem less strange to one another."<sup>2</sup>

This is the prevailing note of his whole life. But we should beware of painting his character in black and white. "I'm a lonely chap", he once remarked, and the words recall sharply the turbulence of his romantic revolt, the arduous conflict of his middle years, the failure in his personal life, his intellectual isolation at the dawn of modern Socialism, the stresses beneath the surface of his final years of action. The French critic, Gabriel Mourey, was struck by his "strange face"—

"Fierce, and yet at the same time overflowing with gentleness . . . the undecided *brusquerie* of the shy, the reserve of a man filled with his own thoughts and self-contained, but with sudden fits of *bonhomie* and gusts of enthusiasm which all at once fire, exalt, and transfigure him."<sup>3</sup>

While Morris's acquaintance, the Rev. Stopford Brooke, who knew him over twenty-five years, declared:

<sup>1</sup> M. McMillan *The Life of Rachel McMillan* (1927), p. 58

<sup>2</sup> "The Art of the People", *Works*, XXII, p. 49

<sup>3</sup> *St. James Gazette*, October, 1896

"His life was a wonder of work and pursuit and of intensity His character . . . is a strange study, extraordinarily heterogeneous People think it simple, it was amazingly complex" <sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the truth is twofold His character was amazingly complex in the strange blend of the romantic and realist, in the fires of conflict through which he had passed and which still flickered within him to the end But in the integration of his life, the splendid unity of aspiration and action of his later years, there is the simplicity of greatness It was this simplicity which held so much influence over his contemporaries, and drew tributes from men so diverse as Tom Mann

"He was to me the outstanding man among the intellectuals of the time, with a personality of so distinguished and commanding a type that I felt it a privilege to be identified with the same movement that held out such a glorious hope to the workers of the world" <sup>2</sup>

As W B Yeats, in the deep romanticism of his early period

"He may not have been, indeed he was not, among the very greatest of poets, but he was among the greatest of those who prepare the last reconciliation when the Cross shall blossom with roses." <sup>3</sup>

And as George Bernard Shaw, at the end of his life

"With such wisdom as my years have left me I note that as he has drawn further and further away from the hurlyburly of our personal contacts into the impersonal perspective of history he towers greater and greater above the horizon beneath which his best advertised contemporaries have disappeared" <sup>4</sup>

And, in so writing, he proved the truth of his words written forty years before in the week that Morris was buried "You can lose a man like that by your own death, but not by his And so, until then, let us rejoice in him" <sup>5</sup>

### *XI Desire and Necessity*

What was the source of the greatness of Morris—this growing stature which he assumes in the perspective of history? His

<sup>1</sup> See *Life and Letters of Stopford Brooke* (Ed L P Jacks), *passim*

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Worker*, March 24th, 1934

<sup>3</sup> *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1903

<sup>4</sup> May Morris, II, p xl

<sup>5</sup> *Saturday Review*, October 10th, 1896

poetry alone, or his work in the decorative arts—profound though its influence was—would hardly be sufficient to establish his claim to the universal greatness suggested by Shaw. As a political organizer his efforts ended in failure. His political theory, important as it is in the English tradition, appears as bold crayon-work beside the firm and fine-drawn analysis of Marx and Engels. As a theorist of the arts—despite all his profound insight—he failed to erect a consistent system, and muddled his way around some central problems. Did he make any major contribution to English culture which is marked by the stamp of unquestionable originality and excellence?

The answer must be, "Yes." Morris's claim to greatness must be founded, not on any single contribution to English culture, in one field alone, but on the quality which unites and informs every aspect of his life and work. This quality might best be described as "moral realism"—it is the practical moral example of his life which wins admiration, the profound moral insight of his political and artistic writings which gives them life. *The Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*, those two richly imaginative moralities, seem the most natural and fitting expression of his artistic genius.

Morris never sought to disguise the leading part which moral considerations played in the formation of his outlook, and in guiding his actions. He was brought to Socialism by his conscious revolt against that mechanical materialism which reduced the story of mankind to an objectless record of struggle for the survival of the "fittest", and which, in his own time, under whatever high-sounding phrases, put profit and not "free and full life" as the touchstone of value. He declared, by contrast, "I am a sentimentalist in all the affairs of life, and I am proud of the title."<sup>1</sup> "I must tell you that my *special* leading motive as a Socialist is hatred of civilization, my ideal of the new Society would not be satisfied unless that Society destroyed civilization."<sup>2</sup> His ever-ready response to the beauty and possibilities of life, his capacity for indignation at its impoverishment in "civilized" capitalist society, was limitless. Unlike those late romantic poets who revolted once in their youth, and slumbered thereafter for years, he was in continual volcanic eruption. Here

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, I, p. 147.    <sup>2</sup> "The Society of the Future", *ibid*, II, p. 457.

he is writing his *Commonweal* "Notes", and catches sight of a sordid incident of Imperialism

"What now? Who is the civilized English Government copying now?—Genghis Khan or Tamerlane? Scarcely even these, for these destroyers had their ideas stirred and their blood heated by the atmosphere of personal war and violence in which they lived, and at worst they were no hypocrites. But our black-coated, smug-visaged, dinner-party-giving, go-to-church 'scourges of God' who have not even the spirit to plead for themselves that they *are* curses and must act after their kind, who can one liken them to? For the sake of what one cannot even call a whim—for the sake of one knows not what, they must slaughter a number of innocent persons whom they are pleased to call 'the enemy' "1

"Bah! the man of modern civilization is a sickening animal to contemplate", he breaks out on another occasion, after describing a British shooting party in an Egyptian village.2 General Gordon, "martyr" of the Sudan, is placed in a phrase—"that most dangerous tool of capitalistic oppression, the 'God-fearing soldier'."3 "One paper says that this task of civilizing Africa is well worthy of Modern Christianity. Surely that is undeniable. Tom Turnpenny never had a better job offered to him, 20 per cent and the Gospel. . . are tempting indeed"4 And so the sordid climax of capitalist "progress" is put in the perspective of history

"O lame and impotent conclusion of that Manchester school which has filled the world with the praises of its inventiveness, its energy, its love of peace! Strange that the new Attila, the new Ghengis Khan, the modern scourge of God, should be destined to stalk through the world in the gentlemanly broadcloth of a Quaker manufacturer!"5

Or here we have his attention caught by such a trivial incident as we might read in the Press every day of our lives. Notice how the whole of capitalist society, its legal code, its sense of values, is present in his mind as he comments on the incident

"A citizen complained of a nuisance, in the form of a stink, in a police-court the other day, and the whole subject was thought to be very funny, the magistrate leading off the laughter. We cannot

1 *Commonweal*, December 29th, 1888

2 *Ibid*, April 9th, 1887

3 *Ibid*, October 27th, 1888

4 *Ibid*, August 27th, 1888

5 May Morris, II, p. 196

tell what the merits of this particular case might be, but we do know that a neighbourhood may be stunk out without a legal nuisance being established, which is indeed ridiculous enough, though not more ridiculous than most of our law. Perhaps the magistrate and his audience were laughing at English law in general. Or perhaps they thought it a preposterous joke that a well-to-do citizen should make a fuss about commerce annoying him with a mere stink when it murders so many poor people day by day. No doubt this is a joke, but I can't laugh at it. There is another explanation, which is that these laughers were such dullards that they had no conception that people might possibly restrain commerce so as to allow people to live decent lives. *That* also is no laughing matter."<sup>1</sup>

And so, in these casual passing notes, he revealed his astonishing insight into the self-destructive progress of capitalism in its final years.

"International Capitalism and the workman a hungry machine, International Socialism and the workman a free man and the master of his own destiny—it must be one or other of these two. All the feeble compromises . . . will be speedily found out by the monster which the Age of Commerce has made by dint of such mighty effort and cleverness, and which it must now feed by anything that may be handy. Honour, justice, beauty, pleasure, hope, all must be cast into that insatiable maw to stave off the end awhile, and yet at last the end must come."<sup>2</sup>

Morris, one feels, would not have been surprised if he had lived to see the defenders of "Christian" civilization armed with deathly bacteria and atomic weapons. He had seen into the heart of "the Bourgeois" and had found within it the negation of all life. On one side was the comfortable hypocrisy.

"In the naivest and most unconscious way the one standard of good or evil, of better or worse, is the comfort and morals of the Middle-class . . . They very naturally therefore are always fairly contented with the world as it is especially since most of them look forward to another Bourgeois world beyond."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, June 29th, 1889.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, June 29th, 1887.

<sup>3</sup> "The Political Outlook", Brit Mus Add MSS 45330. See also his corresponding characterization of the feudal ideal of "hierarchical government" "an idea founded on the assumption of the existence of an arbitrary irresponsible God of the universe, the proprietor of all things and persons, to be worshipped and not questioned, a being whose irresponsible authority is reflected in the world of men by certain other irresponsible governors whose authority is delegated to them by that supreme slave-holder and employer of labour in Heaven." (Lecture, "Equality", Brit Mus Add MSS 45330). See also

On the other hand, his writings are full of forecasts of the recklessness of individualism grown desperate when its end is near. In a striking image he suggested that Albert Durer's "Knight and Death" (a favourite of his youth) might serve as "a figurement of the doom of Blood and Iron in our own day", where—

"the armed bourgeoisie which to-day owns all that is made and all that makes, and which after a long period of that confidence of living for ever, which is the natural gift of youth and manhood, is now entering the valley of the shadow of death, and has become conscious of its coming defeat, and of the companions it has made for itself, and so rides on warily and fearfully, Crime behind it, Death before it."<sup>1</sup>

And yet there was hope in this as well, for—

"happily it always happens in revolutions [that] the nearer the time comes for the defeat of reaction the more the courage of the reactionists fails them, because they begin to be conscious that their cause has become a mere mass of found-out lies and helpless hypocrisies."<sup>2</sup>

This is, indeed, the prevailing note of Morris's later actions and writings—the appeal to man's conscience as a vital agency of social change. Critics of Marxism constantly aver that there can be no meaningful morality, to which men and women can attach conscious and passionate value, within a materialist interpretation of reality. Morality (it is said) implies some idealist absolute, which cannot be deduced from man's own history. If this be taken away, then life itself is despoiled of value: it is an accident of nature, without meaning or aim, and all talk of morality can relate only to the behaviour-conditioning of passing phases of social development. It is from this general standpoint that so many interpreters of William Morris have sought to deny that he was in any serious sense a Marxist, or have suggested that, in so far as he accepted certain Marxist formulations in his political thought, he was guilty of inconsistency.

In fact, this confusion should not be attributed to Morris, but

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his comment on Bradlaugh and the anti-Socialist rationalists in a late lecture on "Communism" (Brit Mus Add MSS 45331) "Religious tradition also hampers us but little, or need not, save that double-faced hypocrisy has now another double face, and can look at the same time east and west as well as north and south, for atheism stands by its old foe orthodoxy to strike a blow together with it, against true freedom and in favour of monopoly."

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, March 12th, 1887

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, March 19th, 1887

to those critics whose slender acquaintance with Marxism has led them to identify the theoretical position of Marx and Engels with that very mechanical materialism against which Morris was in revolt. Morris's moral criticism of society is not only entirely compatible with dialectical materialism, and parallel to the criticisms developed in Marx's early writing, and then in the *Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, *The Origin of the Family* and *Ludwig Feuerbach*, it is also the theme of his most vigorous and original writings within the Marxist tradition.

Morris felt no need for any theological justification for his moral convictions. Discussing the existence of God with Allingham, in 1882, he remarked. "It's so unimportant, it seems to me"<sup>1</sup> He held that the fact that man's moral concepts have been created by man himself, in the course of his social evolution, should heighten rather than diminish their passionate value. Moreover, he avoided that error against which Marx and Engels so often warned, of attempting to abstract from society moral precepts and principles applicable to all men in all societies. "The human essence", wrote Marx, "is no abstraction inherent in each separate individual. In its reality it is the *ensemble* of the social relations"<sup>2</sup> Like Marx, he founded his interpretation upon "men, not in any fantastic isolation or definition, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions". It is true that Morris was (as he has so often been called) a "visionary" but he directed men's eyes, not "to the skies",<sup>3</sup> but to the realities of life upon the earth. His moral insight was that of a materialist and a realist.

Certain remarkable passages in Engels's writings help us to assess Morris's moral standpoint. In *Anti-Dühring* he declared,

"As society has hitherto moved in class antagonisms, morality was always a class morality, it has either justified the domination and interests of the ruling class, or, as soon as the oppressed class has become powerful enough, it has represented the revolt against this domination and the future interests of the oppressed. That in this process there has been on the whole progress in morality, as in all other

<sup>1</sup> Allingham, *op cit*, p. 316

<sup>2</sup> Marx's Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach

<sup>3</sup> See Francis Williams, *Fifty Years March: The Rise of the Labour Party*, p. 53, where Morris is described in the usual way as a "visionary" who lifted "men's eyes to the skies", and whose criticism of society was "moral" as opposed to "economic".



branches of human knowledge, cannot be doubted. But we have not yet passed beyond class morality. A really human morality which transcends class antagonisms and their legacies in thought becomes possible only at a stage of society which has not only overcome class contradictions but has even forgotten them in practical life."

This "progress in morality", as Marx and Engels showed, took place as each advance in man's productive powers enriched his possibilities of life, enlarging the range of individual experience and relationships. This much Shelley had perceived in his *Defence of Poetry*:

"After one person and one age has exhausted all of its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight."

But he did not perceive the dialectical movement of this progress. "Everything civilization brings forth", wrote Engels, "is double-edged, double-tongued, divided against itself, contradictory." "Every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others."<sup>1</sup> "Since civilization is founded on the exploitation of one class by another class, its whole development proceeds in a constant contradiction. . . Every fresh emancipation of one class is necessarily a new oppression for another class."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Morris, in his turn, never ceased to iterate, class oppression distorts the mind and sensibility of the oppressors at the same time as it denies the possibilities of life to the oppressed.

In this context it is possible to understand the importance which Morris attached to a word which he constantly employed—"aspiration". "The possibility", wrote Engels in *Ludwig Feuerbach*, "of purely human sentiments in the intercourse with other human beings has nowadays been . . . curtailed by the society in which we live, which is based upon class antagonism and class rule". The possibilities of a "really human morality", of "purely human sentiments", denied their fulfilment by class oppression, have not of course remained the same within all past societies: rather—as Engels

<sup>1</sup> Engels, *The Origin of the Family* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1942), p. 71

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202

shows throughout *The Origin of the Family*—these possibilities have themselves changed and become enriched with each social advance. And at each stage of advance, while denied satisfaction within class-divided society, they have given rise to *aspirations* for their fulfilment even among individual members of the ruling class itself, given expression in art, in moral idealism and in forms of rebellion against the poverty of the present. In all his writings Morris sought to arouse and feed these aspirations, and to give them direction as a powerful agency of revolutionary change.

Morris, as a true creative artist, was unusually well equipped to lay bare the moral truths of his society. Unsteady among generalizations, weak in analytic thought, his response to life was immediate and concrete. He felt life directly, "on the pulse", as all creative artists must, and his responses were received by a deeply cultured mind, thoroughly familiar with the aspirations of the people of past times, and in particular with the quality of life in pre-capitalist societies. Moreover, he himself possessed more than his full share of that aspiration-of-life-unsatisfied generated by capitalist society itself, which had been one source of the romantic movement in which his youth had been nourished. In the result, we have that "never-ending contrast" between the quality of man's life, at its finest, in the past, the concrete perception of the present, and the aspiration for a fuller life in the future, which plays throughout Morris's later writings, and which enables him to embody in it repeated intuitions of that "really human morality" by the light of which he criticizes his own time.

The quality of realism in his moral criticism of society flowed directly from his scientific understanding of social development, his Marxism. Without this understanding his intuitions must have been haphazard, utopian, or nostalgic. Like Carlyle, Ruskin, and contemporary "railers against progress", his indignation would have been impotent to guide and inspire to action. But at the same time the concrete nature of his artistic perception saved him from falling into the error of which Engels accused Feuerbach, who—

"never contrives to escape from the realm of abstraction . . . into that of living reality. He clings hard to nature and humanity; but nature and humanity remain always mere words with him. He is incapable of

telling us anything definite about real nature or real men. But from the abstract men of Feuerbach one arrives at real living men only when one considers them as participants in history."

The insights of Morris, like those of all true artists, were not into some imaginary heaven, but into the life about him. With his unusual strength of historical imagination, he was concerned, not with abstract and "eternal" principles, like those employed on every politician's lips to justify each twist and turn in the "game political", but with definite men and women, living in definite societies—their real sufferings, joys and deprivations. His moral criteria were derived from his understanding of the unfolding aspirations of men in history, and his direct perception of "real living men" in the present. Every time he cut through all casuistries and sophistries to the underlying moral realities, the naked antagonism of classes, the real misery of the exploited peoples, the actual denial of life in capitalist society. And when he expressed his aspirations for the future, so far as was possible he gave them concrete embodiment, as in *News from Nowhere*, creating in his imagination a new "ensemble of social relations".

It is unlikely that Morris ever read *The Origin of the Family, Anti-Dühring* or *Ludwig Feuerbach*, although he may have learned something of their theme from Bax, and he would have encountered these central ideas in *Capital*. The understanding that in the fight for Socialism the age-old contradiction between the unfolding possibilities of life and their negation by class oppression, between aspiration and actuality, was at last ended; or, if not ended, at last transmuted into the contradiction between man's boundless desire and the necessary limitations imposed by his environment and nature, this came upon him with the force of an independent discovery. The whole face of the world was changed for him by this new understanding. This discovery appeared to him to give a new meaning and dignity to man's whole story. The scientific interpretation of history made possible a great access of understanding and sympathy with the struggles of men in past times, which need no longer be viewed as a series of haphazard accidents.

"We see that the world of Europe [in the Middle Ages] was no more running round in a circle than now, but was developing, sometimes with stupendous speed, into something as different from itself as the

age which succeeds this will be different from that wherein we live. The men of those times are no longer puzzles to us, we can understand their aspirations, and sympathise with their lives, while at the same time we have no wish (not to say hope) to put back the clock. For indeed it is characteristic of the times in which we live, that, whereas, in the beginning of the romantic reaction, its supporters were for the most part mere *laudatores temporis acti* [praisers of past times] at the present time those who take pleasure in studying the life of the past are more commonly to be found in the ranks of those who are pledged to the forward movement of modern life while those who are vainly striving to stem the progress of the world are as careless of the past as they are fearful of the future. In short, history, the new sense of modern times, the great compensation for the losses of the centuries, is now teaching us worthily, and making us feel that the past is not dead, but is living in us, and will be alive in the future which we are now helping to make. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps his greatest meditation upon the meaning of life, both in its individual and in its historical context, is *The Dream of John Ball*, and this passage takes us directly to its central theme. Here, in those magnificent last scenes in the Church, with the dead from the day's battle, friend and foe, lying beside him,

"I . . . pondered how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."

Here is Morris's reflection, from the standpoint of aspiration, upon man's unmastered history. It is paralleled, from the standpoint of historical science, in a passage of *Ludwig Feuerbach*, first published in the same year

"In spite of the consciously desired aims of all individuals, accident apparently reigns on the surface. That which is willed happens but rarely, in the majority of instances the numerous desired ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends themselves are from the outset incapable of realization or the means of attaining them are insufficient. . . . The ends of the actions are intended, but the results which actually follow from these actions are not intended, or when they do seem to correspond to the end intended, they ultimately have consequences quite other than those intended."

Morris declared that his main intention in writing *The Dream* had

<sup>1</sup> Preface by Morris to R. Steele, *Medieval Lore*

been in the dialogue of the concluding chapters,<sup>1</sup> and the problem debated here is whether "John Ball's" struggle and death is not a mockery in the light of the centuries of capitalism to come. The answer is two-fold: first, "John Ball", symbol of the oppressed struggling for objectives incompatible with the necessities of history, has no alternative, he can only achieve the dignity of manhood by rebellion—"to strive was my pleasure and my life". Second, his life is given deeper meaning by its foreshadowed consummation in "The Change Beyond the Change", in which his aspirations, and those of the nameless millions he represents, will at length be fulfilled, in that day-dawn which may be "cold and grey and surly"

"And yet by its light shall men see things as they verily are, and no longer enchanted by the gleam of the moon and the glamour of the dreamtide. By such grey light shall wise men and valiant souls see the remedy, and deal with it, a real thing that may be touched and handled, and no glory of the heavens to be worshipped from afar off. The time shall come, John Ball, when that dream of thine that this shall one day be, shall be a thing that men shall talk of soberly, and as a thing soon to come about."

This unity, in the fight for Socialism, of necessity and desire, this understanding that the action by which man takes hold of the helm of his own history will at one and the same time be the consummation of the finest aspirations of past history, is central to the thought of Marx and Engels. It is perhaps Morris's most important contribution to English culture to have brought his rich store of historical and artistic knowledge, and the passionate moral insight of a great artist, to the task of revealing the full meaning of this—the greatest step forward in man's cultural (as in his economic and social) life. Morris did not make the mistake of giving precedence to moral factors as agents of revolutionary change.

"No amount of preaching, of enthusiasm, or of devotion even, will

<sup>1</sup> "William Morris", by Owen Carroll, *Everyman*, September 23rd, 1933. In 1894 Mr Carroll suggested to Morris that the *Dream of John Ball* should be dramatized, and received the following letter in reply "I am not of the timber from which playwrights are hewn. Why not have a try at it yourself? . . . When I wrote my little book, I did it with the intention of bringing in the Socialistic dialogues at the end rather than dealing with the literary and dramatic side of the story."

induce the workers, with whom the world's future lies, to accept and to act upon mere abstract propositions of what they have a right to aspire to, necessity must push them on before they can even conceive of the future of equality and mutual good-will which we KNOW awaits them . Necessity only can make them conscious of this [class] struggle ”<sup>1</sup>

But, nevertheless, he laid the greatest stress upon their role. “Necessity” alone would impell spontaneous riot and class-struggle, wasteful and uncertain of success

“If the present state of society merely breaks up without a conscious effort at transformation, the end, the fall of Europe, may be long in coming, but when it does, it will be far more terrible, far more confused and full of suffering than the period of the fall of Rome ”<sup>2</sup>

And *conscious* effort implied not only clear theoretical understanding but also hatred for the present and love for the future Speaking of “the two great forces which rule the world, Necessity and Morality”, he declared, “if we give it all up into the hands of necessity, Society will explode volcanically with such a crash as the world has not yet witnessed.”<sup>3</sup>

“I am not going into argument on the matter of free will and predestination, I am only going to assert that if individual men are the creatures of their surrounding conditions, as indeed I think they are, it must be the business of man as a social animal, or of Society, if you will, to make the surroundings which make the individual man what he is Man must and does create the conditions under which he lives, let him be conscious of that, and create them wisely ”<sup>4</sup>

“Necessity”, on the one hand, he wrote, was hastening the crisis by the increasing tendency towards monopoly, and by forcing the workers into closer combination—

“and on the other hand morality, her eyes cleared by the advance of necessity, is beginning to remember the ancient legend of the first murderer, and the terrible answer to his vile sneer, Am I my brother's keeper ”<sup>5</sup>

“Her eyes cleared by the advance of necessity”—could there be a more dialectical expression of the interrelation between “desire” and “necessity” than this? And so to the magnificent recognition of what victory will mean

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, December 18th, 1886.

<sup>2</sup> May Morris, II, p 201

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* , p. 202 .

<sup>4</sup> “The Society of the Future”, *ibid* , p 456

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* , p. 203.

"If we live to see the day when that slavery receives its death wound we shall regret no labour or pain that we have spent in the cause no men that have ever lived will have been so happy as we shall be"<sup>1</sup>

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Morris was not a mere muddle-headed convert to Marxism, but was a creative and original thinker, whose best work falls within the Marxist tradition. He understood that the consummation of his own romantic aspirations in the Socialist cause symbolized a historical consummation of vast significance. Socialism, he saw,

"is not a change for the sake of change, but a change involving the very noblest ideal of human life and duty a life in which every human being should find unrestricted scope for his best powers and faculties"

All his Socialist writings returned to this point. Moreover, he actively resented the suggestion that the perception of the artist, the moral criticism of society, was irrelevant to Scientific Socialism. In an important *Commonweal* article he criticized the attitude of such "one-sided Socialists".

"They do not see except through the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us, and it seems somewhat strange not that they should have no vision of the future, but that they should not be ready to admit that it is their own defect that they have not. Surely they must allow that such a stupendous change in the machinery of life as the abolition of capital and wages must bring about a corresponding change in ethics and habits of life. Is it conceivable, for instance, that the change for the present wage-earners will simply mean hoisting them up into the life of the present 'refined' middle-classes? What! will the family of the times when monopoly is dead be still as it is now in the middle-classes, framed on the model of an affectionate and moral tiger to whom all is prey a few yards from the sanctity of the domestic hearth? Will the body of the woman we love be but an appendage to her property? Shall we try to cram our lightest whim as a holy dogma into our children, and be bitterly unhappy when we find that they are growing up to be men and women like ourselves? Will education be a system of cram begun on us when we are four years old, and left off sharply when we are eighteen? Shall we be ashamed of our love and our hunger and our mirth, and believe that it is wicked of us not to try to dispense with the joys that accompany procreation of our species, and the keeping of ourselves alive, those joys of desire which make us understand that the beasts too may be happy? Shall we all, in short, as the 'refined' middle classes now do, wear ourselves away in the anxiety to stave off all trouble, and emotion, and responsibility, in

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, II, p, 163

order that we may at last merge all our troubles into one, the trouble that we have been born for nothing but to be afraid to die”

And he concluded.

“I hold that we need not be afraid of scaring our audiences with too brilliant pictures of the future of Society, nor think ourselves impractical and utopian for telling them the bare truth, that in destroying monopoly we shall destroy our present civilization. If you tell your audiences that you are going to change so little that they will scarcely feel the change, whether you scare anyone or not, you will certainly not interest those who have nothing to hope for in the present Society, and whom the hope of a change has attracted towards Socialism. And certainly the Socialists who are always preaching to people that Socialism is an economic change pure and simple, are very apt to repel those who want to learn for the sake of those who do not”<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, this was the compelling reason why he never faltered for a moment from his revolutionary position, why Fabianism, Reformism, “semi-demi-Socialism” repelled him and held no attractions for him whatsoever. Shaw got hold of a part of the truth when he attempted to answer the question, “Why did Morris not join the Fabians?”

“The answer is that he would have been more out of place in our drawingrooms than in any gang of manual labourers or craftsmen. The furniture would have driven him mad, and the discussion would have ended in his dashing out of the room in a rage, and damning us all for a parcel of half baked shortsighted suburban snobs, as ugly in our ideas as in our lives. He could be patient with the strivings of ignorance and poverty towards the light if the striver had the reality that comes from hard work on tough materials with dirty hands, and weekly struggles with exploitation and oppression, but the sophistications of middle-class minds hurt him physically. He had made his way through much opposition and ridicule, and he was a wise and great man *sub specie eternitas*, but he was an ungovernable man in a drawingroom”<sup>2</sup>

By temperament Morris had not the least interest in “politics”. He was interested in “free and full life and the consciousness of life”.<sup>3</sup> He was in uncompromising rebellion against the shadow of life of the Victorian middle class—its cant of individualism, “that unceasing cry of the bore and the dullard”,<sup>4</sup> its orthodox

<sup>1</sup> “On Some ‘Practical’ Socialists”, *Commonweal*, February 18th, 1888

<sup>2</sup> May Morris, II, p. xviii      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456

<sup>4</sup> Morris and Hyndman, *Summary of the Principles of Socialism*. For Morris’s opinions of individualism, see May Morris I, p. 29, and II, p. 121 (“The Dull Level of Life”)



religion, its sexual and personal morality, its Grundyism, its callous brutality Morris, alas, despite all of Mr Attlee's incantations, would not have given his blessing to the "Welfare State" when the "ideal" was set before him of "the capitalist public service . . . brought to perfection", he merely remarked that he "would not walk across the street for the realization of such an 'ideal' " <sup>1</sup> Alas, again, he would not have rejoiced in the democratization of our blessed monarchy, he would not have stalked through the Malayan jungle with Mr. Strachey in search of an enlightened imperialism, he would not have written Chants to our great American ally, he would not even have understood the new partnership of reformed capitalism and be-knighted labour in defence of the free world. And even if he had been told of the final overthrow of Marx's theories by several generations of university professors, he would still have excused himself from changing his opinions "Even supposing I did not understand that there is a definite reason in economics, and that the whole system can be changed", he had told the Northumberland miners in 1887, "I for one would be a rebel against it." (See p. 522 )

## *XII Conclusion*

William Morris was the first creative artist of major stature in the history of the world to take his stand, consciously and without shadow of compromise, with the revolutionary working class to participate in the day-to-day work of building the Socialist movement to put his brain and his genius at its disposal in the struggle. In the Socialist world of the future, Morris's writings and example will be remembered to England's honour.

It is no small matter for a man of fifty, in the face of the ridicule of society, the indifference of family and friends, to set aside the work he loves and fashion his life anew But this was what Morris did

"To have breasted the Spanish pikes at Leyden, to have drawn sword with Oliver that may well seem at times amidst the tangles of to-day a happy fate for a man to be able to say, I have lived like a fool, but now I will cast away fooling for an hour, and die like a man—there is something in that certainly. and yet 'tis clear that few men can be so lucky as to die for a cause, without first of all having lived for it And

<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, July 16th, 1887

as this is the most that can be asked from the greatest man that follows a cause, so it is the least that can be taken from the smallest"<sup>1</sup>

His was not the impulsive whim of the dilettante idealist, but the steady enduring courage of the realist, which upheld him in all the drudgery, committee wrangling and trivial duties of the movement.

Morris will always occupy a position of unique importance in the British revolutionary tradition. The utopian aspirations of the peasants of medieval England, the far-sighted moral indignation of Sir Thomas More, fed his own realist outlook. He mastered, and gave a qualitatively new, revolutionary, content to the current of profound social criticism of industrial capitalism which is found in the best English writers of the nineteenth century. The work of Ruskin, Carlyle and of the Romantic Revolt as a whole, assumes more importance, a new kind of interest, in the light of Morris's transformation of the tradition. His was the type of achievement which throws its significance backwards as well as forwards, just as the achievements of Marx and Engels give added importance to the work of Hegel and of the classical English economists.

There can be little doubt as to the influence which Morris's writings could have upon the contemporary British labour movement, were they more widely known. Despite all that has been said by reformist politicians of Morris's "vision" of the future, one of the most prophetic sides of that vision has been conveniently ignored—his forecast of the emergence of a specifically British brand of Social-Democracy, with its terrifying resources of compromise and betrayal. This "vision" offended his moral feelings as profoundly as his vision of Socialism satisfied them, and the reasons are plainly declared in his writings. But beyond this ugly vista, Morris saw "deadlock and break-up", as old Hammond described the matter in *News from Nowhere*.

"State Socialism was partly put in motion, though in a very piecemeal way. . . . The result was growing confusion, great suffering amongst the working classes . . . great discontent . . . The power of the upper classes had lessened, as their command over wealth lessened, and they could not carry things wholly by the high hand as they had been used to. . . . On the other hand, the working classes were ill-organized, and

<sup>1</sup> "The Beauty of Life", *Works*, XXII, p. 176

growing poorer in reality, in spite of the gains . which they had forced from their masters Thus matters hung in the balance. ”

And while Morris's forecasts were not fulfilled in every particular, so matters hang in the balance now To-day, when more and more people are turning to re-examine their Socialist principles, are searching once again for the revolutionary road, Morris's writings have an added significance and an immediate importance <sup>1</sup>

“Intelligence enough to conceive, courage enough to will, power enough to compel. If our ideas of a new Society are anything more than a dream, these three qualities must animate the due effective majority of the working-people, and then, I say, the thing will be done ”<sup>2</sup>

The power is the power of the organized working class The *intelligence* is their revolutionary theory, Marxism. The *courage*—that is a moral quality. And it is here, above all, that we need William Morris to-day. Never before in history have the moral issues facing mankind been more challenging. On the one hand, almost within man's grasp is a life richer and more satisfying than any known before On the other, man is threatened by the appalling destruction of atomic war. And yet it is under cover of talk of “morality” and “Christian values” that savage wars have been waged, and that a greater war is being prepared. It is in the name of a high morality that truth is suppressed, justice denied and freedom placed under assault.

If we cannot have William Morris back among us to flay these hypocrisies, we may at least take his writings back into the heart of the revolutionary movement where they belong, and imbue it with his spirit both of passionate indignation and of “hope”. Mr. Harry Pollitt has recalled the effect upon him of Morris's writings when he was a youthful propagandist.

<sup>1</sup> See Shaw's partial recognition of this in his Preface to the 1931 Edition of the *Fabian Essays* of 1889 “The distinctive mark of the Fabian Society among the rival bodies of Socialists with which it came in conflict in its early days was resolute constitutionalism. When the greatest Socialist of that day . William Morris, told the workers that there was no hope for them save in revolution, we said that if that were true there was no hope at all for them, and urged them to save themselves through parliament, the municipalities, and the franchise Without, perhaps, quite converting Morris, we convinced him that things would probably go our way It is not so certain to-day as it seemed in the 'eighties that Morris was not right ”

<sup>2</sup> “Communism”, *Works*, XXIII, p 270

"There is not half enough of this type of propaganda to-day. We have all become so hard and practical that we are ashamed of painting the vision splendid—of showing glimpses of the promised land. It is missing from our speeches, our Press and our pamphlets, and if one dares to talk about the 'gleam' one is in danger of being accused of sentimentalism. Yet I am convinced it was this kind of verbal inspiration that gave birth to the indestructible urge which helped the pioneers of the movement to keep fight, fight, fighting for freedom, when it was by no means as easy as it is to-day."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, for all the universality of his interests, Morris's genius was peculiarly English in its most characteristic expressions.

"The land is a little land, too much shut up within the narrow seas, as it seems, to have much space for swelling into hugeness: there are no great wastes overwhelming in their dreariness, no great solitudes of forests, no terrible untrodden mountain-walls: all is measured, mingled, varied, gliding easily one thing into another: little rivers, little plains, swelling, speedily-changing uplands, all beset with handsome orderly trees, little hills, little mountains, netted over with the walls of sheep-walks: all is little, yet not foolish and blank, but serious rather, and abundant of meaning for such as choose to seek it: it is neither prison nor palace, but a decent home."

"Some people praise this homeliness overmuch, as if the land were the very axle-tree of the world, so do not I . . . yet when we think what a small part of the world's history, past, present, and to come, is this land we live in, and how much smaller still in the history of the arts, and yet how our forefathers clung to it, and with what care and pains they adorned it, this unromantic, uneventful-looking land of England, surely by this too our hearts may be touched, and our hope quickened."<sup>2</sup>

However inspiring the news from distant or neighbouring countries of the building of Socialism, Morris will always be able to "quicken our hope" with his dreams of aspirations satisfied, of desire and necessity no longer opposed, in our own land. "The movement is going on in all civilized countries", he wrote to one correspondent, "some of which are riper for the change than England is. England's adhesion would put the coping stone on the New Society".<sup>3</sup> "Think of it a little!" he exclaimed in one of his lectures on Communism:

<sup>1</sup> Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time* (1941), pp. 43-4.

<sup>2</sup> "The Lesser Arts", *Works*, XXII, p. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Brit. Mus. Add. MSS. 45346.

"What amount of wealth we should produce if we are all working cheerfully at producing the things that we all genuinely want, if all the intelligence, all the inventive power, all the inherited skill of handicraft, all the keen wit and insight, all the healthy bodily strength were engaged in doing this and nothing else, what a pile of wealth we should have! How would poverty be a word whose meaning we should have forgotten! Believe me, there is nothing but the curse of inequality which forbids this"<sup>1</sup>

So he still paces ahead of us, no longer "lonely" but still in the van—beckoning us forward to the measureless bounty of life. He is one of those men whom history will never overtake.

<sup>1</sup> "Communism", Brit Mus Add MSS 45331.

