

CHAPTER III

OXFORD—CARLYLE AND RUSKIN

I "*Where is the Battle?*"

LET us return to the 1850s, with William Morris at Oxford, in the age of Mr Gradgrind's triumph. Rarely can the face of England have changed so rapidly as in the thirty years following the death of Keats. The Reform Bill (1832) and the repeal of the Corn Laws (1847) had left no major obstacles between the manufacturers and the prospects of unlimited material progress. Even the old rallying cries against corruption and privilege were being forgotten by the middle class, and the landed aristocracy could be viewed by them with sycophantic tolerance.

"Still Queen Victoria sits upon her throne,
Our aristocracy still keeps alive,
And, on the whole, may still be said to thrive,—
Tho' now and then with ducal acres groan
The honoured tables of the auctioneer
Nathless, our aristocracy is dear,
Tho' their estates go cheap, and all must own
That they still give society its tone,"

warbled one poet, of the clan of Tupper, in 1849.¹ Indeed, the Chartist threat of the previous ten years had altogether shifted the old lines of class alliance: manufacturer and scion of the aristocracy served together, marshalling the special constables against the demonstrators of 1848. and the Duke of Wellington, arch-reactionary, arch-enemy of Reform and last-ditch Tory of 1832, was in charge of the defence of London on the famous 10th of April, 1848—the hero of nobility, millowners, and shopkeepers alike!

Moreover, the character of this middle class was itself undergoing a marked change. Upon the labours of the previous century,

¹ G. J. Cayley, *Some Account of the Life and Adventures of Sir Reginald Mohun, Bart* (1849), reviewed in *The Germ*, No. 3.

in the mines and cotton-mills, in Sheffield and Birmingham, of women, men, and children, there was already established the wealth of a large and growing class who took no part in the productive process or in the direct exploitation of this labour. Even in the great industrial cities, the residential quarters were becoming demarked from the homes of the workers "The isolation of classes in England", wrote one observer in 1842, "has gone far to divide us into nations as distinct as the Normans and the Saxons".

"We have improved on the proverb, 'One half of the world does not know how the other half lives,' changing it into 'One half of the world *does not care* how the other half lives' Ardwick knows less about Ancoats than it does about China, and feels more interested in the condition of New Zealand than of Little Ireland"¹

The new public schools, reformed by Arnold and Thring, were like a mint, stamping upon all children the same class assurance and moral complacency, providing that the raw material, wealth, was to be found. William Morris's father, a partner in a Quaker firm of bill and discount brokers, made his wealth from mines but he neither risked health and life, nor gave expert knowledge or inventiveness in the process. His holding of 272 £1 shares in the Devon Great Consols (controlling copper and tin mines in the South-West) suddenly boomed and they did not stop booming until they had realized a sum approaching £200,000. When he died, in Morris's boyhood, his death made no difference to the prosperity of his family. Property was property, subject to the laws of supply and demand, but transcending the trivial affairs, the death or grief of its owners. Regularly the handsome dividends came in to the rural village of Walthamstow, on the edge of Epping Forest, bringing with them nothing to indicate the miseries at the bottom of the cramped and ill-ventilated shafts from which they had their source. At the age of twenty-one William Morris came into his own share—at the rate of £900 a year.

Morris's father was exceptionally lucky, his rise to affluence was hardly arduous. He did not provide those texts for industry and prudent enterprise to qualify him for inclusion in Samuel

¹ W Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* (1842), p. 160

Smiles's gallery of exponents of "Self-help" But his son's upbringing, far from factory, mine or mill, was much the same as that of tens of thousands of others who were to become pillars of the Victorian middle class during Britain's age of industrial supremacy For some reason, William Morris did not run true to type Perhaps his upbringing was *too* comfortable for a child with a most active imagination and practical, inquisitive temper—his head filled with stories of heroic actions, great conflicts against overmastering odds, hard adventures and sacrifices J. W. Mackail in his biography of Morris mentions a story of a schoolboy rebellion at Marlborough, of which Morris was one of the leaders, and which resulted in his withdrawal from the school to study under a private tutor. But we know too little to complete the picture of the young lad's first protests against the values of his class.

By the time he reached Oxford, he was certainly inclined towards rebellion A good account of these early years is preserved in the recollections of Canon Dixon and of his close friend, Edward Burne-Jones He and his small circle of friends lived a strenuous, imaginative and intellectual life, isolated from the general run of university activities Oxford was still preoccupied by the discussions which had been aroused, twenty years before, by the "Oxford Movement", and had been more recently inflamed by Newman's "return" to the Catholic Church. Morris and Burne-Jones were swept into the same current. Canon Dixon recalled.

"At this time, Morris was an aristocrat, and a High Churchman His manners and tastes and sympathies were all aristocratic His countenance was beautiful in features and expression, particularly in the expression of purity Occasionally it had a melancholy look He had a finely cut mouth, the short upper lip adding greatly to the purity of expression I have a vivid recollection of the splendid beauty of his presence at this time"¹

Burne-Jones, writing to a friend in 1854, drew a similar picture—but with a significant qualification. he could not quite fit him to the perfect model of the young romantic genius.

"He is full of enthusiasm for things holy and beautiful and true, and, what is rarest, of the most exquisite perception and judgement in

them For myself, he has tinged my whole inner being with the beauty of his own, and I know not a single gift for which I owe such gratitude to Heaven as his friendship If it were not for his boisterous mad outbursts and freaks, which break the romance he sheds around him—at least to me—he would be a perfect hero"¹

That was the trouble If it were not for this damned cheerfulness, he would have seemed set fair to become a Canon, Judge, or minor romantic poet¹

The attraction of Medievalism and Catholicism were in no sense an impulse originating with Morris and his circle. The tide had long been set in that direction or rather, this may be seen as part of the under-tow and reaction to the tide of utilitarianism Revolutionary and reactionary alike were caught in the same current. Disraeli and Lord John Manners, the Tory Young Englanders, dreamt of feudal ideals taking shape in the form of an alliance between the aristocracy and the proletariat (the inheritors of the peasantry) in opposition to the manufacturers and speculators. Staunch "Tory" Radicals, like Richard Oastler, cherished the same illusions in their horror at the naked exploitation and self-interest of industrial capitalism At Oxford Morris and Burne-Jones admired *The Heir of Redclyffe*, whose hero was an embodiment of saintly, chivalric honour in a sordid and commercial world, and Kenelm Digby's romanticized pictures of noble and knightly virtue² Their attraction lay in their contrasts to the world of Gradgrind and his Facts. But they held little positive in their influence—except as nourishment for the protest of the young men, in an idealized and luxurious form Malory, Froissart, legends, ballads and chronicles of medieval Europe—all heightened the sense of contrast between the world of the imagination and the world of Fact. Catholicism, and its near cousin, the Oxford Movement, fed the same emotions. On the one hand was the complacent evangelicalism of Morris's childhood memories on the other, the saintly renunciation of the world practised by Pusey—and the attractions of ritual and plainsong, with their historical associations In a world which had

¹ *Memorials* I, p. 96

² Especially *The Broad Stone of Honour* An interesting discussion of the sources of Morris's medievalism can be found in the first two chapters of Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris, Medievalist and Revolutionary* (1945)

no use for the human spirit, Catholicism appeared to offer a spiritual refuge free from the taint of commerce

The source of this feeling is revealed clearly in Morris's early prose romances, written for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. In *Lindenberg Pool*, the narrator is taken (as in the *Socialist Dream of John Ball*) out of the nineteenth century and back to the Middle Ages but in this tale he finds himself in the character of a priest, urgently summoned to the castle of an evil baron, to administer the last sacrament at his death-bed. At this time Morris was reading the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, whose influence can be found in the mounting sense of evil and mystery as the priest approaches the bed-side. The patient is inarticulate and bandaged to the eyes as the priest stands beside him the room is filled with people, who jeer, and sing, and dance:

"I got on with the service, and at last took the Pyx, and took thereout the sacred wafer, whereupon was a deep silence through all those rooms, which troubled me, I think, more than all which had gone before, for I knew well it did not mean reverence

"I held it up, that which I counted so holy, when lo! great laughter, echoing like thunder-claps through all the rooms and, with a slow upheaval of the rich clothes among which he lay, with a sound that was half snarl, half grunt, with helpless body swathed in bedclothes, a huge swine that I had been shriving tore from me the Holy Thing, deeply scoring my hand as he did so with tusk and tooth, so that the red blood ran quick on to the floor

"Then right madly skirled the intolerable laughter, rising to shrieks that were fearfuller than any scream of agony I ever heard, the hundreds of people through all those grand rooms danced and wheeled about me, shrieking, hemming me in with interlaced arms, the women loosing their long hair and thrusting forward their horribly-grinning unsexed faces toward me till I felt their hot breath

"Oh! how I hated them all! almost hated all mankind for their sakes, how I longed to be right quit of all men, among whom, as it seemed, all sacredest things even were made a mock of. I looked about me fiercely, I sprang forward, and clutched a sword from the gilded belt of one of those who stood near me, with savage blows that threw the blood about the gilded walls and their hangings right over the heads of those—things—I cleared myself from them, and tore down the great stairs . . ."

Adolescent this may be, but it is no theological disputation. The opposition from which the feeling springs is clearly expressed. "I held up that which I counted so holy, when lo! . . . a huge

swine . . . tore from me the Holy Thing . . . scoring my hand . . . with tusk and tooth" It is not difficult to find here Morris's own reaction to the world about him, where, "as it seemed, all sacrest things . . . were made mock of". a world only half-hidden in the allegorical mazes of another early romance, *Svend and His Brethren*.

"All things this people that King Valdemar ruled over could do they levelled mountains they drained lakes, that the land might yield more and more, as year by year the serfs, driven like cattle, but worse fed, worse housed, died slowly, scarce knowing that they had souls .

"They sent great armies and fleets to all the points of the heaven that the wind blows from, who took and burned many happy cities, wasted many fields and valleys, blotted out from the memory of men the names of nations, made their men's lives a hopeless shame and misery to them, their women's lives a disgrace, and then—came home to have flowers thrown on them in showers, to be feasted and called heroes

"Should not then their king be proud of them? Moreover they could fashion stone and brass into the shapes of men, they could write books, they knew the names of the stars, and their number, they knew what moved the passions of men in the hearts of them, and could draw you up cunningly, catalogues of virtues and vices, their wise men could prove to you that any lie was true, that any truth was false, till your head grew dizzy, and your heart sick, and you almost doubted if there were a God. .

"Should not then their king be proud of such a people, who seemed to help so in carrying on the world to its consummate perfection, which they even hoped their grandchildren would see?

"Alas! alas! they were slaves—king and priest, noble and burgher, just as much as the meanest tasked serf, perhaps more even than he, for they were so willingly, but he unwillingly enough

"They could do everything but justice, and truth, and mercy, therefore God's judgements hung over their heads, not fallen yet, but surely to fall one time or other"

It was during this early period of revulsion against utilitarianism that Morris and Burne-Jones first formed the idea of founding a sacred order or Brotherhood on medieval lines—a small group of friends, celibate, dedicated to the purity of art and religion and the service of the things of the spirit in a world given over to Mammon. The idea was first mooted even before they had any acquaintance with the more famous "Brotherhood", the Pre-Raphaelites. Edward Burne-Jones, a pale witty,

self-effacing youth, at this time (unlike Morris) inclined to dramatize his own emotions, mentioned the project in a half-flippant way in May, 1853, to his friend Cormell Price at Birmingham.

"I have set my heart on our founding a Brotherhood Learn Sir Galahad by heart He is to be the patron of our Order I have enlisted *one* in the project up here, heart and soul" ¹

The enlisted "*one*" was soon the moving spirit In mid-1854 Burne-Jones was writing to the same friend that he longed to be back at Oxford "with Morris and his glorious little company of martyrs" ² Morris was debating seriously the idea of devoting his fortune to the foundation of a monastery The aim of the Brotherhood was summed up in Burne-Jones's words, as a "Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age" ³

But how was this "Holy Warfare" to be fought? Indeed, where was the battleground? Many young men of the middle classes whose aspirations for a life with finer ends than the amassing of wealth and social position had not been utterly crushed, felt at this time a desire to do battle with the forces around them but their aspirations drained away into the sands of frustration and hopelessness as they faced the immovable façade of Victorian society. "Yet is my feeling rather to ask, where is the battle?", wrote Arthur Hugh Clough in a long poem published several years before and, finding no answer the feeling recedes into disillusion

"O that the armies indeed were arrayed! O joy of the onset!
Sound, thou Trumpet of God, come forth, Great Cause, to array us,
King and leader appear, thy soldiers sorrowing seek thee
Would that the armies indeed were arrayed, O where is the battle?
Neither battle I see, nor arraying, nor King in Israel,
Only infinite jumble and mess and dislocation,
Backed by a solemn appeal, 'For God's sake, do not stir, there!'
Yet you are right, I suppose, if you don't attack my conclusion,
Let us get on as we can, and do the thing we are fit for,
Every one for himself, and the common success for us all, and
Thankful, if not for our own, why then for the triumph of others,
Get along, each as we can, and do the thing we are meant for"

Here, faced by.

¹ *Memorials*, I, p 77

² *Ibid*, I, p 103

³ Mackail, I, p 63.

" . the whole great wicked artificial civilised fabric—
All its unfinished houses, lots for sale, and railway out-works—"¹

where was the chosen battlefield?

For Morris, it did not long seem to be in a return to purer religion. Religion of all varieties was deeply compromised by the same evils. Gradually, aided partly by the Christian Socialism of Kingsley and Maurice and the hostility to Rome of John Ruskin, but mostly by his own warm concrete response to the world about him which prevented him from becoming, like nearly all his contemporaries—Christian and atheist alike—enmeshed in the abstract "doubts, disputes, distractions, fears", and ceaseless searchings of conscience of his time, the emotional lure of High Anglicanism began to fade. In May, 1855, Cormell Price noted solemnly

"Our Monastery will come to nought, I'm afraid . Morris has become questionable in doctrinal points, and Ted [Burne-Jones] is too Catholic to be ordained. He and Morris diverge more and more in views though not in friendship"²

And from this time onwards the divergence was to increase.

But, when Cormell Price was writing this note, a decision of vital importance was already being formed in the minds of both friends. In the summer of 1855 they were in France together, visiting the cathedrals of Amiens, Beauvais, and Chartres. From Chartres, Burne-Jones recalls, they

"made northwards for Rouen, travelling gently and stopping at every Church we could find. Rouen was still a beautiful mediaeval city, and we stayed awhile and had our hearts filled. From there we walked to Caudebec, then by diligence to Havre, on our way to the churches of the Calvados and it was while walking on the quay at Havre at night that we resolved definitely that we would begin a life of art, and put off our decision no longer—he should be an architect and I a painter. It was a resolve only needing final conclusion, we were bent on the road for the whole past year, and after that night's talk we never hesitated more. That was the most memorable night of my life"³

The battlefield had been found

¹ "The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich"

² *Memorials*, I, p. 109

³ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 114-15

II *Medievalism and Thomas Carlyle*

Under the influence of the high excitement cast upon their minds by the medieval cities and towns of France, the decision seemed simple. Here were achievements which the Gradgrinds would never be able to equal! It must be their vocation to add their contribution to the beauty of the world.

For "Ned" (or "Ted") Burne-Jones the choice was most straightforward. From his boyhood he had been a talented draughtsman, and his drawings of devils circulated around his school. But Morris (despite his long interest) had no practical experience of an architect's work. Not all his shares in Devon Grand Consols could make a cathedral rise from the ground at his bidding. Moreover, he had recently discovered in himself great abilities in another art—poetry. The decision for him, therefore, was dictated less by the bent of his own talents than by the desire to strike a conscious blow in the "Holy Warfare against the age."

The banner of the Romantic Revolt was passing from the literary to the visual and architectural arts. Indeed, by the late 1860s, when Morris was writing *The Earthly Paradise* it seemed to him that literature was no more than a skirmish on the edge of the main battlefield. Poetry could withdraw into a world of its own, and the poets could shut out the philistines by refusing to read their work. But architecture it was impossible to ignore. Everywhere, at every turning, Morris and his friends were confronted with the degradation of the human spirit at the hands of industrial capitalism—in the railway stations, slum quarters and bogo-Gothic buildings of Victorian prosperity and in those hybrid monstrosities of architecture, Egyptian, classical and utilitarian by turns, against which the Catholic architect, Pugin, had for some years been writing in protest. Here, at the least, there was something concrete to fight.

The young architects of the 1850s were already deeply involved in the medieval revival, and this was indeed a congenial climate to Morris, who had felt the lure of the Middle Ages since his boyhood. In 1850, the cult of the medieval had already revealed itself in various forms. Appearing, both in literature and architecture, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the

fascination with the "Gothic" was rarely more than a freak of aristocratic decadence—the attraction of the bizarre, the "barbarous", and the grotesque, in reaction against the sophistications of eighteenth-century society. Later, Keats enriched his poetry with medieval associations, not so much from any close interest in the thought or society of the Middle Ages, as from the desire to heighten the illusion of his art, and to give his fantasy-world a strange and colourful habitation. We have seen that Morris spent his adolescence surrounded, as if by a palpable atmosphere, by the sense of the mystery and interest of the life of past times. This powerful historical imagination which never died in him, which—rather—became disciplined and deepened during a lifetime of study, this capacity to respond instantaneously to every evidence of the aspirations and sorrows of the men of past ages, was perhaps his greatest single intellectual strength. In his youth, this faculty was quickened to intensity by his growing hatred of his own civilization, and, in common with other great romantics, the contemplation of the past brought with it a sense of nostalgia and loss. As Wordsworth wrote,

" . . the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago "

Heroism, beauty, high endeavour, love—all overthrown, and all contrasting with the tawdry present—these were the reflections aroused by the contemplation of the past. And when he expressed these feelings in a schoolboy poem, "The Abbey and the Palace", he was voicing sentiments which were in no way original, but which were shared by many other romantically dissatisfied young men:

"Standing away from all men
In October weather
A grey tower lifting
Where the grey clouds are shifting,
Four great arches stood:
Beneath them lay the tall men
Who have fought together,
There the old monks lay
And the wind moaned well-a-day
For their chaunt through the wood

"Lying there in the choir
 By the ruined wall
 With his hands clasped together,
 Praying there for ever,
 Look at the stone-carved knight.
 And about lies the shivered spire
 Once so tall, so tall,
 And the crow flies over
 The head of the lover
 Of him was brave in fight"¹

But, as the nineteenth century advanced, a new content was being infused into the cult of medievalism. Increased scholarship added daily to the knowledge of medieval times. For Morris, the most important result of the new scholarship was in the reconstruction of a picture of the Middle Ages, neither as a grotesque nor as a faery world, but as a real *community* of human beings—an organic pre-capitalist community with values and an art of its own, sharply contrasted with those of Victorian England. However much this reconstruction may have been modified by twentieth-century scholars, it was an influence of the very first importance in liberating Morris's mind from the categories of bourgeois thought. In this reconstructed world, Morris found a place, not to which he could retreat, but in which he could stand and look upon his own age with the eyes of a stranger or visitor, judging his own time by standards other than its own. And the two men who most influenced him in effecting this liberation were Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin.

Carlyle's *Past and Present* was published in 1843, and was read by Morris and Burne-Jones during their years at Oxford. The whole book is a blistering Old Testament attack on the morality of industrial capitalism, contrasted with an idealized picture of life in the monastery of St Edmundsbury in the twelfth century. Carlyle's books, with their perverse, ejaculatory, repetitive and arrogant style, find few readers to-day. Consistency is not among his merits. pretentious mysticism, white-hot moral indignation, pious mumbo-jumbo, lie side by side. But his writings are among the greatest quarries of ideas in the first half of the nineteenth century, shot through with occasional gleams of the profoundest revolutionary insight

¹ May Morris, I, pp 523-4

Carlyle was essentially a negative critic. In his political conclusions he was not only reactionary, but actively malignant—jeering at the Chartist leader, Ernest Jones, in prison—letting fall his denunciations on the heads of Owenites, Chartists and industrialists alike.

“All this dire misery, therefore, all this of our poor Workhouse Workmen, of our Chartisms, Trades-strikes, Corn-Laws, Toryisms, and the general breakdown of *Laissez-faire* in these days,—may we not regard it as a voice from the dumb bosom of Nature, saying to us ‘Behold’ Supply-and-demand is not the one Law of Nature, Cash-payment is not the sole nexus of man with man,—how far from it! Deep, far deeper than Supply-and-demand, are Laws, Obligations sacred as Man’s Life itself these also, if you will continue to do work, you shall now learn and obey ’ ”¹

His position was closely akin to that brilliantly characterized by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* as “Feudal Socialism”:

“Half lamentation, half lampoon, half echo of the past, half menace, of the future, at times, by its bitter, witty and incisive criticism, striking the bourgeoisie to the very heart’s core, but always ludicrous in its effect, through total incapacity to comprehend the march of modern history . . . What they upbraid the bourgeoisie with is not so much that it creates a proletariat, as that it creates a *revolutionary* proletariat ”

But it was within the social dialectic of this time that progressive *human* feeling might keep company in the same man with reactionary thought. The same current is found to run not only in Thomas Carlyle, but in such men as Richard Oastler. The Manchester School of political economists was now in almost sole possession of the field: under the shiboleths of *laissez-faire*, Free Trade, freedom from all restraint, the Railway Age was being pressed forward. If it brought misery in its wake—that was unfortunate. But if this advance were necessary for commercial prosperity, it was argued, then it must in the end bring prosperity for the “nation”:

“ ‘I am almost ashamed,’ said Sissy, with reluctance. ‘But to-day, for instance, Mr M’Choakumchild was explaining to us about Natural Prosperity.’ ”

“ ‘National, I think it must have been,’ observed Louisa . . . ”

“ ‘National Prosperity’ And he said, ‘Now, this school-room is a

¹ *Past and Present*, Book III, Ch 9

nation And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and ain't you in a thriving state?

"What did you say?" asked Louisa

"Miss Louisa, I said I didn't know I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine But that had nothing to do with it It was not in the figures at all

"That was a great mistake of yours," observed Louisa."

—*Hard Times* once again If reason and economics taught this philosophy, then men like Carlyle and Oastler, were tempted to cast reason and economics aside, to appeal to the heart, to "Obligations sacred as Man's Life itself". But when these Obligations came to be described, they often took on the colour of feudal obligations and relationships relationships which, however severe and binding, at least appeared as *human* relationships, relations between *men*, and not between man and an impersonal labour-market

It is in Carlyle's disgust at the reduction by capitalism of all human values to cash values that his greatness lies it is this which exercised most influence over Morris, and—while it ran underground awhile—found full and constant expression in his later years. It is the perpetual refrain of *Past and Present*

"Cash-payment never was, or could except for a few years be, the union-bond of man to man Cash never yet paid one man fully his deserts to another, nor could it, nor can it, now or henceforth to the end of the world"¹

Work and Wages—these Carlyle put forward as the "largest of questions" in his time, and, while his positive proposals are either feudal nonsense or too paltry to do more than scratch the surface of the problem, his denunciation of the "cash-nexus" won a response from Marx, and remained indelibly printed upon William Morris's consciousness Years afterwards, in his Socialist lectures, he refers again and again to capitalism as this "so-called society", and reiterates that a "society" based upon cash and self-interest is not a society at all, but a state of war. This all-important idea he learnt, in his Oxford days, directly from Carlyle.

¹ *Past and Present*, Book III, Ch 10.

"We call it a Society; and go about professing openly the totallest separation, isolation Our life is not a mutual helpfulness, but rather, cloaked under due laws-of-war, named 'fair competition' and so forth, 'it is a mutual hostility We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that 'Cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings'"¹

And, all the while, Carlyle stressed the contrast between capitalist society and the feudal obligations and relations of the monks of St. Edmundsbury to point his moral—a contrast from which Morris was only too ready to learn.

One other doctrine of Carlyle was profoundly important to Morris—his constant emphasis on the value of work—that labour is the root of life. "All work, even cotton-spinning is noble; work is alone noble",² "All true Work is sacred; in all true Work, were it but true hand-labour, there is something of divineness".³

"A man perfects himself by working Foul jungles are cleared away, fair seed-fields rise instead, and stately cities, and withal the man himself first ceases to be a jungle, and foul unwholesome desert thereby The man is now a man"⁴

This teaching, of the dignity of all labour, Morris learnt to practise in his own life. It formed one of his first bonds of sympathy and understanding with the working class But Carlyle saw labour as a religious sacrament; he was not concerned with art. And it was from John Ruskin that Morris gained a new outlook on the role of creative labour in human life.

III John Ruskin

To the end of his life, Morris looked back to Ruskin with gratitude. Ruskin was the "Master" and though Morris, the pupil, in the end left him far behind, he was always quick to acknowledge his great debt. In his article of 1894, *How I Became a Socialist*, Morris recalled:

"Before the uprising of *modern* Socialism almost all intelligent people either were, or professed themselves to be, quite contented with the civilisation of this century . . . This was the *Whig* frame of mind, natural to the modern prosperous middle-class men .

"But besides these contented ones there were others who were not

¹ *Past and Present*, Book III, Ch 2

² *Ibid*, Book III, Ch 4.

³ *Ibid*, Book III, Ch 12

⁴ *Ibid*, Book III, Ch 11.

really contented, but had a vague sentiment of repulsion to the triumph of civilisation, but were coerced into silence by the measureless power of Whiggery. Lastly, there were a few who were in open rebellion against the said Whiggery—a few, say two, Carlyle and Ruskin. The latter, before my days of practical Socialism, was my master towards the ideal aforesaid, and, looking backward, I cannot help saying, how deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin! It was through him that I learnt to give form to my discontent, which I must say was not by any means vague. Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation.”

On another occasion in his later years, when a speaker at an Art Congress in Edinburgh referred slightly to Ruskin, Morris declared. “That’s all nonsense. Why, man, Ruskin has made Art possible for us!”¹

When Morris went up to Oxford, Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* had already been published. Canon Dixon recalled

“It was when Burne-Jones and he got at Ruskin, that strong direction was given to a true vocation. Morris would often read Ruskin aloud. He had a mighty singing voice, and chanted rather than read those weltering oceans of eloquence as they have never been given before or since, it is most certain. The description of the Slave Ship, or of Turner’s skies, with the burden, ‘Has Claude given this?’ were declaimed by him in a manner that made them seem as if they had been written for no end but that he should hurl them in thunder on the head of the base criminal who had never seen what Turner saw in the sky.”²

But it was Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, the second and third volumes of which were published in the year after Morris went up to Oxford, that gave Morris a theory of art and society which was to influence all his later thought.

Ruskin’s criticism of the arts puzzles, indeed irritates, anyone who looks in them for discussions of pure aesthetics, and although Ruskin had a sound knowledge of the structural principles of architecture and the technique of the arts, these were rarely his main concern. His interest in art was essentially moral, and in the moral inter-relation between art and society. He was not, of course, the first nineteenth-century critic to assert

¹ A. Compton-Rickett, *William Morris* (1913), p. 54.

² Mackail, I, pp. 46–7.

that the arts had a moral function although he was the first to give the visual arts this special prominence. It was generally held that the arts had some didactic, or even utilitarian, task to perform. But between the generally held view and Ruskin's view there was the difference that lies between the words "moralizing" and "moral". The Victorian critics were content that art should moralize, should point a moral drawn from capitalist society. and, in his weaker moments, Ruskin fell as deeply into this error as any other (see p. 179). But, at his best, Ruskin sought to treat the arts as the expression of the whole *moral being* of the artist, and—through him—of the quality of life of the society in which the artist lived.

Great art, said Ruskin, "compasses and calls forth the entire human spirit", and should the art of a period be poor, it was an unfailing indication of the poverty of life of the people, while, in their turn, the poverty or health of the arts affect the quality of life. His criticism is made up of a continual passage from life to art, and from art to life. He was, like Carlyle, a man of deep but fitful insight ("Of Ruskin Morris said that he would write the most profound truths and forget them five minutes later"),¹ and while the moment of insight lasted he had the moral courage to follow his thought to a conclusion. Such a moment was reached in the sixth chapter of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, when the mists of Victorian sentimentality parted and he saw directly the Great Lie at the heart of capitalist society.

"The great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than the furnace blast, is all in very deed for this,—that we manufacture everything there except men, we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery, but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages."²

"We manufacture everything . . . except men" "From the time at which he wrote this chapter . . . those ethical and political considerations have never been absent from his criticism of art; and, in my opinion, it is just this part of his work, fairly begun in 'The Nature of Gothic' . . . which has had the most enduring and beneficial effect on his contemporaries, and will have through

¹ May Morris, II, p. xxxii

² *The Stones of Venice*, "The Nature of Gothic", para. 16.

them on succeeding generations". So wrote Morris in 1892, when he printed this chapter, "The Nature of Gothic", separately at the Kelmscott Press. And he added: "To my mind . . . in future days it will be considered as one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century"

In "The Nature of Gothic" Ruskin set himself the task of analysing the main characteristics—and, more than this, the essential character—of Gothic architecture. The first characteristic he singled out was "Savageness or Rudeness", and the sections dealing with this are the ones which impressed themselves upon Morris's mind. The rough, irregular character of the stonework of late medieval buildings, Ruskin declared, can only be understood by considering the nature of the craftsmen who built them. Every man, Ruskin asserted, has creative powers slumbering within him. Moreover, the act of self-realization in labour was, for Ruskin, no mere luxury. Like Carlyle, he believed that through labour man achieved his own humanity but with Ruskin there was this difference—the labour must be *creative* labour, summoning up the intellectual and moral—and not only physical and mechanical—powers of the labourer. This led him to a direct contrast between medieval and nineteenth-century society.

"Observe, you are put to a stern choice in this matter. You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must inhumanize them. All the energy of their spirits must be given to make cogs and compasses of themselves . . . On the other hand, if you will make a man of the working creature, you cannot make a tool. Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing, and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dulness, all his incapability, shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause but out comes the whole majesty of him also . . ."¹

The very precision of the products of the modern engineering industry were—Ruskin asserted—the visible indications of the slavery of the modern worker; "all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel" upon which Victorian society so

¹ *The Stones of Venice*, "The Nature of Gothic", para. 12.

prided itself were the marks of the murder of the human soul by the exclusion of the worker's moral and intellectual faculties. By contrast, in medieval times,

"There might be more freedom in England, though her feudal lord's lightest words were worth men's lives, and though the blood of the vexed husbandman dropped in the furrows of her fields, than there is while the animation of her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the exactness of a line

"And, on the other hand, go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors, examine once more those ugly goblins, and formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid, but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone, a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure, but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children"¹

Ruskin was not the first to notice or to protest against "this degradation of the operative into a machine". but he was the first to declare roundly that men's "pleasure in the work by which they make their bread"² lay at the very foundations of society, and to relate this to his whole criticism of the arts. Moreover, he went on to declare, in a passage that may have had an incalculable influence on Morris's future career, that the separation of manual and intellectual labour was equally destructive of both.

"We are always in these days endeavouring to separate the two; we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman and the other an operative, whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen, in the best sense. As it is, we make both ungentle, the one envying, the other despising, his brother, and the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers, and miserable workers. . . It would be well if all of us were good handicraftsmen in some kind, and the dishonour of manual labour done away with altogether. . . In each several profession, no master should be too proud to do its hardest work. The painter should grind his own colours; the architect work in the mason's yard with his men, the master-manufacturer be himself a more skilled operative than any man in his mills; and the distinction between one man and another be only in

¹ *The Stones of Venice*, "The Nature of Gothic", para 13.

² *Ibid*, para 15

experience and skill, and the authority and wealth which these must naturally and justly obtain.”¹

In this passage may, perhaps, be found the germ of the Morris Firm

In the next decade—as we shall see (see p. 234 and p. 283)—Ruskin turned his attention more and more to political economy and questions of social morality, and took several further impetuous zig-zag steps in the direction of a revolutionary understanding of capitalist society indeed, he was to advance to the very verge of Socialism. But, for all his moral courage and indignation, his eyes were set firmly back and fixed longingly upon the craftsmanship of domestic industry and art in pre-capitalist modes of production. He could not make that leap into the future which would enable him to understand that, with the means of production owned and controlled by the workers for their own use, a new—and even greater—dignity and pleasure could be brought back to labour, and the productive forces would be used to make *men* and not to make profit. In his negative criticism, however, he was in his time without rival—

“We have much studied, and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour, only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided, but the men—Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life, so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail”²

William Morris read this and discussed it excitedly with Edward Burne-Jones in 1853. In 1883 he was reading excitedly once again, and wrote at the top of a sheet of notes:

“It is not only the labour that is divided, subdivided, and portioned out betwixt divers men—it is the man himself who is cut up, and metamorphosed into the automatic spring of an exclusive operation.

“Karl Marx.”³

And the sheet continues with notes from Chapter XIV of the

¹ *The Stones of Venice*, “The Nature of Gothic”, para. 21.

² *Ibid*, para. 16

³ Walthamstow MSS. The notes comprise passages of free translation (for his own use) from the French. They refer especially to Volume One of *Capital*, Chapter XIV, section 5

First Volume of Marx's *Capital*, "Division of Labour and Manufacture". Repeatedly, when reading this Chapter, Morris must have felt the hand of Ruskin on his shoulder:

"The knowledge, the judgement, and the will, which, though in ever so small a degree, are practised by the independent peasant or handicraftsman . . . these faculties are now required only for the workshop as a whole. Intelligence in production expands in one direction, because it vanishes in many others. What is lost by the detail labourers, is concentrated in the capital that employs them."¹

And, in another part:

"Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer, all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers, they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work, and turn it into a hated toil, they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour-process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power, they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness, they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital. But all methods for the production of surplus-value are at the same time methods of accumulation . . . of capital. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite . . ."²

"It is not the place, here", Marx wrote, "to go on to show how division of labour seizes upon, not only the economical, but every other sphere of society, and everywhere lays the foundation of that all engrossing system of specialising and sorting men, that development in a man of one single faculty at the expense of all other faculties, which caused A. Ferguson, the master of Adam Smith, to exclaim. 'We make a nation of Helots, and have no free citizens' "³

And neither Marx nor Engels had the time—nor, perhaps, the special abilities—to work out the full implications of their thought in relation to the social function of the arts and to social

¹ *Capital* (1938), p. 355

² *Ibid*, pp. 660–1. Mr R. Page Arnot first called attention to the relation between this passage of Marx and Morris's thought in his *William Morris a Vindication* (1934).

³ *Ibid*, p. 347.

morality. When Morris read *Capital* he was able to take all that was positive in Ruskin's thought, and give it a new coherence and revolutionary direction (See pp. 747 f.) This is one of Morris's greatest contributions to modern thought. and, had he not read Ruskin in his Oxford years, it would not have been possible. There is no wonder, then, that he often acknowledged his debt.