

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST JOUST WITH VICTORIANISM

I "Janey"

WHAT lasting impression did these five years of excitement, painting and studying in the studio at Red Lion Square, decorating the Oxford Union, defying the conventions of the Respectable and the Good, leave upon William Morris?

First, one reservation must be made. Morris has been treated by some critics as though the original impulse of his life came from his contact with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This is not the case. Although Morris came under Rossetti's influence when he was (in his own words) a "mere boy" of twenty-three, his revolt reached back into his teens, and many of his guiding ideas, were formed in earlier years. The decision to devote his life to Art had been made on the quay at Le Havre, before Burne-Jones stood awestruck in Rossetti's studio. However literally Morris adopted the idea of discipleship to the master-artist,¹ he was no creature blown into life by Rossetti's breath.

Next, we should guard against the danger of interpreting these years of the late 1850s in terms of later developments, when the Pre-Raphaelite movement drifted towards its insipid close. We should recall, not the failures, defections and despondencies, but the clear note of excitement of the young men in revolt against the orthodoxies on every side. Political revolt was present in the movement, though it was not uppermost in young Morris's or Burne-Jones's minds. Hunt and Millais had been touched by the spirit of 1848. they had even joined the Chartist procession on April 10th. Woolner, the sculptor, an original member of the Brotherhood, with whom Morris and Burne-Jones were acquainted, held fervently democratic convictions. Rossetti was too extreme

¹ See Mackail, I, p. 111. "Once, when Burne-Jones complained that the designs he made in Rossetti's manner seemed better than his own original work, Morris answered with some vehemence, 'I have got beyond that. I want to imitate Gabriel as much as I can.'"

an individualist to take interest in political matters: but he had behind him the Republican background of his home, and his brother (whom Morris thought to be a bore) earnestly maintained his ex-patriate father's principles. It was natural for Burne-Jones and Morris in the sixties to regard themselves as "People's Men" (see p. 232), although the absence of any powerful popular movement in the late fifties meant that this was less a matter of conviction than of private sentiment.

Moreover, the circle of artists and intellectuals felt themselves to be, in other ways, an island of unorthodoxy amidst the encroaching seas of Victorian conventions. Both Rossetti's were free-thinkers. Madox Brown's home in London in the sixties (which Morris frequently visited) was noted for its easy Bohemian atmosphere where eccentric artists, atheists, foreign refugees (even "communists") would foregather. Among some of the circle, unconventional personal relations and behaviour—the flouting of respectable "manners"—were not only tolerated they were necessary as a true hall-mark of genius. Sometimes, indeed, "revolt" seemed close to the symptoms of retarded adolescence. Swinburne careering down the banisters at Rossetti's house, arriving drunk in a cab at Madox Brown's, hopping on and off the furniture in enthusiastic discussion, was on the border-line of mental stability. As if to underline the fact that such forms of "revolt" in no way endangered the established powers, society turned one blind eye in the direction of the artists, fashioning the myth (still dominant in the popular imagination to-day) that abnormal behaviour is only to be expected from the "eccentric genius", and must be viewed with special tolerance.

But all these various forms of "revolt" stemmed from the same source—hatred of Victorianism, the attempt to fight back the insidious pressure of respectability. Among all the members of this circle, Rossetti was perhaps the most earnest both in his hatred and in his devotion to art. His unhappy relations with "Lizzie" Siddal (who became his wife) were redeemed throughout by his respect for her personality, his desire that she should develop her independent abilities as a painter and poet. The misery of Rossetti's last years, when he became the victim of laudanum, insomnia, and of a morbidity only occasionally uppermost in his youth, have hidden from view the man whom

Morris and Burne-Jones first met and loved. But, despite all the clouds which later came between them, Morris never denied his debt to Rossetti in the early years of their friendship. "He was, not a happy man", he wrote in 1892, "being too self-centred, though very kind, and fair in his judgement of other people".¹ His main reflection remained. "He did us a great deal of good". And this was no more than the truth. Rossetti, in the late fifties, was aroused by the enthusiasm of his two young friends to a renewal of his own excitement, when plotting the "P R B" revolt with Hunt and Millais. "He was very kind and sincere. . . Art was his religion", recalled one of the students whom he had taught at the Working Men's College in 1855. "He could inspire and thrill us, we loved him so, and were happy to render him the smallest service. . . He did not want our worship."² The tribute reveals Rossetti's real interest and quick sympathy for people, irrespective of considerations of class or social convention, in all matters of art or ideas. The startling influence which he exerted over so many of his contemporaries was not based (as is sometimes supposed) upon a bizarre, "magnetic", egocentric personality, but, far more, upon this quality of sympathy, his ability to give them confidence in their own powers.³ Good-natured, accomplished, assured, a brilliant conversationalist continually throwing out new whims and theories as if they were infallible doctrine, yet still ready to enter into the enthusiasms of his friends and make them his own, saturated from childhood in the poetry of Dante and the atmosphere of the arts, he seemed to embody in himself the life for which the young men were searching. Through his influence Morris was weaned from the last bourgeois fetishes which held him back. The pressure of "respectability", the desire to acquire a sound professional status—these were set behind him. Rossetti was the first man to recognize the evidence of genius in the two friends: he nourished it, encouraged it with friendship rather than patronage, and paid it a succession of most generous tributes. In 1869, when he and

¹ *Works*, Vol. XXII, p. xxxi.

² Quoted Doughty, *op cit*, pp. 167-8.

³ See T. Watts Dunton, "A Glimpse of Rossetti and Morris at Kelmscott", in *The English Review*, January, 1909. "I am never tired of iterating, and reiterating, that Rossetti could, and did, take as deep an interest in another man's work as in his own. It was this that made all his friends love him."

Morris were drifting apart, he was still writing of him in a private letter as "the greatest literary identity of our time", and praising his "width of relation to the mass of mankind"—a quality in which Rossetti well knew that he was himself lacking. "He has done things in decorative art which take as high and exclusive a place in that field", the letter continued.¹ Here is no sign of that self-absorption and jealousy which some commentators have deduced as a constant trait in Rossetti's character. "Rossetti always urged Morris to follow his artistic tendencies", wrote one mutual friend, criticizing the "unjust" treatment of Rossetti in Mackail's biography of Morris.² And, for Burne-Jones, the liberating influence of Rossetti's friendship was one which he never ceased to cherish "He gave me courage to commit myself to imagination without shame"³

But these years were to bring their lasting influence in yet another form—in Morris's choice of the beautiful Jane Burden as his wife. As we have seen, the pursuit of "romance" was not confined to the painting and poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites it also intruded into their lives. Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Morris sought to create a romantic world of their own, in despite of their society—and even to flaunt it in the faces of the philistines. The studio at Red Lion Square, the fraternity of artists painting at Oxford, the building by Morris of the Red House at Bexley Heath—these were acts of defiance, or refuges from the world of Gradgrind. So long as money could command it (even if the money came from the same world which they denounced) it was possible to live their lives of make-belief. But no amount of money could bring back an idealized Guenevere or Beatrice for a lover. In their first conception, the Pre-Raphaelite and the Oxford Brotherhood were to have celibacy as a binding condition upon the artists of the "Order". Such a condition was bound to break down. Moreover, in pursuit of "Truth to Nature", models for Beatrice and Guenevere had to be found. And so an attitude to women, shared in different degrees by Rossetti, Burne-Jones, Morris, and others of their circle, was created.

This attitude (once again) was foreshadowed in the personal

¹ Sir J. Skelton, *Table Talk of Shirley* (1895), p. 85

² W. J. Stillman, *Autobiography of a Journalist* (1901), p. 91

³ Quoted by Lethaby, *William Morris as Work-Master* (1901).

relationships of Shelley and of Keats. On the one hand, there was a persistent underlying element of respect for the personality of women, and a yearning for a fully-equal relationship of love, and companionship between the sexes. On the other, there was an extreme idealization of Love itself, which (it has been suggested) could sometimes degenerate into narcissism—the woman was the “soul” of the man, to be isolated and sheltered from the cares and realities of life. For Rossetti, nourished on the *Vita Nuova* of Dante, this yearning for ideal Love, both in his life and his art, was to become an over-mastering obsession. Apart from art itself, Love seemed to him to be the supreme experience in life, the only oasis in the wastes of living which approximated to the ideals of his dreams.

“ it lies
In one gracious form’s control,
Fair with honourable eyes,
Lamps of a translucent soul
O their glance is loftiest dole,
Sweet and wise,
Wherein Love descries his goal
“Reft of her, my dreams are all
Clammy trance that fears the sky.
Changing footpaths shift and fall,
From polluted coverts nigh,
Miserable phantoms sigh,
Quakes the pall,
And the funeral goes by”¹

Certain physical characteristics recur frequently in the models preferred by the Pre-Raphaelites—wide masses of hair, often red, large eyes which, for Morris, must always be grey, pale colouring; a long, finely-defined neck. Here, she is presented (in an unpublished novel of 1870) by Morris:

“She was slim and thin a little above the middle height of women, well-knit and with a certain massiveness about her figure. Her face, like her figure, had something strong and massive amidst its delicacy dark brown abundant silky hair, a firm clear cut somewhat square jaw, and round well-developed lips a straight nose with wide nostrils and perfectly made high cheeks . . and to light all this up, large grey eyes set wide apart.”²

¹ “Love’s Nocturn”

² Brit Mus Add MSS 45328

And while there cannot be said to have been a rigid "type" of Pre-Raphaelite womanhood, nevertheless the idealization of Love in the early paintings of Rossetti, the early poems of Morris, and the paintings of Burne-Jones, has something in common.

These attitudes find one of their most remarkable expressions in Morris's poem, "Praise of My Lady," addressed to Jane Burden, his future wife

"My lady seems of ivory
Forehead, straight nose, and cheeks that be
Hollow'd a little mournfully
Beata mea Domina!"

"Mournful"—that is a key word. Languorous melancholy—not a Platonic idealization to the abstract extreme of Dante's love for Beatrice, but a physical beauty which is nevertheless remote, unattainable, and sad. It is as if the idealized Lady has been created in an idealized Heaven, only to languish, as in Rossetti's early poem, *The Blessed Damozel*, for a mortal and physical love in the real world

"Her great eyes, standing far apart,
Draw up some memory from her heart,
And gaze out very mournfully,
—*Beata mea Domina!*—

"So beautiful and kind they are,
But most times looking out afar,
Waiting for something, not for me
Beata mea Domina!

"I wonder if the lashes long
Are those that do her bright eyes wrong,
For always half tears seem to be
—*Beata mea Domina!*—

"Lurking below the underlid,
Darkening the place where they lie hid—
If they should rise and flow for me!
Beata mea Domina!"

But directly contradicting the melancholy, soulful eyes are the frankly sensuous lips.

"Her full lips being made to kiss,
Curl'd up and pensive each one is,
This makes me faint to stand and see
Beata mea Domina!

"Her lips are not contented now,
Because the hours pass so slow
Towards a sweet time (pray for me),
—*Beata mea Domina!*—

"Nay, hold thy peace, for who can tell,
But this at least I know full well,
Her lips are parted longingly,
—*Beata mea Domina!*—

"So passionate and swift to move,
To pluck at any flying love,
That I grow faint to stand and see
Beata mea Domina!"

And so the idealized image was projected on to the canvas or on to the page a love perpetually yearning for fulfilment, but bringing with it the fear that with the fulfilment of love the ideal would be shattered. It is as if the figures on Keats's "Grecian Urn" had become part of the pattern of their lives.

"Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve,
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!"

So it was that the legend of Launcelot and Guenevere came to exercise so powerful an influence over Morris and Rossetti—the story of a love in idealized chivalric colours which remained for ever poised on the brink of physical satisfaction,—a satisfaction which, in the world of Victorian morality, seemed to imply either the squalid scenes of Vice, or the respectable bourgeois property contract.

"In that garden fair

"Came Launcelot walking, this is true, the kiss
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,

"When both our mouths went wandering in one way,
And aching sorely, met among the leaves,
Our hands being left behind strained far away .

"Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever happened on through all those years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie

"Being such a lady could I weep these tears
If this were true? A great queen such as I
Having sinn'd this way, straight her conscience sears,

"And afterwards she liveth hatefully,
Slaying and poisoning, certes never weeps. "

This is from the title poem of Morris's first volume of poems, *The Defence of Guenevere*—a poem whose intensity springs not only from the defence of a love which trembles at the point of adultery, but from the dramatic situation of the poem itself—the passionate defence of that love against a hostile inquisition:

"This Mellyagraunce saw blood upon my bed—
Whose blood then pray you ' is there any law

"To make a queen say why some spots of red
Lie on her coverlet' . . .

so must I defend
The honour of the Lady Guenevere'
Not so, fair lords, even if the world should end

"This very day, and you were judges here
Instead of God "

So powerfully is the beautiful, defiant, figure of Guenevere evoked, that it seems as if Beauty and Love themselves are defying the world:

"there was one less than three

In my quiet room that night, and we were gay,
Till sudden I rose up, weak, pale, and sick,
Because a bawling broke our dream up, yea

"I looked at Launcelot's face and could not speak,
For he looked helpless too, for a little while,
Then I remember how I tried to shriek,

"And could not, but fell down; from tile to tile
The stones they threw up rattled o'er my head,
And made me dizzier; till within a while

"My maids were all about me, and my head
On Launcelot's breast was being soothed away
From its white chattering, until Launcelot said—

"By God! I will not tell you more to-day,
Judge any way you will—what matters it?"

But in the poem's sequel, "King Arthur's Tomb", the dream-world of love, once again so powerfully evoked in the body of the poem (this time in Launcelot's words):

" . . she held scarlet lilies, such
As Maiden Margaret bears upon the light

"Of the great church walls, natheless did I walk
Through the fresh wet woods, and the wheat that morn,
Touching her hair, and hand and mouth, and talk
Of love we held, nigh hid among the corn.

"Back to the palace, ere the sun grew high,
We went, and in a cool green room all day
I gazed upon the arras giddily,
Where the wind set the silken kings a-sway."

is shattered by the death of Arthur. The very poignancy of their love was in its offence against the moral sanctions of society:

"We went, my maids and I, to say prayers when
They sang mass in the chapel on the lawn.

"And every morn I scarce could pray at all,
For Launcelot's red-golden hair would play,
Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall,
Mingled with dreams of what the priest did say,

"Grim curses out of Peter and of Paul,
Judging of strange sins in Leviticus,
Another sort of writing on the wall,
Scored deep across the painted heads of us "

Here—on the one word "painted"—the worlds of illusion and reality are reversed. The "dreams" of the moral sanctions voiced by the priest become suddenly more real than the "painted" illusion of their love. And so Arthur's death, which at last permits Guenevere and Launcelot to consummate their love in marriage with the moral approval of society, by destroying this tension between their passion and the sanctions of society at the same time destroys their desire, leaving the lovers in a grey world of everyday reality:

"Still night, the lone
Grey horse's head before him vex'd him much,

"In steady nodding over the grey road—
Still night, and night, and night, and emptied heart
Of any stories, what a dismal load
Time grew at last, yea, when the night did part,

"And let the sun flame over all, still there
The horse's grey ears turn'd this way and that . . ."

All the rich colours of the illusory world, the "scarlet lilies", the "fresh wet woods", the "arras", and the "silken kings", are drained away, and

"suddenly the thing grew drear,
In morning twilight, when the grey downs bare
Grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere "

But the sense of "sin" is, for Guenevere, less a feeling of remorse for Arthur, than the realization that the moral sanctions of society (expressed as an implacable Heaven and Hell), once broken, will in the end have their revenge "Banner, and sword, and shield," Guenevere addresses Launcelot at the end of the poem.

"you dare not pray to die,
Lest you meet Arthur in the other world,
And, knowing who you are, he pass you by,
Taking short turns that he may watch you curl'd
"Body and face and limbs in agony,
Lest he weep presently and go away,
Saying, 'I loved him once,' with a sad sigh—"

These poems are so much more violent and intense than (for example) Tennyson's domestic bourgeois moralities in medieval dress, the *Idylls of the King*, that it has been suggested that they represent a complete escape into the Middle Age, a true imaginative realization of the life of medieval times without any reference to the nineteenth century. But this is only a part of the truth. The intensity of the feeling in these poems comes, not from the Middle Ages, but from William Morris, the young nineteenth-century poet. It is a measure of the intensity of his own revolt against the impoverished relationships of his own society.

This impoverishment can be illustrated by referring once again to Arthur Hugh Clough's long poem (*The Bothie of Tober-Na-Vuolich*), published a few years before *The Defence of Guenevere*. In this poem, Clough, sensitive, intelligent, and sincere, tried to handle a contemporary theme, of the moral, intellectual and emotional conflicts of a young undergraduate, Philip Hewson, of radical (even "Chartist") views. Clough's manner is at times the mock-heroic (in itself a confession of the poverty of the subject), but more often of serious intent. Hewson oscillates in love

between a lovely peasant girl and a sleek and beautiful daughter of the aristocracy, before coming to rest at Elspie, an unspoiled Highland lass who nevertheless has gentility and cultural attainments. The confession of love is a climax to the poem.

"So he retained her hand, and, his tears down-dropping on it,
Trembling a long time, kissed it at last And she ended
And as she ended, uprose he saying, What have I heard? Oh,
What have I done, that such words should be said to me? Oh, I see it,
See the great key-stone coming down from the heaven of heavens,
And he fell at her feet, and buried his face in her apron

But as under the moon and the stars they went to the cottage,
Elspie sighed and said, Be patient, dear Mr Philip,
Do not do anything hasty It is all so soon, so sudden
Do not say anything yet to any one

Elspie, he answered,
Does not my friend go on Friday? I then shall see nothing of you
Do not I go myself on Monday?

But oh, he said, Elspie!
Do as I bid you, my child do not go on calling me Mr ,
Might I not just as well be calling you Miss Elspie?
Call me, this heavenly night for once, for the first time, Philip.

Philip, she said, and laughed, and said she could not say it,
Philip, she said, he turned, and kissed the sweet lips as they said it."

At their next encounter, the foregoing scene of passion is chewed over:

"As we went home, you kissed me for saying your name It was dreadful.
I have been kissed before, she added, blushing slightly,
I have been kissed more than once by Donald my cousin, and others;
It is the way of the lads, and I make up my mind not to mind it,
But, Mr. Philip, last night, and from you, it was different, quite, Sir.
When I think of all that, I am shocked and terrified at it
Yes, it is dreadful to me "

Yes—it is laughable And yet Clough succeeded (and the poem as a whole shows both sincerity and sensitive understanding of his times) in portraying only too faithfully contemporary middle-class sensibility, the extinction of a straining passion in gentility, fears, and repressions The young poets lived in a time when every relationship, no matter how intimate, was becoming tainted by the tribe of Tupperts—the pressure of respectability and the acute sense of property values of the Victorian middle class. Samuel Butler and Thomas Hardy, at the end of the century, were

to expose (in *The Way of All Flesh* and *Jude the Obscure*) the terrible inhumanity of the bourgeois marriage-relationship—an “iron contract”, a title deed to property, a “license to be loved on the premises”. All the rich colours of the bourgeois dawn, of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hero and Leander*, were draining into these grey “lumps of sin”, Grundyism, and guilt

This, then, was William Morris's youthful world. At one extreme was Vice, gaudy, blatant, and miserable: at the other, Mrs Grundy and Theobald Pontifex, giving moral names to the tyranny of possession. And, in between, as the constant background to his revolt, there was the muted gentility of the Philips and Elspies, whose mild aspirations were soon huffed out by the winds of hypocrisy, respectability, and philistinism (those winds which always circle the brutal storm-centre of class oppression and imperialist aggression), unless they shelter them carefully in a Highland cottage or candle-lit cabin of Art or (like the original Philip and Elspie) seek to step back an hundred years to the more heroic climate of New Zealand. Here is one source of the elusive, yearning passion of these poems: the aspiration for a richer love could only be a dream embodied in morning coats, or Victorian manners, it became a farce. embodied in armour, and the atmosphere of chivalry, it had an illusory reality, but of a beauty that was always unattainable, a love that was haunted by the fear of loss.

“Over those bones I sat and pored for hours,
And thought, and dream'd, and still I scarce could see
The small white bones that lay upon the flowers,
But evermore I saw the lady, she

“With her dear gentle walking leading in,
By a chain of silver twined about her wrists,
Her loving knight, mounted and arm'd to win
Great honour for her, fighting in the lists.

“O most pale face, that brings such joy and sorrow
Into men's hearts—yea, too, so piercing sharp
That joy is, that it marcheth nigh to sorrow
For ever—like an overwinded harp.”¹

Poignant in art, but disastrous in life:

¹ “Concerning Geffray Teste Noir.”

"Life's eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair,
And from her breasts the ravishing eyes of Death"¹

So wrote Rossetti, torn all his life, and in much of his poetry, by the conflict between the yearning melancholy ideal and the grey reality, between the deathly-pale and passive "Lizzie" Siddal and the sensuous Fanny Cornforth. How far the most famous Pre-Raphaelite models—and in particular "Lizzie" Siddal and Jane Burden—were cast by temperament and nature for their role, and how far they were created anew in the image of the ideal it is impossible to judge. Both were discovered early by Rossetti. Jane Burden was only seventeen when she was thrown (in the days of the Oxford Union) into the constant company of this group of artists in their deepest medieval phase. Her melancholy, large-eyed beauty struck all who knew her. Perhaps the young girl was swept into the role of Guenevere and Iseult before she herself had found out who she was. In 1869, ten years after her marriage to Morris, she seemed to Henry James the very type of "Pre-Raphaelite womanhood":

"Oh, *ma chère*, such a wife! *Je n'en reviens pas*—she haunts me still. A figure cut out of a missal—out of one of Rossetti's or Hunt's pictures to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made—or they a 'keen analysis' of her—whether she's an original or a copy. In either case she is a wonder. Imagine a tall lean woman in a long dress of some dead purple stuff, guiltless of hoops (or of anything else, I should say), with a mass of crisp black hair heaped into great wavy projections on each side of her temples, a thin pale face, a pair of strange, sad, deep, dark Swinburnian eyes, with great thick black oblique brows, joined in the middle and tucking themselves away under her hair . . . a long neck, without any collar, and in lieu thereof some dozen strings of outlandish beads—in fine complete."²

But of her character all accounts are reticent. she is silent, languorous, frequently unwell (although she lived to a good age) or supposedly unwell, occasionally high-spirited and good-humoured in more intimate company. Few accounts go beyond such appearances, and all dwell upon her remarkable melancholy

¹ D. G. Rossetti's fragment, "The Orchard Pit"

² *Letters of Henry James* (1920), Vol. I, pp. 16-18

beauty. The truth is more difficult to penetrate. but one thing at least seems to be clear. William Morris had married not her, but a picture, an ideal from his Pre-Raphaelite dream-world. The dream-world was so all-embracing in these years that it unfitted him for an equal human relationship. It was no fault of hers that, when the dream passed away and he came to know her as a real person, she was not suited to the fuller relationship he then desired. It certainly was no fault of hers indeed, when this time came she was already so moulded to his dream that she could not change the poses and affectations he had helped to create. But none-the-less it must be acknowledged that this marriage was to provide an element of tragedy in his life

II The Defence of Guenevere

William Morris and Jane Burden were married in April, 1859. He was then twenty-five, and she was more than five years younger. The ceremony was the occasion for one of the last gatherings of the "Oxford Brotherhood". Dixon officiated, joining them by mistake by the names of "William and Mary"

His marriage, and the building of the Red House (see p 120), marks the climax of the first phase of Morris's revolt—the attempt to build a world within a world, whose values and relationships, architecture and manners, were distinct from those of the modern civilization which he hated. But the building of the Red House opens, at the same time, the second phase—the attempt to reform the outer world, in some measure, by means of Art, and especially by means of the decorative arts.

The real achievement of the first phase of Morris's life was in his first volume, published in 1858, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. It was at Oxford that Morris had discovered (or, rather, reopened) in himself his vein of poetry. His friend, Canon Dixon, later recalled

"One night Crom Price and I went to Exeter, and found him with Burne-Jones. As soon as we entered the room, Burne-Jones exclaimed wildly, 'He's a big poet' 'Who is?' asked we. 'Why, Topsy' . . .

"We sat down, and heard Morris read his first poem . . . As he read it, I felt that it was something the like of which had never been heard before. It was a thing entirely new founded on nothing previous perfectly original, whatever its value, and sounding truly striking and

beautiful, extremely decisive and powerful in execution. I expressed my admiration in some way, as we all did, and I remember his remark, 'Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write.' From that time onward for a term or two, he came to my rooms almost every day with a new poem."¹

From that time onwards he continued to write fluently. Two years later, when Val Prinsep joined the artists painting the Oxford Union, he took dinner with Rossetti, Morris and Burne-Jones at their lodgings.

"When dinner was over, Rossetti humming to himself as was his wont, rose from the table and proceeded to curl himself up on the sofa. 'Top,' he said, 'read us one of your grinds.' 'No, Gabriel,' answered Morris, 'you have heard them all.' 'Never mind,' said Rossetti, 'here's Prinsep who has never heard them, and beside they are devilish good.' 'Very well, old chap,' growled Morris, and having got his book began to read in a sing-song chant some of the poems afterwards published in his first volume. All the time he was jiggling nervously about with his watch-chain. Forty years after, I can still recall the scene. Rossetti on the sofa with large melancholy eyes fixed on Morris, the poet at the table reading and ever fidgetting with his watch-chain, and Burne-Jones working at a pen-and-ink drawing.

" 'Gold on her head, and gold on her feet,
And gold where the hems of her kirtle meet,
And a golden girdle round my sweet,
Ab qu'elle est belle, La Marguerite,'

"still seems to haunt me, and this other stanza:

" 'Swerve to the left, son Roger, he said,
When you catch his eyes through the helmet slit,
Swerve to the left, then out at his head,
And the Lord God give you joy of it.' "²

Val Prinsep was a man of perception, and the two verses he recalled well represent the two elements—ideal decorative beauty and violent, almost brutal, realism—which are so striking in Morris's first (and best) volume of poetry. If the master influence is that of Keats, two more immediate influences can be felt in the poems—the sensuous lyricism of Tennyson, the rough vigour of early Browning. But, while many poems in the volume are directly derivative from these two poets, and others are little more than bizarre "medieval" experiments, the best among them

¹ Mackail, I, pp. 51-2

² *Memorials*, I, pp. 161-2

are entirely original, in the sense that Morris has thoroughly absorbed the influence of his forerunners, and achieved a synthesis of his own. These poems—among which are the title poem, "Sir Peter Harpdon's End", "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire", "The Haystack in the Floods", "The Judgement of God", and "King Arthur's Tomb"—are the great achievement of Morris's youth, an achievement which has only rarely received due recognition. They are, indeed, among the last true and uncorrupted works of the Romantic Revolt.

When Morris was at Oxford, this Revolt was already in its autumn, and was beginning to enter its long decline. We have already seen something of the causes of this in the parallel movement of Pre-Raphaelitism in art. The aspirations of the great romantic poets, denied by the advances of industrial capitalism and the triumph of a philistine middle class, were being driven into a dream-world of imagination. "Only in ourselves and the world of art and literature was there any hope" (see p. 878). The romantic movement was escaping to a world of "romance", in compensation for the poverty of life, where beauty, the energies of youth, love, and heroism, were conjured up in ancient heroic or medieval chivalric settings, or by frequent allusions to the culture of the past, or by hypnotic and sensuous incantation. But always in this dream-world these values are evoked with a savour of nostalgia, of loss, of the unattainable. This sense of loss, this searching for a renewal of the inspiration at the well-head of the Revolt, was voiced by Mathew Arnold in his poem, "Growing Old", which was intended as a conscious allegory of the decline of the movement. The sorrow of age (he wrote) lies not only in the passing of youthful enthusiasms—

"It is to suffer this,
And feel but half, and feebly, what we feel
Deep in the hidden heart
Festers the dull remembrance of a change,
But no emotion—none.

"It is—last stage of all—
When we are frozen up within, and quite
The phantom of ourselves,
To hear the world applaud the hollow ghost
Which blamed the living man."

It was in Tennyson's early poetry that this savour of nostalgia first found overwhelming lyrical expression.

According to Canon Dixon, Tennyson at this time carried everything before him among the young men at Oxford

"Poetry was the thing and it was felt with justice that this was due to Tennyson. Tennyson had invented a new poetry, a new poetic English, his use of words was new, and every piece that he wrote was a conquest of a new region. There was the general conviction that Tennyson was the greatest poet of the century, some held him the greatest of all poets, or at least of modern poets"¹

Tennyson's "Palace of Art" had not yet, in the 1850s, capitulated before the siege of Victorianism. Still feelings of guilt, "uncertain shapes",² lurked in the corners, inspiring the remarkable opening verses of *Maud*, which appeared in 1855 when Morris was at Oxford, and which disappointed Tennyson's more respectable admirers. But the charm which Tennyson cast upon the young men was derived less from the persistence, in muted form, of the romantic protest, than from his new expression of the colours of the romantic twilight.

A reference in a letter of twenty-year-old Burne-Jones gives insight into the nature of their enthusiasm. Writing of the lyric, "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean", in *The Princess*, he said "In some hot dreamy afternoons I have thought upon it for hours, until I have been exquisitely miserable"³ So the young men pined in the luxurious misery of languishing after "the days that are no more". The sweet autumnal tints of departed heroism were present in his verse, the nostalgia of the death of King Arthur, and the last years of Ulysses among a hostile, spiritless people. But—despite his effort to shake free in "Ulysses"—Tennyson was falling in love with the disease itself, becoming becalmed in the land of "The Lotos-Eaters". The "hatred of civilization" is rarely felt in his poems, the real bitterness and poignancy of loss are absent. From Tennyson onwards, the later stages

¹ Mackail, I, p. 44

² "The Palace of Art"

"But in dark corners of her palace stood
Uncertain shapes, and unawares
On white-eyed phantasms weeping tears of blood,
And horrible nightmares [she came]"

³ *Memorials*, I, p. 77.

of the romantic movement are testimony to the truth of Blake's prophetic Proverb of Hell "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence." Decay begins to steal in from every side, and—although Tennyson could sense its coming—the utmost cry to which he could give voice was.

" 'I am half sick of shadows,' said
The Lady of Shallott."

Morris, too, shared in this admiration for Tennyson. But there was a difference, one of the greatest significance. "The attitude of Morris I should describe as defiant admiration", recalled Dixon.

"This was apparent from the first. He perceived Tennyson's limitations . . . in a remarkable manner for a man of twenty or so. He said once, 'Tennyson's Sir Galahad is rather a mild youth'."¹

He responded to the feelings of loss, the musical languor of Tennyson, yet still his feelings rose in protest at the acceptance of defeat. He refused to relax passively in the currents of nostalgia, however much he felt their attractions. This resistance must have prepared the way for his ready response to Browning's *Men and Women*, which appeared in 1855. Moreover, he found in Browning a realism, in the treatment of medieval themes, which served as an antidote to the tendency already becoming apparent in Tennyson to intrude into his world of "romance" Victorian middle-class values in medieval fancy dress. Tennyson's Sir Galahad is indeed a "mild youth", a pious genteel prig, a "maiden knight" on a "goodly charger":

"How sweet are looks that ladies bend
On whom their favours fall!
For them I battle till the end,
To save from shame and thrall
But all my heart is drawn above,
My knees are bow'd in crypt and shrine
I never felt the kiss of love,
Nor maiden's hand in mine
More bounteous aspects on me beam,
Me mightier transports move and thrill,
So keep I fair thro' faith and prayer
A virgin heart in work and will."

Contrast the Galahad of Morris—by no means one of the best of his early poems:

¹ Mackail, I, p. 45

"I thought, O' Galahad, the days go by,
Stop and cast up now that which you have found,
So sorely you have wrought and painfully

"Night after night your horse treads down alone
The sere damp fern, night after night you sit
Holding the bridle like a man of stone,
Dismal, unfriended, what thing comes of it.

"And what if Palomydes also ride,
And over many a mountain and bare heath
Follow the questing beast with none beside?
Is he not able still to hold his breath

"With thoughts of Iseult"

The enervated hymnal rhythm, the featureless vocabulary, the smug spiritual complacency of the first. the sinuous, irregular, meaningful rhythm, the evocation of a concrete environment ("your horse treads down . the sere damp fern"), the sense of real conflict in the oath of chastity, in the second. It is as if Morris's poem is a declaration of war against Tennyson's Galahad and all he symbolizes.

It is true that in this first volume of Morris, Blake's "pestilence" can be seen at work as well. The autumnal tints of late romanticism are all to be found in the volume. But, with these, there is still a vitality and rough vigour to be found only in occasional passages of Browning—nowhere else. The sense of loss and failure is there.

" . . everywhere

The knights come foil'd from the great quest, in vain,
In vain they struggle for the vision fair "

Sir Peter Harpdon, defeated, laments the end of an heroic age.

"Day after day I see the French draw on,
Hold after hold falls as this one will fall.
Knight after knight hangs gibbeted like me,
Pennon on pennon do they drain us out. . . " ¹

But the poems are not therefore exquisite luxuries of misery,

"sometimes like an idle dream
That hinders true life overmuch,
Sometimes like a lost heaven, these seem—" ²

¹ Omitted fragment of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End", *Works*, Vol I,
p xxviii

² "Old Love "

Certainly, the idle dream, the use of poetry as a refuge from life, is present in some of the poems. But in others (and these, the best) it is not nostalgia but protest, protest at the "lost heaven", which is dominant. Sir Peter Harpdon, holding on to a rotten outpost in France, the great days of chivalry long past, doomed as he knows to certain over-throw, still keeps his courage up.

"Men will talk, you know,
(We talk of Hector, dead so long ago,)
When I am dead, of how this Peter clung
To what he thought the right, of how he died,
Perchance, at last, doing some desperate deed
Few men would care to do now, and this is gain
To me, as ease and money is to you,
Moreover, too, I like the straining game
Of striving well to hold up things that fall;
So one becomes great, see you! in good times
All men live well together, and you, too,
Live dull and happy—happy? not so quick,
Suppose sharp thoughts begin to burn you up.
Why then, but just to fight as I do now,
A halter round my neck, would be great bliss "

And so it is not only "the great dim broken walls he strove to keep", but also the old heroic values, even after the conditions for their existence had disappeared. The very choice of themes is a declaration against the ageing Ulysses, the dying Arthur. Sir Peter Harpdon and Alice, Robert and Jehane in "The Haystack in the Floods", even Launcelot and Guenevere, are full of the colours of youth, instinct with hope and eagerness, cut short by the hostile external world. "Lord Jesus!" cries out Jehane.

" . pity your poor maid!
For in such wise they hem me in,
I cannot choose but sin and sin,
Whatever happens . "

And the soldier who recounts Sir Peter's death to Alice, declares:

"Few words he spoke, not so much what he said
Moved us, I think, as, saying it, there played
Strange tenderness from that big soldier there
About his pleading, eagerness to live
Because folk loved him, and he loved them back,
And many gallant plans unfinished now
For ever."

"Eagerness to live"—this quality is seldom absent from the best of these poems.

Few poems are so pervaded by this poignancy of eager life struggling against overmastering odds as "The Haystack in the Floods". Here all the ingredients are apparently those of the most heavy-handed Victorian melodrama—the wicked baron and the defenceless maiden watching her knightly lover slain. And yet the incident—the extinction of life and beauty in a brutal act of revenge and lust in the drenching rain—is evoked with the pain of reality. The deliberate prominence given to violence (in this and other poems) is so marked as to have brought upon Morris accusations of sadism:

" she,
Being waked at last, sigh'd quietly,
And strangely childlike came, and said—
'I will not' Straightway Godmar's head,
As though it hung on strong wires, turn'd
Most sharply round, and his face burn'd .

"From Robert's throat he loosed the bands
Of silk and mail, with empty hands
Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw,
The long bright blade without a flaw
Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand
In Robert's hair, she saw him bend
Back Robert's head, she saw him send
The thin steel down, the blow told well,
Right backward the knight Robert fell,
And moan'd as dogs do, being half dead,
Unwitting, as I deem so then
Godmar turn'd grinning to his men,
Who ran, some five or six, and beat
His head to pieces at their feet "

Morris was not the first to counterpose violence and the idealization of love. Browning had already done this, notably in his "Count Gismond". Both poets used the device to give flesh and blood and the semblance of realism to their romances—to prevent the idealization of love from declining into the pious sentimentalities of Tennyson's Sir Galahad. This idealized love was not to be reached through a respectable Victorian courtship but only through trial and hardship, brutality and cunning, and

acts of heroism: while the straining of these opposites towards union gave poignancy to the love:

"I see her pale,
Her mouth half open, looking on in fear
As the great tilt-yard fills . . ."¹

Perhaps it is in the poem "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire", that the distinctive qualities of the volume find their most perfect expression. The poem is narrated (in the manner of Browning) by an old man, in whose memory the intensity of past experience struggles with the present mood of dispassionate reflection. The perspective of the poem is deepened by the inter-mingling, within the narrative itself, of memory and of action. Strand by strand, the bright primary colours of opposed emotions are laid side by side—the colour of heroic chivalry.

"The dancing trumpet sound, and we went forth,
And my red lion on the spear-head flapped
As faster than the cool wind we rode North,
Towards the wood of Verville . . ."

—the sharp eye for matter-of-fact detail.

"fold
"Lying on fold of ancient rusted mail,
No plate at all, gold rowels to the spurs,
And see the quiet gleam of turquoise pale
Along the ceinture . . ."

—the sudden memory of the Jacquerie, and the burnt skeletons of women hanging in the church at Beauvais—the passage of reflective passion—

"I saw you kissing once, like a curved sword
That bites with all its edge, did your lips lie,
Curled gently, slowly, long time could afford
For caught-up breathings. . ."

broken abruptly by the intrusion, once again, of the main action of the poem, and the whole rounded by the return to the autumn-mood of age. This poetry has little in common with the dream-world of Burne-Jones's paintings. Although seen through the veils of medievalism and memory, the passions and vigour of

¹ *Works*, Vol. I, p. xxviii

youth are evoked with more realism than by any Victorian poet who treated contemporary themes

Indeed, Morris in the best poems of this group is the true inheritor of the mantle of Keats. His best poems are both more limited than those of Keats, and more poignant. After this volume, no English romantic poet, within the main tradition, succeeded in achieving so successful an illusion of the very appearance and movement of life. The closely-imagined detail, the flat restraint of the continuously-moving rhythms, broken with an apparently casual roughness and careless awkwardness:¹ the constant mingling of memory and present narrative, reflection and action, the deliberate muddling of time in the perception of the moment, all these devices heighten the illusion of reality, and maintain the dramatic tension. It is not difficult to find in the Morris of these poems the master of W. B. Yeats.

The tense and colourful medievalism of Morris's volume gives emphasis to the curious outcome of the Romantic Revolt in the age of Britain's industrial supremacy. It is as if the fight for the human spirit, in the hour of Gradgrind's triumph, could only find satisfactory expression in the setting of the Round Table, or of the Thirteenth Century. Carlyle and Ruskin, Tennyson, Browning, Morris and Kingsley—all engaged in conflict in this medieval setting, and yet the battles which they fought had a very real relevance to the lives of the people of the Nineteenth Century. The violence of Morris's poetry may be seen as an attempt to resist the encroaching mists of Victorianism. When these mists triumphed, as they did in the next decade (both without him, and also, temporarily, within), the romantic movement rapidly lost its vital energies. The main tradition retired to ever-more-limited regions of sensibility, to a world of "art for art's sake", country cottages, and nostalgic dons. But the real aspirations of man—the vision of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity",

¹ Cf. Mr. Jack Lindsay, Introduction to *Selected Poems of William Morris* (Crown Classics, 1948). "In his great book, *The Defence of Guenevere* he carried English romanticism to its climax. The early poems have a naïve accent of simplicity, of passion, which is obtained by a deliberate flatness. You must read them with an almost equal value given to each syllable. Yet it is a flatness inside which a tremendous dramatic tension is at work, an elemental seething of forces. The pictorial quality is precise, casual, and yet unified by that intense dramatic vision."

at the source of the Revolt—no longer went with it; rather, they had now become involved in the struggles for emancipation of the working class, which alone could offer the hope of their realization. When William Morris made this discovery, twenty-five years after publishing *The Defence of Guenevere*, he was able, in his own life, to bring the Revolt which first inspired the romantic movement to its point of conclusion, and also to its point of transformation, not into a new “socialist” romanticism, but into the socialist realism which needs to project the aspirations of man into no dream-world of art, but, rather, finds them in the heroism and beauty of the real world of struggle on every side.

III Conclusion

Here, then, is some picture of William Morris at the age of twenty-five. When scarcely twenty he had raised the banner of “Art” in revolt against the society around him. The form of his revolt had been influenced by Carlyle and Ruskin, and it had been strengthened, but partly diverted into Bohemianism, by his discipleship to Rossetti. In his first volume of poems (in 1858) he had made a distinctive contribution to the great romantic tradition—a movement which was still one of protest, although it was already becoming tainted with hopelessness and nostalgia for an idealized past.

The distinction of Morris’s contribution was recognized only by a small circle of friends. Fewer than 300 copies of the book were sold, and a number of these were bought by Morris himself, as gifts for his acquaintances. The Press generally ignored the book, although one reviewer (in the *Athenaeum*) found it “a curiosity which shows how far affectation may mislead an earnest man towards the fog-land of Art”. The Editor of *Fraser’s* “could make nothing of them”:

“Nor could a very able man who looked at the MS for me. Surely nineteen-twentieths of them are of the most obscure, watery, mystical, affected stuff possible? I am sick of Rossetti and his whole school. I think them essentially unmanly, effeminate, mystical, affected, and obscure.”¹

Certainly the poems did not chime in with the practical spirit of

¹ Sir J. Skelton, *Table Talk of Shirley*, pp. 78–9.

the age, with its self-important civilizing mission, and confidence in its own progress.

It may be that the poem's reception served to harden Morris's "hatred of civilization". At any rate, he now had no difficulty in finding the great issues on which to do battle. He saw them to lie on every hand. But to find the enduring courage—to nourish his hatred with "hope", and to select some skirmish where the odds were not too unequal—that was a different matter. Nearly every one of Morris's early circle of friends either gave up in despair, or came to terms with the enemy. No one was beaten into such total defeat as was Rossetti himself, but even the degradation of his defeat was perhaps more noble than the compromised worldly success gained by Millais, and, in lesser degree, by Cornhill Price, Canon Dixon, and Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

But underneath the shy, gruff, Bohemian exterior of the young William Morris were qualities these others lacked—the qualities of a fighter: a capacity for endless devotion to detail, of practical application, foreshadowed in his own delineation of a character in a story, "Frank's Sealed Letter", which appeared in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.

"I could soon find out whether a thing were possible or not to me, then, if it were not, I threw it away for ever, never thought of it again, no regret, no longing for that, it was past and over for me, but if it were possible, and I made up my mind to do it, then and there I began it, and in due time finished it, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left hand till it was done. So I did with all things that I set my hand to."

These qualities of character, his wealth (which enabled him to choose his own profession and to be his own master), and, above all, his rich, direct, poetic response to life—the source of his glorious wrath and ever-burning indignation at cant, injustice, misery and ugliness—these were among the things which saved him from either compromise or total despair.

PART II

THE YEARS OF CONFLICT

“He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.”

WILLIAM BLAKE. *Proverbs of Hell*

CHAPTER I

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE DECORATIVE ARTS

I Introduction

DURING the years between his marriage and his conversion to practical Socialism in 1883, William Morris established his reputation as a poet, and as a craftsman in the decorative arts. His activities during these years have been described in close on an hundred different books—among the best of which are the first two which were written J. W. Mackail's biography and a study by Aymer Vallance. These years are usually regarded as those of his most fruitful achievement. The building of the Red House, the establishment and growth of the Firm of Morris & Co., the writing of *The Earthly Paradise* and *Sigurd the Volsung*, the formation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings; and the famous series of public lectures on art and society—all these took place during these twenty years.

It was during these years, also, that Morris's personality appeared to take confident shape. In place of the shy, self-conscious youth, with his outbreaks of rage or boyish humour, Morris presented a face to the world made up of bluff self-assertive decision, vigorous application to detail, matter-of-fact workmanship. He was damned if he would let anyone take *him* for an ineffectual aesthete! "I sits with my feet in a brook", he used to recite,

"And if anyone asks me for why,
I hits him a crock with my crook,
For it's sentiment kills me, says I"¹

In Bohemian and artistic circles he became familiar, with his rough beard, his disordered hair, his fierce intolerance of fools and fashions—a character resembling the King of Thrace in *The Knight's Tale* of his favourite poet, Chaucer

¹ Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (1916), p. 216