

CHAPTER III

"ONLY THE LEDGER LIVES . . "

"THIS sordid, aimless, ugly confusion", "a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing"—so MORRIS was later to describe England in the years when *The Earthly Paradise* was first published. And yet, despite the "hatred of modern civilization" which underlay the poem, it was immediately received with acclamation among a very wide section of the middle-class reading public. MORRIS (declared the reviewer in *St James's Magazine*) was "one of those men this age particularly wants" The "world"—"all that roar of machinery and that bustle about wealth—is too much with us".

"It is not necessary that Mr William Morris, or, indeed, any single man whatsoever, should supply a full and adequate antidote to prevalent feverishness, but he does a distinct and notable service when he provides one possible means of escape"¹

The reviewer of the *Pall Mall Gazette* also found himself "glad to retire from the stress and the cares of his ugly workaday English life and be entertained . . with that succession of gracious pictures . . of a remote romantic world"² The *Saturday Review*, attacking Browning for his obscurity, found it refreshing to meet "with a modern poem of the Chaucerian type".

"There is a fairer chance for poetry to be read and appreciated and taken back into favour by a busy material age, if its scope is distinct and direct, its style clear and pellucid, and its manner something like that of the old rhapsodists, minnesingers, and tale-tellers who in divers climes and ages have won such deserved popularity. So seems Mr. Morris to have thought"

¹ *St James's Magazine*, January, 1878 For this, and for several other sources quoted in this chapter, I am indebted to a study by an American scholar, Oscar Maurer, in *Nineteenth-century Studies*, Edited Davis, De Vane, and Bald (Cornell U P, 1940) See also "William Morris and the Reviews", by Karl Litzenberg, in *The Review of English Studies*, October, 1936

² *Pall Mall Budget*, December 11th, 1869

So seem also to have thought a class of readers who bring to mind Mr. Plint, the Leeds stockbroker, and the industrialists who patronized Burne-Jones, Rossetti, and the Morris firm

"Mr Morris's popularity has something remarkable about it. He is, we have noticed, appreciated by those who as a rule do not care to read any poetry. To our personal knowledge, political economists and scientific men to whom Shelley is a mystery and Tennyson a vexation of spirit, read the 'Earthly Paradise' with admiration."¹

If the poem had been intended to voice a revolt against the age, then it would seem to have been a signal failure. Rather, it seemed to strike a chord in the very age which Morris despised. How can this startling reception of the poem be explained?

Morris's readers were largely drawn from the great middle class into which he himself had been born, which had been enriched by the Industrial Revolution, and which was reaching the climax of its power and prosperity during Morris's youth and middle age—in the twenty years which followed the Great Exhibition of 1851, when Britain was indeed the workshop of the world. In the census of 1851, 272,000 were numbered in the professions. In 1871, 684,000. In the same years the numbers classed as domestic servants swelled from 900,000 to 1½ millions. Between 1854 and 1880 British capital invested overseas (largely in foreign loans and railways) jumped from about £210 millions to £1,300 millions. By this latter date there were close on 50,000 shareholders in Indian railway stock alone, most of whom lived in Great Britain. At the climax of these years, shortly after the passing of the Reform Bill of 1867, John Bright, champion of Free Trade, uttered one of his many paeons of triumph: "The aristocracy of England which so lately governed the country has abdicated", he declared.

"There is no longer a contest between us and the House of Lords, we need no longer bring charges against a selfish oligarchy, we no longer dread the power of the territorial magnates, we no longer feel ourselves domineered over by a class, we feel that denunciation and invective now would be out of place, the power which hitherto has ruled over us is shifted."²

¹ *Saturday Review*, May 30th, 1868

² Address to the working men of Edinburgh, November 5th, 1868, *Public Addresses by John Bright, M.P.* (1879), pp. 122-3.

This vast middle class, part actively engaged in commerce and industry, part *rentier*, part professional, which felt itself to be the real ruler not only of England but of the greater part of the world, was the soil in which the characteristic attitudes which we now name “Victorianism” flourished

“Victorianism” did not arise suddenly in 1851 Wilberforce, the prototype of so many “Victorian” public men, was dead before Queen Victoria came to the throne. Ernest Jones had pilloried the Victorian middle-class Liberal when Chartism was still a living force.

“Against the slave trade he had voted,
‘Rights of Man’ resounding still,
Now, basely turning, brazen-throated,
Yelled against the Ten Hours Bill,”¹

and when Samuel Fielden denounced the “cotton conscience” in 1849, he was commenting on a theme which had been familiar to Lancashire and Yorkshire working-men for twenty years

“These masters about Stalybridge, he heard, were principally dissenters, and many of them unitarians, his [Mr Fielden’s] own set—[*Laughter*—and he believed he was among a very bad lot, for true it was, that unitarians and quakers were the worst politicians in existence. They had agitated, defended, and passed more measures tending to enslave and oppress the poor man than any set of men in the country. Their cry of civil and religious liberty all the world over was now pretty well understood. It meant liberty for them to help themselves, and put down all who were in the way of their doing so. These were the men who made all the hubbub about black slavery, but who thought nothing of working their own people to death. . .”²

What was new in the years after 1851 was the widespread power exercised by the breed of Wilberforce and the Stalybridge masters in every field of public life, the permeation of the arts, the sciences, of all intellectual life by many of their attitudes, the increasing complacency of a triumphant class, surfeited with wealth and self-importance; and the great extension in the *rentier* class which drew its dividends but took no direct part in the exploitation of labour

For Morris, it was always Dickens’ inspired chapter, “Podsnappery”, in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) which described (for his

¹ “A Christmas Story”, *The Labourer*, Vol I (1847)

² Speech at Stalybridge, August 10th, 1849

mingled delight and fury) the characteristic attitudes of this class. Mr Podsnap was "well to do, and stood very high in Mr. Podsnap's opinion".

"Beginning with a good inheritance, he had married a good inheritance, and had thriven exceedingly in the Marine Insurance way, and was quite satisfied. He never could make out why everybody was not quite satisfied, and he felt conscious that he set a brilliant social example in being particularly well satisfied with most things, and, above all other things, with himself."

Other countries he considered "a mistake", and would dismiss their customs and culture with the devastating observation, "Not English!" Mr. Podsnap's world was entirely well-regulated and respectable.

"The world got up at eight, shaved close at a quarter past, breakfasted at nine, went to the City at ten, came home at half-past five, and dined at seven. Mr Podsnap's notions of the Arts in their integrity might have been stated thus: Literature; large print, respectfully descriptive of getting up at eight, shaving close at a quarter past, breakfasting at nine, going to the City at ten, coming home at half-past five, and dining at seven. Painting and Sculpture, models and portraits representing Professors of getting up at eight. Music, a respectable performance (without variations). . . sedately expressive of getting up at eight. . ."

But Mr. Podsnap's greatest faculty lay in his ability to evade and dismiss all unpleasant realities, "calculated to call a blush into a young person's cheek".

"There was a dignified conclusiveness—not to add a grand convenience—in this way of getting rid of disagreeables. 'I don't want to know about it, I don't choose to discuss it, I don't admit it!' Mr Podsnap had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clearing the world of its most difficult problems, by sweeping them behind him. . ."

Should anyone stray into Podsnap's company and commit such a breach of etiquette as to refer to the death by starvation of paupers in the London streets, he was soon brushed aside:

"I must decline to pursue this painful discussion. It is not pleasant to my feelings. . . I . . . do not admit these things. . . If they do occur (not that I admit it), the fault lies with the sufferers themselves. It is not for *me* . . . to impugn the workings of Providence. . . The subject is a very disagreeable one. . . . It is not one to be introduced among our wives and young persons. . ."

In his Socialist years, Morris was to publish extracts from this chapter in the *Commonweal*. As he saw it, Dickens had drawn not just a caricature of a City man, but the very type of bourgeois philistinism of these years. “The fault lies with the sufferers themselves . . .”—this was one of the cardinal doctrines held by a majority of the Victorian middle class. The Reform Bill of 1832 was the signal for the commencement of a campaign to emasculate the working-class movement. The *Saturday Magazine* and the *Penny Magazine* (founded by the “Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge”) were launched as counters to the popular unstamped Press, and were among the earlier of that avalanche of pious tracts and papers and lectures compounded of economic platitudes, religious sentiment and titbits of geographic or botanical information, with which the workers were deluged in the second half of the century. At first the Stalybridge masters and their kind looked askance at the kid-glove methods advocated by Lord Brougham and his friends: they were more accustomed to use the “document”, the informer, and the methods of force. Moreover, the successive mass agitations of the Chartist years brushed these homilies aside. But the panic months of 1848 brought the whole middle class into line. In one of the storm-centres of physical force Chartism in the industrial North, the local paper, in the summer of 1848, blossomed into verse:

“The working men of England, a loyal race are they
 ’Tis an easy task to train them to ‘love, honour and obey’
 If they have somewhat angered you, be kindly to them still,
 And you may rule the rudest, guide the wildest if you will
 Teach them to read their Bibles, you’ll find that they will read,
 Save them from being infidels, they’ll serve you at your heed.”¹

The deluge had begun

Between 1848 and 1880 a really surprising amount of the energy of the middle class was expended in carrying into practice the advice of this philosophical bard. The dusty shelves of neglected libraries of old mutual improvement societies or mechanics’ institutes in the industrial districts still bear testimony to the labours of hundreds of unsung clergymen, schoolmasters and industrialists’ wives. Not only did Samuel Smiles, and a dozen minor Smileses, publish the doctrines of *Self-Help*, or “Look After

¹ *Halifax Guardian*, 27 May, 1848

No 1, and Let Unemployment Take the Hindmost", but many hundreds of lectures were published, in which a nice blend was made of moral precept and of exposition of the iron laws of supply and demand. The exploitation of man by man was dressed up in a dog-collar.

"Perhaps the public ought to pity the overwrought and under-paid artisan, but the public will buy what it wants at the lowest price at all consistent with economy, and the artisan's only appeal is to the strength which sobriety and industry afford, the artisan's only appeal is to his own power to demand higher wages, which power depends upon the amount of his savings, and this is regulated by his sobriety, industry, and economy."¹

The remedy for exploitation was for the workers to work harder and spend less—a remedy still advocated confidently to-day by the upholders of the "finest traditions of Western Democracy". Some few of those who take it might be admitted to the Company of the Blessed.

"I do not wish to bribe men, by telling them that 'godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come', nevertheless it is very true, it is capable of abundant demonstration 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you' The principles which religion inculcates, the state of mind which religion produces, are most exactly calculated to lead a man into that position, of all others the most enviable, in which, shielded from the bitter blasts of penury, and protected from the burning rays of uninterrupted prosperity, the evils of each extreme are happily avoided . . . The soul, like the body, thrives best in a temperate zone."²

Even Jesus Christ was pressed into service, together with George Stephenson, as an example of a man who made good, by perseverance and industry, only to rise in the end to the top of a profession.

"For many a year the morning sun found him toiling in the workshop of Nazareth, fashioning, most likely, tables, and chairs, and ladders, and ploughs for the wild, rough Nazarenes, often weary, often worried, and often, doubtless, confronted with the question whether this was fit work for one that had come to save the world . . ."³

¹ H. Stowell Brown, *Lectures to the Men of Liverpool* (1860), p. 37.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ Rev. W. G. Blaikie, *Better Days for Working People* (1864), p. 62.

Great pains were taken to show, not only that the Sabbath is holy, but also that it *pays*.

“Taking all things into account, it is something more than a possibility that greater prosperity will result from the observance than from the violation of the Sabbath. Such at least was the experience of that excellent man and enterprising navigator, Captain Scoresby”

This reverent seaman described in his *Sabbaths in the Arctic Region* how—in the face of the opposition of his crew—he decreed the Sabbath a day of rest for sailors and whales alike.

“The next Lord’s day, though fish were astir, was a day of sanctified and happy repose. Early in the week, on the appearance of several whales, our efforts, put forth with augmented power, no doubt in consequence of the restraints of the Sabbath, and furthered, I firmly believe, by Him who hath promised his blessing to them who ‘call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable’, were under various anxious hazards, highly successful. Two large whales were taken on Tuesday, and another on the Friday, yielding together a produce of the value of about £1,600.

“A day of sweet and welcome repose was the succeeding Sabbath. . . Several whales sported around us . . . they were allowed a Sabbath-day’s privilege to sport unmolested”¹

No doubt the working men addressed were not encouraged to draw any parallel between themselves and the unfortunate whales.

The possibilities of variation on these themes were endless. Not only was the Victorian middle class conscious of its responsibility for evangelizing the infidel British workmen. God had given the whole world to Mrs Grundy. In the words of the Rev. Robert Bickersteth

“One sixth part of the inhabitants of the whole world are beneath the British sceptre, and bow to British dominion. Surely never was there a nation so placed for evangelizing the world. For what end can there have been bestowed upon England so vast an extent of commercial influence and power? Was it not that, like a moral beacon in the midst of the nations, she might shine for the light of the world, exhibiting in her own aspect the power of Christianity to make a nation great? . . . And oh, if England as a nation were to act up to this her illustrious vocation, if she were but to determine to weave her Christianity into the staple of all her commerce, if, when freighting her noble vessels with stores of merchandize, she were not to forget to freight them with the Bible and the missionary, if she were to seek

¹ *Better Days for Working People*, p. 263

that wheresoever her navies spread their canvass or plough the ocean they might carry along with them the preachers of Christianity, and thus seek to evangelize the whole earth"¹

As Ernest Jones put the matter in his *New World*

"Upbraided oft for India's conquering scheme,
You urged—'We civilize, reform, redeem.'
In proof of which—a smile escaped his lips,
You sent out bishops in your battleships"

This is only one aspect of the outlook of the Victorian middle class: and yet it is an important element in that mixture of complacency, chauvinism and hypocrisy which were among the ingredients of "Podsnappery." To-day, some attempts are being made to rehabilitate the "Victorians." Historians and critics look back nostalgically to the confidence and faith in natural and social "progress" of Victorian scientists, philosophers and politicians. We are reminded of the energy of some typical "Victorians"—engineers, company promoters, men of letters, theologians—of their common-sense outlook and fertility of achievement. The revolt of middle-class intellectuals against their Victorian grandpapas seems now to be changing to a blend of envy and condescension.²

For this reason it must once again be asserted that the world portrayed by Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend*, and, later, by Samuel Butler in *The Way of All Flesh*, was not a figment of the imaginations of the writers, but was a true representation of a part of the reality of middle-class life between 1850 and 1875. The declension of spirit which is the real theme of Mark Rutherford's *Revolution in Tanner's Lane*—the change from the radicalism of the Hampden Clubs to the days of Sabbatarianism, bigoted Wesleyan tradesmen, chapel wrangles and tea-meetings—this is no caricature but fact. England's age of industrial supremacy nourished

¹ *Lectures to Young Men* (Y M C A, 1849), p. 108

² Unfortunately, Mr. Philip Henderson, the editor of Morris's *Letters*, is not free from this attitude. See his Introduction, p. xxv. "Morris was a thorough Victorian. He belonged to an age of British supremacy and expansion, and shared its belief in progress and the upward trend of things. It was from this environment that he drew his vitality and boldness. To-day, caught in the apparent ebb of Western civilization, we can only look back in amazement at our Victorian ancestors, borne forward on the flow of this great wave of energy and confidence. It is partly in this that the fascination of William Morris lies."

this corruption at every level of society. Towards the top of the scale were men like Beatrice Webb's father, Richard Potter. His grandfather a Yorkshire farmer and shopkeeper, his father a Manchester cotton warehouseman, Peterloo rebel and Radical M P, Richard Potter left the Reform Club for the Carlton in the 1860s. Appointed a director of the Great Western Railway in the late 1840s, and realizing a small fortune by a stroke of profiteering during the Crimean War, he was an important financier in the second half of the century:

“I used to ponder over the ethics of capitalist enterprise as represented by my father's acts and axioms . . . He thought, felt and acted in terms of personal relationship and not in terms of general principles; he had no clear vision of the public good . . . Hence he tended to prefer the welfare of his family and personal friends to the interests of the companies over which he presided, the profits of these companies to the prosperity of his country, the dominance of his own race to the peace of the world”¹

And yet, in his private life, “he was never troubled with doubts as to the divine government of the world”

“He attended church regularly, took the sacrament and prayed night and morning. It seems incredible, but I know that, as a man, he repeated the prayer taught him at his mother's lap—‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child’ . . .”²

At the other end of the social scale, the ethic of “Self-Help” had also made its inroads. and it was, perhaps, the absence of a vigorous and independent working-class movement, presenting a challenge to the position and pretensions of the middle class, which intensified Morris's feeling that Victorian society in these years was nothing but a “sordid, aimless, ugly confusion”. For the two decades of prosperity after the Great Exhibition tended to drive a wedge between the skilled workers, organized in the “new model” unions, and the unskilled workers in the growing slums of the industrial towns. In 1842, when the “Plug Riots” spread through industrial Lancashire, the cotton workers owned little more than their clothes, and, if they were fortunate, some household possessions. In 1863 it was estimated that more than eight million pounds was invested in the Lancashire cotton districts, largely by the skilled and privileged sections of the

¹ Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship*, Pelican Edn, p. 23

² *Ibid.*, p. 25

working class, in co-operative societies, savings banks, building and friendly societies, and trade union funds.¹ This was the basis for the often-quoted comment of Thomas Cooper, the ex-Chartist leader, returning to Lancashire in 1869.

"In our old Chartist time . . . Lancashire working-men were in rags by thousands; and many of them lacked food But their intelligence was demonstrated wherever you went You would see them in groups discussing the great doctrine of political justice . . . or they were in earnest dispute respecting the teachings of Socialism Now, you will see no such groups in Lancashire But you will hear well-dressed working-men talking of co-operative stores, and their shares in them, or in building societies"²

Certainly, the aims of the leaders of the trade union and co-operative movements of this time were often more noble and selfless by far than those of the gallery of rogues, financiers, and industrialists held up to honour in the many chronicles of "Self-Help" But, however hard they might fight against particular injustices or for particular objectives, they did not confront capitalist society with a revolutionary challenge rather, they tended increasingly to draw their economic and political arguments from the armoury of their enemy. W. H. Wood, Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council, early in the 1870s was proclaiming the "Advantages of Trades Unions" in terms which might have been drawn from an Investor's Handbook

"The time expended in a strike is simply capital sunk to produce remunerative labour, just as a mill is capital sunk to produce remunerative employment, and it is by the capital of working men, judiciously invested in a well-regulated Trade Society, that working-men are enabled to obtain terms from their employers that would not otherwise be conceded to them. . . Savings Banks, Building, Loan, and Co-operative Societies offer the highest rate of interest for the capital at the disposal of the non-unionist, but that rarely exceeds 5 per cent ; whilst, on the other hand, the increased rate of wages obtained by the large associations of labour, have reimbursed them to the extent of fully 300 per cent for the outlay of the money invested, by a return in wages alone, and this has been achieved without the alternative of a strike."

Moreover, Wood declared, there was an additional return of thousands of pounds expended "in travelling allowance, sick,

¹ John Watts, *The Facts of the Cotton Famine* (1866), pp 88-9

² T. Cooper, *Life* (1897), pp 393-4

out of work, accident, funeral and superannuation benefits”, and hence:

“the degradation of receiving parochial relief is obviated, the dignity of the operative is sustained, principles of independence practically inculcated, provident habits encouraged, and the rates of the employing class saved at least to the extent of 50 per cent . . .”¹

There is no wonder that the great contractor, Thomas Brassey, praised the trade unions for their “spirit of self help.”

Moreover, the climate of these two decades was such that even the most pernicious doctrine of “Podsnappery” (“The fault lies with the sufferers themselves . . .”) found some echo among the working class. While the middle class grew in power and influence, and the skilled workers improved their position and their organization, the vast pool of the unskilled had little share, if any, in Britain’s age of prosperity. A comparison of Mayhew’s investigations into the East End of London in 1851 and of Charles Booth’s investigations in the 1880s reveals the emptiness of a quarter of a century of “progress” as far as millions of unskilled, migrant and sweated workers were concerned. Not only in London, but in Glasgow, Liverpool, Newcastle, Bradford, Manchester and, indeed, in every industrial centre, tens of thousands lived in inconceivable poverty, in insanitary and decaying slums, in overcrowded rooms. Frank Kitz, who was later to become a close comrade of William Morris in the Socialist League, recalled his lonely childhood in the 1850s in the East End of London—

“a fatherless lad living in a single room, for my mother had to go out to service. I supported myself as errand boy, porter, and messenger . . . ill-shod, badly-clothed, and seldom enjoying a square meal, except occasionally when my mother smuggled me into her employer’s kitchen . . .”

Like many thousands of others, when a young man he tramped the country looking for work “in the depths of a hard winter when the unemployed were thronging the streets of London”. Penniless and in clogs he tramped through the Midlands, North Wales, Liverpool and further north.

“I found everywhere the same conditions—the factory with its iron discipline, the mazes of the mean streets and insanitary slums for the

¹ W. H. Wood, *The Advantages of Trades Unions* (Salford, n.d.), pp. 4-5, 13.

workers, the enslavement of women and children the rows of mothers outside a factory at meal times, suckling their babies. ”¹

Frank Kitz was one of the unskilled who learned to fight back, but hundreds of thousands had lost all hope of bettering their lot and were forced into degradation by their terrible conditions. Here was the reality behind the various pictures of Vice which mesmerized the Victorian moralists and minor novelists: which lurks with all its horrors along the water-front and in the mean streets of Dickens’ novels here was one source of that sense of guilt, that ever-present odour of charity, which poisons so much Victorian “philanthropy”. here in the East End, in the eyes of Mark Rutherford,

“was nothing but sullen subjugation, the most grovelling slavery, mitigated only by a tendency to mutiny Here was a strength of circumstance to quell and dominate which neither Jesus nor Paul could have overcome . No known stimulus, nothing ever held up before men to stir the soul to activity, can do anything in the back streets of great cities so long as they are the cesspools which they are now ”²

Here were to be found the army of “fallen women”, of orphans, of drunkards, and the “criminal classes” painted in lurid colours in Christian tracts for the poor.

Mark Rutherford was to be proved wrong, in 1889, when the great Dock Strike provided the stimulus which stirred the soul of the East End But such a stimulus—the hope which Chartism before had provided—was the last thing which the middle-class philanthropist wished to revive Charles Knight, pillar of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, discussed the problem in 1859:

“All classes are dangerous in whom there is none of that self-respect which goes along with domestic comfort—with sobriety, with cleanliness, with a taste for some pursuit that has a tincture of the intellectual How is such a class to be dealt with? The adult are almost past hope, the young, taken early enough, may be trained into something better ”³

And so the middle-class church- and chapel-goers busied themselves in the fifties and sixties with ragged schools and charitable education in much the same way as if they were hoping to vaccinate “the young” against a revolutionary virus. But from the

¹ *Freedom*, January, 1912

² Mark Rutherford’s *Deliverance*, Ch. 2.

³ Charles Knight, *Knowledge is Power* (1859), p. 412-13

young working man the gospel of "Self-Help" aroused a positive response. If born into the ranks of the unskilled, it seemed that only the most rigorous exercise of the qualities admired by Samuel Smiles—"diligent self-culture, self-discipline, and self-control"—thrift, sobriety, temperance in all things—could raise him from the degradation of his lot into the ranks of the aristocracy of labour. The morality of "Self-Help" penetrated the working class simply because it seemed to work. With industry expanding in every direction, with large fields open for emigrants, a minority of the working-people could and did "better" themselves by following Smiles's virtues. It was a daily occurrence to see men falling, through bad luck, or intemperance, or illness, from the ranks of the skilled into the abyss of misery at their feet. Where sub-contracting or "butty" systems operated, some sections of skilled workers participated in the exploitation of the unskilled. and the skilled trade unionists, defending their privileged position against the inroads of cheap labour, tended like the middle class to make a virtue of their good fortune. The unskilled and unsuccessful, paying the terrible penalty for their failure, were further demoralized by the incessant preaching that "the fault lies with the sufferers themselves . . .".

Moreover, "Self-Help" translated into the active working-class movement, often took on a more positive direction. John Wilson, one of the earliest Lib-Lab. M.Ps., described how he turned his back upon a life of intemperance when he joined the Primitive Methodists and became a Sunday school teacher. within a few months he was taking a leading part in the bitter struggle to build up the miners' union in the Durham coal-fields.¹ Joseph Arch, and many of his colleagues in the leadership of the agricultural workers' struggles, were also local preachers schooled in the same virtues of manly independence and self-respect. In the minds of many co-operators, trade unionists and working-class radicals and secularists, the doctrine of "Self-Help" was extended to the whole working class: by preaching temperance, co-operation, self-education and "mutual improvement", or even sexual abstinence, they hoped that the working class could raise itself by its own efforts without the charity of philanthropists or the aid of the State. They sought earnestly to remedy the effects

¹ See John Wilson, *Memories of a Labour Leader* (1910), pp. 209 f.

of exploitation, by the exertions of the exploited, and without attacking frontally the exploiting class.

But, however the morality of "Self-Help" became modified in the working-class movement, in the large middle class which stretched from Richard Potter and his fellow financiers at the top to the nonconformist tradesmen at the bottom, it tended to take the form of complacent self-interest, shored up by occasional acts of charity and self-righteous philanthropy. The rich first robbed the poor, and then preached to them that their poverty was the result of their own sin. The "Victorian" middle-class family was becoming (as Morris later described it) "framed on the model of . . . an affectionate and moral tiger to whom all is prey a few yards from the sanctity of the domestic hearth"¹. Of course, there was lip-service enough to noble social ambitions. Paeons of praise to the achievements of capitalist society, rhetoric about progress, lofty schemes for social advancement, were on every politician's lips. But so long as the prosperity of the few rested upon the hell of East London and the slums of the great towns, so long as the ethic of self-interest dominated in all social life, it was impossible for men to feel any real identity of interest between their lives and the "commonwealth".

Was Podsnap a conscious hypocrite? Possibly. but the working of man's conscience is a complex matter, and certainly many typical "Victorians" did not *feel* themselves to be hypocrites. Even the Podsnaps liked to appear to themselves, as well as to others, as enlightened, humane, in the forefront of progress. To Matthew Arnold (whose *Culture and Anarchy* was published in 1869, the same year as a part of *The Earthly Paradise*) the middle classes were not so much hypocrites as the "Philistines", "mechanically worshipping their fetish of the production of wealth and of the increase of manufactures and population, and looking neither to the right nor left so long as this increase goes on". The Philistines, he said, "have developed one side of their humanity at the expense of all others, and have become incomplete and mutilated men in consequence". The word "mutilated" gives a clue perhaps as important as any other in Matthew Arnold's book. The characteristic "Victorian" middle-class sensibility was made up of a veritable complex of involuntary inhibitions and

¹ *Commonweal*, February 18th, 1888

evasions, the sum of which made up that shallow culture in which both sentimentality and hypocrisy flourished. The greatest evasion of all was to be found in the hallowing of the "laws of supply and demand", as "God's laws" or "Nature's simplest laws",¹ to hide the fact of the exploitation of man by man. Around this central evasion a thousand others grew unchecked. The *rentier* class in the London suburbs, in the cathedral and university cities, might cultivate a love of nature or an interest in foreign missions and charities, while remaining in ignorance of the source of their own incomes. The sons of the self-made millowners were given an expensive education, which equipped them with an earnest sense of their own moral mission of leadership, for no better reason than that their fathers had been able to pay their fees. In every field of life and of art these evasions and this confusion of wealth with righteousness re-appear. In complex ways (which Butler was to lay bare in *The Way of All Flesh*) the reduction of human values to property values, the pressure of "respectability" and of orthodoxy, made the "Victorians" ashamed of all the vitalities of life which could not be harnessed to the chariot of "Self-Help". The middle classes eased their own consciences by accusing the poor of being guilty of indigence, intemperance, and sensual and sexual excess: even the *Beehive* announced in 1869 that one of the foremost duties of working-men M.P.s. (if elected) would be to "diminish the growing passion for mere sensual indulgence".² It was as if the ethic of "Self-Help" had desiccated man's feelings, so that they were reduced to tinder within him. But let the spark of life enter through any route—the sympathies of love, the passion for truth or liberty, the energies of childhood—and all might be kindled to one flame or revolt. And for fear of this, Mrs. Grundy covered her bare skin down to her ankles, gathered her children close to her, and tightened her lips in hostility to life.

Of course, such a limitation of intellect and sensibility was not imposed suddenly and uniformly upon a whole class. Rather, it resembled a poison seeping through the veins of society, and yet continually resisted by the forces of life. Sometimes its oncoming

¹ E.g. Dr. Andrew Ure, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), p. 279, where the laws of supply and demand are compared with "God's moral law".

² Quoted in Cole and Postgate, *The Common People* (1938), p. 384.

was consciously felt, as by Tennyson when composing *Maud*:

" . . . these are the days of advance, the works of the men of mind,
When who but a fool would have faith in a tradesman's ware or his
word?

Is it peace or war? Civil war, as I think and that of a kind
The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the sword

"Sooner or later I too may passively take the print
Of the golden age—why not? I have neither hope nor trust,
May make my heart as a millstone, set my face as a flint,
Cheat and be cheated, and die—who knows? we are ashes and dust

"Peace sitting under her olive, and slurring the days gone by,
When the poor are hovell'd and hustled together, each sex, like swine,
When only the ledger lives, and when only not all men lie;
Peace in her vineyard—yes!—but a company forges the wine

"And the vitriol madness flushes up in the ruffian's head,
Till the filthy by-lane rings to the yell of the trampled wife,
And chalk and alum and plaster are sold to the poor for bread,
And the spirit of murder works in the very means of life . . ."

Moreover, by seeking to describe the "typical" Victorian attitudes, we necessarily pass over the spirited resistance to them in one field after another of life, the conflict within the middle class itself. These years are also years of great advances in scientific theory. of the battle between Darwinism and obscurantism: of the movement among women of the middle classes for educational, legal and professional rights: of the militant secularist agitation in the face of Mrs. Grundy. The courage of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant in publishing facts about birth-control can only be estimated if we recall the virulence of the Christian tracts and handbills called forth by their action:

"WHAT ARE THEY OFFERING TO US . . . ?

"SENSUALITY, FREE LOVE, and a foul system by which animated nature can be destroyed, and increase of population prevented, thus opening up the way for universal PROSTITUTION . . . This is the beastliness that is held up to the youth of our land, under the misleading names of Free-thought, Agnosticism, Atheism, and Secularism. But which is in reality bold, rampant, God-defying, Christ-despising, Blaspheming INFIDELITY

BEWARE

"Be sure your SIN will find YOU out "

But the strength of these “Victorian” attitudes is to be measured less by the number of courageous opponents of them than by the degree to which even these opponents revealed in one part or another of their outlook the same impoverished sensibility. Even the finest and most sensitive minds did not entirely escape the taint of this poison (not Dickens nor George Eliot nor Matthew Arnold) although the fight they put up was strenuous, and their victories many times more noble than their defeats.

Examine for a moment a judgement upon a painting from a critic who should not be called a “typical Victorian”:

“Go into the Dulwich Gallery, and meditate for a little over that much celebrated picture of the two beggar boys, one eating, lying on the ground, the other standing beside him. We have among our own painters one who, as a painter of beggar or peasant boys, may be set beside Murillo, or any one else,—W. Hunt. He loves peasant boys, because he finds them more roughly and picturesquely dressed, and more healthily coloured, than others. And he paints all that he sees in them fearlessly, all the health and humour, and freshness and vitality, together with such awkwardness and stupidity, and what else of negative or positive harm there may be in the creature, but yet so that on the whole we love it, and find it perhaps even beautiful, or if not, at least we see that there is capability of good in it, rather than of evil; and all is lighted up by a sunshine and sweet colour that makes the smock frock as precious as cloth of gold. But look at those two ragged and vicious vagrants that Murillo has gathered out of the street. You smile at first, because they are eating so naturally, and their roguery is so complete. But is there anything else than roguery there, or was it well for the painter to give his time to the painting of those repulsive and wicked children? Do you feel moved with any charity towards children as you look at them? Are we the least bit more likely to take any interest in ragged schools, or to help the next pauper child that comes in our way, because the painter has shown us a cunning beggar feeding greedily? Mark the choice of the act. He might have shown hunger in other ways, and given interest to even this act of eating, by making the face wasted, or the eye wistful. But he did not care to do this. He delighted merely in the disgusting manner of eating, the food filling the cheek, the boy is not hungry, else he would not turn round to talk and grin as he eats.

“But observe another point in the lower figure. It lies so that the sole of the foot is turned towards the spectator, not because it would have lain less easily in another attitude, but that the painter may draw, and exhibit the grey dust engrained in the foot. The lesson, if there be any, in the picture, is not one whit the stronger. Do not call this the

painting of nature; it is mere delight in foulness. We all know that a beggar's bare foot cannot be clean, there is no need to thrust its degradation into the light, as if no human imagination were vigorous enough for its conception"¹

Here, side by side with those magnificent passages in *The Stones of Venice* which set young Morris's mind aflame, John Ruskin himself falls to the depths of "Victorian" sentiment. Even the "fearless" painting of "nature", it seems, must be done in such a way as to make poverty seem "picturesque", and to light up all "by a sunshine and sweet colour". Two children bear the full weight of the Prophet's indignation: the stops of Ruskin's rich moral organ are all opened the boys are "ragged and vicious", "cunning", "repulsive and wicked", "gathered out of the street"—and all because they have committed the sin of being born poor. But this is not the only source of Ruskin's indignation. The poor are all very well, providing that they show signs of a sense of their own sin, and excite feelings of benevolence and charity which flatter a middle class beholder. Murillo's crime is to depict, not a "wasted" and "wistful" "pauper child", but the vitality of childhood (and even, perhaps, of the working class itself²) shattering the middle class concepts of shamefaced suppliancy on the one hand and righteous philanthropy on the other. The children are evil because they do not plead for charity and they do not care what the middle-class beholder thinks of them: they are guilty of open sensual indulgence ("the food filling the cheek"), and (the tone implies) they robbed the parson's orchard to get their apples without the least sense of guilt; and, final horror of all, they are not even ashamed of their own dirty feet. In short, they have committed the crime of being happy, without the help of a philanthropist, and in defiance of the canons of the middle class.

John Ruskin was to set aside some (but not all) of this rubbish in his middle and later years. But the fact that so fine a mind could be guilty of such lapses serves to emphasize Arnold's phrase, "mutilated men". The conscience and sensibility of men could not be cheapened without doing them injury. Where public professions and the facts of experience were at variance, where the culture of the past criticized the commonplace sentimentalities

¹ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II, Ch. 6, sections 60-1.

of the present, conflicts and tensions were bound to be set up in the individual's mind.

Despite the public applause of “progress”, the daily experience of tens of thousands even among the professional workers in the great cities was far different:

“The facts of life for most of us are a dark street, crowds, hurry, commonplaceness, loneliness, and worse than all a terrible doubt, which can hardly be named, as to the meaning and purpose of life”,

wrote Mark Rutherford. Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of the few men who escaped the shallowness of his time, and who (whenever he dared to look) registered in the depths of his being the impact of the truths of his society, wrote in 1881 to Morris's old friend, Canon Dixon:

“My Liverpool and Glasgow experience laid upon my mind a conviction, a truly crushing conviction, of the misery of town life to the poor and more than to the poor, of the misery of the poor in general, of the degradation even of our race, of the hollowness of this century's civilisation—it made even life a burden to me to have daily thrust upon me the things I saw.”¹

Both Mark Rutherford and Hopkins were exceptional men: but what they could feel and express was present as an incommunicable dissatisfaction among even their Philistine contemporaries. Personal experience and public utterances were at odds. the energies of life, however repressed, still sought an outlet. The more that is known of the lives of the great Victorians, the more the acute conflict in their minds becomes apparent. The neuroses of Carlyle and of Dickens, the madness of John Ruskin, the conflicts of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the anxieties of Herbert Spencer—these and many others indicate the acute pressures of the time. And these conflicts were present not only in the leaders of thought and of art. They are found in an hundred forms in the life of the Victorian middle class, revealing a vast accumulation of half-conscious anxieties and guilt.

This may help us to understand why almost no literature of permanent value was written during these years which voices the dominant faith in “progress” and “Self-Help”. why, on the contrary (in the words of Mark Rutherford):

¹ *Correspondence of G. M. Hopkins and R. W. Dixon* (1935), p. 97

"The characteristic of so much that is said and written now is melancholy, and it is melancholy, not because of any deeper acquaintance with the secrets of man than that which was possessed by our forefathers, but because it is easy to be melancholy, and the time lacks strength."

"The time lacks strength"—a curious comment on the age of England's industrial supremacy, but one which, in its turn, may help us to understand the almost universal welcome given to *The Earthly Paradise* when it first appeared. This welcome came from two apparently incompatible schools of thought. On one hand stood the utilitarians, who—in the days when Godwin and Bentham were still living—had been ready enough to enroll poets among their number to raise the banner of reason, equality, humanity and justice. Now, however, when their ambitions had narrowed to the avowed interests of a section of the capitalist class—the defence of free trade, the non-interference of the State in industry, retrenchment, economy, and rationalization in Government—they were puzzled at what attitude they should adopt towards the Muses. It embarrassed them to be reminded of Byron and Shelley and the excesses of their youth. They did not want a recurrence of that kind of thing at all. Among a die-hard section, culture was suspect as such, both as having no obvious use-value for capitalism, and as providing a possible yard-stick of human experience by which to measure the meanness of their own ambitions. A more moderate party of the same breed were prepared to tolerate the Muses, provided that they could be harnessed docilely to the chariot of capitalism. From this party came several of the small number of unfavourable reviews. Morris (while not being actively dangerous) was no use in helping "to overcome the difficulties and perplexities of life in the work-a-day world", grumbled the *Quarterly*. The failure of poets like Morris to hymn the age "argues, we think, less the emptiness of the day than the incapacity of the poets".¹

The most blasted of the Mrs. Grundys were also severe, sensing in Morris's sensuous verses a member of the "Fleshly School" of poetry.² But the largest group gave the poem a warm

¹ *Quarterly Review*, January, 1872

² For a discussion of this attack upon Swinburne, Rossetti, and Morris, see J. H. Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (1952), Ch. IX

welcome. Frederick Harrison, the positivist, had already aroused Matthew Arnold's wrath by setting forward the doctrine of the separation of the arts and public life "The man of culture is in politics one of the poorest mortals alive . . . No assumption is too unreal, no end too unpractical for him."¹ Poetry was no *use* in public life, and might be actively dangerous by reason of its encouragement of unpractical idealism. On the other hand, *in its proper place*, it might be given the active encouragement of enlightened men. It was Morris's distinction (in the view of this school of critics) to have found this proper place in *The Earthly Paradise*. This was the opinion of the *Saturday Review*, which thought that a "busy material age" could find room for Morris's "clear and pellucid style", and also, it seems, of the "political economists and scientific men" to whom most poetry was a "vexation of spirit".

It was Harrison's positivist colleague, John Morley, who applied the doctrine of the immunization of art with most sympathy to Morris. First, he welcomed Morris's liberation of poetry from theology, and "the turgid perplexities of a day of spiritual transition". While (he pointed out) Morris was careless not only of religion, but also of "the conventional aims and phases of politics and philanthropy", Morley was prepared to accept this in his system.

"Morality is not the aim and goal of fine art . . . Art has for its end the Beautiful only. Morality, so far from being the essence of it, has nothing to do with it at all."²

This was a fairly comforting conclusion, since it meant that man's aspirations towards Beauty might be fed in quiet, without being to the detriment "of energetic social action in the country". Moreover, this relegation of poetry to a world of private satisfaction and escape, might in the end bring social fruits.

¹ Quoted by Matthew Arnold in the Introduction to *Culture and Anarchy*. "Culture is a desirable quality in a critic of new books, and sits well on a professor of *belles lettres* but as applied to politics, it means simply a turn for small fault-finding, love of selfish ease, and indecision in action. The man of culture is in politics, &c."

² *The Fortnightly Review*, January 1st, 1867. This review does not refer directly to Morris, but indicates the standard by which Morley welcomed *The Earthly Paradise*.

"Only on condition of this spacious and manifold energizing in diverse directions, can we hope in our time for that directly effective social action which some of us think calculated to give a higher quality to the moments as they pass than art and song"¹

This school welcomed *The Earthly Paradise*, then, quite simply because it was poetry of escape. For one thing—although this was stated only by implication—it was "safe". By retreating to a world of "Beauty" it did not ask that kind of question about the capitalist ethic which was so pronounced in the writings of Carlyle and Ruskin, and which appeared through the fitful mists of yearning of Tennyson's youthful poetry. Since it was safe, it had clearly found the proper place for poetry in the scheme of social advance. It could be read—and read publicly—by men of action and men of business as a mark of culture. But this line of argument was little more than a rationalization from more subterranean emotional currents—those same currents which were at work in Morris's own creative impulses. And so there was to be found another school of criticism, which also praised the escapism of the poem, but which started from different premises.

This was the school of Romanticism in its decline. Flaubert, watching the ravages upon the human spirit of the bourgeois victory in France, commented in *Madame Bovary*:

"Every bourgeois in the flush of his youth, were it but for a day, a moment, has believed himself capable of immense passions, of lofty enterprises. The most paltry libertine has dreamed of sultanas; every notary bears within him the débris of a poet."

Writing in a not dissimilar vein, Morris commented in a letter to his wife, presumably about some middle-class acquaintances:

"People like you speak about don't know either what life or death means, except for one or two supreme moments of their lives, when something pierces through the crust of dullness and ignorance, and they act for the time as if they were sensitive people."²

Both passages strike the authentic note of a time that "lacks strength" when melancholy is "easy". The flames of the Romantic Revolt could not be doused in a couple of decades. Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, and a hundred others, flirted

¹ *The Fortnightly Review*, 1873, p. 476

² *Letters*, p. 36

with republican or revolutionary ideals in their youth, before they began to take the print of the "golden age". The Victorians may have been "mutilated men", but mutilation cannot be accomplished without pain. The embers of romanticism persisted, and they lacked only the wind of hope to fan them into flame. But desire without hope, as we have seen, turns into nostalgia, luxurious melancholy, individualist gestures of protest, self-pity, and all that complex of emotions springing from a self-absorbed dissatisfaction with life which has no outlet in action. Those who, like Edward Burne-Jones, had felt "exquisite misery" in brooding upon "Tears, Idle Tears" during the hot summer afternoons of their adolescence, found in *The Earthly Paradise* more food for indulging their melancholy. The *Academy*, in an ironic rebuttal of the Philistine attack upon Morris already quoted from the *Quarterly*, declared:

"The main current of intellectual energy runs now to science and politics and history and prose-fiction . . . Poets themselves are a 'survival', and it is the law of survivals to dwindle and become extinct; while there are any left they might be allowed to feed in peace upon their natural food, the transformed emotions which arise from a vanished, decaying past."¹

The concluding image is extraordinarily apposite.

So, to the approval of a section of the utilitarians, there was added a chorus of praise from the reviewers who—while taking no objective action to revolt against the humdrum routines of their existence—still enjoyed the luxury of feeling that they too, like Morris, were misfits "born out of due time", capable of "immense passions" and "lofty enterprises" in any other age. "The Romantics", wrote G. V. Plekhanov, characterizing the more pronounced revolt of the French Parnassians,

"did in fact feel themselves out of tune with the bourgeois society round them. True, their disaccord held no threat to bourgeois social relationships. The romantic circles were composed of young bourgeois who had no objection to these relationships, but inveighed against the dirt, boredom and vulgarity of bourgeois existence."²

In France, they were in open revolt against "the bourgeois", whom Theodore de Banville characterized as "a man whose only

¹ *The Academy*, August 1st, 1873.

² G. V. Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life* (1953), p. 174

religion is that of the five-franc piece, whose only ideal is to save his own skin, who in poetry enjoys sentimental ballads and in the plastic arts—coloured lithographs”. In England many young middle-class men and women were attracted by the parallel revolt of the Pre-Raphaelites and of Swinburne. they felt an equal resentment against the dominance of Mr Gradgrind and Mr Podsnap; they read approvingly the denunciations of Mammon in the pages of Carlyle and Ruskin, and they applauded the criticism of the Philistines in *Culture and Anarchy*. But, without understanding, without the hope of changing their society, without the courage or the desire to challenge the social relationships of capitalist society themselves, they looked to poetry to fulfil the task defined in France by Lesconte de Lisle—to “give an ideal life to those who no longer have a real one”.¹ So we find that the reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (like the reviewer in *St James's Magazine* (see p. 163)) was a confirmed escapist, “glad to retire from the stress and the cares of his ugly workaday English life and be entertained . . . with that succession of gracious pictures . . . of a remote romantic world”.² And so, indeed, was the reviewer in the popular *John Bull*, glad to be free from the “turmoil of the restless driving life” and the “fierce intellectual struggles” of his age, while Morris “tells us in strains most musical his quaint old-world stories”.³

Just as Morley lifted the platitudes of the utilitarian critics to a more serious level of discussion, so among the escapists Walter Pater was to be found. In Pater we find full-blown the theories of Art for Art's Sake already implicit in Keats (see p. 44). To prevent the soiling of art by utilitarianism, to defend it from a “tarnished actual present”, Morris was right, Pater thought, to project—

“above the realities of its time a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or ‘earthly paradise’ It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. . . . The secret of the enjoyment of it is that inversion of homesickness, that

¹ Quoted in Plekhanov, *op cit*, p. 178

² *Pall Mall Budget*, December 11th, 1869

³ *John Bull*, December 31st, 1870.

incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies . . .”¹

Man's aspirations can never break through and be realized in life: they can only find relief in the creation of the Beautiful in art; and, since Pater believed this to be true, it followed that artistic beauty of form became an end in itself. To-day, when the hope of changing society itself has been reborn, a version of this theory has become one of the last refuges of the Philistine. But in Pater's day it was prompted by the desire to defend art from Philistinism, to assert the value of art and of beauty in the face of an utilitarian age.

The reception of *The Earthly Paradise*, then, gives an insight of extraordinary interest into the emotional cross-currents of the age, against which Morris was to be in such uncompromising revolt barely ten years later. It provoked throughout the reviews a discussion of “escapism” in art, in which the most incompatible schools of thought joined in Morris's praise. This discussion served to congeal that theory of Art for Art's Sake, which Oscar Wilde—taking Morris as a leading example of the “English Renaissance of Art”—was later to inscribe upon his banner.

“Art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: rather, by so doing, it more completely realizes that which we desire. Into the secure and sacred house of Beauty the true artist will admit nothing that is harsh or disturbing, nothing that gives pain, nothing that is debatable, nothing about which men argue.”²

Moreover, this reception “placed” Morris in the mind of the Victorian reading public once and for all. He was the sweet unpractical singer, the poet of escape, of the Beautiful and the antique. When Morris began to reveal quite different capacities and attitudes, the public were either disappointed or refused to notice the change. When Morris shocked his public by appearing in the Thames Police Court on the charge of assaulting a policeman, he was sadly admonished by H. D. Traill in the *Saturday Review* to return to his “Earthly Paradise”:

¹ *Westminster Review*, October, 1868, reprinted in the 1st Ed. of Pater's *Appreciations*.

² Lecture, “The English Renaissance of Art”, delivered in New York, January, 1882. See Davis, De Vane, and Bald, *op cit*, pp. 266-7.

"Were it not better that ye bore him hence,
 Muses, to that fair land where once he dwelt,
 And with those waters at whose brink he knelt
 (Ere faction's poison drugged the poet-sense)
 Bathed the unhappy eyes too prone to melt
 And see, through tears, men's woes as man's offence?"¹

This kind of refrain runs through all but the most die-hard and apoplectic bourgeois reactions to Morris's Socialist activities and opinions. The *Manchester Examiner and Times* discussed in a leader Morris's first declaration of Socialist convictions in that city with "mingled feelings":

"We all want to make our surroundings as near as possible to the conditions of an 'Earthly Paradise', though we may not all think it necessary, as a contribution to that end, to send our gifted sons to a cabinet maker's shop instead of Rugby."²

Morris—the usual argument ran—was an "unpractical idealist", whose blunderings out of his proper place would only stir up discontent, and who should get back into the Beautiful woodwork of the middle ages as fast as possible. This myth was perhaps the most serviceable of all which were employed to neutralize Morris during his life-time: and it has remained the dominant myth distorting his real actions and opinions up to the present day.

In all this profusion of comment, the real underlying note of the poem, the note of despair, received very little attention. A few reviewers commented upon it in passing, as proof that even Morris could not shake free entirely from the doubts of his age. Only one—Alfred Austin, writing in *Temple Bar*—faced the issue clearly, and drew some conclusions.

"The realities of the latter half of the nineteenth century suggest nothing to him save the averting of his gaze. They are crooked, who shall set them straight? For his part, he will not even try . . . He sings only for those who, like himself, have given up the age, its boasted spirit, its vaunted progress, its infinite vulgar nothings, and have taken refuge in the sleepy region."

In Austin's view, Morris was wise to "give the go-by" to an age which will be known to posterity as "the age of Railways, the

¹ *Saturday Review*, September 26th, 1885.

² *Manchester Examiner and Times*, March 7th, 1883.

age of Destructive Criticism, or the age of Penny Papers”. On the other hand—

“in doing so not only has he not produced great poetry—he has evaded the very conditions on which alone the production of great poetry is possible Even in co-operation with an age—as the present one, for instance—it may be impossible to develop it, but without that co-operation all hope of such is bootless and vain. . [Morris] is not a great poet—at most and at best the wisely unresisting victim of a rude irreversible current, the serene martyr of a mean and melancholy time ”¹

What was the reaction of the poet himself to the nest of speculation and critical controversy which he had stirred up? His letters reveal very little The favourable reception of the poem gave him pleasure. When his publisher sent him Austin’s unfavourable review his reply was untroubled

“from the critical point of view I think there is so much truth as this in his article, as that we poets of to-day have been a good deal made by those of the Byron and Shelley time—however, in another sixty years or so, when it won’t matter three skips of a louse to us (as it don’t matter much more now), I suppose we shall quietly fall into our places ”²

When the whole poem was completed in 1870, he felt that the time hung on his hands

“I confess I am dull now my book is done, one doesn’t know sometimes how much service a thing has done us till it is gone however one has time yet, and perhaps something else of importance will turn up soon ”³

It was well enough for the critics to discuss the pros and cons of the poetry of escape but for William Morris the despair he felt was no affectation but compulsive and real. And yet—despite his despair—new forces were at work within him, saving him from the bitterness of defeat and the imprint of the golden age, pressing him to encounter new experiences and enter new fields of experiment When, in his last years, his despair had been overcome by his new hope and faith for humanity, it is related that

¹ *Temple Bar*, May and August, 1869 Later this bitter young critic was to accept the Poet Laureateship which Morris contemptuously rejected on Tennyson’s death, and so provide an ironic commentary on the need to “co-operate with the age”.

² *Letters*, p 28.

³ *Ibid*, p 37.

he "pooh-poohed the ideal beauty of *The Earthly Paradise*, and said that there was 'more real ideal' in *News from Nowhere*". He looked forward to the realization of man's aspirations in the real future, not to their shadowy sublimation in a melancholy past of romance. "The best thing about it", he is reported to have said of *The Earthly Paradise*, "is its name "

"Some day or other that will inspire others when every line of the blessed thing is forgotten. *That* is what we're all working for."¹

¹ Recollections of William Sharp in the *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1896