CHAPTER II

THE ROMANTIC REVOLT

I The Great Romantics

IN the 1840s and 1850s, the great Romantics were still the "moderns". Wordsworth died in 1850, when Morris was sixteen. but his fire had long smouldered to ashes, and to the young Robert Browning he was "The Lost Leader", the renegade. The reputation of Keats and of Shelley was still a mâtter for dispute, and the young men of Morris's age who discovered their poetry adopted it with the enthusiasm of partisans in the face of the fusty resistance of their elders Tennyson, whose third volume was published in 1842, was the new rising poet, with (as it seemed to his contemporaries) the promise of maturity ahead. All the great Romantics did not impress their influence upon young William Morris equally In his first volume his most direct debt was to Keats, and, in matters of technique, to Tennyson and Browning Wordsworth repelled him by his piety, and he was never an admirer of Byron [1] But in a movement of this kind there is an emotional logic in which all its members are caught up, whether the influence comes in a direct and conscious manner or through more subtle channels. If Morris was unaware of any direct debt to Wordsworth or Shelley or Byron, nevertheless their own development was a part of his youthful background.

Morris, with his friends, Rossetti and Swinburne, were notable members of the third phase of the Romantic movement In the 1850s half a century had gone by since Blake had written his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* and Wordsworth and Coleridge their *Lyrical Ballads*, and the first phase was opened. For much of this time, Blake had been little known, and when he was "re-discovered" in the 1850s it was Morris's close

[1] *Works*, Vol XXII, p xxxi. "Our clique was much influenced by Keats, who was a poet who represented semblances, as opposed to Shelley who had no eyes, and whose admiration was not critical but conventional." These remarks of William Morris were taken down by Sir Sidney Cockerell Comments on Byron and Wordsworth follow

friend, Rossetti, who possessed one of the priceless manuscripts (which he had bought for only 10*s*) and who assisted Gilchrist in the writing of Blake's *Life* From this manuscript Morris may have made his first acquaintance with the poet who in so many ways anticipated his own profound moral insight into the negation of life at the heart of capitalist society.

"How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls"

In later years he was to rank Blake ("the part of him which a mortal may understand") among the great writers of the world, and was to print passages of his poems in the Socialist *Commonweal*. In the 1850s, however, he would most probably have responded to the passionate note of protest, and admired the "strange" genius, of the almost-forgotten engraver, without drawing any specific social or political conclusions

For Blake and for the young Wordsworth the French Revolution was the greatest single stimulus, releasing their feelings from constraint, and giving direction to a revolt which had been long preparing beneath the surface of English life and writing. For more than a century a corrupt society had become daily more corrupt. The poets lived in a land in which power and influence, justice and honour, were each to be bought for a price. In the countryside the paternalism idealized in Fielding's Squire Allworthy was giving way before the new methods of farming for profit—the great enclosure movement, the rack-renting, the intrusion of commercial nabobs with a fortune won in India or the West Indies The closer one moved towards the centres of power, the greater became the stench of corruption —of Court and packed Parliament, sinecures, pensions and pocket boroughs Johnson, Goldsmith, Cowper—each in his way had lamented the corrupting power of gold. But with Blake all urbanity was cast aside

"There souls of men are bought & sold,
And milk-fed infancy for gold,
And youth to slaughter houses led,
And beauty for a bit of bread"[1]

[1] First draft of "The Human Abstract", *Poetry and Prose of William Blake* Nonesuch Press, 1946), p. 95

With the overthrow of the French aristocracy, all the conventions and forms of aristocratic power, culture and sensibility received a challenge from which they never recovered

> "Europe at that time was thrilled with joy,
> France standing at the top of golden hours,
> And human nature seeming born again"

Wordsworth, when writing *The Prelude*, recalled the scene which he had witnessed in Calais in 1790

> "A homeless sound of joy was in the sky
> From hour to hour the antiquated Earth
> Beat like the heart of Man: songs, garlands, mirth
> Banners and happy faces far and nigh"

"Human nature" could no longer be confined within the limits of the heroic couplet, or the environs of a London coffee-house. And so the revolt, which was to carry Morris as far as Communism, began

Many scholars have attempted to define the term "romanticism" or to analyse the features of the Romantic Movement in English poetry. Without attempting to add a further definition (for all definitions are likely to fall short of the truth, in a movement extending over more than fifty years, and manifesting itself in many contradictory forms) a few generalizations may be made First, the term "romance", and the opposition between "romance" and "realism", is confusing rather than helpful. Romance, a specialized form of literature (which, certainly, William Morris sought to revive in his last "prose romances") in which an imaginary world with its own laws is created, only distantly related to the world of living experience, has little or nothing in common with Blake's songs, or Wordsworth's lyrics, Keats's Odes, Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy* or *The Defence of Guenevere* Moreover, even the word "romantic" has unfortunate associations to-day, suggesting (apart from Hollywood moonlight clinches) high-flown idealisms at odds with reality, or excessive dramatization of the passions and sentiments This popular use of the word "romantic" is not entirely without basis and the Romantic Movement, in its latest and most emaciated stages (as it drifted on into school anthologies in the present century) helped to give it currency. But the use of the word contains an assumption

(which is given backing in many academic studies) that the separation-off between "ideals" and "reality" in the middle and later stages of the Romantic Movement was the result—not, in large part, of the savage reality of the poets' society—but entirely of a certain attitude towards life, a certain emotional posturing, on the part of the poets And this leads, in turn, to the attempt to define the whole movement by finding some unifying attitude toward life or "nature" or "imagination" shared by them all.

No such unifying attitude can be found—unless it be in the poets' revolt against the barrenness, inadequacy or cruelty of the life about them. But even here, the life against which they protested altered greatly during the course of the Movement and the forms of protest varied with the poets and with their times. High Tory and Godwinian Socialist, Atheist and Catholic, influenced each other, reacted against each other, helped to shape a common tradition The poets did not (like those in Germany) think of themselves as belonging to a common "Romantic School". Rather, they were divided—and often bitterly divided—among themselves, with labels (sometimes affixed by their enemies) such as "The Lake Poets", "The Cockney School of Poetry", "The Suburban Group". When the term "romantic" did gain currency, it still meant different things to different writers. Morris himself, in his later years, offered a definition which would certainly displease many commentators.

"As for romance, what does romance mean? I have heard people mis-called for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present "[1]

"A *true* conception of history. . ." Clearly, Morris did not entertain the idea that romanticism, in this sense, was opposed to the understanding of reality. but, rather, that the imagination, when working upon the records of the past, was able to apprehend truths which the Gradgrinds, for all their measuring-rods and calculating tables, overlooked.

It is true that all the Romantic poets, without exception, shared this belief in the importance and power of the imagination. But, while Blake had voiced at the outset of the Movement his sense of opposition between "imagination" and "reason" ("I will not

[1] May Morris, I, p 148

Reason and Compare my business is to Create"), events, and not some necessary doctrine or romantic "attitude", forced this opposition ever more strongly upon the poets Wordsworth, in his revolutionary youth, had hoped that the French Revolution would lead, not to the overthrow but to the enthronement of Reason Shelley, himself a student of natural science, felt no hostility towards the scientific achievements of his age, although he saw it as a prime duty of the poet to right the lopsidedness of his time by a complementary imaginative advance.

"We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know . The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world "[1]

Byron was scarcely aware of the opposition Only with Keats does the opposition (so marked in the youth of Morris and Rossetti) become acute and decisive. The Romantic Movement may, in fact, be seen as the main stream of English poetry in a period when the dominant forces in society were becoming increasingly indifferent, or hostile, towards poetry itself. The unifying link between the poets is to be found, first of all, in the historical circumstances in which they lived, the special characteristics of their age, and only secondarily in the attitudes shared by many of the poets in reaction to their age, and in the definite literary tradition which evolved from it, and outlived it

The first great impulse of the Movement, then, was neither vague nor "idealized", but specific and revolutionary. It was in the slogan, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity", the cleaning-up of injustice and corruption, the liberation of man's thwarted intellect and emotions from the reign of a decadent oligarchy, the realization of a society ordered by Reason—

"Not in Utopia,—subterranean fields,—
Or in some secret island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us,—the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!"

Wordsworth, disappointed in the course of the French Revolution, turned aside from his directly revolutionary convictions, but, during the ten years of his most fruitful creation and thereafter

[1] *The Defence of Poetry*

more fitfully, the impulse of Liberty stirred his whole consciousness. Years passed before Wordsworth could exorcise the spirit of John Thelwall, the ardent revolutionary who visited him and Coleridge at Alfoxden during the marvellous year in which the *Lyrical Ballads* were conceived and so long as the conflict persisted—the argument in Wordsworth's soul imaged forth in the Solitary in *The Excursion* and in the retrospective self-questioning of *The Prelude*—so long the creative springs of his being continued to flow Both Shelley and Hazlitt understood this well. "The most unfailing herald", wrote Shelley in 1819, with his eyes clearly directed at the political apostates Wordsworth and Coleridge,

"or companion, or follower, of an universal employment of the sentiments of a nation to the production of a beneficial change is poetry, meaning by poetry an intense and impassioned power of communicating intense and impassioned impressions respecting man and nature The persons in whom this power takes its abode may often . have little correspondence with the spirit of good of which it is the minister But although they may deny and abjure, they are yet compelled to serve that which is seated on the throne of their own soul And whatever systems they may have professed they actually advance the interests of Liberty It is impossible to read the productions of our most celebrated writers without being startled by the electric life which there is in their words They measure the circumference or sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit at which they are perhaps themselves most sincerely astonished, for it is less their own spirit than the spirit of their age "[1]

And, writing of Wordsworth in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt declared:

"His poetry is founded upon setting up an opposition (and pushing it to its utmost length) between the natural and artificial, between the spirit of humanity and the spirit of fashion and of the world. It is one of the innovations of the time It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age. the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiments His Muse (it cannot be denied, and without this we cannot explain its character at all) is a levelling one It proceeds on a principle of equality. "

This great revolutionary impulse enabled Wordsworth to

[1] *A Philosophical View of Reform* in *Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley* (Ed R. J. White, 1953), p 227

break free from conventional responses, to man and nature, of the previous age, and to voice, in his individual manner, the general enrichment of human consciousness of his time To-day we are so well accustomed to the rural cottage where the minor poet can reside in comfortable contemplation of nature that it is only with an effort of imagination that we can recall the uncompromising rejection of fashionable society implied in Wordsworth's retirement to the Lakes He was turning his back on a society.

> " where dignity,
> True personal dignity, abideth not,
> A light, and cruel, and vain world cut off
> From the natural inlets of just sentiment,
> From lowly sympathy and chastening truth."

This renunciation of "the world" was not one of convenience or affectation, but a passionate search for not only nature, but *human* nature a search for spontaneity and simplicity as opposed to convention and calculation, a search for the essential moral nature of man, "the rudiments of nature as studied in the walks of common life". These positive discoveries of his "levelling muse", this new-found respect for the common people, for "the instincts of natural and social man, the deeper emotions, the simpler feelings; the spacious range of the disinterested imagination",[1] were his special contributions to the tradition of romanticism into which Morris was born.

But a second wave of the same revolt intervened between Wordsworth's finest achievement and Morris's youth. In the years between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and those immediately following Peterloo, Byron, Shelley and Keats had each enriched the tradition in new ways. Whatever ambiguities may be found in Byron's social outlook, the "Byronic" tradition lived long in the nineteenth century. When Morris, Swinburne, and their friends followed with enthusiasm the struggles of Garibaldi, the teachings of Mazzini, they continued that tradition. When, in the 1870s, they took part in the "Eastern Question" agitation, and voiced Republican sentiments, Byron was quoted more than once from their platforms, and (when the proposal was mooted for volunteers to go to the aid of the oppressed Bulgarians)

[1] *Tract on the Convention of Cintra*, in *Political Tracts*, *op cit*, pp 170–1.

the legend of Byron's death at Missolonghi, was brought to mind. But, while in the 1880s Morris was to carry forward all that was most positive in the Republican and internationalist traditions of Byron and of Shelley, in the 1850s these seem to have exercised only a passing influence on his conscious mind. They were other influences—present in Shelley, and triumphant in Keats—which dominated his youth.

Shelley, no less than Blake, or Wordsworth, or Byron, was impelled not by some hazy "romanticism" (in the popular sense) but by a specific, clear-sighted, revolt against the abominations of his time. He voiced the revolt of definite social forces, championing definite human values, against definite oppression and injustice. We must look far in English literature to find so ardent and single-hearted a revolutionary, so earnest in his desire to shape all life anew. And yet, for all this, he has been taken both by critics and by the popular imagination as the prototype of the "romantic dreamer", the unpractical "idealist", the "beautiful and ineffectual angel . . beating his luminous wings in the void in vain". How was it possible for such a legend to grow?

A glance at the famous sonnet, "England in 1819", will help us to understand this paradox, and also the change in the romantic tradition so important to Morris's own youthful outlook

> "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,—
> Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
> Through public scorn—mud from a muddy spring,—
> Rulers, who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
> But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
> Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,—
> A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field,—
> An army, which liberticide and prey
> Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,
> Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay,—
> Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed,
> A Senate—Time's worst statute unrepealed,—
> Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
> Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day."

It is impossible to read this poem without being struck by the contrast between the strength of the opening and the anti-climax of the concluding two lines. Corruption and tyranny are not just listed and described. they are evoked, by the condensed power and

movement, the sharp visual images, which are presented It is because of this vigour that the poem breaks down at the word "graves". Shelley has evoked, not graves, but active, destructive, malignant forces of evil in the world—the Prince Regent and his sycophantic court, the butchers of Peterloo. Shelley would *like* them to be graves but it would only be through the evocation of more powerful, active, forces for good that the poem would convince. Instead of this we are offered a "glorious Phantom". and both rhythm and rhyme compel the ear to linger on the qualifying "may". Nor is this Phantom, this spirit of liberty, evoked in anything more than a very vague and generalized way. it is not identified with any social class, or group, as are the forces of reaction. it may "burst" and "illumine" the "day".

And yet this is characteristic of many of Shelley's poems They have "bite", they are powerfully evocative, when he is attacking the injustice and moral corruption of his time.

> "I met Murder on the way—
> He had a mask like Castlereagh—
> Very smooth he looked, yet grim,
> Seven bloodhounds followed him "

But, in many of his poems, where he seeks to give positive expression to the forces of liberty and humanity, the sense of *straining* often enters—the imagery (except where he falls upon some perfect natural sequence of images, as in the "Ode to the West Wind") is vague and tending towards the abstract, the personifications Phantoms, Sages and Spirits, rather than men like Castlereagh: and the poetry is marked by a searching for inspiration, alternating moods of dejection and elation, and the occasional substitution for the poetry of conviction of that of incantation and hypnosis.

This sense of strain, this tendency for ideals and reality to be at odds, was to become of increasing significance to the poets of the next half-century. Its source lay, not in some inherent romantic attitude towards reality, nor in Shelley's own personality, but first and foremost in his times. Shelley's intention was very far from that of finding a retreat from his own world. He conceived of his mission as that of carrying forward the democratic aspirations, for universal freedom, justice and equality, from which Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey had been frightened by the course of the French Revolution:

"On the first reverses of hope in the progress of French liberty", he wrote, "the sanguine eagerness for good overleapt the solution of these questions, and for a time extinguished itself in the unexpectedness of their result Thus many of the most ardent and tender-hearted of the worshippers of public good have been morally ruined, by what a partial glimpse of the events they deplored, appeared to show as the melancholy desolation of all their cherished hopes Hence gloom and misanthropy have become the characteristics of the age in which we live .. This influence has tainted the literature of the age with the hopelessness of the minds from which it flows "[1]

But it was not possible simply to give re-birth to the same aspirations in the same form. The events of thirty years, and the writings of Godwin, Tom Paine, Bentham, Wordsworth, had thrown the old reaction into a blacker shadow. These were the times of "Oliver the Spy" and the execution of Brandreth, of the public indecencies of the Queen Caroline affair (which drove Shelley almost to incoherence in his "Oedipus Tyrannus"); of famine and Luddism, of abuse after abuse, sinecures, misappropriation of educational endowments, nepotism in the law and pluralities and absenteeism in the Church, dragged into the light of day by the Radicals in their periodicals; of the gagging of the Press and the persecution of free-thinkers; of wholesale capital punishment and of Peterloo.

This overpowering evil was ever-present to Shelley's senses. it is the raw material of "England in 1819". But, despite the inspiring movements of the people, in 1817 and 1819, Shelley was in a position of intellectual isolation. The industrial bourgeoisie and the professional classes, strengthened by the great advances of industry during the Napoleonic Wars, had observed the course of the French Revolution and were well aware that they were fighting for their interests on two flanks—on one side, against the reigning oligarchy, on the other against the emergent proletariat. The demonstrators at Peterloo had been marshalled, not by the new mill-owners and their champions, not by the Peels and the young Lord Brougham, but by weavers, artisans and Radical tradesmen, men like Samuel Bamford and Joseph Knight. These men had little access, as yet, to the learning and literature of their time. Shelley, in his own lifetime, made little contact with them.

[1] Preface to *The Revolt of Islam*

As far as the middle classes were concerned, Shelley's crime was that he had espoused too literally the cause of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity". The generous sentiments of liberty which had touched sections of them on the outbreak of the French Revolution had cooled in the winds of prudence They had a watchful eye for compromise, and their aims were specific and limited They wanted the vote and a share in Government, the end of the East India Company's monopoly, the repeal of the Corn Laws, cheap bread—and cheap labour They wanted engineers, bankers, prudent politicians and newspaper editors, but not poets with the revolutionary enthusiasm of Shelley. Already they were aping the manners of the aristocracy, and becoming more "genteel".

When the people had risen in France, and the mists of reaction had been, for a few brief years, dispersed, a vision had been born of a life altogether more noble, more generous and truly human, than any known on earth before. The middle classes could never realize this vision, neither in France nor in England, because their very existence depended upon the establishment of a new tyranny over the exploited working class. But Shelley, unable to understand fully that the working class alone could fulfil this vision, yet clung stubbornly to it and refused to let it be torn from him. Reaction brushed him aside with contempt. *Queen Mab* was suppressed His children were taken from him. The middle class, even though still unenfranchised and denied their share of power, feared Shelley and dubbed him an idealist. So good a friend as Leigh Hunt (himself a victim of Government persecution) did not dare to publish the *Masque of Anarchy* in the *Examiner* "I did not insert it", he wrote in 1832,

> "because I thought that the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kindheartedness of his spirit, that walked in this flaming robe of verse "

This isolation (not imaginary, like the poses of those poetasters at the end of the nineteenth century who aped a "romantic" loneliness, but real isolation) underlay the sense of abstraction and strain in his writing. The evil he could sense all about him: the good he saw trampled underfoot at Peterloo. Moreover, he came to hold a distaste for the immediate political perspective. "I foresee", he wrote in 1822, with a prophetic vision of the coming Reform Bill, "that the contest will be one of blood and

gold"—a contest in the outcome of which he could only feel indifference [1] Faced by the philistinism and indifference of the middle-class public, he could only retort by exalting the indefinable ideal influence of poets, "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present", and by declaring that *Prometheus Unbound* "was never intended for more than five or six persons"

> "My purpose has . been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence."[2]

A "glorious Phantom" indeed!

It would be foolish to criticize Shelley, for failing to understand (as Morris was to do in the 1880s, with the experience of Chartism and the Commune, and Marx's *Capital* to guide him) that, just as his generous aspirations for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" had found new champions among the self-educated workers and artisans among whom, in his own time, was fermenting the proletarian movement of the future, so the cultural inheritance which he loved could only be carried forward in their hands. This belonged to the future and in that future Shelley did not lose confidence. But this inevitable failure meant that his poetry (for all its fine achievement) marks a new stage in the romantic opposition of desire and necessity, "ideals" and reality. In his poetry there are indications of that desire to abandon the struggle with a harsh reality, with a triumphant evil unbearable to his consciousness, and to escape to regions of luxurious semi-conscious sensation, which so often recurs in Keats—the desire Shelley felt when among the Euganean Hills, for

> " . some calm and blooming cove,
> Where for me and those I love,
> May a windless bower be built,
> Far from passion, pain, and guilt,
> In a dell 'mid lawny hills
> Which the wild sea-murmur fills,

[1] Shelley to Horace Smith, June 29th, 1822 Mr F W. Bateson is surely wrong to quote this letter (*English Poetry* (1950), p 217) as "explicit" evidence of Shelley's "retreat from politics" Surely Shelley's meaning is that in a contest between aristocratic privilege ("blood") and capital ("gold"), whatever the outcome the human values which he champions will be losers'

[2] Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*

And soft sunshine, and the sound
Of old forests echoing round,
And the light and smell divine
Of all flowers that breathe and shine"

Such fluent rhymes, with their self-indulgent sentiment, do no justice to Shelley's stature But they do anticipate moods met more often, in more complex forms, in the poems of Keats, Rossetti, Tennyson and Morris, and it is important to remember one of the sources of these moods Already in Shelley, and pronouncedly in Keats, the revolt of definite social forces championing definite human values in the face of definite tyranny was becoming transmuted into the opposition between the aspirations, for beauty, freedom, or love, nourished by art and by history in the individual poet's heart, and the brutal or inadequate reality of life And from this opposition, which arose from the thwarting in actual life of the revolutionary impulse from which the movement stemmed, arose other attitudes and moods which found their fullest expression in the astonishing achievement of the moodiest of all our great poets, John Keats

II John Keats

We must look more closely at Keats than at any other forerunner of Morris, for his shadow falls most markedly upon Morris's youth, and the evidence of his influence may be found in every page of *The Defence of Guenevere* Within his work may be found the germ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the deepening influence of medievalism, the first assertion of the theory of "art for art's sake". There is no wonder that Morris later recalled that "our clique was much influenced by Keats".

Keats was the contemporary and friend of Shelley. In Leigh Hunt's circle he mixed with advanced Radicals and free-thinkers. His private letters show that he was Radical himself in his sympathies, admired Orator Hunt, the chief speaker at Peterloo, and Richard Carlile, the courageous free-thinker, and shared Shelley's revulsion at the oppressive corruption and tyranny of his times. And yet (if his late poem, "The Cap and Bells", be excepted) there is little evidence of direct political interest in his poetry. "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"—none of these are made into themes for his great Odes.

Keats's poetry is highly self-conscious, highly wrought and finished He is less concerned than Shelley with the communication of an all-important message, more concerned with the craftsmanship of his art. His vocabulary differs significantly from that of his forerunners Wordsworth's employment of the "language of conversation of the middle and lower classes" is abandoned. we rarely meet the abstractions so frequent in Shelley. In their place we find the conscious employment of a "poetic" vocabulary, of words coloured by their cultural and historical (in particular, medieval) associations, but no longer in the general currency of speech. These facts, on their own, would suggest that the mood of dejection, which we have noticed in Shelley, had become, in Keats, overpowering, and that he had found in his poetry a refuge from a social reality which he felt to be unbearably hostile.

But this is only a part of the truth The greater part can be found in that sense of conflict which may be found in all Keats's poetry, from his early "Sleep and Poetry" to his final draft of "Hyperion" This conflict sometimes appears as one between the sensuous and the philosophic life ("O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!"), sometimes as between science and imagination ("Do not all charms fly/At the mere touch of cold philosophy?") more often it is deeply embedded in the very structure of the poems themselves, in the acute tension between the richness of the life of the senses and imagination and the poverty of everyday experience, and in Keats's struggle to reconcile the two It is his intense awareness of this conflict (which was of central significance to English culture), which gives greatness to his achievement The "Ode to a Nightingale" makes this plain.

The poem opens with the invocation of a mood of unconsciousness—"drowsy numbness", "hemlock", "opiate", and "Lethe-wards" are the key words, and the nightingale's song is shown as the external cause of the poet's mood The second verse intensifies the evocation of this mood, of the suspension of the active, conscious, suffering mind by the means of wine

> "That I might drink, and leave the world unseen
> And with thee fade away into the forest dim "

"Fade far away" is picked up in the third verse, and the world

from which release is desired is defined. It is a world of "weariness", "fever" and "fret", "where men sit and hear each other groan", a world of mortality and sickness, where Beauty and Love are transient, and "but to think is to be full of sorrow". In the fourth verse, the list of those agents (hemlock, opiates, wine) which bring release from reality, is not only continued but is intensified by the invocation of "poesy" (and the deliberate choice of the archaic word is of significance):

> "Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
> Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
> But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
> Though the dull brain perplexes and retards . "

Poetry is now seen as the supreme means of escape to another world of art and imagination, where the active consciousness is numbed, and in the fifth verse Keats employs all his magnificent powers of sensual suggestion to evoke a blissful state on the very edge of the unconscious The associations of "incense" and "embalmed" are realized in the next verse

> "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath,
> Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain. "

Drugs, wine, "poesy"—all have led to Death, the ultimate escape from reality. Now, with the real world exorcised, the other world of art and beauty becomes (as in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn") *more* real than life itself. and, in the seventh verse, this world is left in sole possession, the nightingale becomes *all* nightingales, a symbol of ideal beauty persisting unchanged throughout history, a part of a magic world

> "The same that oft-times hath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn "

But with "forlorn", the sense of the poet's alienation from the world of his everyday experience comes back to Keats—"the very word is like a bell/To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" The unreal world dissolves, the language becomes plain and everyday, the rhythm loses its drowsy incantation.

"Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream
Up the hill-side, and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music —do I wake or sleep?"

The real world has re-entered but the question hangs in the air—*which* world is the real one?

The conviction of feeling in the poem is undeniable. Why should Keats have felt this conflict to be of so deep and poignant a nature? Most critics read the poem as simply an attempt to dispel the consciousness of death and of change by invoking a dream-world of art [1] But this does not fully explain the profound attraction for Keats of the suspension of the active consciousness. Why is it that reality should appear so unbearable to Keats that "poesy" should be allied with opiates and drugs as a means of escape? Why is it that the idea of consciousness is inseparable, for Keats, from the idea of suffering? Why is it that growing maturity and insight "into the heart and nature of Man" convinced him that the "world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression . . "[2] No explanation taken from his personal life is sufficient to account for this extreme polarization between the pleasures of sensation and imagination, and the pain of consciousness, nor to explain why despite his own political convictions, the great part of his best poetry is marked by an absence of warm or hopeful ambitions for mankind.

Now let us turn to one of Keats's letters, written to his friend Bailey in November, 1817 His friend had sustained some insult at the hands of the Bishop of Lincoln, and the spontaneous incoherence of Keats's rage reveals more of the very movement of his feelings than many of his more studied letters

[1] E g among recent studies, Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (1949), pp 120–1 "The Odes of Keats are a series of lovely casuistries on this theme, attempts to make the facts of change, old age and death tolerable—by finding a quasi-permanence in art, by making the individual nightingale immortal because the collective song of all nightingales has persisted . "

[2] Keats to Reynolds, May 3rd, 1818, *Letters of John Keats* (Ed Buxton Forman, 4th Edition, 1952), pp 142–3

"It must be shocking to find in a sacred Profession such bare-faced oppression and impertinence—The Stations and Grandeurs of the World have taken it into their heads that they cannot commit themselves towards an inferior in rank There is something so nauseous in self-willed yawning impudence in the shape of conscience—it sinks the Bishop of Lincoln into a smashed frog putrefying Such is this World—and we live—you have surely in a continual struggle against the suffocation of accidents—we must bear (and my Spleen is mad at the thought thereof) the Proud Man's Contumely O for a recourse somewhat human independent of the great Consolations of Religion and undepraved Sensations—of the Beautiful—the poetical in all things—O for a Remedy against such wrongs within the pale of the World "[1]

And so the invective continues, until it reaches a conclusion which takes us directly to the third verse of the "Ode to a Nightingale" —"The thought that we are mortal makes us groan".

"You have one advantage which the young men of my time lacked", William Morris wrote to the young Socialist, Fred Henderson, in 1885

"We were borne into a dull time oppressed with bourgeoisdom and philistinism so sorely that we were forced to turn back on ourselves, and only in ourselves and the world of art and literature was there any hope You on the contrary have found yourself confronted by the rising hope of the people . " (see p 878)

These words might serve as a commentary on Keats's life. The warm aspirations for Liberty, "suffocated" by his times and denied hope of realization, turned back upon their source. The imagination, he suggested in one letter, must either "deaden its delicacy in vulgarity and in things attainable", or "go mad after things that are not". Faced by the "Proud Man's Contumely", Keats exalted the pride of his own creative genius "Undepraved sensations . . the Beautiful . . . the poetical in all things"—these at least were beyond the contamination of the "Stations and Grandeurs of the World". The timeless world of art and literature provided a democracy of its own, open not to place-seekers and pensioners but to those with the inborn right of their own talent. "The Beautiful" is posed as a "Remedy" for the oppressions of the world but, in the heat of Keats's rage, it seemed to him an inadequate remedy, as he cried out for a recourse "somewhat human", a remedy "within the pale of the World" Almost

[1] *Letters of John Keats*, p. 59

without intending it, his letter reveals that the "world" of culture and imagination, and the "world" of his daily experience in society had become opposed to each other and distinct.

Keats was one of the first poets to feel in his own everyday experience the full shock of "bourgeoisdom and philistinism" In his "Epistle to Reynolds" there is a passage where the "world" of dream and poesy breaks down sharply, and he writes.

> " . . . I saw
> Too far into the sea, where every maw
> The greater on the less feeds evermore.—
> But I saw too distinct into the core
> Of an eternal fierce destruction
> The Shark at savage prey,—the Hawk at pounce ."

"Big fish eat little fishes"—the image of the ethic at the heart of capitalism, of ruthless competition, self-interest, a i struggle for survival, the same as used by Shakespeare in *Timon*. Keats was not screened by birth or wealth (as were Byron and Shelley) from the full impact of this competitive struggle. In the publication of his poetry, he found himself exposed on two fronts. On the one hand, much of the influence in the world of letters still rested with men who sought to continue the servile tradition of dependence upon aristocratic patronage, even after the substance had gone When Keats and his friends (drawn mostly from the poorer professional classes) sought to claim a share in the cultural life of the nation, they were ridiculed as "Cockneys". The very idea of a medical student or a schoolmaster writing poetry, independent of the patronizing encouragement of the Great, was laughable and when the circle was found to be grouped around Leigh Hunt, a convicted Radical, it was dangerous! *Blackwood's*, reviewing some of Keats's poems, declared

> "The egotism of the Cockneys is an inexplicable affair None of them are men of genius they are lecturers of the Surrey Institution, and editors of Sunday papers and so forth They have all abundance of admirers in the same low order of society to which they themselves originally belong, and to which alone they have all their lives addressed themselves "[1]

On the other hand, Keats, no less than Shelley, found that the middle classes who were pressing forward the industrial revolution and who were soon to gain the day with the Reform Bill of

[1] *Blackwood's Magazine*, April, 1819

1832, had little time for poetry—a commodity which could not easily be measured by Mr. Gradgrind's measuring-rod, and which "you couldn't state in figures, or show to be purchaseable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest", unless it was concerned with hymning the virtues of those marketable assets, prudence, enterprise and thrift.

Already in Keats's time the way was being prepared for the triumph in the mid-century of Victorian utilitarianism. Such perspectives filled Keats with no more enthusiasm than he felt for the decadent "Stations and Grandeurs of the World" Under this strain, he revealed in his letters a morbid sensitivity to money relations and transactions He found his poems on sale in the capitalist market, subject to the same laws of supply and demand as any commodity The equation of human and artistic values to money values aroused his disgust, and revealed itself in a feeling of estrangement from his audience:

"A Preface is written to the Public, a thing I cannot help looking upon as an Enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings of Hostility."[1]

In reaction he turned his attention from the business of communication to the art product itself If art-values were irrelevant to the market, they could only be realized through the integrity, the "self-concentration", of the artist himself He became the prototype of the "pure" artist, producing art for its own sake.

"I should say I value more the privilege of seeing great things in loneliness than the fame of a prophet I never expect to get anything by my Books. and moreover I wish to avoid publishing—I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*. I should like to compose things honourable to Man—but not fingerable over by *Men*"[2]

This should not be seen as a desire on the part of Keats to escape from all social responsibilities. As he saw it, he was defending art itself in a world which had no place for it. "His nonsense . . is quite gratuitous", declaimed one supercilious reviewer

[1] Keats to Reynolds, April 9th, 1818, *Letters of John Keats, op cit*, p 129 "I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public—or to anything in existence—but the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of great Men When I am writing for myself for the mere sake of the moment's enjoyment, perhaps nature has its course with me—but a Preface," etc.

[2] Keats to Haydon, December 22nd, 1818, *Ibid*, p 271

"He writes it for its own sake."[1] And the implication of this violent philistine attack was that poetry *ought* to be written to the greater glory of a society which Keats despised. At every turn Keats was racked by the conflict between the ideal and the real. Rather than hand over poetry to the Bishop of Lincoln and Parson Malthus, he was *proud* to write it for "its own sake", and to nourish his aspirations for beauty and a nobler humanity in the "loneliness" of his own heart. Even in his tormented personal relations with Fanny Brawne he sought to attach ideal attributes to her sadly at variance with the vapid society of bourgeois conventions within which the real girl had her being. The same conflict was posed in "Lamia" in the opposition of the imaginative, sensuous, intuitive life, to the power of an analytical science which in his lifetime was carrying all before it. Even the "Eve of St Agnes" is a supreme essay in illusion: an interval between storms, where the cold light of the moon is transformed by the coloured glass of windows against which the sharp sleet beats—the same image which Morris was to use with such effect in the final verses of his Apology to *The Earthly Paradise*

This inward-turning of the great romantic impulse brought to Keats a heightened sensitivity to every shade of subjective experience, and in expressing the complexities of a vividly self-centred consciousness he anticipated new generations of writers (and of people) to come. But we are concerned here, not with an assessment of Keats's special contribution to English culture, but with the sources of that conflict which was to prove of such importance to Morris. For this conflict was not personal to Keats alone. it was central to the position of the artist in capitalist society The terrible prophetic vision of Blake was becoming realized. All values were becoming, in Keats's day, tainted with the property-values of the market, all life being bought and sold. The great aspirations at the source of the Romantic Revolt—for the freeing of mankind from a corrupt oppression, for the liberation of man's senses, affections, and reason, for equality between men and between the sexes—were being destroyed by each new advance of industrial capitalism But, with these aspirations (or the *hope* of their realization "within the pale of the

[1] *The Quarterly Review*, April, 1818.

World") denied, this seemed to Keats to be an ugly, non-human, objectless world of oppression and pain, redeemed only by the pleasures of sensual experience, which themselves were evanescent and subject to mortality and change. On the other hand, the culture of the past, "the realms of gold", in which finer values than those of Cash and Fact were enshrined, seemed saturated with a richness not to be found in life.

So it was that the words "Beauty" and "work of art" acquired a new meaning, which first crystallized in the writings of Keats, and which was accepted almost unconsciously by the young Morris and Rossetti. "Beauty", for Keats, was something "abstract", not to be found in reality It belonged especially to the world of artifice, art, imagination Its source was in those aspirations within the artist's heart, denied adequate expression in the realms of social existence and human action

> "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same idea of all our passions as of Love, they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty "[1]

It is not the world of objective reality (we should note) but the "passions" of the artist which are the source of "Beauty". These passions (unfulfilled in action) in the heart of the artist seemed to Keats to be the source, the inspiration, for the finished "work of art". The work of art embodied these feelings in its unchanging, intrinsic Beauty, and it could, in its turn, evoke these feelings, this sense of Beauty, in the heart of the beholder. And so, between the heart of the artist and the work of art, the work of art and the audience, a self-contained aesthetic was fashioned, excluding the world of action and social reality. Art was no longer conceived, as by Shelley, as an agent in man's struggle to master nature and discover himself Art (if we set aside a lingering faith in its refining moral influence) was conceived as a compensation for the poverty of life.

While, in Keats's poetry, these two "worlds" of art and of everyday experience became opposed and distinct, he remained, as a poet, simultaneously aware of both worlds, and never ceased to struggle to reconcile the two This, indeed, was one of the

[1] Keats to Bailey, November 22nd, 1817, *Letters of John Keats, op cit*, p 67

sources of his greatness. In the end, as in the "Ode to the Nightingale", the real world triumphs, but he always resumed the struggle, because (if we except the rare mood given its finest expression in his "Ode to Autumn") the world of his everyday experience seemed to him to be empty of all warmth and beauty. Only in the imaginary world of the "realms of gold" could the richness and nobility of human desires find expression. And yet he knew that an escape to a world of pure fantasy and "romance", unrelated to his living experience, would also prove inadequate to the dignity of his desires Here lies the meaning of his revision of "Hyperion" The struggle which he described on the steps to the altar was the struggle for the human spirit, the struggle to keep major poetry alive—poetry capable of responding to the widest range of human experience For Keats understood that the source of poetic inspiration lies, in the end, in the poet's total response to human experience, his responsibility to humanity The escape from the full cares of consciousness might bring a momentary enrichment of sensual and subjective responses But it led to the denial of the poet's own sensibility—to its partial and one-sided development, at the expense of the anaesthetizing, atrophy, or frustration of the rest—to the decline of major poetry and its limitation to select "poetic" attitudes and subjects, while the greater part of everyday experience is regarded as "unpoetic" and unfitting material for the poet's imagination This was realized intuitively by Keats, when he described the stupor, insensitivity, and death overcoming the poet becalmed in the dream-world of art

> " 'None can usurp this height,' return'd that shade,
> 'But those to whom the miseries of the world
> Are miseries, and will not let them rest
> All else who find a haven in the world,
> Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,
> If by a chance into this fane they come,
> Rot on the pavement where thou rottedst half.' "

Did Morris, after writing *The Earthly Paradise*, recall these words?

Ten years after Keats's death the vision of 1789 was finally trampled underfoot in the prudent Reform Bill of 1832. "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"—all were disregarded. The

slender hope, which Shelley still cherished, that the alliance of middle and working classes in the struggle for Reform might lead on to some startling and revolutionary consummation, was no longer tenable by the most sanguine temperament. On the eve of the Reform Bill, Edward Baines, a champion of the northern manufacturers in their fight for "Liberty", was—while making revolutionary speeches to the people—privately conducting a survey in Leeds to re-assure himself and the Whig parliamentarians that the proposed new franchise would effectively exclude the working class.[1] Nor were "Equality" or "Fraternity" to find any striking new expression in public or personal life, except among the same despised working class. The struggle for Reform had not subsided before the class battles which led on to Chartism had begun. Shelley's noble championship of the equality of the sexes was to find no countenance in the relations between Victorian Papa and Mama. If Shelley's genius was honoured, it was for his lofty "idealism", his lyrics about birds and flowers, while his revolutionary convictions were frowned upon or disregarded except among the new generation of working-class poets and free-thinkers who paid honest tribute to his name.[2] The great middle class preferred the sentiments of Martin F. Tupper, whose *Proverbial Philosophy* entered its twenty-third edition in 1855, the year in which Morris was writing *A Dream* (p. 20) Here is a sample of Tupper's "Philosophy" ("Of Marriage"):

"Mark the converse of one thou lovest, that it be simple and sincere,
For an artful or false woman shall set thy pillow with thorns
Observe her deportment with others, when she thinketh not that thou art nigh,
For with thee will the blushes of love conceal the true colour of her mind.
Hath she learning? it is good, so that modesty go with it·
Hath she wisdom? it is precious, but beware that thou exceed,
For woman must be subject, and the true mastery is of the mind.
Be joined to thine equal in rank, or the foot of pride will kick at thee;
And look not only for riches, lest thou be mated with misery
Marry not without means, for so shouldst thou tempt Providence,
But wait not for more than enough, for Marriage is the DUTY of most men . . ."

[1] Edward Baines, *Life of Edward Baines* (1851), pp 157–8

[2] G B Shaw relates in *Sixteen Self-Sketches* (1949), p 58, that when he joined the Shelley Society in the 1880s, and proclaimed himself "like Shelley, a Socialist, Atheist, and Vegetarian two Browningite ladies resigned on the spot"

That is, the great middle class preferred to read Tupper, if they read poetry at all

What wonder is it that it was Keats, rather than Shelley, who threw his shadow upon Morris's youth? In 1820 there was still "hope" in the world, although in his moods of dejection Shelley felt it difficult to express it with the force of conviction. In 1850 there was no hope—except that hope in the power of the working class which Morris had yet to learn Again and again, in the life of young Morris and Burne-Jones, in the Pre-Raphaelite circle and their friends, we shall meet with echoes of Keats's life. Like Keats, they were (in the main) unorthodox and advanced in their opinions—free-thinkers, or Republicans, or simply "Bohemians", and, like Keats, their opinions found little expression in their art or their actions, they were without "hope" of their effective realization, they were "suffocated" and oppressed on all sides by "bourgeoisdom and philistinism" When Morris became an active Socialist, it was this re-birth of "hope" to which he recurred, again and again, in lectures and poems. The heroes of his long Socialist poem he called "The Pilgrims of Hope". Their "hope" was the vision of 1789, with a new brightness and certainty—"Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"—reborn "within the pale of the World"

But in Morris's youth, the world of art and imagination was both a palace of refuge and a castle in revolt against the philistines He turned to a dream-world more strange and fantastic than that of Keats. The continual conflict in Keats's life between rich, aspiration and drab reality, could no longer be sustained with such intensity Rather, the poetry of the mid-nineteenth century appears to oscillate between the two poles contained within Keats's sensibility On the one hand, the poetry of "realism" (at its worst, the poetry of Tupper) was soiled by the drab or brutal reality of life within industrial capitalism. It was impoverished and infected by philistine attitudes, was marked by a shallowness of feeling and an absence of the enthusiasm and vitality of life. Where it was not moralizing or sentimental, but was most sincere (as in some poems by Clough and Arnold) it was rarely far from disillusion or irony And, alongside this, there was the poetry of "romance"—of medievalism, trance, and escape, filled with nostalgia and a yearning for values which capitalism had

crushed, and which were projected into archaic or dream-like settings. The two kinds of poetry were not mutually exclusive Tennyson, Arnold and Browning, moved between them both. But neither kind of poetry rose to the sustained greatness of the earlier Romantics. Keats's prophecy in "Hyperion" was being fulfilled, and the poetry of "romance"—as is emphasized by its special "poetic" attitudes and vocabulary—was always a little detached from the essential human conflicts of the time But, notwithstanding this, the love of art, the cherishing of aspirations threatened by philistinism, gave birth to poems of great poignancy and beauty. And it was to this poetry of "romance" that William Morris's youthful contribution was made