

An English Revolutionary

On St. George's Day, we republish E. P. Thompson's essay on the life and politics of William Morris – an English revolutionary and the greatest moral critic of capitalism of his age.



I have in no way altered my opinion that if we are to acknowledge William Morris as one of the greatest of Englishmen it is not because he was, by fits and starts, a good poet; nor because of his influence upon typography; nor because of his high craftsmanship in the decorative arts; nor because he was a practical socialist pioneer; nor, indeed, because he was all these; but because of a quality which permeates all these activities and which gives to them a certain unity. I have tried to describe this quality by saying that Morris was a great moralist, a great moral teacher.

It is in his moral criticism of society (and which of his actions in the decorative arts, or in *Anti-Scrape*, or the renewal of interest in Icelandic Saga, was not informed by a fundamental criticism of the way of life of his own time?) – and in the crucial position which this criticism occupies in our cultural history at the point of transition from an old tradition to a new – that his greatness is to be found. And this greatness comes to its full maturity in the political writing and example of his later years. I have gained the feeling that perhaps through fear of controversy and out of respect for admirers of William Morris who do not share his political convictions – this Society has tended to be reticent on this matter. But Morris was one of our greatest men, *because* he was a great revolutionary, a profoundly cultured and humane revolutionary, but not the less a revolutionary for this reason. Moreover, he was a man working for *practical* revolution. It is this which brings the whole man together. It is this which will make his reputation grow as the years advance

English revolutionaries in the past hundred years have been men without a Revolution. At times they have convinced themselves of the Revolution's imminence. H.M. Hyndman when he founded the Social Democratic Federation in 1882 looked forward to 1889 as the probable date of its commencement. For a time Morris (whose thinking was greatly influenced by the Paris Commune) shared this cataclysmic outlook. But when he founded the Socialist League in 1884 he had already grown more reticent 'our immediate aim should be chiefly educational ... with a view to dealing with the crisis if it should come in our day, or of handing on the tradition of our hope to others if we should die before it comes'.

Five years later again, when writing *News from Nowhere*, Morris postponed the commencement of the

Revolution to 1952. In the sixty years that would intervene he foresaw much 'troublesome wearisome action' leading to the triumph of 'demi-semi-Socialism', which would improve the *condition* of the working-class while leaving its *position* unchanged. At the end of this vista of reform he still saw an ultimate revolutionary confrontation: and in one of his last lectures – delivered in 1895, the year before his death – he avowed:

I have thought the matter up and down, and in and out, and I cannot for the life of me see how the great change which we long for can come otherwise than by disturbance and suffering of some kind. We are living in an epoch where there is combat between commercialism, or the system of reckless waste, and communism, or the system of neighbourly common sense. Can that combat be fought out ... without loss and suffering? Plainly speaking I *know* that it cannot.

He was a revolutionary without a Revolution, more than that, he *knew* that he did not live within a revolutionary context. He did not, like Cromwell, have Revolution thrust upon him: nor did he, like Lenin, build a dedicated party within a society whose revolutionary potential was apparent. In the eyes of his opponents was the very type of the socialist 'trouble-maker' or (as they would phrase it today) the maladjusted intellectual. He wanted to stir up revolt where no revolt was. He wanted to make contented men discontented, and discontented men into agitators of discontent. It 'it is to stir you up *not* to be content with a little that I am here tonight'. And he spent his energy recklessly during the last fifteen years of his life, with the aim of creating a revolutionary tradition – both intellectual and practical – within a society unripe for Revolution.

This is, of course the role for which the romantic poet is cast, and many have been content to dismiss Morris, the revolutionary, with this platitude. The late romantic poet, author of *The Earthly Paradise*, and the Utopian dreamer, author of *News from Nowhere*, are confused in the same sentimental – or irritable – portrait of baffled unpractical idealism.

The portrait is false. For one thing, the convention supposes an effervescent iconoclastic youth, succeeded by premature death or by a respectable and pedestrian middle-age. This was not the course of Morris' life. Certainly, he rebelled in his youth. It was a moral rebellion, stemming from the romantic tradition, nourished by Carlyle and Ruskin. The enemy was 'bourgeoisdom and philistinism'. The tilting-grounds in his 'holy warfare against the age' were the visual arts. The battle was joined with fervour, but it had scarcely started when – as happened with more than one Victorian rebel – the enemy opened its ranks to receive him with acclaim.

Morris, in his late thirties, seemed doomed to enter the family album of Victorian men of letters. That tedious poem, *The Earthly Paradise*, was taken into the bosom of that very 'bourgeoisdom and philistinism' against which Morris had risen in revolt. So costly were the products of the Firm in the decorative arts that it was forced to depend upon the custom of the wealthy. And while the Morris fashions began to penetrate the drawing-rooms of the select, the Railway Age and the architects of Restoration continued to desecrate the outside world.

This was the first time that success spelt failure to Morris: he savoured the futility of his revolt like gall. 'Am I doing nothing but make-belief then, something like Louis XVI's lock-making?' he asked. And – when supervising work in the house of the Northern iron-master, Sir Lowthian Bell – he turned suddenly upon his patron 'like a wild animal' and declared: 'I spend my life ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich.'

He repudiated success as other men repudiate calumny. He plunged into more intricate problems of craftsmanship at the Firm. He sustained his hatred of modern civilisation by translating Icelandic saga. He deliberately sat on his top hat. He launched his great campaign for the protection of ancient buildings. He opened his morning paper and was astonished to find that Britain was on the eve of a major war, on behalf of the Turkish Empire. His response was to become an agitator.

This agitation was to carry him, by way of an acute personal and intellectual crisis, into the embryonic socialist movement, which he joined in his fiftieth year. From this time forward he was to see war – whether overt, imperialist and bloody, or stealthy, respectable and bloodless – as the authentic expression of the Victorian ethos. It was from the circumstances of war that he was to draw one of his most evocative images of capitalist society.

Do not be deceived by the outside appearance of order in our plutocratic society. It fares with it as it does with the older norms of war, that there is an outside look of quite wonderful order about it; how neat and comforting the steady march of the regiment; how quiet and respectable the sergeants look;

how clean the polished cannon ... the looks of adjutant and sergeant as innocent-looking as may be, nay, the very orders for destruction and plunder are given with a quiet precision which seems the very token of a good conscience; this is the mask that lies before the ruined cornfield and the burning cottage, and mangled bodies, the untimely death of worthy men, the desolated home.

This second rebellion was at one and the same time the consummation of his youthful revolt and the genesis of a new revolutionary impulse within our culture. This time there was to be no reconciliation. The Victorian middle-class, which dearly loved an idealist reformer, was shocked not so much by his rebellion as by practical form of expression. 'Mr Morris is not content to be heard merely as a voice crying in the wilderness,' complained one aggrieved leader-writer, 'he would disturb the foundations of society in order that a higher artistic value may be given to our carpets'.

For Morris broke with the conventional picture of the rebellious romantic in another respect. In everything to which he turned his hand he demanded of himself *practical* mastery. As he turned to the dye-vat and to the loom, so he turned his hands to the work of making a Revolution. There is no work which he did not take upon himself. He spoke on open-air pitches, Sunday after Sunday, until his health broke down. He addressed demonstrations of miners and of the unemployed. He attended innumerable committee meetings. He edited *Commonwealth* and sold it in the streets. He appeared as a prisoner and as witness, in the police courts.

'I can't help it,' he answered a reproof from his closest friend, Georgie Burne-Jones. 'The ideas which have taken hold of me will not let me rest ... One must turn to hope, and only in one direction do I see it – on the road to Revolution: everything else is gone ...'

And yet, for all this evidence of practical personal commitment cannot the charge of misguided romanticism still be sustained? While Morris accepted almost *in toto* the economic and historical analysis of Marx he always avowed that his 'special leading motive' in becoming a revolutionary socialist was 'hatred of modern civilisation'. 'It is a shoddy age', he roared at a *Clarion* reporter. 'Shoddy is King. From the statesman to the shoemaker all is shoddy!' The reporter concealed his boots further beneath the table. 'Then you do not admire the common-sense John Bull, Mr Morris?' 'John Bull is a *stupid unpractical oaf*' was the reply.

Nothing infuriated Morris more than the complacent philistinism of the 'practical man', unless it was the complacent philistinism of the unpractical one 'That's an impossible dream of yours, Mr Morris,' a clergyman once declared, 'such a society would need God Almighty Himself to manage it.' Morris shook his fist in reply: 'Well damn it, man, you catch your God Almighty – we'll have Him.'

But as we draw further from his time, it is Morris, and not his critics, who appears as a realist. He was a healthy man, living in a neurotic society. I speak of *moral* realism, not the realism of the practical revolutionary. As leader of the Socialist League he made blunders enough – Engels had justification for his irritable characterisation of him, in private letters, as a 'settled sentimental socialist'. But, Engels underestimated the vigour of that long tradition of moral criticism which was Morris' inheritance.

With his rich historical experience and his concrete response to social reality, Morris had astonishing insight into the lines of growth, the elements of decay, within his culture. In lectures, speeches, passing notes in *Commonwealth*, he cast his eyes forward to our time. He foresaw (in 1887) that the opening up of Africa would lead to the ending of the Great Depression, followed by 'a great European war, perhaps lengthened out into a regular epoch of war.' He foresaw Fascism. He foresaw (and regretted) the Welfare State.

The enemy, as in his youth, was still 'bourgeoisdom and philistinism.' But now he stood appalled before the destructive urges which he sensed within the Victorian middle-classes, whom he said – 'in spite of their individual good nature and banality. I look upon as a most terrible and implacable force': The most refined and cultured people have a sort of Manichean hatred of the world (I use the word in its proper sense the home of man). Such people must be both the enemies of beauty and the slaves of necessity...

The utilitarian, competitive ethic he now saw as the ethic of Cain; he always known that it murdered art, he had come to understand that it murdered man's dignity as a creator in his daily labour, he now discovered that it could murder mankind. He spoke in a lecture of 'the strength of that tremendous organisation under which we live Rather than lose anything which really is its essence, it will pull the roof of the world down upon its head.'

He was consumed with the urgency of the socialist propaganda. If capitalism were not to be displaced by a clear-sighted constructive revolutionary movement, if it were to end in mere deadlock and blind insurrection, then 'the end, the fall of Europe, may be long in coming, but when it does, it will be far more terrible, far more confused and full of suffering than the period of the fall of Rome.'

In this tormented century such insights are worth more than a pedantic sneer. It is as if Morris had cast his eye over Gallipoli and Passchendaele, over purge and counter-purge, over concentration camps and scorched earth, over the tragedy of Africa and the other tragedies to come. At times one feels, indeed, that he deduced from the acquisitive ethic within class-divided society an Iron Law of Morality no less rigid than Lassalle's Iron Law of Wages. Into the maw of the Age of Commerce 'honour, justice, beauty, pleasure, hope, all must be cast ... to stave off the end awhile; and yet at last the end must come.' He might have found the proof the culminating logic, of such a Law in our own ingenious devices for annihilation.

Morris was sceptical – especially in his last years – as to the tendency towards the immiseration of the masses within capitalism. But he was convinced of the tendency towards the moral immiseration of the dominant classes. Whence was this terrible diagnosis derived? It came, by one road, from Carlyle's denunciation of a society where cash-payment is the sole nexus of man with man; by another road, from his own study of the conditions of nineteenth century labour and productive relations; by yet another, from Marx's moral indignation, and its foundation in the manuscripts of the early 1840s. Morris did not use the term 'alienation,' which has regained currency today; but he was – and remains – our greatest diagnostician of alienation, in terms of the concrete perception of the moralist, and within the context of a particular English cultural tradition. From those economic and social relationships, this moral logic must ensue.

And this logic demanded that the ethic of atomised, acquisitive society be opposed by the ethic of community. As between these two there could be no shadow of compromise. It was this logic which drove Morris to the street-corners, to play the fool's part as revolutionary agitator in the complacent streets of Gladstone's England. And here we meet with the second great irony of Morris' career. For a second time his rebellion met with success; and for a second time success was flavoured with gall. This is not to say that Morris' section of the movement – the Socialist League – was successful. It petered out into anarchist tomfoolery, leaving Morris stranded in his Hammersmith Socialist Society. But, indirectly, the propaganda helped to set a mass movement in motion: and, indeed, the direct political influence of Morris is often underrated. By the early 1890s men whom Morris had helped to convert were leading dynamic popular movements: Tom Mann and the new unions; Blatchford and *Clarion*; the Socialist Leaguers, Jowett and Maguire, who were architects of the Yorkshire ILP. And yet this was not the success for which Morris had looked.

Here lies the dilemma of the revolutionary within a society unripe for revolution. If he stands aside from the main currents of social change, he becomes purist, sectarian, without influence. If he swims with the current, he is swept downward by the flow of reformism and compromise. In the 1880s Morris had hoped that the propaganda would 'make Socialists ... cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics.'

At that time he was an uncompromising anti-parliamentarian. A parliamentary socialist party would, he thought, enter into a path of compromise and opportunism: it would 'fall into the error of moving earth and sea to fill the ballot boxes with Socialist votes which will not represent Socialist *men*.' The 'rollicking opportunism' of the Fabians, and especially of Sidney Webb, met with his absolute opposition. Webb's mistake (declared Morris) was 'to over-estimate the importance of the *mechanism* of a system of society apart from the *end* towards which it may be used.'

The *end* he himself always described as Communism. When, in the nineties, the whole movement set in the direction of piecemeal reform, eight-hour agitation and parliamentary action, he welcomed this as a necessary process in awakening the aspirations of the worker, But, in his last lectures, he asked repeatedly 'how far the betterment of the working people might go and yet stop short at last without having made any progress on the *direct* road to Communism'?

Whether ... the tremendous organization of civilized commercial society, is not playing the cat and mouse game with us socialists. Whether the Society of Inequality might not accept the equasi-socialist machinery ... and work it for the purpose of upholding that society in a somewhat shorn condition,

maybe, but a same one ... The workers better treated, better organized, helping to govern themselves, but with no more pretence to equality with the rich ... than they have now.

Herein lies his realism, overlapping his own circumstances, and searching the dilemmas of our own time with a moral insight so intense that it can be mistaken as callous. When the prospect of 'the capitalist public service brought to perfection' was put before him, he remarked that he 'would not walk across the street for the realisation of such an ideal.'

The nub of the question lies in the concept of community. Webb and the Fabians looked forward to Equality of Opportunity, within a competitive society. Morris looked forward to a Society of Equals, a socialist community. It is not a small difference that divides these concepts. In one – however modified – the ethic of competition, the energies of war. In the other, the ethic of co-operation, the energies of love. These two ethics Morris contrasted again and again by the names of False and True Society: False Society, or Commercial War: and 'that true society of loved and lover, parent and child, friend and friend which exists by its own inherent right and reason, in spite of what is usually thought to be the cement of society, arbitrary authority.'

It was the greatest achievement of Morris, in his full maturity, to bring this concept of community to the point of expression: to place it in the sharpest antagonism to his own society: and to embody it in imaginative terms and in the 'exalted brotherhood and hope' of the socialist propaganda. To this he summoned all his resources – his knowledge of medieval and of Icelandic society, his craftsman's insight into the processes of labour, his robust historical imagination. He had no time for noble savages, and even less for the Fabian nostrum of State bureaucracy. No amount of mechanical manipulation from above could engender the ethic of community; 'individual men' (he said) 'cannot shuffle off the business of life onto the shoulders of an abstraction called the State.'

Contrary to the prevalent opinion, Morris welcomed all machinery which reduced the pain and drudgery of labour; but decentralisation both of production and of administration he believed essential. In True Society, the unit of administration must be small enough for every citizen to feel a personal responsibility. The community of Communism must be an organic growth of mutual obligations, of personal and social bonds, arising from a condition of practical equality. And between False and True Society there lay, like a 'river of fire,' the Revolution. It was the work of a realist to indicate where that river ran, and to hand down to us a 'tradition of hope' as to the lands beyond those deadly waters.

In conclusion, if there is one part of my long study of Morris which – in the light of the political controversies of recent years – would seem to be a fruitful area of re-examination, it is in those passages where I seek to relate the basis of Morris' moral critique of society to the Marxist tradition. The question is complex, and leads into an intricate succession of definitions. I feel now – as I did then – that Morris' and Marx's critique of capitalism are complementary and reinforce each other. There can be no question of disassociating the two. Moreover, I would wish to retract nothing of what I have written of Morris' profound debt to the writings of Marx; these gave to his own criticism much of their form and some of their force.

But I have tended at certain points to suggest that Morris' moral critique of society is *dependent upon* Marx's economic and historical analysis, that the morality is in some ways secondary, the analysis of power and productive relationships primary. That is not way in which I look upon the question now. I see the two as inextricably bound together in the same context of social life. Economic relationships are at the same time moral relationships; relations of production are at the same time relations between people, of oppression or of co-operation; and there is a moral logic as well as an economic logic, which derives from these relationships. The history of the class struggle is at the same time the history of human morality. 'As I strove to stir up people to this reform,' Williams Morris wrote in his Preface to *Signs of Change*:

I found that the causes of the vulgarities of civilization lay deeper than I had thought, and little by little I was driven to the conclusion that all these uglinesses are but the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which we are forced by our present form of society ...

This is the phrase – 'innate moral baseness'. And if capitalist society in Britain today displays fewer of the extreme hardships and oppressions of Morris' day, the innate moral baseness of the acquisitive ethic, and of exploitive rather than co-operative social relationships, gives rise to new inhumanities, to the atomisation of social life, and to the greater international idiocies.

There is nothing here which contradicts Marx's analysis. What I am insisting on is not only that Morris' discoveries are complementary to those of Marx, but also that they are a *necessary* complement, that without this historical understanding of the evolution of man's moral nature his essential concept of the 'whole man' becomes lost, as it has so often been lost in the later Marxist tradition.

A generation is now arising to whom the moral critique of society makes a more direct appeal than the traditional analysis of economic causes. For this generation, Morris' writings have lost, in the passage of years, none of their pungency and force. And as socialists see Marx's genius in transforming the traditions of English economic theory and of German philosophy, so they should see how Morris transformed a great tradition of liberal and humane criticism of society, and how he brought this into the common revolutionary stream.

And if this achievement had been more widely recognised, perhaps fewer Marxists would have been found who could have supposed that the overthrow of capitalist class power and productive relationships could – by itself – lead on to the fruition of a Communist community; that, if the forms of economic ownership were right, the rest would follow. They would have realised – as Morris proclaimed in all his work – that the construction of a Communist community would require a moral revolution as profound as the revolution in economic and social power.

It is because William Morris, in imaginative and in day-to-day polemical writing alike, sought to body forth a vision of the actual social and personal relations, the values and attitudes consonant with a Society of Equals, that he remains the greatest moral initiator of Communism within our tradition.

A lecture to the Williams Morris Society, 1959.