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WILLIAM MORRIS'S "EQUALITY":  
A CRITICAL EDITION

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Morris delivered his talk titled "Equality" eight times between 30 September 1888 and 9 February 1890, in most cases to audiences of his fellow socialists. May Morris excerpted sections in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (2:197-203), but the essay has never been published in full, and remains in the British Library as Additional Manuscript 45,333, folios 214-32. Morris's message throughout was quite radical: only near-complete equality of condition and dispersion of power would sustain the integrity of the revolutionary ideals he and his comrades professed.

He began the essay with an admission of the impediments to progress: "There must be a long period of half formed aspirations, abortive schemes, doubtful experiments, and half measures interspersed with disappointment, reaction and apathy" (f.214). But he insisted that one such "half-formed aspiration" would have to be an earnest, unwavering desire to keep an originary ideal of "fellowship" in view. For

it is not a small change in life that we advocate but a very great one. That socialism will transform our lives and habits, and leave the greater part of the political[,] social and religious controversies that we are now so hot about forgotten[,] useless and lifeless[,] like wrecks stranded on a sea shore. (f.215)

Sustenance of "a society, a community, a commonwealth" (f.218) would also have to dispense with a "cast clout of feudalism[:] the creed of the superior person" (f.216), a treacherous mirage which had its origins, Morris believed, in

the assumption of the existence of a ... God of the universe[,] the proprietor of all things and persons, to be worshipped and not questioned ... whose irresponsible authority is reflected in the world of men by certain ... [lesser]

governors whose authority is delegated to them by that supreme slaveholder and employer of labour up in heaven. (f.218)

As for these lesser lords, he pointed out that

[t]he civilized workman ... besides keeping himself almost as well as the savage, can also keep a queen[,] a landed aristocracy[,] a house of lords and commons, an army and navy, annual piratical wars against harmless people capable of being robbed, an Irish constabulary, a Parnell Commission, a great population[,] in short[,] of harmful or useless persons[,] a mass of corruptions[,] luxury, waste and confusion such as the world has never seen before. (f.218)

(The world had, in fact.... But no matter.) All these lesser lords, as they passed across the scene, had also left most of their fellows "to put it mildly[,] insufficiently supplied with food, clothing and house-room" (f.220). Since these are the minimal preconditions of a flourishing human life, it is an indictment of us all – then and now – that their fulfilment remains a "half-formed aspiration."

Once these minimal preconditions have been met, thoughtful human animals naturally next yearn for "leisure[,] pleasure & education" (f.221). Art and creative labour, the subjects of several of Morris's most eloquent essays, he subsumed, characteristically, under "pleasure:" for "leisure after due work is both in itself pleasure and is also the parent of pleasure, which is really but the consciousness of a useful and manly [sic] life" (f.221).

If 'rights' are needs and opportunities for which a just social order would assume a collective responsibility, one such 'right' for Morris was a right to education, which he defined "as the opportunity for developing our faculties pleasurably" (f.221). He contrasted this opportunity with the worst aspects of his own formal education, whose "masters" had

robbed others of education which their folly has turned to an instrument of mocking cynicism baser than the grossest ignorance. I am ashamed to live; I am afraid to die, is the true watch-word of the last development of tyrannous inequality. (f.222)

It is natural to see in this passage a brief wince of personal pain.

More radically, Morris compared successful capitalists and their workers to "slaves and slaveholders" (f.223). He also characterized such "slavery" as a form of murder (a point to which he returned in his peroration); and responded briefly to claims that the market simply caters to peoples' needs and demands with three observations: 1) alleged "needs" for cheap goods are

the byproduct of poverty; anyone "forced to live in a tumbledown house" would also be "forced to desire an undue amount of ... plumbers' work" (f.223); 2) other alleged "needs" are fictitious; some "men cannot keep their self respect ... in a palace that would comfortably house a hundred families...." (f.224); and finally, 3) some forms of manufacture produce Ruskinian "illth": products which "exist ... for the sole purpose of making adulterants for various articles of consumption" (f.224), for example. (He may have had in mind the adulteration of staples such as milk, tea, and bread. It is interesting to consider what he would have thought of milk laced with hormones, antibiotics, and pesticides.) Worst still ("now comes the worst part of it") was and is the insidious trap of forced cooptation:

while the present system lasts we must go on ... [, for] if ... the rich leave off being luxurious, as some moralists (very naturally) bid them[,] they will by so doing throw the dependent workmen out of employment. (f.224; 225)

A deeply corrupt and corrupting social order of this sort might come to an end, he conjectured, as "happened at the time of the break up of the Roman empire[,] when] civilization was being first overwhelmed and at last resuscitated by healthy barbarism" (f.225) such as he had found (or thought he had found) in the Icelandic sagas or *The House of the Wolfings*, a historical romance he also drafted in 1888. But

where are the healthy barbarians to come from? From the democracy. I doubt it if things do not alter from what they have been; for ... though the workers are more useful than the idlers, yet they too are corrupted and degraded by their position. No one can expect to find the virtues of free men in slaves. No[,] if the present state of Society merely breaks up without a conscious effort at transformation, the end[,] the fall of Europe[,] may be long in coming, but when it does come it will be far more terrible[,] far more confused and full of suffering than the period of the fall of Rome. (f.225)

Even if one sets the downfall-of-Rome scenario aside, this was a bleak and prescient admission, for then and now, revolutionary opponents of a corrupt social order can only come from those who are in one way or another "corrupted" by it. This line of reflection prompted Morris to focus primarily in the last years of his life on the "making of socialists," as he called it in "Where Are We Now?"

In "Equality," his brush with despair eventuated in a persuasive historical hypothesis: resolute people in every age have achieved what they achieved when they were animated by egalitarian ideals, and undermined those achievements when they betrayed or corrupted them.

Even the Victorians, Morris acknowledged, had managed a few such advances – from him a striking admission – but only for a narrow subpopulation, and this was its betrayal:

we ... who have created the Equality of the Educated Middle-classes, who have forced the so-called aristocracy of birth to recognize their position, & to receive as equals the deft man of business[,] the learned scholar, the gifted professional man...? [But t]he ordinary labourer[, by contrast,] is in a worse position than a savage living in a good climate. (f.227)

The lies the “Educated Middle-classes” told themselves to justify this betrayal of enlightenment ideals – as they fondled the elitist Ring, so to speak – came in various guises. Pseudo-Darwinist “survival of the fittest” offered a scientific rationale for simple greed in its new *habillement* as an “ideal of commercial society which puts forward the acquirement of riches as the one aim of life” (f.228).

In the end, however, “society will explode volcanically with such a crash as the world has not yet witnessed” (f.228). For as competition, overproduction, and spoliation of the environment become more intense, corporations will form larger and larger cartels and compete more ruthlessly against their workers, in “an elaborate scheme for shutting down the safety-valve and sitting on the boiler” (f.229).

The sole glimmer of hope Morris found lay in new forms of international solidarity. The first – which might be called “workers without borders” – would require that we take seriously Eugène Pottier’s hope that “*l’internationale sera le genre humain*”:

for ... unless we recognize the unity of the working classes through the world and cast aside our old absurd jealousy of the workmen of other countries[,], all radical improvement in the position of the workers is hopeless. (f.229)

The second lay in the possibility that working-people would accept a need for ‘syndicalism’ – worker-controlled production and communally owned endeavour – on an international scale, and reconcile “the claim of the independence for the workman with the necessary acceptance of responsibility by him” (f.230).

Mindful of the contingent nature of these hopes, Morris appealed to us all to “be on the side of the change so that we may look at it not with fear but with hope,” and

understand the pleasures of fellowship[,] the joy of converse with our equals; the advantage of the give & take which ought always to be between two men

good[-]tempered and useful to society, whatever the different caliber of their minds may be.... Can we not change our ideal[?] (f.230)

Remembering the thousands of people who had gathered at the funeral of Alfred Linnell, the victim of police violence at “Bloody Sunday,” he observed that

[a]mong those poor people were[,] I know[,] many and many who might not perhaps have been made into great men, but who certainly might have been made into happy and useful ones; and I tell you plainly that we are criminals because they have not been so made, and if the consequences of our crime overtakes us, who shall pity us[?] (f.231)

He then posed the following question, a kind of socialist retort to Dostoyevsky’s parable of the ‘Grand Inquisitor’:

Or do you think, as some do, that it is not ill that a hundred thousand harmless people should be boiled down in the fire of misery to make one single glorious great man?... I would rather have a hundred thousand happy persons than one genius made up of murder. (f.231)

[M]orality[,] her eyes cleared by the advance of necessity[,] is beginning to remember the ancient legend of the first murderer, and the terrible answer to his vile sneer. Am I my brother[']s keeper? (f.232)

The “answer,” in the “ancient legend,” was “*What hast thou done? His blood cries out to me from the ground*” (Genesis 4.9).

In “Equality” Morris tried to identify dilemmas honest seekers after social justice must confront, describe some of the shape-changing capacities of political manipulation, and offer rationales for his ‘obstinate refusal’ to embrace “the degrading game of politics.” These imperatives were openly utopian, but were not naive. He was not, for example, a “little-England” socialist. He had entered political life through an anti-war movement, and understood all too well the atavistic force of nativism and chauvinism, and its power to corrode fragile ideals of social solidarity. Nor – as his historical allusions strongly suggested – did he underestimate the gradients of ruthlessness, cynical brutality, and diversionary cunning which may corrupt anyone who accedes to power.

For the ‘powerless,’ after all, are *powerless*. It would be paradoxical (or perhaps simply naive) to assert that powerless people – many of whom are also desperate and confused – have the power to organize *themselves*. But organization by *others* may create a new class of powerholders, some of

whom might well decide to purge their more principled rivals.

Finally, of course, Morris – an agnostic – understood that ‘the new society’ is a secular counterpart of an elusive but egalitarian religious ideal: that of a counterfactual “realm of ends,” in which “the crooked will be made straight” (cf. Kant’s “*krummes Holz der Menschheit*”); “the last shall be first, and the first last” (all will be truly *equal*); and “those who hunger after [justice] will (therefore) be satisfied.”

But what of “the Great Change” (“*And we shall be changed ...*”) in *News from Nowhere*? It was, I believe, at least in part a beautifully crafted counterfactual parable, which Morris offered as “a vision rather than a dream”: a thought-experimental “green and pleasant land” in which the worst, for once, might “lack all conviction,” and a stable, communal, post-industrial society might evolve.

Be that as it may, Morris’s reminder in “Equality” that equality of condition is a precondition for all forms of “fellowship” resonated deeply with an observation he had formulated two years earlier in *A Dream of John Ball*:

I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name. (31)

Perhaps the “other name” for the “thing ... they meant” was (and still remains) “*equality*.”

#### The Text

“Equality” is the eleventh of the 23 essays on socialism preserved in the May Morris Bequest (B.L. Add. M.S. 45,333, ff.214-32). Morris drafted his manuscript in ink on large ruled pages, and used spaces of varying lengths to mark pauses. I have preserved these pauses, and marked with brackets any changes to his original punctuation.

The following excerpts were printed in May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1936), 197-203:

folios 214-15: “It is usual ... on a sea shore.”

folio 216: “But remember ... suffers by it.”

folio 217: “Having said so much ... forgo his desire.”

folios 218-19: “as the standard ... to his capacities.”

folio 225: “if the present state ... fall of Rome.”

folios 227-28: “The inequality of our days ... not yet witnessed.”

folio 231: “all those clevernesses ... useful ones;” ... “Or do you ... murder.”

folio 232: “necessity on the one hand ... keeper?”

#### “Equality” [William Morris]

[folio 214] It is usual when a Socialist is addressing an audience of those who wish to know what his Socialism means, to touch lightly on the aim that Socialism has in view and to dwell chiefly on the means by which that aim is to be reached. The speaker assumes (usually I am glad to think with reason) that his audience are sufficiently with him to sympathise with his wish to better the present condition of affairs, and are eager to know what process he proposes to them as the means for the bettering of the life of the great mass of the population; it is natural for people to say to an earnest reformer, tell us what it is that you wish to have done at once, and then we will look at the matter; and all the more natural perhaps when the aim of the speaker is far reaching and all inclusive, when in fact he is preaching a change in the basis of society and not a mere palliation of its worst evils: because people say, and reasonably, we cannot be expected to change that basis suddenly, to go to sleep on Saturday night in our present condition & wake up on Monday morning with the revolution accomplished<sup>1</sup> and everything going smoothly with a contented population round about us. There must be a long period of half[-]formed aspirations, abortive schemes and half measures interspersed with doubtful experiments, disappointment, reaction, and apathy before we get anywhere near the beginning of the obvious and dramatic change which people know as revolution, and it is a matter of course that people should ask the would-be revolutionists what the first step is to be, and that socialist lecturers generally spend a great part of their lecturing time in showing what the first step may be and hold keen argument about it with their audiences.

You cannot however fail to agree with me when I say that not even the first step can be taken until the advocates of a complete change have managed to persuade a sufficient number of people that it is necessary and should be a change of a certain kind. It is true that there are some [215] people of a timid or very opportunist mind who press on us the necessity of leading people on by little and little, concealing the object they have in view, until people are so far committed to the steps to be taken towards it that they cannot draw back again. We are told for instance not to use the word Socialism, but rather to tell people that what we want to lead them into is a kind of advanced democracy and so forth: nay one quite ingenious author has even started the curious paradox<sup>2</sup> that it is possible to be a good Socialist and a good Tory at one and the same time.

Now passing by the question whether or not this is quite honest[,] I do not think it is very effective strategy. If you want to convert people to a new and unpopular creed that obviously has no immediate material advantages, no

loaves and fishes, to offer you must not expect at first to get hold of persons whose intelligence is not somewhat above the average; and to such extra intelligent persons your opportunism will be too transparent for deception; so I think it is always best to face the matter from the first, and to say right out that democracy or radicalism is not incipient socialism although the two things have something in common; that it is not a small change in life that we advocate, but a very great one. That socialism will transform our lives and habits, and leave the greater part of the political[,] social and religious controversies that we are now so hot about forgotten[,] useless and lifeless like wrecks stranded on a sea shore.

Let me begin then and not end by telling you what the nature of my ideal as a Socialist is, an ideal which I believe to be really held by all socialists though some may be unconscious of it, and which the very first steps of conscious Socialism will inevitably lead to directly; it is complete equality of condition for all. That is to my mind the aim of Socialism stated in the fewest possible words: any sacrifice that [216] is necessary for its attainment is worth making: no further mastery over the powers of nature that we may gain can be a substitute for it; without it freedom[,] education[,] happiness, in one word[,] progress is impossible; whatever we have done is done, but this lies ahead, and we must attain it, there is no second course open to us; whatever great change as yet undreamed of lies before the world must be reached through this: reaction is an empty word in this matter for a thing which is not and cannot be.

That is my faith: now let me try to give you some reasons for my holding it.

But remember before I go on that I have just admitted that there must be a transitional period before this ideal can be realised; a transition during which democracy or radicalism will work itself out by performing its ultimate function of getting rid of the fag end of the idea surviving from the epoch before this, the feudal epoch, of a hierarchy of divinely appointed government; which idea takes refuge now in places quite unexpected by the radicals of 50 years ago in the form of the claim of an aristocracy of intellect to govern the average man<sup>3</sup> for his own good even if he suffers by it. It is the flourishing of this cast clout of feudalism, the creed of the superior person, which has given rise to the delusion that there is a reaction in progress in favour of a kind of refined (but exceedingly corrupt) Toryism, and which bears the same relation to the old Toryism as a rotten moldy apple does to the unripe fruit hanging on the tree: it has more flavour in it – but ugh! it is nasty.

I think one reason why we continue to be plagued with it is because radicalism has been somewhat hampered by the growth of socialistic ideas and in fact scarcely exists in a genuine & intelligent condition except in

conjunction with them. However I think that the democratic idea, even as socialism grows, will gather strength until equality is ready to supersede it, and so sweep away this last feeble recrudescence of Toryism and clear the ground for the true Socialism of equality and the new world which it will bring about. Meantime[,] you see I have [217] no quarrel with radicalism, so long as it is regarded as the last of the old and not the first of the new order of things: when it has fulfilled its function partly by its own strength and partly in alliance with Socialism it will quietly disappear[,] not because it has been defeated, but because it has triumphed, and in consequence been transformed into Socialism.

Having said so much I must now tell you what I mean by equality, so that we may not begin by a misunderstanding. I have advisedly used the phrase equality of condition; for of course I admit that it is [no] more possible that men should be equal in capacity or desires or temperament than that they should be equal in stature or weight: but in fact if there were not this inequality in this sense I doubt if we could have equality of condition; I think in that case we should begin again to create artificial inequalities and so get back to something like our present condition. But the variety of capacity & gifts and to a certain extent of desires is just what will enable us in the long run to live without competition, that is to say[,] without forcibly taking from others to aggrandize ourselves; since if our labour were properly organized it would be easy to produce enough of all ordinary objects of desire to satisfy the needs of all; and as for extra-ordinary objects of desire[,] the innate variety of disposition would prevent competition when life was easy enough to allow each man to sacrifice something he desired little for something he desired much without forcing someone else to forego his desire.

Now I must make the assertion, which I have made elsewhere, that it is the object of true Society to prevent any one of its members from being injured by any other or by all the others; or to put it in another way[,] to satisfy the needs of each and all so long as they do not forfeit their rights by behaving in an unsocial manner.

You will find that if on consideration you do not assent to this proposition, your dissent must be founded on the crudest Toryism, that you do in fact assert the necessity of slavery in some form or other.

[218] For consider whether it is possible to call any collection of people working together a society if their efforts are not directed towards the common good: you will find that this idea is obvious even in the words by which we have to designate groups of men so working together, a society, a community, a commonwealth[,] all these imply the fact of working together for the good of each and all; and I repeat[,] the opposing idea is that of a hierarchical government. An idea founded on the assumption of the existence

an arbitrary[,] irresponsible God of the universe[,] the proprietor of all things and persons, to be worshipped and not questioned: a being whose responsible authority is reflected in the world of men by certain other responsible governors whose authority is delegated to them by that supreme avenger and employer of labour up in Heaven.

As to whether Society can satisfy people's needs, it is obvious that it can [so] according to some standard or another: the savage running wild in the woods does at least live, although he has scarcely attained the most elementary form of cooperation: as the standard of livelihood rises the difficulty of satisfying its needs by no means rises with it, on the contrary cooperation, gradually increasing[,] as it makes new objects of desires so it makes it easier to attain them: the savage can keep himself poorly; the civilized workman working under a system of cooperation so involved & elaborate that it is a standing miracle, and aided also by miraculous machinery, besides keeping himself almost as well as the savage, can also keep a queen[,] a landed aristocracy[,] a house of Lords and Commons, an army and navy, annual piratical wars against harmless people capable of being robbed, an Irish constabulary, Parnell Commission, a great population[,] in short[,] of harmful or useless persons[,] a mass of corruptions[,] luxury, waste and confusion such as the world has never seen before. In sober earnest all these artificial wants and wastes our labour produces, and no man who [219] has ever thought about the matter at all can doubt that a man working in civilization with cooperation and by means of machinery and workshop organization can produce more than enough to keep himself in mere necessities, or that if his labour were properly organized toward the production of useful things there would be enough wealth produced to enable everyone to live comfortably except those who were criminally idle. If this is the case it is clearly owing to some huge blunder that our present gross inequalities exist; it is owing to the fact that our Society has missed the aim of true Society, which I must now again assert to be the satisfaction of the wants of every-body in the community in return for the exercise of their faculties for the benefit of the community. Or as the formula of us Communists has it: To everyone according to his needs, from everyone according to his capacities.

Now what are the needs of a human being living in a civilized society which like ours has gone far on the road to the subjugation of external nature to the necessities and desires of man?

Perhaps you will not quarrel with me for words used for convenience rather than for accuracy, when I say that the needs of men may be divided into two groups, necessities for the body and necessities for the mind. Do you not think once more that a true Society ought to satisfy those two groups of needs according to the measure of its aggregate wealth? The capacities[,]

dispositions and desires of men are various[,] as I have already admitted; but some desires are common to all absolutely. All men must eat and be sheltered from the weather by clothes and housing: people vary indeed as to the amount and kind of food and shelter which they require[,] but they all want not only these things but they want [them] in due quantity and of due quality, or else [220] as a matter of fact they have not got them but only makeshifts for them: here surely the rule for Society is clear: to each according to his needs: if you give him less than his needs you starve him; and why, for whose benefit? For the sake of giving someone else more than he needs: is that a benefit to him? Surely not; it is a curse, as many a rich man knows. Well[,] does our society satisfy even the most elementary wants of all its members? You know very well it does not: you know very well that now while I am speaking there are many thousands of people in this country, the richest country that ever has been, who[,] to put it mildly[,] are insufficiently supplied with food[,] clothing and house-room; and if you think that this lack[,] this misery[,] this murder can be of any benefit to anyone – well I have done with you – But of course you do not and cannot think so: there are few here of the well-to-do[,] I believe sincerely[,] who would not willingly give up at once the greater part of their superfluities if they knew that by so doing they would be able to extinguish abject poverty for others, while they themselves remained well-to-do. That you cannot thus renounce your luxuries for the benefit of the miserable is really the key to the whole mystery of iniquity which I am considering, as later on I hope to be able to show you.

Well[,] this much for the bodily needs, as I have called them[,] and I repeat that these could be fully satisfied for every person living in our community if our system of the production and the distribution of wealth were put on a proper basis; and I must say in the face of all the misery and suffering I see about me[,] the satisfaction of these elementary bodily needs is the first thing that I think of: because if the whole of our population were well fed[,] clothed and housed in twenty years time the face of the country would be changed, and our people would be a new race [221] as much superior to the present one as they are to the [Digger?] Indians.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless I think you will all allow that man has other absolute needs besides the merest bodily ones which a rich society is bound to satisfy or be convicted of being an imposture. These are broadly speaking[,] Leisure, pleasure, and Education: the attainment of these along with the attainment of the material needs may in fact mean the attainment of the life of a man, and in some proportion they are possible of attainment by even a very poor community; a community in fact which has to struggle sorely to supply its most elementary needs may[,] and generally does[,] take care that at least it shall not lack leisure[,] pleasure & education; but this it does and can do only when inequality of condition is

reduced to a minimum. In any case I assert that then three things are absolutely necessary to the life of a free man: I need not ask if the whole population has leisure[,] pleasure & education[,] as it obviously has not; but again I ask[,] if you take them away from one man, why do you do it, and for whose benefit? Cannot every person have these necessaries also? Yes[,] certainly he can if labour is so duly organized amongst us that each and all are engaged in doing some useful work for the community & their livelihood is not precarious: for if all work at things useful no one need do more than enough work; and leisure is attained; and leisure after due work is both in itself pleasure and is also the parent of pleasure, which is really but the consciousness of a useful and manly life. No less do leisure & pleasure between them make education possible, for what is education but the opportunity for developing our faculties pleurably; believe me there is no education save this which is anything else than a mockery.

But if you take away these mental necessaries from people, for whose benefit do you do it? For nobody's benefit. Look round you and note the use which the rich make of the blessings which [222] they have filched from the poor! How does it benefit them that they have robbed others of leisure when all they can do is to turn it into vacuous idleness; that they have robbed others of pleasure that in their foolish hands has turned to mere weariness & boredom; that they have robbed others of education which their folly has turned to an instructed mocking cynicism baser than the grossest ignorance. I am ashamed to live; I am afraid to die, is the true watch-word of the last development of tyrannous inequality; a glorious result truly of the modern reaction against the somewhat mechanical materialism of the last generation of democracy.

Here is the plain truth; the results of labour employed on the gifts of nature must be consumed in some way: there are in fact but two ways of consuming them: the one way is to use them, the other is to waste them. If you use them[,] by their means you add to life and the joys of life; if you waste them you sicken life and destroy its joys: but they can only be used by those who need them, if you hand them over to those who do not need them they must waste them, they have no choice. And please to consider what that means; it means the waste of labour, that is of men's lives. In every community there is a certain amount of potential wealth: what is that possibility of wealth? [L]abour, and raw material to exercise it on[,] i.e. men and the earth and its gifts. How can such a community thrive? Surely by using the labour and the natural gifts to produce what is necessary and desirable for men & women – and nothing else. Is it not clear that if you employ that labour and that raw material in producing what is unnecessary & undesirable you are wasting them irremediably? You will say no doubt that the only test for this

necessity and desirability is the test of the market; that people will buy what they want. In a manner [this is] true, but only true where there [is] [223] absolute freedom, and there can be no freedom except among equals: in our present Society people are forced into conditions which force them to desire wares not desirable in themselves. If you are forced to live in a tumbledown house you are also forced to desire an undue amount of tilers['] & plumbers['] work: but, granted reasonable conditions the tilers' & plumbers' services should not thrust aside those of the baker and the butcher; it is only misfortune[,] ill-management[,] in a word[,] the compulsion of circumstances that makes them do so: and in the great case of Society which I am considering we ourselves have made the circumstances and are ourselves responsible for their continuance.

Perhaps you will think that I am flying in the face of scientific economics when I make the assertion that what the brutal man desires is not desirable although it may be marketable, that what the fool, what the rogue desires, is not desirable: but political economy[,] remember[,] does not concern itself with what ought to be, but what is, and what will result from it, granting certain conditions of life. It says[,] suppose a certain part of the population are brutes[,] fools and rogues[,] certain goods in certain properties must be produced; but it does not say (and if it did we should not listen to it) that the workers must be condemned for ever to slave for brutes[,] fools and rogues two thirds at least of their working hours. Once more if there were no artificial rules which forced men in whole classes into a position in which the due development of their faculties is hopeless[,] this test of the market would be near enough for practical purposes. But as a matter of fact there are such artificial regulations into vacuous life, dishonesty, and brutality, and [these] therefore force them to waste the lives of men and the resources of nature in ministering to brutality[,] folly and roguery. For in short we are in our present Society divided sharply into slaves and slaveholders; and whatever a slave may in the abstract desire, for market purposes [224] he can only be said to desire what he has some chance of getting[,] i.e. slave-wares[,] and these slave-wares are what the workers make for themselves; if they were free they would not make them because they would not need them. E.g. a friend of mine told me he had recently visited a great chemical works somewhere in England; these works[,] most admirably & scientifically managed[,] existed for the sole purpose of making adulterants<sup>5</sup> for various articles of consumption: here is an industry which must surely be forced on people by the surrounding circumstances; wares so made were certainly not needed by anybody; the labour on them is pure waste[,] to say the least of it.

On the other hand all the thousand & one luxuries of the proprietary or slave-holding class are not in themselves desirable[,] however marketable

they may be; they must consume the wares made for their idle lives, if they did not the whole affair would come to an end, as they would not be able to employ[,] i e to feed their slaves: but these wares are not really usable: men cannot keep their self respect and be surrounded by flunkies, and make a pretense of feasting every day, and live two or three unhappy wretches of them in a palace that would comfortably house a hundred families, all this kind of thing is only waste[,] not use[,] of the results of labour. And only think how frightful the waste of it is. As we now living indeed may perhaps live to discover when some war or other earthquake of the market has upset all our calculations as to the exchange of useless articles against useful, and we find out that a warehouse full of silk velvet or kid gloves won[']t buy us a few hundred bushels of wheat, and our fleet of gorgeously appointed steam yachts have to be turned into very inefficient fishing smacks. But now comes the worst part of it – that while the present system lasts we must go on [225] with it. If we are determined to sustain a society based on inequality we must use the necessary instruments for doing so. Those instruments are the continued dependence of the workers on the employers, and the competitive market for forcing wares on people who either do not or should not need them. As long as the workmen are dependent they have no chance of raising their condition as a class: the non-socialist professor [Caird?]<sup>6</sup> says this and echoes what we socialists have to say on the subject: but the dependent workmen being poor are bad customers to the workmen; they can buy nothing [except] dependent workmen's wares. Neverthe[le]ss the competitive market must not be allowed to languish on account of their poverty; what is needed to supplement this poverty? The waste of the rich: if therefore the rich leave off being luxurious, as some moralists (very naturally) bid them[,] they will by so doing throw the dependent workmen out of employment; and what can happen then? That must mean the employers ceasing to employ, failing those who are dependent upon them; and what do you think is likely to happen then? That might happen which happened at the time of the break up of the Roman empire[,] a long agony during which civilization was being first overwhelmed and at last resuscitated by healthy barbarism.

And yet I don't know; where are the healthy barbarians to come from? From the democracy. I doubt it if things do not alter from what they have been; for surely all I have [been] saying tends to show that though the workers are more useful than the idlers, yet they too are corrupted and degraded by their position. No one can expect to find the virtues of free men in slaves.

No[,] if the present state of Society merely breaks up without a conscious effort at transformation, the end[,] the fall of Europe[,] may be long in coming, but when it does come it will be far more terrible[,] far more confused and full of suffering than the period of the fall of Rome.

[226] That is the reason why I am here speaking to you about equality; I do not speak to you about it as a mere abstraction, but as a thing quite practical, and indeed the only practical political matter, that which lies at the root of all our politics. I can see looking back to past history that whatever has been achieved in the arts and in letters, in all those delights of life which[,] rather than arbitrary coercion, are the true bond of Society, Equality has been a necessary element. The life of the ancient Greeks with its Equality of free citizens gave us that brilliant epoch of thought[,] literature & art on which the world has lived ever since. The Equality of the ancient yeoman citizens of Ancient Rome gave us the organization of the family & the state which still abides with us.<sup>7</sup> The Equality of the g[u]ildsmen of Medieval Europe has given birth to our own society with all its comfort of middle-class life and its triumphs of science and the organization of labour.

You will say; but all these equalities were in existence side by side with hideous inequalities, tyranny which now for many years we have agreed to curse though we are not so eager to curse that amongst which we ourselves live. Yes[,] that is true, but note the lesson which that points out to us. Greek citizenship was supplemented by Greek slavery, and in consequence was unstable: the egotism of people who had their rough work done for them by mere chattel-slaves overthrew the patriotism of the city which was the real religion of the Greeks.

Roman citizenship was supplemented by an iron chattel slavery worse than that of Greece; and as it developed, and the place of the yeoman cultivating his narrow patrimony with the help of his sons & his household slaves was taken by the great capitalist landowner with his stewards & gangs of most miserable slaves, so Rome staggered on towards its final corruption [227] and after a long period during which it was[,] as it were[,] the mere jail of civilization[,] fell before the onset of the free tribesmen who bore with them a rougher yet a purer form of that equality which had once made Rome great.

No less the g[u]ildsmen of the M[iddle] A[ges,] though free in their work and within their city walls, had not won political freedom, and their condition of life also was lamentably unstable, and fell before the bureaucracy which was the inevitable outcome of a feudal hierarchy which had outlived the possibility of the performance of its functions.

And we in our turn who have created the Equality of the Educated Middle-classes, who have forced the so-called aristocracy of birth to recognize their position, & to receive as equals the deft man of business[,] the learned scholar, the gifted professional man, do we think that we can escape the doom of inequality, and that our society can be stable when it is founded on the misery and discontent of the slaves whom we are gradually educating?

No[,] we shall go the way of the societies turned tyrannies which were



before us. And if you ask me how it will come about[,] I think I can see the logical outcome of it, although the actual historical event no man can forecast.

The inequality of our days differs chiefly in two respects from that of the ancient world: In the first place it is more real and trenchant than that of the ancient and still more of the medieval world: the ancients lived simply, the medievals rudely, but we live delicately & luxuriously: there is far more comfort or luxury to be shared between us all than there was in times past.

But this extra wealth is not shared at all amongst the lower classes; the ordinary labourer is in a worse position than a savage living in a good climate; and consequently he is an inferior animal to that savage. On the other hand as far as material advantages go the well-to-do man has advanced [228] enormously on his forerunners[,] the citizen of the ancient world and the noble of the medieval world. For the well-to-do man the world has progressed; for the labourer it has not. We have exaggerated inequality: that is the first difference. The second is that the inequality of the older world was arbitrary on the surface. Ours appears at first sight to be the result of natural causes. There is no legal arbitrary obstacle to a labourer raising himself into the privileged class, and this fact is the safety-valve to our society of inequality, which without it would at once explode in mere violence. But this safety valve is the creation of the ideal of commercial society which puts forward the acquirement of riches as the one aim of life; i e[,] bids every man struggle to attain a position of social uselessness as the reward of labour: which means in plain terms that our Society ignores all society but that of club-law:

That those shall take who have the power

And those shall keep who can.<sup>8</sup>

Now this safety[-]valve[,] called in the ignorant[,] illogical[,] sham scientific jargon of the day, the law of the selection of the fittest<sup>9</sup> applied to society, is being at present attacked by the two great forces which rule the world, Necessity and Morality.<sup>10</sup> And I say once more that if we pay no heed to the matter and give it all up into the hands of necessity, Society will explode volcanically with such a crash as the world has not yet witnessed. Competition is the instrument by which our society is worked, not free competition of course, but competition among the privileged on the one hand & competition among the wage-slaves on the other. But competition is only another name for war, and it is of the very nature of war to exhaust itself, which competition is now doing, to the great damage of the above-mentioned safety-valve. Competition is getting so fierce among the privileged that they are reducing profits to a minimum, and as a result they are abolishing more and more the small steps to great fortunes which [229] once gave opportunities to the workers to rise out of[,] i e[,] to betray[,] their own class; nay to such a pitch is this getting that as you know, the last new discovery of

commercialism is an elaborate scheme for shutting down the safety-valve and sitting on the boiler. The rings [?] and trusts which are now being elaborated<sup>11</sup> form between them an event which crowns the once despised Socialist with the wreath of triumph[;] they indicate the decrepitude of Compe[ti]tion and are a forecast of its fall, and as a Socialist I wish their promoters complete & speedy success.

Now as competition among the privileged is growing sick[,]<sup>12</sup> so also among the workers it is being discarded. Competition for employment among the workers received its first check at the hands of trades unionism, which claims that there shall be some relation between the profits of the masters & the wages of the men. That was the first step in combination; but it was a very incomplete one, because it recognized the dependence of the men on the masters, and dependents cannot dictate to their masters the terms of their slavery. But this older form of limited trades-unionism is, I firmly believe, now in process of transformation into a new unlimited combination of the workers from which everything may be hoped. I must refer you to the International Congress just ended in London<sup>13</sup> as a very encouraging sign of the times: for in the first place unless we recognize the unity of the working classes throughout the world and cast aside our old absurd jealousy of the workmen of other countries[,] all radical improvement in the position of the workers is hopeless; and in the second place at that Congress there was a general recognition of the fact of that unhappy struggle of the classes which is the inevitable result of inequality[,] and which it is our business to bring to an end.

While therefore competition among the privileged classes is being found out not to pay, among the working-classes it is giving place to combination[,] the end of which is [230] the claim of the independence for the workman with the necessary acceptance of responsibility by him. This claim[,] joined to the failure of monopolist competition[,] will bring about practical Equality amongst us; and no price is too high to pay for this blessing; but as it is clear that it must come through Commercial ruin unless we organize ourselves for the new world of production before it comes, unless we lend ourselves consciously to bring about the change, we shall have to pay a high price.

For my part[,] unless we face the situation from a moral as well as an economical position I do not think we can do this. Our wills must be on the side of the change so that we may look at it not with fear but with hope. Even apart from the danger of it, the threat of ruin in it, are we contented to meet at every turn those savages of civilization I have spoken of? Do we not understand the pleasures of fellowship[,] the joy of converse with our equals; the advantage of the give & take which ought always to be between two men good[-]tempered and useful to society, whatever the different caliber of their

minds may be? If we do not[,] we are not men but workmen or shopmen or businessmen[;] the man in us is cumbered & half destroyed. Can we not change our ideal[?] Surely to have the privilege of being no longer useful is a poor reward for past usefulness. Surely the continued development of our faculties is a better & happier ideal; nor need you think that this means a life of ceaseless unrest; for in your very work itself will be rest when once you have full opportunity for the pleasurable exercise of your faculties, and your obvious rest that the wear of life compels you to take will be fertile with thought and happy contemplation: will not this make happiness for you this combination of happy work and fruitful rest? Does it not already to some of you make happiness? To all those I would especially appeal to help to spread the happiness which they themselves have gained. And to [231] those who have it not, who have never had the chance of having it, I appeal also, and bid them claim their birthright of happy work and fruitful rest with no doubtful voice. Remember that he who allows himself to be robbed makes the robber and must accept part of the guilt of the robbery: a rebellious slave[,] even to his master[,] is less of an evil than an obedient one.

I should like you sometimes when you are looking at an assembly of the lower, the lowest classes, such as I saw many many thousands of them at Linnell[']s funeral,<sup>14</sup> to ask who made all these poor people what they [are] and to consider what they might have been, and not to evade the question with some tag about selection of the fittest, but to consider what you would have been if you had been born in such a condition, among such surroundings, where would be all those clevernesses[,] gifts and virtues on which you much pride yourself. Among those poor people were[,] I know[,] many and many who might not perhaps have been made into great men, but who certainly might have been made into happy and useful ones; and I tell you plainly that we are criminals because they have not been so made, and if the consequences of our crime overtakes us; who shall pity us[?]

Or do you think, as some do, that it is not ill that a hundred thousand harmless people should be boiled down on the fire of misery to make one single glorious great man? I honestly believe that there are people who are fools enough to think that. I answer plainly[,] great men are nourished on no such soup, though prigs may be; it is the happiness of the people that produces the blossom of genius. But even if it were so I should say that I would rather have a hundred thousand happy persons than one genius made up of murder. That is the word[,] my friends; the splendid position of the well-to-do classes is based on the murder of the wage-slaves, and a useless murder too since we all of us might be wealthy if we put from us the [232] waste of inequality. This miserable condition of things will last no longer than the time when people on both sides begin to be conscious of it; and they

are beginning: necessity on the one hand is as I have said turning the competition of the privileged into combination against the interests of the public, and at the same time is turning the competition of the worker into combination for the interests of labour[,] i e all honest men: and on the other hand morality[,] her eyes cleared by the advance of necessity[,] is beginning to remember the ancient legend of the first murderer, and the terrible answer to his vile sneer.<sup>15</sup> Am I my brother[']s keeper?

### Critical Notes

1. This conjectural fantasy forms the frame of *News from Nowhere*, written two years later.
2. Morris reacted strongly against the position, taken by some members of the Social Democratic Federation, that aiding the Tories in electoral contests might help defeat Liberals and thus contribute to the rise of Socialism. This sentence may be an indirect reference to Henry Hyde Champion, who had shocked many fellow socialists by allegedly accepting "Tory gold" to help split the Liberal vote for an 1885 election; Champion's publications to date had included *The Truth About the Unemployed* (1886), *Wrongs that Require Remedies* (1887), *Co-operation vs. Socialism: being a report of a debate between Mr. H.H. Champion and Mr. Benjamin Jones ...* (1887), and *Social-Democracy in Practice* (1887). Another candidate for this reference may have been S.D.F. leader Henry Myers Hyndman, who before his conversion to socialism had been characterized as a "Tory radical," and whom Morris repeatedly accused of political opportunism and lack of realism. In addition to editing and writing for *Justice*, Hyndman was the author of *The Historical Basis of Socialism* (1883), *The Coming Revolution in England* (1884), *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (1884), *Socialism and Slavery* (1884), *Will Socialism Benefit the English People?* (1884), *Socialism versus Smithism* (1884), *The Chicago Riots and the Class War in the United States* (1886), and *A Commune for London* (1887), as well as several books denouncing British policy in India.
3. Here Morris may be aiming at the Positivists and Fabians, as well as perhaps H.M. Hyndman, known for his gentleman's manner and autocratic approach to organizing workmen.
4. Word is written over and unclear. "Digger Indians" was a now-discredited term for several groups of Native Americans, including tribes in Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, Nevada and central California.
5. John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), notes that after the Sale of Food and Drugs Act of 1875, an 1877 sampling of food throughout the country revealed that 19.2% of the random samples analyzed were adulterated (263).
6. This may be Edward Caird, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow and author of *The Social Philosophy and Religion of Comte* (1885). Morris may have been aware of Caird's book through his conversations with his Positivist friend, Vernon Lushington. For a discussion of Positivism in England, see Martha Vogeler, *Frederic Harrison: The Vocations of a Positivist* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).
7. Morris would have been aware of Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, published in German in 1884 and reviewed by Eleanor Marx for *Commonweal* in April 1885.
8. The epigraph to Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* (1817): "The ancient rule, the good old plan, / That those shall take who have the power / And those shall keep who can."

9. The “survival of the fittest” was a phrase first used by Herbert Spenser after reading Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Its proponents argued that competition among males was necessary for human progress, that only the relatively favoured should be encouraged to reproduce, and in some cases, that attempts to improve the situation of the poor were genetically counterproductive. More humane interpreters attempted to broaden the notion of “fittest” to include skills of social feeling and cooperation – Peter Kropotkin, for example, in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902).

10. A Morrisian variant on the Hegelian/Marxist tenet that history is dominated by the dialectical forces of “necessity” and “freedom.”

11. Morris here observes a phenomenon recorded by historians. According to Derrick Murphy et al, “Although some historians have seen 1889 as a turning point for the development of British trade unionism, the strike victories of 1888-89 were of limited success. During the 1890s the employers began to fight back. In 1890 the Shipping Federation was created to help break the hold of the Dockers’ Union. In 1893 the National Free Labour Association was able to provide blackleg labour to the Federation and other employers.... The success of the employers in the docks was matched by similar developments in the cotton and coalmining industries. If 1889-91 was a period of rapid growth for trade unions, the 1890s proved to be a period of retreat” (Derrick Murphy, Richard Staton, Patrick Walsh-Atkins, and Neil Whiskerd, *Britain 1815-1918* [London: Collins Educational, 1998], 277). Through his familiarity with his family’s investments in the Devon Great Consols, Morris would also have known of the Association of Smelters, which had organized the Devonshire and Cornwall mining companies through the mid-nineteenth century to fix wages and set prices “in restraint of trade” (J.C. Goodridge, “Tamar View, The Horn of Plenty and the Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company,” *Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science*, 140 [2008]: 238).

12. During the fall of 1888 Morris frequently mentions the rise of employer cartels in his “Notes on News” for *Commonweal*, commenting on a Salt Trust and Coal Trust (22 September 1888: 297; Salmon 462-63); the Salt Trust (6 October 1888: 314; Salmon 467); and again on the Coal Trust (27 October 1888: 338; Nicholas Salmon, ed., *Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal 1885-1890* [Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996], 472).

13. Morris refers to the International Trades Union Congress in “Notes on News” in the *Commonweal*, stating that this “took the course which might be expected: that is to say, it was a contest between the reactionary trades unionism of the ordinary English workmen and the Socialism more or less pronounced of their Continental brethren” (17 November 1888: 361; Salmon 483). In “Equality” Morris stresses the positive aspects of this meeting rather than his disappointment with English trades unions.

14. Alfred Linnell, a passerby, was one of three persons killed by police attempting to disband a demonstration in Trafalgar Square in favour of free speech and against a further Coercion Bill for Ireland, on 13 November 1887, “Bloody Sunday” (a fourth was killed in another police action the following week). At Linnell’s funeral on 18 December, Morris’s “A Death Song for Alfred Linnell” was sung:

We asked them for a life of toilsome earning,  
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;  
We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning;  
We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.  
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,  
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

15. In Genesis 4.9, the Lord answers Cain’s question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” with “What have you done? Your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!”

## AUBREY BEARDSLEY’S BLUE AND WHITE

Steven Hobbs

From the autumn and winter of 1892 to June 1894 Aubrey Beardsley engaged on the first major commission of his life, the illustration of the Dent edition of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. This work, which Beard started with such enthusiasm and was to finish disillusioned and we spanned the period during which he developed his own distinctive style. It was the period of the *Bon Mots* (Dent’s sweetener to ease the arduous burden of medieval drudgery on the young artist), of *The Studio*, of the first two *Notes* volumes, and significantly of *Salome*. The development of Beardsley’s style can be charted graphically as the twelve parts of the *Morte Darthur* published. This rapid development did not on the whole, with a handful of wonderfully incongruous exceptions, divert Beardsley from the task at hand: namely to provide illustrations and decorations broadly in keeping with text, in the manner of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Although temptation to stray stylistically and literally from his publisher’s brief must have been great, nonetheless Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has shown that, contrary to popular notion, Beardsley’s drawings were indeed firmly grounded in Malory’s narrative (55-72).

At face value Beardsley seems to restrict his vocabulary to the medieval. This, as we shall see, is not entirely the case, for in several of his illustrations he is unable to suppress an underlying oriental influence from percolating to the surface. On the whole his drawings reflect a rich mix of influences, from the obvious and well recorded to the esoteric. The general style of his early *Morte Darthur* drawings betrays the all-pervading influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, and Burne-Jones in particular. There are numerous references to Beardsley’s first mentor, evidenced in the physiognomy, pose, and dress of his principal figures. And occasionally we can see examples of Beardsley borrowing a particular design or motif virtually unchanged, one example being the design for the chapter heading of Book 8, chapter 23 (fig. 1).