

THE BRITISH AVANT-GARDE
The Theory and Politics of Tradition

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- 103–204. The essay was also printed in *Poems of Wordsworth* (London: Macmillan, 1879b).
42. Arnold, 'Wordsworth', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 199–201.
43. For example, for Shairp 'Wordsworth's obscurest sonnet [was] . . . transparent compared with even the average of Rossetti's.' See Shairp, 'Aesthetic poetry', 29.
44. Pater, 'Wordsworth', *Appreciations*, 40.
45. *Ibid.* 57–8.
46. Arthur Hugh Clough, *Poems and Prose Remains* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 318.
47. Pater, 'Wordsworth', 43.
48. Pater, 'Measure for Measure', *Appreciations*, 182–4.
49. Pater, 'Wordsworth', 43–4.
50. Walter Pater, 'Charles Lamb' *Appreciations*, 109. The essay was originally published in the *Fortnightly Review* in October 1878.
51. For a general discussion of the relationship between *Plato and Platonism* and contemporary scholarship see Ian Small, 'Plato and Pater: Fin-de-Siècle Aesthetics', *op. cit.*
52. Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, 112.
53. *Ibid.* 136.
54. See Philip Appleman, 'Darwin and Pater's Critical Dilemma', *Darwin: A Norton critical edition*, ed. Philip Appleman (New York: Norton, 1970).
55. Mrs Mark Pattison, 'Art', *Westminster Review*, 43 (1873), 639.

CHAPTER 6

William Morris: Tradition and revolution

At first glance the term avant-garde might appear to be a more appropriate description of William Morris than of a writer such as Pater. Indeed, as I have indicated, Donald Drew Egbert, one of the few historians of avant-gardism to take account of nineteenth-century Britain, sees Morris as a dominant figure.¹ However, it is significant that Morris is included in Egbert's history solely on the grounds of his political radicalism; it is Morris's role in the development of British socialism, rather than his career as a writer or painter, which has enabled him to be described as avant-garde.

The reason for the marginalisation of Morris the writer is that in a miniature, as it were, of the main problem of British avant-gardism; namely, that the relationship between politics and aesthetics in his work is a vexed one: there appears to be a profound contradiction between his socialism, his view of revolutionary social change, and the dependence of his literary works upon tradition, both in terms of their form and their subject. This contradiction is most keenly felt in the opposition between Morris's demands, made most forcefully in his lectures, for a popular art form – 'an art which is to be made by the people and for the people'² – and the exclusive, even undemocratic nature of the styles he employed in his own work. Morris's use of Icelandic sagas, verbal archaisms (such as the use of the 'thou' and the verbal form *-eth* for the second person singular in *News from Nowhere*) and medieval narrative techniques (as in *The Dream of John Ball*) made his writing 'difficult', and like Pater and Rossetti, he was accused of obscurity and affectation.³ Morris's reluctance to embrace popular contemporary forms and his hostility towards the

formal innovations of other avant-gardes thus give him the appearance of being deeply conservative, a position which consorts strangely with his socialist politics. As Egbert comments, 'in many respects he was far from being avant-garde . . . [He] could not accept the work of artistically progressive artists and writers who, like him, were concerned with social problems.'⁴

The apparent discrepancy between Morris's radical political views and the traditionalism of his literary works has often been noted, but rarely explained adequately.⁵ Most accounts of Morris's radicalism have tended simply to marginalise his literary works. So for critics such as Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson – and, more recently, even Paul Meier – Morris's radicalism is seen principally (if not solely) in his activities in organisations such as the Socialist League and in his political pamphlets and lectures written during the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s. As they define these terms, Morris the 'political' radical is effectively bracketed off from Morris the literary artist.⁶ The limitations of these kinds of accounts of Morris's radicalism are two-fold. In general terms, as John Goode has suggested, there is a problem of 'value'. Since one of the distinguishing features of Morris's socialism is the social role he grants to art, it is important that Morris's own literary work should be seen fulfilling that function. To reject his creative writing is 'to call into question the whole social criticism – it relies too much on what seems to be a bad conception of art'.⁷ The second and related problem is one specific to avant-garde histories. In the terms of these histories, Morris clearly cannot be accommodated within a tradition of cultural avant-gardism for his literary work is simply not oppositional in nature – not, that is, in the senses in which opposition is usually defined.⁸ In order to make a case for Morris to be seen as an avant-garde figure it is important to explain the radical political views advocated in his lectures and the traditionalist aesthetic of his literary works within the same frame of reference; the latter, as Goode suggests, has to be seen in some way as an appropriate response to the former. Two observations, about Morris's socialism and about his literary works, suggest the direction in which this task might proceed.

In the first place, it is striking that in all Morris's writing – in his lectures, pamphlets, literary works, and so on – there is no detailed and convincing explanation of the process or means of revolutionary change. Tireless in pointing out ills in contemporary society, and equally insistent in pressing his vision of the socialist future, for a

'revolutionary' Morris seemed remarkably vague about the question of how precisely social change is to come about. It is this larger issue, rather than simply that of Morris's ability to provide a convincing account of the function of art in the revolutionary process, which needs to be explained. It suggests that the so-called 'weakness' of Morris's aesthetic – in Thompson's words, Morris's failure 'to construct a theory [of art] both consistent with a materialist conception of history, and adequate to explain the active part of the artist in the ideological struggles of his time'⁹ – might in fact be a characteristic of his socialism in general. If this is so, then an explanation of this latter, more general weakness may provide an answer to the problem of his role as a radical literary artist.

In the second place, it is equally striking that the work of other (particularly French) avant-garde writers who held equally radical political views is not marked with the same contradictions. In this respect, an illuminating comparison can be made between Morris and Courbet. Morris's proposals for a popular art-form have some parallels with Courbet's ambition to create 'l'art démocratique'. Both Morris and Courbet were conspicuous in proclaiming their solidarity with 'le peuple' and both claimed to be opposed to all forms of élitism, especially those associated with the institutions of art. Both also held radical political views. Morris's were indebted to a number of figures, the most important of which were Cobbett, Owen, Kropotkin and Marx; and Courbet's derived from his experience of revolution, and from the writing of Henri de Saint-Simon and his friendship with the anarchist Proudhon. However, the similarities between these two figures end when we consider the relationship between their declared political ambitions for art and the actual works which they produced. Unlike Morris, who used traditional forms and subjects, Courbet attempted to develop an art appropriate to a revolutionary climate and deliberately broke from artistic traditions. The democratisation of art required new forms and new subjects; and in Courbet's Realist paintings it is the people, rather than eminent historical figures or historical events, which become the subjects. Moreover they were depicted in ways indebted to popular, contemporary iconography rather than the idealising forms of the Academy. The question suggested by this comparison is why did Courbet, but not Morris, see the rejection of artistic traditions as both appropriate and realisable in the development of a revolutionary iconography and symbolism?

The explanation of the singularity of Morris's position lies in factors unique to British culture. Both the general question of Morris's politics – his apparent difficulty in envisaging the precise ways in which a revolution might take place in contemporary Britain – and the more specific question of his use of traditional forms and subjects in his literary works can be explained in terms of the profound intellectual conservatism which I have suggested characterised nineteenth-century Britain. That conservatism operated upon Morris in two related ways. In a general sense, it conditioned the nature of his socialist polemic; as I shall indicate, it determined his use of certain apparently 'conservative' concepts – in particular, his holding to an attenuated notion of historical continuity and his appreciation of the important role played by traditions in contemporary society. However, that intellectual conservatism also put limits on Morris's aesthetic or formal choices; it constrained them to borrowing of traditional literary forms and subjects rather than to the invention of new ones, for in Britain such a strategy was an entirely appropriate (and even necessary) response to the task of 'revolutionising' contemporary literature.

The concept of revolutionary social change, as I have indicated, was foreign to nineteenth-century British culture. It is significant that even in the 1870s, when attitudes towards the past had become problematised, the main theory of social change to emerge in Britain, that of Spencerian sociology, was evolutionary rather than revolutionary in character. It should not seem surprising, then, that having enthusiastically embraced the revolutionary politics of socialism in the intellectual ferment of the late 1870s, Morris subsequently encountered considerable difficulties in applying them to the British context. (Whatever the appeal of socialism – and the possibility of a wholly new social order was clearly an attractive answer to Morris's long standing discontent with contemporary society – in Britain there was simply no intellectual tradition to support a theory of radical social change.) Morris's growing realisation of the practical difficulties involved in bringing about a socialist revolution in Britain – the problem, that is, of an appropriate form of political action – has often been noticed. The early revolutionary optimism which led to his disagreements with Hyndman, and his subsequent break from the Social Democratic Federation over the issue of 'state socialism' in the 1870s, was gradually replaced by more sober reflection on the diminishing

possibility of the revolution – evidence perhaps that, along with his disillusionment, Morris had developed a certain political 'pragmatism'. Less frequently noted than these practical political difficulties, however, is Morris's acute awareness of the intellectual constraints imposed by the uniqueness of the British intellectual climate – of the inappropriateness of applying certain kinds of political ideas in relation to British history. He frequently commented, for example, on the hostility aroused by the term 'revolution', attributing much of the misunderstanding which greeted British socialism to its association with the destructive lawlessness of the Jacobinism of the French.

The word Revolution, which we Socialists are so often forced to use, has a terrible sound in most people's ears, even when we have explained to them that it does not necessarily mean a change accompanied by riot and all kinds of violence, and cannot mean a change made mechanically and in the teeth of opinion by a group of men who have some how managed to seize on the executive power for the moment. Even when we explain that we use the word revolution in its etymological sense, and we mean by it a change in the basis of society, people are scared at the idea of such vast change, and beg that you will speak of reform and not revolution.¹⁰

Like others adopting new ideas in late nineteenth-century Britain, Morris was forced to adapt the revolutionary concepts of socialism to meet the demands of British *intellectual* (rather than simply political) conservatism. Indeed he used the term 'reconstructive Socialism' to replace 'revolution'.¹¹ He had to find a way of reconciling two opposing views of the past – the concept of radical social change, common to French revolutionary historiography, and the concept of constitutional continuity held by most British historians. At an intellectual level, then, the issue facing Morris was identical with the one which faced all avant-garde artists and writers in Britain. In attempting to introduce revolutionary socialism into Britain, and to create a revolutionary art-form, Morris had to negotiate a new relationship with the past, a task rendered peculiarly problematic in Britain by the difficulties involved in the direct repudiation of traditions. Moreover, Morris's response to this historiographical impasse was equally in keeping with the solutions found by other British avant-garde writers. In Morris's eyes, the intellectual bridge between the revolutionary and evolutionary views of historical change was supplied by a third concept, that of tradition: traditions

bore witness to the continuity of history – they were, as most British historians recognised, an important record of human endeavours and aspirations; but at the same time they were also the enabling condition for radical change. What precisely Morris meant by this paradox is best illustrated by a comparison with his immediate predecessors, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, of which he was at one time a member, and with his contemporaries, the Aesthetes. First, however, it is useful to examine further the nature of the intellectual problem he faced, and a useful means of doing so is provided by his defence of his activities with ‘Antiscrape’, set out in a series of papers delivered to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in the late 1870s and 1880s.

The society was founded by Morris in the 1870s in reaction to a current fashion for ‘restoring’ ancient buildings in imitation of the Gothic style. Morris justified his campaigning against this practice in terms of a need to avoid attempted reproductions of the past. He argued that buildings should be ‘preserved’ rather than restored – that is, that basic structural repairs and so forth should be made where necessary, but that there should be no attempt to impose a particular style on a building, as with, for example, the tendency to ‘correct’ later additions by replacing them with imitations of some notional – generally Gothic – ‘original’ style. Moreover, he maintained that the distinctiveness of preservation, as opposed to restoration, was that it did not imply that art of the past should or could be imitated; on the contrary. The historical uniqueness of the conditions under which such art was produced explicitly precluded such a possibility. Underlying Morris’s views was a belief in the importance of tradition in contemporary society; the protection of ancient buildings was necessary, according to Morris, because those buildings, like all artefacts, embodied the unique values of the particular culture which had produced them, and so represented an important historical record, one which could be destroyed by unsympathetic hands.

The especial value to which I wish to-day to call your attention [is that] . . . ancient architecture bears witness to the development of man’s ideas, to the continuity of history, and, so doing, affords never-ceasing instruction, nay education, to the passing generations, not only telling us what were the aspirations of men passed away, but also what we may hope for in time to come.¹²

This argument is in fact very close to the claims about tradition made by conservative figures such as William Courthope; it appears to invoke the same historiographical assumptions used by the proponents of a national literature. Indeed that same year, in the context of a different lecture, Morris had defined as one of the necessary prerequisites for a ‘decent life’ an ‘active mind in sympathy with the past’.¹³ Stated in terms as general as these, contemporaries such as Courthope certainly would not have disagreed with such an ambition. What then distinguished Morris’s views of the past and what made them appear subversive? A clue is provided in a later paper, delivered to the SPAB in 1889; here Morris argued his position more carefully, drawing attention to the difference between his understanding of the concept of ‘historical continuity’ and that used by his contemporaries:

I say that the straining of the ideas of the continuity of history – although there is a certain interest in it – is now pedantry; not wholly dull and stupid pedantry, but founded on a misconception. . . . Persons with that false idea of the continuity of history are loath to admit the fatal words, ‘it cannot be, it has gone’. They believe that we can do the same sort of work in the same spirit as our forefathers, whereas for good and for evil we are completely changed, and we cannot do the work they did. All continuity of history means is after all perpetual change, and it is not hard to see that we have changed with a vengeance, and thereby established our claim to be the continuers of a nation.¹⁴

Clearly, as critics such as E. P. Thompson have been keen to point out, Morris is far from exhibiting the ‘conservatism’ which his campaigning on behalf of the protection of ancient buildings might suggest: he is no ‘nostalgic’ revivalist or ‘sentimental pedant’.¹⁵ At the same time, however, there is an important sense in which Morris appears reluctant to reject completely those very orthodoxies about the past which Thompson wants to distance him from. Rather than dismiss altogether the concept of historical continuity, Morris instead attempts elaborately, and somewhat confusingly, to redefine it – to accommodate it within a concept of social change. That he attempts such an accommodation (or feels the need to do so) is evidence of the difficulties involved in replacing wholesale current intellectual orthodoxies in Britain with new or foreign ideas. Morris’s attitude towards the past was, then, determined by a characteristically British paradox: an awareness of two contradictory

impulses, the first being that traditions had a 'negative and conservative power [which] . . . keeps people from changing the general tendency of . . . Art [or society]',¹⁶ and the second that a culture was simply 'not able to dispense with tradition'.¹⁷ It was, in other words, exactly the problem which faced all nineteenth-century avant-garde figures, including Pater and Wilde, who were, to borrow Peter Faulkner's phrase, 'against the age': it was the problem of the vexed relationship between the radical or innovative individual and the pervasive authority of tradition.

The suggestion that there are analogies between Morris's and Pater's position may seem a perverse one. Indeed most accounts of Morris's radicalism have tended to define it against his literary and artistic contemporaries and predecessors: against, on the one hand, the 'idealism' and 'political naivety' of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Morris's association with the Brotherhood is dismissed by Thompson as mere 'youthful revolt'); and, on the other, the alleged conservatism and apolitical stance of the Aesthetes. As I have indicated, an examination of the relationships between Morris and these two groups sheds further light on his attitudes towards the past and tradition.

It has been argued that Morris's career underwent a decisive turning point around 1877, the moment when he first entered public politics over the Eastern question, first came in contact with socialism, delivered his first overtly political lecture and began to distance himself from Pre-Raphaelite ideas. This last move is described in terms of Morris's rejection of the Brotherhood's allegedly 'escapist' idealisation of the past and his development instead of a more 'serious', more critical perspective, one which was aware of historical process and aware too of the inevitability of social change. In this view Morris's intellectual break from Pre-Raphaelitism becomes one of the keys to understanding his new political awareness: Morris 'the revolutionary' begins, it is argued, at the point where the Pre-Raphaelite idealist ends.¹⁸

The suggestion that Morris departed from Pre-Raphaelite ideals is, however, misleading, for it is based on a misunderstanding of the subversive nature of the Brotherhood's use of tradition. Indeed Morris himself never acknowledged such a rupture. His address, 'The English Pre-Raphaelites', delivered in 1891 on the occasion of an exhibition of the Brotherhood's work at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, was a tribute to the movement's

achievements, both aesthetic *and* political. Morris gave a particular emphasis, for example, to the serious nature of the Pre-Raphaelite revolt: 'these few young men', he argued, 'wholly unknown till they forced the public to recognise them, began what must be called a really audacious attempt; a definite revolt against the Academical Art which brooded over all the Schools of Europe at the time.'¹⁹ Morris's argument is that the main impetus behind the formation of the Brotherhood was a growing impatience with the Academy's conventionalism. Frustrated by its tendency to encourage imitations of established styles rather than the development of new ones, and resentful of the authority embodied in the example of Joshua Reynolds, Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Millais and Woolner founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to reinvigorate British art. Such a view was confirmed by that of the Brotherhood's first historian, William Michael Rossetti. William Rossetti had suggested that the Brotherhood had two principal aims: one was to encourage artists 'to develop their own individuality, disregarding school-rules';²⁰ and the other was to restore an 'authentic' tradition of Western pictorial art by locating its birth in medieval Italian painting.

At first glance, such aims may appear contradictory: the desire to encourage innovation and individuality does not square easily with the notion of a perpetuating tradition. However, the concept of tradition which the Brotherhood had in mind was a different one from that held by the Academy. In proposing early Italian artists as their models, the Brotherhood did not simply replace one set of idols – the Old Masters – with another; rather they argued that the exemplary nature of artists such as Giotto, Masaccio and Gozzoli lay not in their style, but an attitude which they took towards their subject matter. The Brotherhood further claimed that this attitude – 'an entire adherence to the simplicity of nature'²¹ – was the basic precondition for innovation in art. By emulating early Italian models the modern painter, according to the Brotherhood, was merely reproducing the conditions necessary for the expression of individuality. In the Pre-Raphaelite manifesto, *The Germ*, F. G. Stephens had described the Brotherhood's attempt 'to lead the taste of the public into a new channel by producing pure transcripts and faithful studies from nature, instead of conventionalities and feeble reminiscences from Old Masters.' He went on to explain that this tactic entailed 'an entire seeking after originality in a more humble manner than has been practised since the decline of Italian Art in the Middle Ages.'²²

By seeing a tradition as the embodiment of the preconditions which made 'authentic' art possible, rather than as the exemplification of a particular style, the Brotherhood claimed, without any sense of a contradiction, to be both endorsing originality and respecting a tradition.

That the Brotherhood saw themselves as innovators rather than mere revivalists has tended to have been ignored, both by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics. However, the Brotherhood were explicit about their intentions; in his retrospective account of the movement, William Holman Hunt took this issue up. Hunt described the Brotherhood's 'sympathy' with the work of Gozzoli, and the subsequent decision to make him 'the standard under which we were to make our advance', but he stressed that such a view did not entail an uncritical imitation of his style:

We did not curb our amusement at the immature perspective, the undeveloped power of drawing, the feebleness of light and shade, the ignorance of any but the mere black and white differences of racial types of men, the stinted variety of flora, and their geometrical forms in the landscape; these simplicities, already out of date in the painter's day, we noted as belonging altogether to the past and to the dead revivalists, with whom we had determined to have neither part nor lot. . . . The assumption that all our circle knew [was] that deeper devotion to Nature's teaching was the real point at which we were aiming.²³

There is ample evidence to suggest that Hunt's account of the Brotherhood's activities was not one shared by contemporary critics. One of their fiercest critics, the reviewer for *The Times*, for example, was typical in claiming that 'these young artists have unfortunately become notorious by addicting themselves to an antiquated style and an affected simplicity in Painting, which is to genuine art what the medieval ballads and designs in *Punch* are to Chaucer and Giotto.'²⁴ The fortunes of the Brotherhood, mixed as they were, relate to the enduring power of British orthodoxies, especially in the mid-nineteenth century, to assimilate and marginalise forms of dissent. Nevertheless the mixed nature of their success should not be allowed to obscure the fact that in its initial conception, the Brotherhood's revolt was 'intended' to be revolutionary. Indeed William Michael Rossetti described the Brotherhood as having 'meant revolt and produced revolution'.²⁵ It was precisely this 'intention' – an ambition to use the past or tradition only in order to 'create

something new' – which Morris recognised as marking the uniqueness of the Brotherhood's achievement, and which he acknowledged in his address as the only viable strategy for the innovative artist or writer in Britain.

I say by all means let us cultivate whatever there may be left of any wish to get back into the best traditions of Art. Those traditions we must undoubtedly work up again for ourselves. They must help us to produce something which has not been produced before. We cannot do the work of the past again. We don't want it, and it would be no particular use if we could; but whether we want it or not it is absolutely certain that we cannot do it.²⁶ "English P-R School"

These words echo a much earlier comment in 1877 on ancient art: 'let us therefore study it wisely, be taught by it, kindled by it; all the while determining not to imitate or repeat it'.²⁷ What did Morris mean by this injunction? In what sense was knowledge of the past 'useful' if traditions could not be repeated? It is clear that Morris is advocating a quite different view of tradition from that held by the majority of his contemporaries; (in his eyes, traditions did not and could not have a normative function.) Secondly, it is equally clear that Morris did not mean the injunction to be a purely negative one. Earlier in the same lecture he had suggested the positive application which knowledge of traditions might have: '[for] those . . . [who] can do nothing else', he argued, 'it may be their business to keep alive some tradition, some memory of the past, so that the new life when it comes may not waste itself more than enough in fashioning wholly new forms for its new spirit'.²⁸ Morris seems to suggest that tradition could in some way provide models which, reworked, or – to borrow Pater's term – 'rehabilitated' might form the basis of the new society, or indeed of a new art. Moreover, in so far as that new society would have its origins (however attenuated) in those old models or traditions, so they would come to be authorised by them. As Pater had recognised, the new was, in an important sense, the old also; hence Morris's dictum that 'all continuity of history means is after all perpetual change'.

Morris systematically worked up or reinterpreted certain aspects of the medieval past in order to authorise his socialist politics, in order to create, to use Pater's terms again, a 'constant tradition' of socialism. The extent (though not the significance) of this interpretation has been scrupulously documented by Margaret Grennan.²⁹ She highlights four general areas where the partiality of that

interpretation is particularly striking. The first and most 'innocent' concerns his idealised treatment of medieval craftsmen. As Grennan points out, although scholarship since Morris's day has heavily qualified his view, in the nineteenth century the 'miracle' of the organisation of labour required by Gothic architecture demanded explanation, and that supplied by Morris had been endorsed by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* and thus seemed plausible. The second and more self-consciously propagandist area concerns Morris's attempt to revalue the hierarchical political structures of feudalism. Unlike conservatives such as Carlyle, who had seen in feudal society an admirable form of authoritarianism, Morris pointed to the existence of an important, if frequently imperfectly executed, principle of 'rights and personal duties'. It was the existence of this principle, largely free from hypocrisy, which, according to Morris, made medieval society, for all its manifest inequalities, preferable to the contract based society of contemporary capitalism. The third area where Morris's partiality is exhibited concerns his profound underestimate of the importance of the medieval Catholic Church, particularly with regard to the roles played by religious mysticism and piety. Significantly, the one positive function which Morris did attribute to the Church was its success in fostering what he claimed was a genuinely corporate spirit. The fourth and most important area of Morris's rewriting concerns his attention to the medieval guilds. In Morris's eyes they epitomised the communal and democratic spirit characteristic of socialist society; they foreshadowed 'the pleasure of life [which] might be in a society of equals'.³⁰ But it is interesting to notice, as Grennan points out, that contemporary medieval scholarship, of which Morris was certainly well aware, had presented a very different picture of guild life, one characterised by rivalry, self-interest and an exclusivity which, according to some historians, was the principal cause of the guilds' demise.

In one sense this overtly propagandist rewriting of medievalism was not particularly new. As Charles Dellheim suggests, medievalism was not the exclusive cultural property of conservatives; it had also been appropriated by early nineteenth-century radicals, most significantly by William Cobbett in his *A History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland* (1824), to endorse arguments for political and social democracy.³¹ However, by the time Morris was writing, historiography had greatly changed. The better availability

of sources and the Rankean emphasis on facts, which I have described, had made both the deliberate manipulations of Cobbett's history on the one hand, and the dramatic and personal style of Carlyle's *Past and Present* on the other, unacceptable. Much more representative of late nineteenth-century medieval historiography was the work of Edward Freeman. A Tory turned Liberal, and one of the chief campaigners for the professionalisation of the discipline of history, Freeman used medievalism to trace a tradition of English liberty which authorised liberal programmes for political reform. It is against the work of figures such as Freeman that Morris's medievalism should thus be seen. In this respect two points are important. First, Morris's use of the medieval past to authorise a revolutionary socialist, rather than reformist liberal, political tradition was highly unorthodox; secondly, that his methods of so doing were quite different from those of historians; as Grennan indicates, Morris presented a 'generalized picture' – a 'delineation of the past in broad strokes rather than the penetrating criticism of particular phases of life or thought'.³²

Morris was clearly not in competition with historians; the much stricter methodological paradigms characteristic of late nineteenth-century historiography made a straightforwardly historical account of the medieval past in terms of a socialist tradition both implausible and very difficult to execute. In this respect Morris's selective use of historical sources, his refusal to engage with contemporary debates in historiography about the significance of certain aspects of medievalism, and his cavalier disregard for the scholarship which controverted his political thesis, is illuminating. Morris's reworking of medievalism was quite deliberately an imaginative rather than a scholarly one. Drawing upon literary qualities, its appeal was emotional and dramatic rather than intellectual. In this sense the significance of the prose romances for Morris's overall political ambitions can easily be seen. Literary forms, especially those of dream and vision, themselves borrowed from medieval literature, gave Morris a much greater licence to rework history than the scholarly rhetoric of historiography; they enabled him, that is, to ground the apparently 'unreal' – those revolutionary concepts and ideas which were foreign to Britain – in what the general reader, familiar with the themes and tropes of medievalism but not necessarily with debates in medieval historical scholarship, would recognise as a framework of historical fact. The dream of revolution

in, say, *The Dream of John Ball* or *News From Nowhere*, becomes 'real' (and therefore convincing) precisely to the extent that it can be seen to have a basis in 'real' historical events. Other formal qualities of Morris's literary works, in particular his use of linguistic archaisms in order to recreate an 'authentic' medieval voice, can also be seen as part of this self-consciously literary, as opposed to historiographical, reworking of medievalism. The use of 'thou', and of archaisms such as 'betwixt' and 'forsooth', were part of Morris's general attempt to realise the medieval past in a manner not open to historians. In ways such as these the specifically literary artifices of the prose romance made 'conceivable' (and therefore possible) those revolutionary concepts which orthodox historiography had largely rejected.³³ 'What romance means', Morris argued, 'is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present.'³⁴

It is not surprising, then, to find that Morris takes much greater liberties with historical evidence in his literary works than in his lectures or pamphlets. In the *The Dream of John Ball*, for example, Morris rewrites his historical sources – those concerning the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 on which the narrative is based – in several significant ways. First, and most importantly, he presents a totally erroneous thesis concerning the cause and effect of the revolt. This major error has often been explained in terms of Morris's dependence upon Thorold Rogers, whose thesis on the causes of the revolt, despite its unsupportable generalisations, had attained the status of an orthodoxy between the late 1860s and the early 1890s, when it was discredited by the work of historians such as André Reville and Charles Oman. In view of his own detailed reading of many of Rogers's sources, it is unlikely that Morris was unaware of the obvious flaws in the thesis. In fact Morris, like Rogers, greatly romanticises the revolt: he underplays its violence and exaggerates the open nature of the contest; he moves the action from London to the country; he 'invents' a battle (there were no encounters between the peasants and troops of the kind Morris describes) and conjures up a sermon, the dramatic centrepiece of the narrative, for which there is no historical counterpart; and he significantly reorders the chronology. Morris also takes liberties with historical characters, unjustifiably attributing 'communist' motives both to his protagonist, John Ball, and to the rebel peasants. Grennan argues that there is virtually no evidence in the chronicles to support such an

interpretation, and quotes Trevelyan's opinion that 'the attempt to picture the rising as a communistic movement ignores the plainest facts'. She goes on to describe Morris having 'deliberately in some cases . . . ignored the scope, [and] the complexity . . . of the rising and once at least, . . . [having] read more into the sources than the record will justify'.³⁵ But of course for the literary artist, rather than the historian, all these 'liberties' are perfectly justified: historical accuracy can be sacrificed for dramatic or literary purposes. Similar strategic rewritings can be found in Morris's other prose romances. *The House of the Wolfings*, for example, is also based upon a 'core of historical reality', the most significant aspect of which is the 'mark', the name given to a primitive form of communal village life in Germany. In Morris's narrative the German mark, like the Peasants' Revolt, becomes a site of early communist associations, represented by a detailed description of the Wolfing's homelife and a dramatic account of the battle against the invading Romans. However, at the time when Morris was working, contemporary historical scholarship was undecided about the nature and significance of the mark. An influential group of historians, headed by the Frenchman, Fustel de Coulanges, had challenged the 'Teutonic' tradition of scholarship which Morris had drawn upon, arguing that the premiss that English liberties (however defined) could be traced back to an ideal of fellowship embodied in the German mark was erroneous. Morris, however, appears to have ignored the whole 'Romanist' critique, exaggerating instead the very elements of Teutonism which that critique had disputed.

The 'success' of Morris's literary works – in John Goode's terms, the extent to which they are able to make revolutionary concepts 'conceivable' – depends upon the balance struck between the fictional or literary elements and the framework of historical 'fact'. In many of the later prose romances, such as *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895) and *The Well at the World's End* (1896), the literary overwhelms the historical as Morris's borrowings from the past become increasingly eclectic. The consequence, of course, is that the political propaganda becomes correspondingly less 'real' and the concept of revolution becomes grounded in myth rather than history. One reason for this may simply be Morris's growing disillusionment; as the prospect of a socialist revolution in Britain receded, so Morris's representations of revolution swerve further away from any recognisable historical 'facts'.³⁶ In this sense, certain

of the later prose romances may justifiably be accused of a romantic idealism. However, to concede this point is only to suggest that Morris's earlier literary works are more successful than his later ones, and that these successes coincide, not unreasonably, with the height of his enthusiasm and confidence in the revolutionary cause.

In general terms, then, Morris used medievalism to authorise his socialist politics; revolution became possible or conceivable in Britain to the extent that it could be seen to possess a historical precedent, one which, by being located in the English past, was significantly different to that so feared in France. It is in this sense, then, that traditions can be seen to have provided the enabling condition for social change in Britain – they presented social change as a real possibility – and that Morris's literary art can be seen as a genuine attempt to create a revolutionary art form, one entirely appropriate to his socialist politics. Moreover, it is in this 'positive' use of tradition to 'create something new', that Morris was substantially indebted to his Pre-Raphaelite colleagues. His use of tradition was certainly more complex than theirs; the suggestion that traditions had a 'negative' as well as 'positive' role added an ambiguity absent from the Brotherhood's interest in medieval Italian art. Absent, too, from their interest was Morris's use of tradition for overtly party-political ends. However, in his basic recognition that contemporary orthodoxies could be overturned in Britain only through the reworking of traditions, Morris was at one both with the Brotherhood and, more importantly, with the Aesthetes.

The suggestion that Morris had certain strategic affinities with the Aesthetes, and that his avant-gardism can be understood in the same terms as theirs is novel and so needs some qualification. At one level Morris's politics were clearly very different from those of Aestheticism. He attacked the doctrine of 'art for art's sake' on numerous occasions, objecting to its élitism and its attempt to remove art from a social domain:

I do not want art for a few, any more than that education for a few, or freedom for a few. No, rather than art should live this poor thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible, for a brutality that they will not struggle with, – rather than this, I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile . . . Rather than the wheat should rot in the miser's granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark.³⁷

Despite holding quite different views from the Aesthetes on the nature and function of art, Morris nevertheless shared with them one fundamental characteristic. The strategy which he adopted to articulate his views – the use of tradition to challenge contemporary orthodoxies and thus to underwrite his politics – was exactly the same as that which the Aesthetes employed. He shared their recognition that 'revolutionaries' in Britain had to accommodate themselves to tradition. There were, of course, other less welcome similarities with the Aesthetes. The ornate and archaic language of some of Morris's poetry and prose romances, and the elaborate publications of the Kelmscott Press (they were described by one critic as 'printed for the aesthetic few'³⁸) laid him open to exactly the allegations of obscurantism, artifice and élitism which accompanied the works of Aestheticism. Also, in light of Morris's own prescriptions for a popular art form, one 'by the people and for the people', they were much more difficult to counter. Indeed, this particular affinity was not lost on the Aesthetes: Morris was, for example, the subject of a review by Pater, the last paragraphs of which later became the famous 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*; Wilde also appropriated him, playfully referring in 'The English Renaissance of Art' to Morris's 'faultless devotion to beauty'.³⁹

It is only by placing Morris's literary art in its unique *intellectual* (rather than social or political) context that its radicalism can properly be assessed and the contradictions between Morris's aesthetics and politics explained. In particular, such a context allows Morris's art to be seen as an entirely appropriate, if not always completely successful, response to his political vision. (In his use of the past – his appropriation of a medieval tradition in order to provide context, form and rationale for his radical politics – Morris was merely exhibiting a characteristic which was common to all avant-garde writers and artists in Britain, including acknowledged adversaries such as Whistler.) The uniqueness of Morris lies only in the consequences of that attempt to accommodate himself to tradition.

Notes

1. See Donald Drew Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Western Arts: Western Europe* (London: Duckworth, 1970), 424 ff.

2. William Morris, 'The art of the people', *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (London: Longman, 1910-15), XXII, 47.
3. See Peter Faulkner (ed.), *William Morris: The critical heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 31, 35, 36, 492. In order to circumvent the problem posed by the élitism or difficulty of Morris's literary works, it might be tempting to argue that they were in fact quite deliberately aimed at an educated audience in order to 'raise the consciousness' of that audience *vis-à-vis* socialist politics. Such a view would, however, be totally at odds with Morris's claims both for his own art, and for art works in general.
4. Egbert, 445.
5. On this issue Peter Faulkner, for example, merely comments vaguely: 'The question goes deep, and is related to the coexistence in Morris of a love of some aspects of history and an intense concern about the future of humanity.' See Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), 129. A more typical reaction is that of Margaret Grennan who explains Morris's late literary works as a diversion, or 'escape' from politics, 'never intended to "delight the naïve minds of the Victorian working classes" . . . [but] intended, rather, to delight William Morris and those who could follow him in his knowledge of the romantic tradition.' See Margaret Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and revolutionary* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1954), 106. Other studies of Morris's literature have failed to address this issue altogether. Alice Chandler, for example, has discussed the politics of Morris's prose romances in terms of their content and so has largely ignored the difficulties which their form presents. Amanda Hodgson, on the other hand, by concentrating on the aesthetic or literary qualities of these works has tended to marginalise their political impact. In her eyes the overt propaganda of *The Dream of John Ball* and *News From Nowhere* debars them from being true romances; hence for her the problems raised by those politics are irrelevant. See Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The medieval ideal in nineteenth-century literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) and Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). An exception to these tendencies, which I refer to later in this chapter, is John Goode. Contrasting Morris's prose romances with works by writers such as Gissing, Hardy and James, Goode argues that Morris's choice of the romance form, rather than the devices of realism used by some of his contemporaries, far from being 'a mere relief from or appendage to his directly active work as a Socialist in the eighties' was a reasoned and appropriate response to 'the realities of his own situation':

Morris's Romances are attempts to give concrete expression to values which are best seen in possibilities offered by defeated social orders, but also to recreate those orders so that they speak to the dreams of the estranged man not merely as something gone but as something containing values that must be striven after, and can be attained only by the transformation of dream into vision.

- See John Goode, 'William Morris and the Dream of Revolution' in John Lucas (ed.), *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1971), 221-78.
6. See E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to revolutionary* (London: Lawrence Wishart, 1955); Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist dreamer*, 2 vols. (Brighton: Harvester, 1978); and Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (Harmondsworth: Chatto and Windus, 1968). Williams's comments may stand for all three:

For my own part, I would willingly lose *The Dream of John Ball* and the romantic socialist songs and even *News from Nowhere* - in all of which the weaknesses of Morris's general poetry are active and disabling - if to do so were the price of retaining and getting people to read such smaller things as *How we Live*, and *How we might Live*, *The Aims of Art*, *Useless Work versus Useless Toil*, and *A Factory as it Might Be*. (158)
 7. Goode, 222.
 8. In this respect it is worth noting that Egbert's definition of avant-gardism was purposely narrow - the tracing of radical political views held by artists and writers in Western Europe; how those radical views were represented in art and literature was not of interest to him.
 9. Thompson, 773.
 10. Morris, 'How we Live & How we might Live', *Collected Works*, XXIII, 3.
 11. Morris, 'Art Under Plutocracy', *Collected Works*, XXIII, 189. It is interesting to note also that Morris chose the decline of the Roman Empire as a metaphor for revolutionary change. (See 'Art and Socialism', *Collected Works*, XXIII, 204.) During the 1880s, as Linda Dowling has argued, Roman historiography underwent some fundamental changes central to which was the idea, taken from the German scholar, Theodor Mommsen, that the history of Rome was in fact characterised by the continuity of its institutions rather than by a 'decline and fall'. See Linda Dowling, 'Roman decadence and Victorian historiography', *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), 579-607.
 12. Morris, 'Paper read at the seventh annual meeting of the SPAB, 1 July 1884', *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), I, 124.
 13. Morris, 'How we Live & How we might Live', 25.
 14. Morris, 'Address at the twelfth annual meeting, 3 July 1889', *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, I, 152.
 15. See Thompson, 277.
 16. Morris, 'The English Pre-Raphaelite School', *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, I, 297-8.
 17. Morris, 'Papers on arts and crafts: Gothic architecture', *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, I, 285.
 18. See in particular Thompson and Meier, *op. cit.*
 19. Morris, 'The English Pre-Raphaelite School', 297.
 20. William Michael Rossetti, 'The Brotherhood in a nutshell', *The Germ*,

- (1850). Quoted in Derek Stanford (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelite Writing* (London: Dent, 1973), 16.
21. F. G. Stephens, 'The purpose and tendency of early Italian art', *The Germ* (1850). Quoted in James Sambrook (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelitism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 57.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905). Quoted in Sambrook, 337.
 24. *The Times*, (7 May 1851). Quoted in Stanford, 331.
 25. William Michael Rossetti, 'The Brotherhood in a nutshell'. Quoted in Stanford, 15.
 26. Morris, 'The English Pre-Raphaelite School', 308.
 27. Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', *Collected Works*, XXII, 16.
 28. *Ibid.* 12.
 29. See Margaret Grennan, *William Morris*, op. cit.
 30. Morris, 'Art and its producers', *Collected Works*, XXII, 345-6.
 31. See Charles Dellheim, *The Face of the Past: The preservation of the medieval inheritance in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
 32. Grennan, 62.
 33. A similar kind of argument has been set out by John Goode (op. cit.). He suggests that Morris used the narrative structures of dream and vision in order to 'dramatize the tensions in the revolutionary mind' and so to overcome the 'theoretically insoluble' epistemological problem in Marxist accounts of art of the relationship between determining processes and individual consciousness. What Goode does not explain is why Morris's 'formal experiments' of the 1880s were based on reworkings of old devices except in the weak sense that these devices were a more useful means of dramatising these tensions than those of realism. Nor indeed can Goode account for the linguistic archaisms of Morris's style which he describes as 'opaque and frequently inept - a combination of pseudo-anachronism trying to escape from the realities of modern English.' (239)
 34. Morris, 'Address at the twelfth annual meeting, 3 July 1889', 148.
 35. Grennan, 94.
 36. For an account of the 'more purely imaginative approach' of the last romances, see Hodgson, 157 ff.
 37. Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', 26.
 38. Unsigned review, *Nation*, 63 (1896), 88. Quoted in Faulkner (ed.), *William Morris: The critical heritage*, 388.
 39. Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art' in Oscar Wilde, *Essays and Lectures* (1908; London: Methuen, 1913), 122. 'The English Renaissance of Art' was first delivered as a lecture in New York on 9 January 1882. A portion of it was reported in the *New York Times* the following day, and was subsequently reprinted from time to time in unauthorised editions.

CHAPTER 7

Oscar Wilde:
'Traditional iconoclast'

Although Wilde is widely recognised as one of the nineteenth century's most conspicuous iconoclasts, he is rarely acknowledged to be an avant-garde writer. The reasons are not hard to find. Wilde's radicalism simply elides the differences between the categories into which avant-garde activity is generally placed. It is difficult, for example, to find consistent evidence of radical political thinking in his work. Only *Vera, or the Nihilists*, his privately printed and unperformed play, has an overt political subject. Even then the 'seriousness' of those politics - a form of aristocratic socialism distilled from Wilde's interests in anarchism, socialism and democracy - is severely compromised by the play's melodramatic formal devices. As Katherine Worth has noted, the revolutionary rhetoric is too easily and too often sacrificed to the passion and sensationalism characteristic of the genre.¹ In addition, it is equally difficult to find evidence of formal innovation in Wilde's work; his writing is too derivative, too free in the formal conventions it borrows for such a judgement. Even *Salomé*, clearly Wilde's most innovative play, borrows heavily from other traditions and from other writers. Its subject matter owes much to Huysmans's *A Rebours* and Laforgue's *Moralités Légendaires*, Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*, Flaubert's *Hérodiade* and Massenet's *Hérodiade*; and elements of its imagery to Maeterlinck's *La Princesse Maleine* and Moreau's painting, *The Apparition*.² In this respect it is not surprising that in recent years Wilde's radicalism has tended to engage the attention of critics interested in his sexual politics, for in this view it is Wilde's confrontation with Victorian sexual orthodoxies, rather than literary traditions which is