WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE
"LITERARY" TRADITION

By KARL LITZENBERG

IT IS customary to criticize the Victorian social philosophers for inventing social systems representative of high idealism and great impracticability. In defense of Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, and their companions, however, it may be said, first, that their purposes were idealistic rather than practicable; and, second, that, like Jonathan Swift, they were more concerned with discovering and analyzing the ills of society than they were with constructing political platforms or designating the steps which men might take in the march toward a perfect state of society. A basic assumption was made by almost every writer of doctrinal prose in the Victorian period, an assumption which puts the burden of achievement on society rather than upon the philosopher. This assumption is, in essence, that there cannot be a better world until there are better people.

The origins of sociopolitical and sociophilosophical thought in the nineteenth century are as many as they are various; and in some instances, the origins themselves offer a partial explanation of the impracticable nature of the system ultimately developed by an individual Victorian dogmatist. It was said of Matthew Arnold that he presented the Christian religion in a manner which made it recognizable to neither friend nor foe; and one may be tempted to apply the same epigram, without committing too much violence, to Carlyle's interpretation of German philosophy. But to accuse the Victorians of impracticability without recognizing the magnificence of their ideals is to misunderstand their purposes as well as to fix an arbitrary purpose for all idealistic social thought. A thousand ill-fated legislative experiments have long since established that the nature of man cannot be changed or improved by law; and the essential propriety of the Victorian assumption appears, therefore, to remain unchallenged.

The Victorian proposition is as true today as it was in 1850. It is, in a sense, a kind of categorical imperative: man can improve his society only by improving himself; and toward the elucidation of this assumption the great bulk of doctrinal Victorian prose...
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It is dedicated. It should detract from neither the validity nor the importance of Victorian culture to observe that the practical achievement of its idealism, the modus operandi, is not usually set forth as an adjunct to the ideal.

There were a few Victorian social philosophers, however, who almost never escaped from the ivory tower; whose utopian dream worlds were so remote from the actuality of accomplishment that their significance for poverty is associated with literary and artistic interest rather than with life itself. Such a social philosopher was William Morris, known to his enemies in Victorian society as the “Poet – Upholsterer” and to his friends as a latter-day Leonardo. Morris did descend from the ivory tower upon occasion: he led parades of protest; he attended meetings dedicated to the improvement of the lot of workingmen; he wrote some marching songs for socialists; and he was not beneath delivering a realistic, socially conscious harangue when circumstances prompted him to it. But as a writer of sociopolitical treatises, he depended so much upon his intellectual experience, that is, upon his literary knowledge, upon his medieval dreams and his artistic impulses, that there is some question as to whether we have any right to use such realistic terms as “socialist” or “communist” – terms commonly applied to him—in describing his brand of social philosophy.

In a sense, the dreamworld of William Morris was a very real world indeed, and to say, merely, that his poetry is “literary” because it derives from Chaucer, Froissart, Malory, the old Norse sagas, and other writers and documents of the literary past, is to overlook the fact that out of the past Morris created a world of his own which was more real to him than the age in which he lived. But even though such a world may produce art and poetry, and, in some of Morris’ shorter medieval poems and Signed the Volumen, great poetry, there is considerable doubt as to whether it can produce a social philosophy applicable to the modern world. In the case of William Morris it apparently did not produce such a social philosophy. It is our purpose here to examine the origins of what is frequently called the socialism or communism of William Morris and to show that it has more to do with art and literature than with life and society.

II

When Morris published the first part of his mammoth framework poem,
The Earthly Paradise, he advertised his muse as one whose feet would spurn the traditional Victorian paths of dogmatism. He wrote in his "Apology":

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,

I cannot ease the burden of your fears,

Or make quick-coming death a little thing,

Or bring again the pleasure of past years.

He called himself "The Idle Singer of an Empty Day"; I have no message, he warned; but if one would amuse himself, would while away a tedious hour, he might travel to the earthly paradise with "certain gentlemen and mariners of Norway." The Earthly Paradise, avowedly, was written for the pleasure rather than for the edification of its readers. But certain of Morris' critics took his purpose and his warning too seriously. Good literature, they exclaimed, must delineate a way of life. Whether has fled the moral principle? Where is the Victorian mead of philosophy?

The critics might well have held their peace, for within ten years after the completion of The Earthly Paradise, Morris became John Ruskin's only rival as the most prolific English writer of social dogmas in the later nineteenth century. I need not enumerate the separate books in that avalanche of socio-politico-aesthetic criticism which rolled out of English presses from 1860 to 1890. So great was the bulk of Ruskin's work that he actually advised posterity to read only Sesame and Lilies and Unto this Last, for they contained, he said, the chief truths which he had endeavored to set forth throughout his life. And so completely did Morris become engrossed in social philosophy that Lady Burpee Jones requested, with appropriate tact, that he go back to the writing of poetry. She might as well have asked him to shave his beard.

During the last twelve or fifteen years of his life, William Morris was chiefly a social reformer, a political and social theorist; from the beginning of his career until 1876, however, he had been primarily a poet. I use the words chiefly and primarily with caution, for I am not pretending to ignore the fact that the poet and social reformer was also a painter, a type designer, a printer, a tapestry weaver, a translator and an interior decorator. But in the early period, the center of his interest lay in poetry, in the later, in social and political reform.

III

Literary critics and historians have treated the social philosophy of William Morris with grave seriousness. In so doing they have sometimes overlooked rather significant fact: that the social philosophy of William Morris has not been taken very seriously by professional political philosophers and practical social reformers. One of Morris' most active disciples was Elbert Hubbard, and the American's version of the Englishman's theories seems far more of East Aurora than of Kelmscott.

The reason that the socialist or communitarian who is searching for comfort or support can find very little of practical value in Morris' writings is that his social philosophy (as has been suggested above) is "literary." It is, as I shall presently attempt to point out, a synthesis of ideas and values which are in their very nature ephemeral, utopian, and otherwise remote from the realistic and incontrovertible facts of social evolution. When (according to legend) a hungry man told Morris that he did not like the color of butter, but that he did like the taste of it, he unwittingly condemned Morris' whole system. For Morris, and perhaps Ruskin as well, seems to have had a God-given aptitude for dodging the convincing truth that an empty stomach is unresponsive to an aesthetic ideal, even if that ideal is intended to alleviate the pains of starvation. The workmen asked for bread, and they were offered handicraft; many of them could not get the first, and most of them did not want the second. Morris' innocent other
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Worldliness prevented him from realizing that he had to sacrifice the belly before he could inform the head. Indeed, it was in his nature to live, write, think, and dogmatize in a world quite apart from the real one in which his ample flesh existed. He said himself that no other man was so irrevocably born out of his due time. His efforts to set the crooked straight, therefore, may have been as much an expression of, and a revolt against, his own physical and intellectual 

worldliness prevented him from realizing that he had to sacrifice the belly before he could inform the head. Indeed, it was in his nature to live, write, think, and dogmatize in a world quite apart from the real one in which his ample flesh existed. He said himself that no other man was so irrevocably born out of his due time. His efforts to set the crooked straight, therefore, may have been as much an expression of, and a revolt against, his own physical and intellectual displacement as they were a conscious and serious attempt to propound a doctrine by which men might live comfortably and decently. I am not limning a psychograph; nor am I mocking the greatness of the most versatile English gentleman of the last century. I am merely insisting that the very substance out of which Morris’ dogma emerged made it inevitable that the resulting social philosophy would be a "literary" product rather than a workable program of reform.

IV

It is necessary here to outline the system which we are considering, though we need not sketch in the whole picture. By defining the terms which stand for Morris’ social and political objectives, we can expose the skeleton of his social structure. These terms are the Great Change, Peace, and the Fellowship of Man. The Great Change is revolution, "a complete turning about"; it creates a new civilization upon new ground. The old foundations must crumble and fall; the old customs must be wiped from our memories; the old order must be destroyed. If blood be shed during this leveling process, we may weep for it, but we may not stop its flow. Such an all-consuming annihilation—born out of Morris’ hatred of his times—must precede any other action which might take in order to better their condition. But after the battle is over, while we stand amidst the ruins of the institutions we have pulled down upon our heads, a great and lasting Peace will settle upon us. Sleep after pain and surcease from care—these are the rewards of revolution. Peace must and shall prevail, for now there is no capital to persecute labor; no bourgeoisie to plague the proletariat; no machine to enslave the worker. And then, out of the Peace which has come over the land, the Fellowship of Man will arise. This Fellowship will have "equality of condition as its economic goal, and the habitual love of humanity as its rule of ethics. Men will work with their hands; they will create art; they will shape with their fingers articles which are both useful and beautiful. United in brotherly purpose, they will live in a commune of happy workers. Freed from the fetters of the industrial civilization they have destroyed, they will live in contentment. This perfection of existence, this Fellowship of Man, Morris pictures in his News from Nowhere, the utopian romance which deals with the enlightened society of the coming time. And, except for his insistence on the importance of art to labor, Morris’ description of events which would bring about the Fellowship differs only slightly from that of any other revolutionary philosopher. To say that "Art led William Morris to Socialism" is to repeat an old saw. To state that Morris was an artist at all times is to recognize that he wrote poetry and designed wallpaper. But even though we merely pay tribute to the obvious when we declare that art led the poet to socialism, we dare not evade the conclusion which stares us in the face: revolution was to produce socialism; and socialism was to lead the people to art.

A socialism which has an aesthetic mission in, I think it will be conceded, no ordinary socialism. But less conventional still is the complicated background out of which this extraordinary social philosophy arose. It was not art alone that led Morris to the cause of the people. The Great Change, Peace, and the Fellowship of Man are grounded in Mythology, Medievalism, and
perhaps in *Monasticism*—but not, let it be added, in *Mara*. The words in this fortuitous alliterative sequence contain an explanation of the "literary" nature of Morris' social and political philosophy, and require further analysis.

V

**MYTHOLOGY AND MEDIEVALISM**

A revolutionist may base his "necessity for the overthrow" on the premise that there can be no real peace until blood has dyed the social fabric. He has contemplated the perpetual failure of gradual change; contemplation has made him forcibly pragmatic; and pragmatism has forced him to preach revolution. But William Morris looked back upon the religion of the old Norsemen and preached the same doctrine. And if the radical aspects of Morris' program appear to coincide with the general principles of the revolutionary hypothesis, let us not decide too hastily that Morris' social philosophy was established upon the logic which actuated Lenin.

It is an amazing, as well as a scarcely credible, fact that the Great Change, Peace, and the Fellowship of Man comprise the quintessence of the Scandinavian *ragna ríð*—the Doom of the Gods. When, as it is foretold in the *Elder Edda*, Heimdal shall blow his horn, the Gods will foregather on the Chosen Field to do battle with their enemies (the proletariat is summoned to destroy its persecutors); the old Gods are put down, and the new order of Ἐκτιμάσθαι arises (capitalism gives way before the onslaught of social justice); the black fields sprout, and Baldur returns to bring happiness and eternal peace among men (out of the desolate waste springs the new Peace, the Fellowship of Man). In *Sigurd the Valiant* (1876) the poet had already betrayed a firm belief in *ragna ríð*. When he integrated his social philosophy a few years later, he built it around the Great Change of Norse myth; and the spiritual belief of a Viking hero supported the revolutionary hypothesis of an English reformer. As he constructed an ideal state in which art and the beauty of life would be of paramount importance, Morris laid his groundwork upon mythology rather than upon a social concept or an economic principle. The change which was to bring this state about, the peace by which it could exist, and the fellowship which this utopia constituted came into Morris' consciousness when he first read the *Edda*. Before he commenced a serious study of social and economic theory, he had already formulated his own principles of reform—perhaps unconsciously.

If William Morris had evolved a plan which would lead men in well-defined steps toward the Norse millennium, the sources of his theory would have less significance for us. But he did not go much beyond the sources; he remained preoccupied with the mere idea of the perfect society. He was content to think that eventually the underdog would break his chains, would turn his world upside down, would bring his Fellowship of Man into sudden, if not immediate, being. He extolled the glories of the goal; but he neglected to name the road by which it might be reached. It may be reiterated here that while Morris constructed a social system out of a world of dreams, and in so doing was "impracticable," he was not alone in failing to set forth, except very vaguely, the means by which his utopia could be brought into being. The culture principle of Arnold is perhaps as vague as the Fellowship of Man; but in Arnold's behalf it may be pointed out that he was, by his own declaration, not dealing in "practical considerations." Morris' purposes were avowedly practical.

The Doom of the Gods belongs to medieval mythology. And when it is subjected to further analysis, the Fellowship appears also to have much in common with certain aspects of the Middle Ages. The undeniable relationship between the contenido
artisans of the Fellowship and the happy artisans of guild society cannot detain us here. We need merely observe that, along with Cobett and Carlyle, Morris took a retrospective view of social and economic institutions. He regretted the passing of the handmade past; he abominated the mechanized present; and on the future, if the course were not changed, he dared not think. He refused to believe that man could ever control the machine; consequently, he made no effort to adapt labor to the industrial revolution which had long since become a reality. Shutting his eyes to the too-horrible, hypermechanized coming time, Morris gazed lovingly and longingly backward upon that golden day when the artisan blew on the coals of his own fire. He superimposed the glorious age of guild handicraft upon the green fields of Baldur—a metaphor no more mixed than the confusion it purports to illustrate—and in so doing, he further complicated his already stubbornly impracticable social and economic system. He did not live to know that the first communism became a reality not only recognized the machine as an inevitable adjunct to progress but developed a mechanized society with religious zeal.

The bluff, noble-spirited William Cobett, riding westward out of London, complained bitterly of the smoke. Some sixty years later, his more articulate brother, William Morris, had greater reason to complain, for the smoke was thicker. Both of these objectors devoted their energies to what in the time of a man's life seems the most modern of endeavors—the adjustment of society to the conditions which confront it; and both of them tried to face modern problems by being as medieval as possible.

VI

Mонаsticism and Marx

In the 1850's Morris, Edward Burne Jones, and some others established the now famous "Brotherhood" at Oxford. They were not very explicit regarding the exact nature and function of their society; but its original purpose seems to have been devotional as well as artistic. Perhaps the brothers intended to found an exclusive monastery populated by artists; they may have intended, originally, to erect what Street, the Gothic architect, had long desired to establish: a monastic house devoted to the study and production of religious art. By 1855, however, the reform of society occupied the central interest of the twenty-year-olds who constituted the membership of the Brotherhood. Both "Carm" Price and Canon Dixon testify to the serious zeal of the brethren; yet their zeal as well as their society soon died a natural death. But if it was Norse mythology which gave Morris the foundation upon which to base
the system he later developed, the Brotherhood doubtless helped to build the system and to temper the Fellowship with a hollowed spirit of unity: *habitate fratres in sonum*. Morris once said, "The cause of art is the cause of the people," and ever since some of his critics have been prone to discover the whole source of his social philosophy in aesthetics. While it would be ridiculous to insist that a monastic ideal directed him to socialism, we cannot forget that co-operative enterprise was the first socialized idea that ever occurred to Morris. In an inarticulate sort of way, he planned the Brotherhood with his young colleagues. Together they confused the aims of art, social reform, and monastic life. Some of the confusion remained with the older Morris; and the *communal ideal* invaded his formal dogma. He never became a cleric as he had once thought he would; but he tried to become the social reformer he had sworn to be.

It is a long jump from the salad days of 1855 to the period in which Morris made his belated acquaintance with Marx. Between the time of the short-lived Brotherhood and the day on which Morris decided he would have to study *theory* if he intended to be a social philosopher, he had rounded out the larger outlines of his social philosophy. He knew what kind of social reformer he was going to be before he ever became one. He wrote:

> When I took the step [of accepting socialism] I was blankly ignorant of economics; I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo or Karl Marx.

Oddly enough, it was the writings of John Stuart Mill which finally converted Morris to the cause; but anyone who had read *Sigurd the Volsung* with his eyes open cannot believe that its author needed real *conversion*. In the 1880's, Morris joined the Democratic Federation, and of his studies in this period, he said:

> I even tackled Marx, though I must confess that, whereas I thoroughly enjoyed the historical part of *Capital*, I suffered agonies of confusion of brain over reading the pure economics of that great work.

Morris did not remain entirely ignorant of these matters—he commenced to speak of *labor-value*, *surplus-value*, and to use other dialectical terms; yet Marx affected the essential nature of his philosophy only very slightly. We need not damn a socialist for what he does not know about Marx—we must admit that Morris knew the works of Fourier, St. Simon, Owen, and perhaps Lasalle better than he knew those of the German—but we may well ask him why he remains up in the clouds. We do not condemn his principles by remarking that they might have profited from exposure to the economic theory which underlies the reform they pretend to champion. If one wishes to know why Morris did not point the way to his fabulous paradise, and then examines the theoretical phase of his equipment for the task to which he set himself, one can only conclude that Morris did *not know the way*—until too late.

Why, then, did a man who was mainly ignorant of formal social, economic, and political theory set himself up as a reformer in the fields to which these theories are germane? The answer is simple enough. He loved humanity and he hated the devices which society invents for the purpose of corrupting itself. He was obsessed with the idea of reform. He was an idealist and a "culturie." He dreamed of the noble life of days long gone; he hoped to restore the golden glory of the dream by re-establishing the importance of art. He tried vaguely and perhaps clumsily to weave the gossamer of his fancy into the tough fabric of reality; but when we inspect the fruit of his loom, we observe that the threads all run one way.

**VII**

The Fellowship of Man is the stuff that dreams are made on. Its chaste idealism is begrimed with no soot, stained with no
the noise of industry does not violate the sacred Peace. Neither the romance of the people that were (A Dream of John Ball) nor the romance of the coming time (News from Nowhere) will allow that mechanized toil, as we know it, is dignified soil. The collection of Lectures on Art and Industry evades the issue by the simple expedient of smothering it under a discourse on artistic creativity. But the machine is a social and economic force of such magnitude that no social and economic system which detracts it is, per se, not a system which is practical possibilities. We need not own our syllogism with an obvious conclusion. Morris’ disposal of the machine is symbolic of the evasion which his fantasies engender. While he dreamed of the fellowship, he lost the name of action in every. He pictured the utopia for all to see; and anyone will admit that it is a marvelous utopia. But a system of attainable, concrete plan which describes the how and when those are the things which urge men to action. And these are the things which men search for almost in vain in the writings of William Morris.

Although we have long since discovered the background which informed the social philosophy of William Morris, we have not had the single human principle by which it was motivated. That single human principle may have been a part of what Anna Phelan has called the courageous spirit of the great-soled William Morris. The objects of his social philosophy, as we have seen, were the establishment (through evolution) of permanent peace; the creation of comfort and contentment; and the propagation of art. But its wellsprings were as numerous as the fountains of Ida. Fattened more by a mythologic-monastic-aestheticism than by the history and philosophy of economics, nourished at once the bitter blood of revolution and the sweet fruits of peace; conceived in hate and born in love, this “socialism” is far removed from what men are apt to consider to be the immediate problems of their existence. He who would catalogue William Morris, therefore, and tag him “socialist,” or “communist,” must understand the full import of the Brotherhood, the Fellowship of Man, before he discusses Morris’ relationship to state ownership. He should also read the Edda of Saemund the Wise.

When the federal control of railways has been reconciled with the weaving of tapestries, and when the principle of the soviet has been correlated with the hallowed death of Baldur the Bright, we can commence to speak with accuracy of William Morris, Socialist, or William Morris, Communist.

Until the day arrives on which such resolutions are accomplished—a day as remote as the Fellowship itself—the social philosophy of William Morris must remain a “literary” abstraction. In describing its origins we do not detract from its significance, however, for we can discern, amidst so much that is impracticable, a motivating human spirit of great courage and nobility, even though its energies were spent in behalf of a social ideal which is no more susceptible of realistic interpretation than is any other messianic phenomenon.