William Morris:

The Myth of the Fall

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Within a week of William Morris's death in 1896, in a *Daily Chronicle* obituary 'William Morris as a Socialist' reprinted in the special Morris issue of the *Clarion*, George Bernard Shaw announced that after the Trafalgar Square fiasco of 1887, the disillusioned Morris had retreated from socialist activity. By the end of his life, claimed Shaw, Morris had 'practically adopted the views of the Fabian Society as to how the change would come about.'[1] So did the story of the falling off take root, and Morris was probably spinning in his freshly dug grave. Shaw, however, was not completely wrong. There had indeed been a perceptible alteration in Morris's outlook during his last years: enough at least to corroborate guesses of a 'state-ward' shift, and to provide ammunition to those who wished to claim him for a fellow renegade. What exactly happened to Morris during the 1890s is aptly symbolised by James Leatham's account of his 1894 visit to Manchester, a story which exists in two incarnations: in a book which had the honour of being the first critical study of Morris, *Master of Many Crafts*, and in Leatham's serialised memoir in the *Gateway*.

The first account dispels any suspicions about Morris's waning commitment to socialist propaganda. Although he was in failing health,

> He was speaking from a lorry pitched on piece of waste land close to the Ship Canal, his whole environment probably as distasteful to him as possible. It was a wild March morning, and he would not have been asked to speak out of doors, but he expressed a desire to do so; and so there he was, talking quietly but strenuously, drawing a laugh every now and then by some piece of waggish wisdom from the undulating crowd, of working men mostly, who stood in the hollow and the slopes before him. There would be quite two thousand of them. ... In spite of the bitter cold of the morning, scarcely a man moved from the crowd…[2]

The scene is typical of a year of peak lecturing activity such as 1887, even though by 1894 Morris's primary concern, according to received wisdom, was the Kelm-scott Press. But listener reactions betrayed no sign of a weakening in his power to inspire, nor to engage with the unconverted. One member of the audience wrote in the *Clarion*:

> Like an archangel in the morning sun
> He stood with a high message, and men heard
> The rousing syllables, and scarcely stirred,
> Rough though they were, until the tale was done.
> Then there arose full many a doubting one
> Who craved interpretation of a word
> So big with meaning, but so long deferred:
> And the great Poet scorned to answer none.[3]

Leatham's second account largely repeats the narrative of the first, but also brings to the forefront a new element in Morris's political outlook:

> The meeting was under the auspices of the Social-Democratic Federation, from which he and many of his friends had seceded ten years before. The Branch had invited him to come and speak on my suggestion; but not satisfied with two free addresses – he spoke again in the Free Trade Hall in the afternoon – they pressed him to become the Socialist candidate for South Salford! At the Sunday-morning meeting he handsomely admitted that Hyndman had been right in standing by a policy and program of specific political proposals, and 'we are now hand-in-glove,' he said.[4]

Did this mean that Morris was now reconciled to the parliamentary path, even to the extent of being considered as a potential candidate? Did he no longer believe that propaganda and electioneering were antithetical, as he had in the mid-1880s? Hyndman, in his autobiography, insisted that Morris 'stuck steadily to revolutionary Socialism from 1882 to the end of his life,' despite the attempts of 'his relations and intimate friends … to obliterate this portion of his career.'[5] But Leatham's memory was not playing tricks on him. In 1894, roughly two months before he spoke in Manchester, Morris told an SDF reporter that it would be 'madness to attempt anything like an insurrection.' 'The people will not revolt until every other means have been tried.' 'What we have to do … is get control of [Parliament] and then we have that executive power at our back'; 'we have to create a party … with delegates in the House of Commons …. Present circum-stances … go to prove the wisdom of the S.D.F. in drawing up that list of palliative measures … Mean and paltry as it seemed to me – and does still, as compared with the whole thing, something of the kind is absolutely essential.'[6] 'The tendency of the English to neglect organisation till it is forced upon them by immediate

necessity … is obvious in the movement,' Morris complained the same year, 'The materials for a great Socialist party are all around us, but no such party exists. We have only the scattered limbs of it.'[7] And during the mid-nineties he made many more pronouncements along the same lines.[8] But while this may seem, on the face of it, a complete turn-around from the uncompromising rejection of palliatives and parliamentary politics expressed at every opportunity throughout the 1880s,[9] it is difficult to find a single, straightforward repudiation of or dirge for anti-statist socialism in Morris's later speeches and articles. If anything, they demonstrate the complexities of an altered political situation, and Morris's tone when acquiescing in the necessity of Parliament is frequently wistful.

The ambiguity is palpable in the 1895 lecture 'What We Have to Look For,' concerned, significantly, not with the 'ideal of Socialism' but with day-to-day tactics, 'the degrading game of politics' with all its failures, disappointments, and 'causeless quarrels.'[10] Morris admits that during the 1890s the movement had 'undergone a great change.' In the early days it was mostly devoted to 'preaching' socialism, partially because it believed in the inevitability of an insurrection (Morris is here ascribing the views of the Socialist League to everyone else), a belief that was corroborated by government violence on occasions such as Bloody Sunday. At this time socialism gained adherents, but failed to touch the mass of the working class (except its intellectuals), who did not think in terms of class, but in terms of trade-union or even narrower workplace interests. The propagandists, he continues, were too optimistic to admit their failure, or the fact that the spirit of socialism lacked a 'body' that 'would make it a powerful force.'

But by the mid-nineties all of this had changed: virtually no one believed any longer in the change coming by catastrophe, looking rather to the conversion of public opinion to fill Parliament with socialist delegates who would enact the appropriate legislation. Morris is referring, without mentioning names, to the rise of the ILP and *Clarion* socialism: still interested in 'making socialists,' but for a different purpose than the revolutionary Socialist League. He alludes also to the new labour militancy: the working classes, he claims, have finally warmed to socialism, and have begun to take action through strikes 'to be recognised as citizens.' The ruling powers respond by making concessions, which only improve the condition of some workers at the expense of others, and allay the general discontent without fixing its causes. There is no sign here that Morris approves of the concessions: they are what he had always warned against, they prevent further action by the people and perpetuate the status quo. However, now that the decision has been taken to get into Parliament, socialists can no longer remain a sect, but must form a socialist party which will include all the existing groups. Without such a party no political goal would be accomplished; propaganda, he insists, should be used to convert people who would then demand a unified party over the heads of the squabbling 'leaders.'

Morris's words are clearly a reflection of the (ultimately unsuccessful) *Clarion* campaign for socialist unity – the merger of the ILP and the SDF which was obstructed by leadership rivalry. He does not appear too sanguine about its prospects – the 'attempt to act as a party when we have no party' is 'futile' – and even at this late date insists that 'we had better confine ourselves to the old teaching and preaching of Socialism pure and simple.' Before a 'body,' a community of socialists has been created, all talk of legislative transformation is as premature as those early hopes of insurrection. Although Morris appears to endorse Shaw's disillusionment narrative in part – naïve minority revolutionism giving way to mainstream uninspired parliamentarism – the emphasis on conversion remains dominant throughout. The wider labour movement may have begun to awaken to the ideas of socialism, but the propagandists still have their work cut out for them. As May Morris rightly remarked, 'in his latest lectures as in the earliest, the main point he dwelt on was the necessity of "making Socialists".'[11]

This even applied to lectures – such as 'Communism' (1893) – which were destined to be reprinted as Fabian Tracts (No. 113 in 1903, with a preface by Shaw). This was the year of Morris's failed attempt to form a united socialist party with the Fabians and the SDF, and he concluded the lecture with an appeal to all socialists 'not to make a quarrel of it with those whose aim is one with theirs, because there is a difference of opinion between them about the usefulness of the details of the means.'[12] This plea was certainly welcome evidence of a rapprochement, but the reality was much more complex. Morris may have been calling for an end to organisational factionalism, in line with the federal aspirations of large parts of the movement, but he had no intention of abandoning his old goals.

He began by agreeing that the Fabian '*machinery* of Socialism,' such as the London County Council or municipal administration of industry, was a gain, but immediately qualified the admission by asserting that it could not be useful unless it educated the people in real socialism. Morris was merely repeating what he and E. B. Bax had just written in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*: 'The Bill… for the formation of District and Parish Councils, though their powers will be but small, is nevertheless an important step, if only as providing a democratic machinery, which can be hereafter used for socialistic purposes.'[13] Decentralising tendencies were to be encouraged: if in his revolutionary purist phase Morris had looked upon 'local self-government' as 'something considerably short of free communes,' and did not approve of the county councils created by the Local Government Act of 1888,[14] during the 1890s he came to see some hope for the 'transitional condition' being brought about in his own time by 'the further development of democracy' in tandem with the 'conscious attempts of the Socialists themselves.' Democracy could not revolutionise the basis of society, but it could to a certain extent 'improve the position of the working classes,' and also raise their discontent, thereby assisting to bring 'us to the fullness of the fel-

lowship.'[15] 'Work by municipalities and trade organisations for the decentralisa-tion of administration, and the acquirement of control over the industries of the country' could supplement 'the gradual shifting of the opinions and aspirations of the masses.'[16] But both were essential.

The progressiveness of reforms depended on the 'spirit' in which they were obtained, on their success in 'converting the workers to an understanding of, and ardent desire for … true and complete Socialism.' One could better conditions without coming any closer to the attainment of the true Society of Equality: the people must 'consciously and not blindly strive for [the new society's] realisa-tion. That in fact is what we mean by the education into Socialism of the work-ing classes.' The Fabians were probably glad to hear that though Morris 'once believed in the inevitableness of a sudden and speedy change' – which 'was no wonder with the new enlightenment of Socialism gilding the dullness of civilisa-tion' – he now called on socialists to 'take soberer views of our hopes,' for there was to be no sudden revolution. But this did not mean that he was forsaking the religion of socialism altogether, or 'giv[ing] up all hope of educating [the people] into Socialism.' On the contrary, 'all means possible' had to be used for that purpose, and that is where the machinery would come in handy: 'to give form to vague aspirations … to raise their aims above the mere businesslike work of the old trades unions,' and to 'train them into organisation and administration' the lack of which was such 'a huge disadvantage' for the working class.

Such measures must be supplemented by 'instilling into the minds of the peo-ple a knowledge of the aims of Socialism, and a longing to bring about the com-plete change which will supplant civilisation by communism.' At all costs, the social democratic machinery must be prevented from becoming an end-in-itself: 'I look to this spirit [of the expectation of equality] to vivify the striving for the mere machinery of Socialism'; 'in order to make any due use of Socialist machin-ery one should have some sort of idea as to the life which is to be the result of it.' Morris goes on to define complete communism, and warns again against confus-ing 'the co-operative machinery towards which modern life is tending with the essence of Socialism itself.'[17] If this lecture was an endorsement of Fabianism, it was a very half-hearted one. Morris's real attitude was expressed succinctly in 1895 when he told Sidney Webb: 'The world is going your way at present, Webb, but it is not the right way in the end.'[18]

He had, it seems, finally accepted the tools of the state, but only for the purpose of educating workers towards the state-less communal ideal. On their own they were worthless. *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* had made two things clear: that legislation for the bettering of the workers' condition was being pressed by the workers themselves (and not by someone on their behalf), and that by thus taking up the political line 'themselves' they were progressing towards revolution. Strivings for a better standard of livelihood would lead to the birth of a new soci-

ety: the ideal of the theoretical thinkers and the short-term action for immediate gains of the popular movement were finally in accordance. Morris had recognised at last that 'it is through the instinctive working-class movement towards the bettering of life, by whatever political-economical methods,' that his 'ideal of a new society must be sought.'

He would not have been so generous about choice of methods several years previously, certainly not those which potentially accepted the usefulness of state-sponsored palliatives. The theoreticians, he wrote, should 'take part in all action that tends towards Socialism, lest their wholesome and truthful theories should be left adrift on the barren shore of Utopianism,' but the ideal should also be kept in front of the working class lest they lose the way.[19] Limited gains were acceptable only as long as they were fought for with a revolutionary aim in view: 'the essential thing is not an improved administrative machinery …. not mere amelioration of the condition of certain groups of labour, necessarily at the expense of others …. Rise of wages, shortening of hours of labour, better education, etc., all these things are good, even in themselves,' but they must be 'used as steps towards equality of condition.'[20]

As all the foregoing should make us suspect, Morris did not suddenly awaken to this realisation in 1893. The SDF had espoused palliatives as a means of educating the working class towards revolution from the very beginning; their involvement in local government, industrial struggles, and various reformist campaigns side by side with other labour activists was always conditioned by a very Morrisian focus on the development of communal organisational talent.[21] Morris's seemingly new perception possessed deep roots in his previous political associations: even when he disapproved of their electioneering, he had always identified with the SDF branches on the ground in his propaganda work. Given the small size of the Socialist League, the SDF frequently served as his home away from home during the lecture tours of the 1880s. In 1887 he had already admitted that

> it may be necessary to use parliament mechanically: what I object to is *depending* on parliamentary agitation. There *must* be a great party, a great organisation outside parliament actively engaged in reconstructing society and learning administration whatever goes on in the parliament itself. This is in direct opposition to the view of the regular parliamentary section as represented by Shaw, who look upon parliament as *the* means; and it seems to me we will fall into the error of moving earth & sea to fill the ballot boxes with Socialist votes which will not represent Socialist *men*.[22]

In its essentials, this was a view which Morris would never give up. He maintained the need to create a mass socialist movement of the people outside Parliament even when he had grudgingly accepted the parliamentary path. Improving working-class conditions and focusing on the passing hour would not change

the basis of society. When he wrote in 1896 that socialism 'has indeed ceased to be merely a sect or a "church" as it was some fifteen years ago, but has never gained any organisation; its strength, as well as its weakness, lies in its being an *opinion* rather than a party,' he did not have just the parliamentary party in mind.[23] A mass communal movement had not been created either, and it was this to which all effort had to be bent. Though 'it is too much to hope that the *whole* working class can be educated in the aims of socialism in due time … we *must* hope that a strong party can be so educated in economics, in organisation, and in administration,' and they will in turn educate the rest.[24] A 'party' in this sense was an instrument of anti-statist socialism, with the emphasis placed squarely on working-class agency and self-management.

Throughout the 1890s, Morris had come to appreciate the educative function of the 'labour war,' he no longer dismissed industrial strike action out of hand, if it was 'founded on principle, and … not a mere temporary business squabble.'[25] Industrial struggle was finally 'changing its character' and turning into a class war, workmen were expressing their desire 'to manage their own affairs.'[26] Writing in a *Commonweal* article 'Anti-Parliamentary' in 1890, and referring to the New Unionism, Morris claimed that the events of the last year had produced 'a different spirit in the mass of the workers, and they are now beginning to learn how to combine in earnest.' Although he did not mention it, the shift in his thinking could also have reflected the changes in union organisation and activity associated with the rise of syndicalism. In 1890 he was still saying that workers should ignore Parliament, because their real weapon 'is not the ballot box but the *Boycott*' or '*the general strike*.' But though that was to change, the injunction to 'strengthen your own organisations to deal directly with your masters in the present, and to learn how to manage your own affairs both now and for the future' would remain remarkably stable throughout.[27] Reforms won by struggle were preferable to those granted by the state because they could promote working-class agency and organisation and thus indirectly serve the cause of socialism. And once the 'effective majority of the working-people' was animated by socialist principles and powerfully organised, the new Society would arrive.[28]

Even at the end of his life Morris continued to subscribe to the sentiments of the 1885 *Manifesto of the Socialist League*: 'no number of merely administrative changes, until the workers are in possession of all political power, would make any real approach to Socialism.' Political power was not franchise in a representative system but 'direct control by the people of the whole administration of the community.'[29] In the revolutionary scenario offered by *News from Nowhere*, the workers did indeed learn 'administration' in the process of obtaining political control, achieving the communal utopia precisely by developing the organisational skills that according to Morris they so sorely lacked. As Old Hammond explained it to his Victorian guest: the original leaders of the movement

had little administrative capacity … But now that the times called for immediate action, came forward the men capable of setting it on foot; and a new network of workmen's associations grew up very speedily, whose avowed single object was the tiding over of the ship of the community into a simple condition of Communism; and as they practically undertook also the management of the ordinary labour-war, they soon became the mouthpiece and intermediary of the whole of the working classes; and the manufacturing profit-grinders now found themselves powerless before this combination…[30]

One might as well be reading a *Commonweal* analysis of the present struggle. The very vocabulary of the passage – 'administrative capacity,' 'labour-war,' 'network of workmen's associations' – reminds us that the original serialisation of *News from Nowhere* appeared amidst the day to day reports of socialist agitation. The reader's eye would pass from accounts of real strikes and branch meetings, and Morris's appraisals of the situation, to the imagined account of revolutionary change, without registering any difference in tone or phraseology. If the vocabulary of the chapters depicting the utopian end-state was akin to that of the medieval romances, 'how the change came' could only be described in the matter-of-fact political idiom of the speeches and articles. The one grew naturally out of the other, the future was Firmly grounded in the activities and preoccupations of the present, a present which was much more complex than the Shavian narrative allowed.

NOTES

1. George Bernard Shaw, 'William Morris as a Socialist', *Clarion*, 10 October 1896, p. 325.
2. James Leatham, *William Morris: Master of Many Crafts,* 3rd edn, Peterhead: Clerkhill Press, 1908, pp. 125–126.
3. *Clarion*, 31 March 1894, as quoted in Edmund & Ruth Frow, *William Morris in Manchester and Salford.* Salford: Working Class Movement Library, 1996, p. 23.
4. James Leatham, 'Sixty Years of World-Mending. Recollections and the More or Less Pertinent Reflections. XI. – William Morris', *Gateway*, May 1941. As quoted in Michael Bloor, 'James Leatham's Eye-Witness Account of William Morris's 1888 Visit to Aberdeen', *Journal of William Morris Studies* 18.1, Winter 2008, pp. 22–33.
5. Henry Mayers Hyndman, *The Record of an Adventurous Life*, London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1911, p. 365.
6. 'A Socialist Poet on Bombs and Anarchism', *Justice*, 27 January 1894. As

quoted in Tony Pinkney, ed, *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885–96*. Reading: Spire Books Ltd, 2005, pp. 82, 84–5.

7. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary,* New York: Pantheon Books, 1977, p. 745. Afterwards Thompson.

8. See Thompson, p. 600, and William Morris, 'The Present Outlook of Socialism in England', in Norman Kelvin, ed, *William Morris on Art and Socialism*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 1999, p. 191, where he called for the creation of a socialist party which would 'include the whole of the genuine labour movement … [and] all that is definitely Socialist amongst the middle class', for although 'It is true that a wide-spread opinion cannot be defeated, and need not fear the temporary decision of the ballot-box … to such a decision it must come at last'. Subsequently Kelvin, *Art & Socialism.*

9. See, for example, 'The Policy of the Socialist League' (1888), in Nicholas Salmon, ed, *William Morris, Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal 1883–1890*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994, pp. 360–3. Afterwards *Political Writings*. The apparent deradicalisation of Morris's views squares with Gareth Stedman Jones's chronology in 'Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class', *Journal of Social History* 7.4, Summer 1974, pp. 467–8, which identifies the years 1883–1888 – the high point of Morris's revolutionary enthusiasm – as a period of social and political unrest, which quickly subsided after 1889, as the depression lifted. George J. Barnsby in *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850–1939.* Wolverhampton: Integrated Publishing Services, 1998, p. 53 gives 1884–1887 as the peak years both of the depression and of general socialist activity and influence. For a nuanced examination of Morris's purism and his trajectory in the 1890s which conFirms my own analysis, see Introduction to Florence Boos, ed, *William Morris's Socialist Diary*. London: Journeyman Press and the London History Workshop Centre, 1985, pp. 1–18.

10. 'What We Have to Look For', in May Morris, ed, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936, Volume II, pp. 358–61. Afterwards *AWS*.

11. *AWS*, p. 361.

12. *AWS*, pp. 352–3; May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris,* London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910–15, Volume XXIII, p. 276. Subsequently *CW*.

13. William Morris & Ernest Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome.* London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1893, p. 281. Afterwards Morris & Bax.

14. Nicholas Salmon, ed, *William Morris, Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal 1885–1890*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, p. 142; see also *ibid.* pp. xvi–xvii, 516–18. Subsequently *Journalism*.

15. 'Four Letters', in Asa Briggs, ed, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs*. London: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 152–3.

16. Morris & Bax, pp. 280, 285.

17. *CW*, XXIII, pp. 264–6, 268–71, 275.

18. R. Page Arnot, *William Morris: The Man and the Myth*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964, p. 108.

19. Morris & Bax, pp. 276–9. Cf. Harry Quelch in 1900: the SDF had to 'be in and of [the working-class] movement. Otherwise, the movement would pass it by as a mere sectarian body of doctrinaires and dogmatists,'; Graham Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics in Britain, 1881–1911*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002, pp. 162–3.

20. Thompson, pp. 599–600.

21. James Leatham, for instance, called for 'more local government [and the] extension of Municipal operations'; Leatham, *The Class War*. Aberdeen: James Leatham, 1892, p. 15. See also *The Only Thing That Will Do, By One of the Unemployed*. Aberdeen: James Leatham, 1890, pp. 19–21, 26. In this pamphlet, which appeared at the same time as the serialisation of *News from Nowhere*, Leatham proposed going beyond Municipal Socialism, but 'in harmony with the unavoidable decentralising tendencies of the age,' to create Craft Guilds 'which would manage the affairs of the particular calling,' and 'send representatives to the Commune or Council of Delegates' of the county. The devolution of administration and the 'communisation of the land' would solve the 'muddle of Individualism' and realise the 'Collectivist ideal' in line with the necessity of 'social evolution'.

22. Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984–1996, 4 vols in 5, Volume II, p. 693.

23. Kelvin, *Art & Socialism*, p. 190.

24. *Political Writings*, p. 125.

25. Kelvin, *Art & Socialism*, p. 191.

26. Morris & Bax, p. 271.

27. *Political Writings*, p. 483.

28. *CW*, Volume XXIII, p. 266.

29. Thompson, pp. 736, 740.

30. *CW*, Volume XVI, p. 120.

Art of Myth and Fairy Tale. Arts & humanities website. ~Victorian Fashion Fans~. Company. William Morris Society of Canada. Non-profit organisation. May was the youngest daughter of William and Jane Morris and one of the most significant artists of the British Arts and Crafts movement. The exhibition tells the story of May, who at age 23, took charge of the Morris & Co. embroidery department and was responsible for creating some of the company's most iconic textiles and wallpaper designs. One of the items we are loaning is May Morris's embroidery Minstrel with Cymbals shown in the accompanying photo. More information here: https://dovecotstudios.com/exhibitions/may-morris-art-life/. Image credit for photos from the exhibition: John Pre Poems by William Morris. (24 March 1834 – 3 October 1896) was an English textile designer, poet, novelist, translator, and socialist activist. Associated with the British Arts and Crafts Movement, he was a major contributor t. The artist's attraction to the myth of Pygmalion transforming Galatea was another popular image in those days. Morris painted Jane as Isolde (medieval wife of King Mark who falls in love with Tristan) in his only known canvas. He wrote, "I cannot paint you, but I love you." It might appear he felt he could better write about her?