

Between *Ouvriérisme* and Élitism: The dualism of William Morris

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Ouvriérisme – ‘the glorification of manual laborers, often in opposition to the leadership of the labor or socialist movement’ – is now very much part of the vocabulary of social, and especially labour historians, usually with derogatory undertones. The term entered the French language *via* Jules Vallès, who wrote of an ideology which regards working people as the only ones able to lead a truly popular movement. *The Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that it was Gareth Stedman Jones who first used the word, defined as ‘the belief that the traditional working class has a monopoly of socialist potential’, in 1969 – a notion clearly derived from Karl Marx’s concept of the ‘working-class vanguard’ of Revolution. Today, the words (the French word seems to be used increasingly in English – and we will therefore retain it) imply a kind of idealisation of ‘the salt of the earth’, or as Ferdynand Zweig puts it, ‘ouvrierism implies that the worker can never be the wrongdoer, he can be wronged but he cannot wrong others’. It may be argued that there is an *ouvriériste* dimension to William Morris – the difficulty lying in what is meant by the terms ‘the worker’, and even more so ‘the traditional working class’ – but the initial definition used above seems particularly apt to feed the ‘accusation’ as far as Morris is concerned.¹

I

Paul Meier is the French author who has possibly most accurately perceived the ‘dualist’ dimension of William Morris’s objectives. Interestingly, even though the ‘signified’ is everywhere present in Meier’s *magnum opus*, the ‘signifier’, *ouvriérisme*, is not used.

Only a bourgeois intellectual, impregnated with a Marxism whose rigour he does not always sense, carried away as much by his enthusiasm as by his very origins into practising an uncompromising purism, can want to change the world by offering to the oppressed classes a living image of their liberation.

Meier writes of Morris's '*paternalisme bourgeois*', of his '*paternalisme puritain*', in his first approaches towards the working class, however sympathetic and well meaning they may have been. He reproaches him for initially considering these '*masses ouvrières*' as an 'abstraction', the result of this 'abstract vision' being that he only shed his illusions on the imminence of revolution after Bloody Sunday, and only forgot his 'purism', which kept him isolated from the 'real mass movement', after the success of the Great London Dock Strike of 1889.²

Meier also underlines Morris's apparent fear of the result of the proletariat's accession to power after the revolution, adducing evidence from a passage in 'The Hopes of Civilization' (1885), which he quotes in English.

[N]o history has yet shown us – what is swiftly advancing upon us – a class which, though it shall have attained knowledge, shall lack utterly the refinement and self-respect which come from the union of knowledge with leisure and ease of life. The growth of such a class may well make the 'cultured' people of to-day tremble.

Meier builds his argument around his central thesis – it should never be forgotten that the original French title of his book is *La pensée utopique de William Morris* – that all that William Morris offered the masses was his utopia: incapable as he was of speaking to them knowingly of their actual experience, he was only able to talk to them of the perspectives opened by utopia. But – and we are back to the discussion of Morris's 'dualism' – Meier argues that towards the end of his life Morris acknowledged that he could never have become a militant Socialist other than via the utopian route, precisely because he was a bourgeois and never knew the difficulties of everyday life. He adds that Morris's position proceeded from a humble and guilty endeavour to mark the superiority of the proletarian class consciousness.³

Meier's most damning comment on Morris's 'dualism' is formulated a few lines earlier: 'L'utopiste, cherchant dans le futur l'apaisement d'un sentiment de culpabilité, se replongeait aux sources bourgeoises de son utopie'. Still, Meier concedes, Morris was '*un travailleur* [note that he does not say '*ouvrier*'] *manuel autant qu'intellectuel*'; he astonished workers [*ouvriers*] by his extensive practical knowledge. Therefore we may conclude that perhaps he was not the 'Marxist dreamer' of Meier's translator – or at least that he was not so at all times, which takes us back to his 'dualism'.⁴

However, William Morris's Marxism, combined with his appreciation of

manual work, gave birth indirectly to a masterpiece of bookbinding, executed in 1884 by Cobden-Sanderson – to whom we apparently owe the term ‘Arts and Crafts’.⁵ This is the 1867 French edition of *Das Kapital*, which Morris had read again and again since his acquisition of it in 1883, apparently until sections of his original copy in paper wrappers completely fell apart. There was at the time no English translation, and Morris’s knowledge of German was much less extensive than his understanding of French. Even if one is not interested in bookbinding, one immediately perceives that this volume is a masterpiece, with elaborate hand tooling at a time when decoration was routinely obtained using heated block plates. Each dot on this cover is produced by a separate operation, and one is reminded of the painstaking work of the copyists and illuminators of the Middle Ages – an obvious source of attraction for William Morris, when one bears in mind his idealisation of mediaeval labour.

We cannot fail to come to the conclusion that down to very recent days everything that the hand of man touched was more or less beautiful: so that in those days all people who made anything shared in art, as well as all people who used the things so made: that is, all people shared in art.⁶

There is nothing incongruous either in this encouragement of the ‘Lesser Arts’ when it is remembered that William Morris had earlier written an essay in praise of them.⁷ So, what we may call his ‘dualism’ is to be found elsewhere, in the discrepancy we perceive between this treatise of Communist political economy, by an author who sees in the proletariat the saviours of the world, and the splendour of the shrine found in the luxurious covers of his copy of *Das Kapital*.

The many denunciations of this ‘dualism’, voiced soon after Morris’s Socialist commitment – as in the famous caricature, ‘The Earthly Paradox’, published in *Funny Folks* in 1886 – are well known. Following scuffles with the police during the Dod Street demonstration in favour of free speech on 20 September, he had been arrested and brought before a magistrate, charged with striking a policeman. During the course of his hearing, Morris had used his elevated social status to impress Judge Saunders – who had indeed acquitted him while severely condemning the ‘guilty’ coming from the lower layers of British society: ‘I am an artist, and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe’.⁸

Phil Katz reminds us that it was William Morris the anti-monarchist who accepted the commission for wallpaper destined for Balmoral. Tim Barringer also underlines this apparent contradiction, contrasting Morris – accused of not putting his existence in conformity with his great principles – with Gandhi, who did.

William Morris had learned the skills of the weaver and the printer, his arms and hands often stained with inks and dyes, while nonetheless remaining ineluctably

bourgeois in his life and habits. But Gandhi, the dapper, sophisticated lawyer of London and Durban, renounced absolutely the luxuries of middle-class life and painstakingly adopted the persona and the skills of a village spinner.⁹

In contrast, Asa Briggs believed that it was not so much his way of life as his approach to work which gave Morris his credibility:

Morris's work as a craftsman and designer prepared him for the change [to Socialism] far more than his work as a poet. Before he expressed in words his rebellion against [his] age he expressed it in his art... His workshop was a challenge to the Victorian factory.

We may also otherwise note that the anonymous journalist who interviewed him in 1895 declared afterwards that 'Mr. Morris is eminently a working man'.¹⁰

For William Morris, who would answer by studying things from another angle, there was of course no contradiction between his taste for fine things, in spite of their price, and his rejection of luxury – that is, in his eyes, of the gaudiness prized by the pretentious middle class, as he makes it clear in the case of buildings:

You must dismiss at once as a delusion the hope that has been sometimes cherished, that you can have a building which is a work of art, and is therefore above all things properly built, at the same price as a building which only pretends to be this.¹¹

Likewise, a book with a strong binding, made according to the best methods, may be seen as perfectly justifying the cost. We can concede the point; the old principle that 'cheap goods are more expensive in the long run', and the fact frequently lamented by philanthropists that the poorest people are often forced to buy the shoddiest products.¹² But it is far more difficult to follow William Morris when the covers of his *Le Capital* are magnificently tooled. Where then is the utility value? Where is the simplicity he advocates?

Simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste, that is, a love for sweet and lofty things, is of all matters most necessary for the birth of the new and better art we crave for; simplicity everywhere, in the palace as well as in the cottage.¹³

Are we not in the realm of the superfluous, and therefore of the vulgar luxury which Morris abhors, and denounces in his harangues against the middle classes, who combine both an absence of taste and of scruples in exploiting the workers?¹⁴ As he was to write in *Commonweal* ten years later,

We have been forcing the great mass of the workers to make things of no use to the workers (or to any one else for that matter), and we have assumed that we

shall always be able to find people willing to take these pieces of manufacture from us in exchange for food and other necessities which are produced by the workers, and not by the buyers of the useless things. [...] these buyers of inutilities have nothing to buy them with except the necessities which they steal from the workers.

The idea was taken from a lecture of 1884: 'The present position of the workers is that of the machinery of commerce, or in plainer words its slaves; [...] the other classes are but hangers-on who live on them'.¹⁵

It may be argued that William Morris takes refuge in sophistry when he explains that there are two definitions of the superfluous. On the one hand, there is the genuinely superfluous, that of the Philistines, those parasites who decorate their ugly homes with trinkets produced by their latter-day slaves: 'Believe me, if we want art to begin at home, as it must, we must clear our houses of troublesome superfluities that are for ever in our way: conventional comforts that are no real comforts, and do but make work for servants and doctors'. On the other, there is what seems to be superfluous only in appearance for, he says, if you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: 'HAVE NOTHING IN YOUR HOUSE THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW TO BE USEFUL OR BELIEVE TO BE BEAUTIFUL'.¹⁶

It is well known that William Morris despised Utilitarianism – he wrote that reading a refutation of Socialism by John Stuart Mill greatly contributed to converting him to the idea.¹⁷ How then is it possible to understand his apparent reference, if not to Bentham's principle of utility, at least to this word, which recalls the abhorred doctrine? Of course one can make point that Morrisian usefulness cannot be (and indeed refuses to be) quantified, whereas Benthamite utility rests almost entirely on the kind of spurious quantification (and commodification) so beloved of modern politicians, but which was the root of Morris's detestation. Still, he was to go even further in the apparent paradox, in an ardent plea in favour of utility: 'Nothing can be a work of art which is not useful; that is to say, which does not minister to the body when well under command of the mind, or which does not amuse, soothe, or elevate the mind in a healthy state'. Admittedly, he simultaneously denounced *en passant* the rich man's costly baubles: 'What tons upon tons of unutterable rubbish pretending to be works of art in some degree would this maxim clear out of our London houses, if it were understood and acted upon!'¹⁸

This is a superfluity only in appearance. It is not a mere bonus: it is simply art. Not of course the factitious and useless art of the false elites, but the only art which elevates the mind, popular art or 'the art of the people'.¹⁹ How can this genuine art be defined? It is very simple – some would say 'simplistic' – it is only a form of authentic creation born of the pleasure which human beings finds in their work, and which constitutes one of the few 'real values' of the human pres-

ence on earth: 'Nature will not be finally conquered till our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives'.²⁰

The first *Homo faber* was by definition the first *artifex*, the person who transforms nature, the 'natural' into the 'artificial', by manual and intellectual intervention; simultaneously artist and artisan, if one follows the later derivations from the common Latin root. It will be remembered that – as he explained in a lecture delivered on several occasions between 1884 and 1886 – for William Morris, it was the Renaissance which brought about the rupture between the artist and the artisan, by introducing the division of labour: 'The craftsmen were now divided into artists who were not workmen, and workmen who were not artists'. And as he was to repeat in *Commonweal* in 1887: 'Before the rise of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the artisan did not differ in kind from the artist; all craftsmen who made anything were artists of some kind, they only differed in degree'.²¹

This art may only be 'popular', considered solely from the point of view of its intended public – as opposed to the passive consumers from the world of commercialism – and this is how one could understand what Morris wrote to the *Daily Chronicle* in 1893, 'I hold firmly to the opinion that all worthy schools of art must be in the future, as they have been in the past, the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the beauty and true pleasure of life'. This might therefore be an art exclusively destined for the people – an interpretation buttressed by what he writes further on: 'I try to express myself through the art of today, which seems to us to be only a survival of the organic art of the past, in which the people shared, whatever the other drawbacks of their condition might have been'. But this would be far too limiting, and in 'The Art of the People', Morris introduces a formula he was to take up, hardly modified, in later writings: '... Real art, the expression of man's happiness in his labour, – an art made by the people, and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user'.²²

But after all – one might object – all this only discusses 'labour' and 'the people', but there is no mention of 'the worker': where then is Morris's *ouvriérisme*? During the first months of his active conversion to Socialism (it can be argued that it had long been latent within him), William Morris no longer wrote simply of 'the people', but actually of 'workers':

When things are done not for the workers but by them, an ideal will present itself with great distinctness to the workers themselves, which will not mean living on as little as you can, so as not to disturb the course of profit-grinding, but rather living a plentiful, generous, un-anxious life, the first quite necessary step to higher ideals yet.²³

Six years later he seemed weary and disillusioned over the purely working-class dimension of the Socialist movement

When I first joined the movement I hoped that some working-man leader, or rather leaders, would turn up, who would push aside all middle-class help, and become great historical figures. I might still hope for that, if it seemed likely to happen, for indeed I long for it enough; but to speak plainly it does not so seem at present.²⁴

It can be argued that William Morris was gradually, from the 1890s, during the last years of his life, to turn away from what could be called ‘Socialist *ouvriérisme*’ – but this does not mean that he rejected ‘artistic *ouvriérisme*’, as *News from Nowhere* was to show. The ‘Marxist’ phase actually lasted only for a brief period: from the compulsive reading of *Das Kapital* in 1883 to the distance taken in *News from Nowhere*.

It is perhaps the literary critic Northrop Frye who gives the best answers, even if indirect, to the questions which arise from William Morris’s political evolution during that period. He notes first – which is also immediately apparent when one reads the book – that in *Nowhere* one sees hardly any industrial production or factories, and consequently few factory workers. We know the reason: in *Nowhere*, there are no ‘factories’ as such, only workshops.²⁵ Admittedly, the Revolution has taken place, but it was not just the ‘vanguard of the working class’, namely the industrial proletariat in the Marxist sense, which made it – and it is certainly not this vanguard as Marx conceived it which constitutes the people of *Nowhere*. In contrast, Frye argues – with the greatest relevance for our present discussion – that at bottom Morris goes further than Marx in focusing, not just on ‘the worker’, but on ‘labour’: ‘Morris started out, not with the Marxist question “who are the workers?” but with the more deeply revolutionary question “what is work?”’ How does William Morris answer this ‘deeply revolutionary question’? In fact he comes back over and over again to what he wrote – as we have seen – before his ‘Marxist phase’: ‘That thing which I understand by real art is the expression by man of his pleasure in labour’.²⁶

But then another problem arises: what does William Morris include in ‘real art’? It is clear that Morris & Co. (‘the Firm’) deliberately specialised in the Decorative Arts. One sees that his best friends were pictorial artists: one can only bow before his taste in matters of architecture when visiting Red House. We are ready to believe that the workers who were employed by him at Merton Abbey, where mechanical power – which he did not rule out – was provided not by a steam engine (*horribile dictu!*) but by a water wheel, could find some interest in their labour, even some artistic satisfaction. It is equally plausible that highly qualified bricklayers and other craftsmen from the building trades may have found it intellectually rewarding to participate in the construction of Red House: for good measure, we can add the gilders who decorated his copy of *Le Capital*. But it soon becomes clear that all this is limited to the *visual* arts. One must of course count

literature, chiefly poetry, among what would be called today William Morris's cultural practices – but where are the working-class poets?

II

In a remarkably documented article, the late Nicholas Salmon began his article on Morris and the Victorian theatre with a falsely limitative *incipit*: 'On the face of it an article on Morris and the Victorian theatre would not seem to have a great deal of potential. It is well-known that Morris had a dislike of theatre-goers and the plays they went to see'.²⁷ Salmon derives his conclusion from a *prima facie* incontrovertible testimony, that of Morris's daughter May, who indicates in her biography of her father: 'As a form of art my father disliked the modern play, as an amusement it bored him almost (sometimes quite) to swearing point, and modern acting, with its appeal to the emotions, its elaborate realism and character study, was intolerable'. But, as usual with Morris, the important words are 'modern' and 'realism' – two notions he abhorred. May Morris actually tells us that his tastes ended at Shakespeare.²⁸

No hope therefore for plays staged in the manner of the nineteenth century – all the same in his eyes. Yet – surprise! – he wrote a 'Socialist' yarn, *The Tables Turned*, in order to shore up the treasure chest of the Socialist League in 1887, and even joined the troupe – with an enormous success, apparently – to play a caricature of the Archbishop of Canterbury. This point is central to our discussion. Where is the 'highbrow' dimension? Morris of course drew his inspiration from his immense culture, and this 'Socialist interlude', as he called it, is a pastiche of the *Towneley Mystery Plays* dating in all probability from the fourteenth century, intended as a mockery of elites who take themselves too seriously. Where is the 'popular' dimension? We are told that the hall, with its two to three hundred seats, was full for the première, and we conclude that the spectators could not all have been sophisticated intellectuals, even though George Bernard Shaw was among the most enthusiastic.²⁹

Yet some doubts remain about the really 'popular' composition of the audience, since William Morris himself privately possessed the greatest reservations concerning the intellectual abilities of the workers who joined the Socialist League, or at least came to its public meetings. The diaries he kept briefly during the early months of 1887 have survived, and enlighten us on the severe judgement he formulated on those who came to listen to him – for instance in this extract from 23 February:

Except a German from Wimbledon (who was in the chair) and two others who looked like artisans of the painter or small builder-type, the audience was all

made up of labourers and their wives: they were very quiet and attentive except one man who was courageous from liquor, and interrupted sympathetically: but I doubt if most of them understood anything I said; though some few of them showed that they did by applauding the points. I wonder sometimes if people will remember in times to come to what a depth of degradation the ordinary English workman has been reduced.

Or another from 21 March:

Sunday 13th I went to lecture in a queer little den for the Hackney branch, a street out of Goldsmiths' Row, Hackney road, a very miserable part of the east end of course: meeting small almost all members I suspect: one oldish man a stranger, a railway labourer who opposed in a friendly way gave me an opportunity of explaining to the audience various points which I expect; also a fresh opportunity (if I needed it) of gauging the depths of ignorance and consequent incapacity of following an argument which possesses the uneducated averagely stupid person.³⁰

Therefore, in the eyes of William Morris – this 'paternalist bourgeois', as Nicholas Salmon (otherwise a great admirer) called him³¹ – in the Britain of the 1880s, the ideal or idealised worker no longer exists. All the more reason to begin the Revolution and to introduce Socialism – and even if his play was not 'popular' in the sense of 'fully appreciated by members of the people', he could reckon that it at least advanced the cause of Socialism. Paradoxically, as a man who – to say the least – did not like the theatre of his own time, Morris was a great supporter of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen's play premièred in London in 1889, in the name of the implicit Socialism it supposedly contained. When a number of critics denounced its amorality and its morbidity, Morris published a defence in *Commonweal*, with the definitive pronouncement, 'all intelligent people who are not Socialists are pessimists':

Whatever may be the demerits of 'A Doll's House' as an acting play (by the way, if it is different from an ordinary modern play it must be better, just as any day different from last Whit-Monday must be better than it) – I say in any case it is a bit of the truth about modern society clearly and forcibly put. Therefore clearly it doesn't suit the critics, who are parasites of the band of robbers called modern society. Great is Diana of the Ephesians! But if my memory serves me, her rites were not distinguished for purity. I note that the critics say that Ibsen's plays are pessimistic; so they are – to pessimists; and all intelligent people who are not Socialists are pessimists. But the representation of the corruption of society carries with it in Ibsen's work aspirations for a better state of things.³²

With this point, we are back to the principle of utility *à la* William Morris

already discussed: everything which can expedite the elimination of ‘the band of robbers’ and the introduction of authentic values goes in the right direction and should be encouraged. Even if, in his eyes, it is boring, a play which denounces the decaying values of the middle class deserves respect.³³

Last, there was musical life, a ‘cultural practice’ extremely common among his ‘middle-class’ contemporaries – and unsurprisingly the same difficulties immediately arise in trying to assess William Morris’s real attitudes to it. Fiona MacCarthy aptly takes up the well-known story of Morris losing his temper over Wagner, who dared to appropriate his hero, Sigurd (he refused to call him Siegfried), indignantly exclaiming: ‘The idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express!’ In the same letter, he mocked opera, ‘the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art’. Another witness recalls that Morris could not bear the piano. Arnold Dolmetsch, commonly considered the great pioneer in the rediscovery of early music, goes even further: ‘He could find no pleasure in piano recitals and big orchestras’.³⁴

But such absolute judgements must be qualified. Andrew Heywood, one of two authors who have recently undertaken a ‘rehabilitation’ of William Morris in this field, makes two judicious points: playing the piano at home was for William Morris the archetype of the ‘artistic’ pretensions of bourgeois society, and the instrument itself, as an object, was of an ugliness which was impossible to reconcile with his tastes in matters of furniture. In addition, Lesley Baker makes a common sense remark: ‘There is no doubt that Morris reacted favourably to certain forms of music, and unfavourably to others’.³⁵

In fact, during his time at Marlborough College Morris had thoroughly enjoyed sacred music – one of the few aspects of his school years which had left a positive mark on him. Later, as a student visiting France during the summer of 1855, he admired the choral singing he heard in Rouen cathedral:

We were disappointed in one thing, however, we had expected Vespers every afternoon ... We found they were only sung in that diocese on Saturday and Sunday. And weren’t they sung, just. O! my word! on the Sunday especially, when a great deal of the psalms were sung to the Peregrine tone, and then, didn’t they sing the hymns, and then, didn’t they sing the hymns!³⁶

Almost forty years later, his friend George Bernard Shaw was to note, in an article discussing the new taste for early music, thanks particularly to the work of Dolmetsch with his clavichord:

That clavichord will start just such a reform in musical instruments as William Morris started in domestic furniture. It is noteworthy, by the way, that Morris, whose ear, as I can testify from personal observation, is as good as any musician’s,

and whose powers as poet, artist and craftsman have made him famous, hates the pianoforte, and is evidently affected by modern music much as he is affected by early Victorian furniture. He will not go to an ordinary concert; but he will confess to a strong temptation to try his hand at making fiddles; and he has been seen at one of Dolmetsch's viol concerts apparently enjoying himself.³⁷

This comment evidently returns us to the familiar dichotomy between Morris the anti-modern (the piano, nineteenth-century opera) and the advocate of a return to sources (the clavichord, viol and early music); between the man who rejects the spurious sophisticated elite culture of his time, and the man who takes a passionate interest in the rediscovery of a past which they relegate to obscurity. The all-important notion here is to be found in the English word 'plain' – as opposed to over-ornate – a word which Morris treasured, and which is found in the expression 'plain chant' – a musical form which probably represented in his eyes the absolute antithesis of the Wagnerian *Heldentenor's* 'tweedledeeing'.

The best proof of Morris's taste for music – provided it consisted of unornamented melodies inherited from forgotten ancestors – is to be found in a scene which took place on his deathbed. One night, Dolmetsch came to play the virginal for him, and William Morris fell into tears: this obviously makes it difficult to refute Heywood's conclusion:

The fact that he wished for virginals on his deathbed (...) combines with this information [=that Jane played the harpsichord] to reinforce the view that while Morris was critical of the instruments associated with Victorian music-making, he was appreciative of those linked to the music of earlier periods.

William Morris thus had a taste for 'popular' music – in the specific sense he gave that word, as we saw. Also in his defence, Mackail tells us that he was not against singing 'Scotch Ballads and their old tunes', and that he liked the bagpipe.³⁸

In musical matters, the link between an idealised past (did the common people really know of Byrd's music during his own time?) and his 'Socialist' aspirations was made concrete by the creation of his ten *Chants for Socialists*, intended to be sung on tunes familiar to everyone. The titles are revealing: 'The Voice of Toil', 'The March of the Workers' etc. Salmon cites Morris's famous phrase, taken from Ruskin: 'A cause which cannot be sung of is not worth following'.³⁹

Heywood also studied the role which music, both choral and instrumental, played during the meetings of the *Hammersmith Socialist Society* and other militant organisations, and concludes: 'Music did not just play a role as entertainment, in the early socialist movement; it provided the opportunity for an exercise in comradeship in performance and could be directly inspirational'. Notably, he takes the example of the 'Death Song', one of William Morris's *Chants for Socialists*, written to music by Malcolm Lawson (1847–1918) for the funeral of Alfred

Linnell, mortally wounded by mounted police during one of many Socialist demonstrations on 'Bloody Sunday', 20 November 1887.⁴⁰ Fiona MacCarthy believes that this episode enhanced Morris's prestige among fellow-Socialists:

Morris's role at the Linnell funeral subtly altered his standing in the Socialist movement. He had now become the well known and the loved figure. There was a sense of 'He who comes among us'. He had gravitated into the movement's grand old man.⁴¹

Finally, by one of those uncanny twists of history, William Morris, 'the man who did not like sophisticated music', was to inspire one of the best-known British composers of the twentieth century, Gustav Holst (1874–1934). In addition to composing *The Planets*, between 1914 and 1916, Holst set some of William Morris's poems to music; he had been a militant in Hammersmith beside Morris when he was twenty, and dedicated the slow movement of his *Cotswold Symphony*, first performed in 1900, to him. Also, a few years before his own death, in 1930, Holst entitled a commission by the young BBC *Hammersmith*, in memory of those distant years during which he occasionally conducted the militants' choir.⁴² In a roundabout way, therefore, *via* his Socialist militancy, Morris was to find himself the inspirer of a very intellectual form of music – precisely one which he profoundly disliked. Though this is an aspect of Morris which received relatively little attention until recently, it is clear that in music as well, his oscillation between 'popular culture' and 'high culture' is very much in evidence.

III

This entire discussion must be placed in the general context of the debate on 'elite' versus 'popular culture' in nineteenth century Britain. My argument here is that one of the main avowed objectives of William Morris was precisely to refuse to make working people partake of the sham 'culture' of the elites, encouraging them instead to accede to 'genuine' culture: 'popular high culture', however audacious the oxymoron may appear.

What was artificial in William Morris's eyes was not the division between 'high culture' and 'popular culture' – it was simply the artificiality of the 'culture' of the British governing classes, which he could not conceivably consider 'high' culture. On the one hand, they were habitual Philistines; on the other, the very idea of a compatibility between the concept of an elite and that of culture was totally alien to him. To enjoy life while cultivating the arts without knowing it – or at least without taking 'superior' airs – this is everyone's business.

Morris believed that all his contemporaries, whether they came from elites or from 'the people', shared an alienation which had gradually been imposed upon

them. He rejected the lapsarian Judaeo-Christian vision, which made humanity a stranger in its own God-given domain – the Earth. What is more, his Marxism led him to argue that this confiscation of humanity's birthright was 'only' due to collusion, reinforced at the time of the Renaissance, between those whose power was political and *economic*, and those who held political and *religious* power (often the same people).

It is perhaps in order to end on the fine phrase which Fiona MacCarthy attributes to E.P. Thompson, defining William Morris as 'our greatest diagnostician of alienation'.⁴³ One can unreservedly approve – but, to continue the medical metaphor, establishing a diagnostic is not the same as formulating the prognostic, still less unfailingly determining the correct remedy. This is perhaps the foundation of what we have called William Morris's 'dualism'.

NOTES

1. <http://www.wordnik.com/words/ouvrierism>, as accessed 22 March 2011; Jules Vallès, *Le proscrit. Correspondance avec Arthur Arnaud (1852–1880)*. Paris: Éditeurs français réunis, 1950, 243 pp.; Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The meaning of the student revolt', in Alexander Cockburn & Robin Blackburn, eds, *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action*, London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1969, p. 29; Ferdynand Zweig, *The New Acquisitive Society*, Chichester, UK: Centre for Policy Studies, 1976, p. 134.
2. Paul Meier, *La pensée utopique de William Morris*, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1972, pp. 53 (our translation), 61, 60, 79.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 82.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 82, p. 81.
5. Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, London: Phaidon, 2006, p. 53.
6. 'The Beauty of Life'. In *Hopes & Fears for Art: Five Lectures by William Morris*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1921, p. 76. (Afterwards *Hopes & Fears*)
7. 'The Lesser Arts' *Hopes & Fears*, pp. 1–37.
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