Morris’ reply to Whistler

by E. D. Le Mire

In February, 1885, James McNeill Whistler recited his Ten O’Clock lecture before a very distinguished London audience at the very fashionable ten o’clock hour. On a quiet Sunday afternoon in September, 1886, William Morris read his lecture Of the Origins of Ornamental Art to a working-class Manchester audience that sat attentively, but probably uncomfortably, in starched collars and Sunday suits. Whistler made his appearance in top hat, white gloves, cane and tails. He stood daintily toying with his monocle while waiting for full attention, suffered a freezing moment of stage fright, made several false starts, and finally spoke out clearly in his characteristic piping voice. Morris wore his customary dark blue serge suit, with a lighter blue cotton shirt he had dyed himself (being a natural born do-it-yourselfer). He was, as usual, without necktie. As usual, when lecturing he mopped his brow with a red bandanna held in his left hand, and read from a foolscap manuscript held in his right (the same manuscript now kept in the British Museum and from which I quote throughout). His robust voice made longer than ordinary pauses only when he stopped to shift his weight from right to left foot, his bandanna and his manuscript exchanging positions at the same time. If the glitter and pomp of St. James’s Hall, Piccadilly, were accurately reflected by Whistler’s formal attire and manner, the plain seriousness of the New Islington Hall, Ancoats, Manchester, was just as accurately reflected by Morris.

Hesketh Pearson says that Whistler’s lecture, precisely though insouciantly titled The Ten O’Clock, was ‘as closely studied and written as if it had been his life’s work.’ Certainly it was the longest single composition the painter ever attempted. Of the Origins of Ornamental Art was, on the other hand, only one of the hundred or so lectures Morris delivered on the six hundred occasions he appeared before public audiences. Whistler published his separately in 1888, included it in The Gentle Art of Making Enemies in 1890, and listened proudly to Mallarmé’s French
Perhaps you may think that it may at first sight seem to some of you that ornamental art is no very important subject, if that it is no great matter what its origins were; but I hope to show you before I have done that it is a subject of very great importance, and that it is well worth while to consider what its origins were, since it may lead us to finding out what its aims are or should be; which in its turn may lead us to thinking of matters of the deepest importance.

First of all I must say that though the idea of a generally accepted it is not a good or descriptive one; for all art should be ornamental, and all that is not ornamental, and in the degree in which it is not, fails of its a part of its purpose: however, the phrase is used and understood to mean a certain kind of art, other than pictures or sculptures which tell a definite story and are meant to represent according to some standard or another certain facts or external motives.

What then is this body of art which is something different from what we nowadays call pictures and sculpture?

It is the art of the people: the art produced by the daily labour of all kinds of men for the daily use of all kinds of men: such, therefore, we may at the outset suppose that it is of importance to the face of man, since on all sides it surrounds our life and our work.

What is the end and aim of human labour? Do it not first the continuance, and next the elevation.

'Of the Origins of Ornamental Art', a lecture by William Morris. First page of the manuscript (12½ inches deep). Reproduced by permission of the Society of Antiquaries and the Trustees of the British Museum.
translation in 1892. Morris never bothered to publish his at all, though the *Manchester Guardian*, not partial to socialist lectures, printed an almost complete report of its first delivery. It could not find a place in the twenty-four volumes of his *Collected Works* or even in the two-volume supplement. Were it not for May Morris’ devoted preservation of her father’s manuscripts, no full text would remain.

One might at this point marshal a host of arguments to prove that although Whistler’s name was not mentioned Morris’ lecture was a reply to the *Ten O’Clock*. However, that would be to belabour the obvious; and anyone not belonging to a very small section of the intellectual lunatic fringe would be tempted to ask, ‘so what?’ anyway. The point would likely be significant only to those presently editing Morris’ lectures. That party is still definitely in the minority.

It may, perhaps, be of more general interest and more use to explore what Morris’ lecture had to say about the beginnings of art, its relation to nature and society, and finally—that perennial concern of Victorian critical theory—the artist’s relation to his society. That Morris was here replying to Whistler should be sufficiently apparent, though incidental to the main concern. Loath to reawaken the armed butterfly by such disrespect, remembering as one must the many less-offending corpses stung to premature death and laid out so precisely on the white slabs of *The Gentle Art*, each neatly signed with that sting-tailed insect, yet will I use the *Ten O’Clock* only as significant background.

After debunking some ‘false prophets,’ including his oldest enemy, Ruskin, and his newest, Wilde, Whistler set out to make some even newer enemies by conjecturing the earliest origins of art, origins just then so much in the news because of recent archaeological discoveries. By giving life and colour to prehistoric scenes, he decorated a system of aesthetic values.

In the beginning, man went forth each day—some to do battle, some to the chase; others to dig and delve in the field—all that they might gain and live, or lose and die. Until there was found among them one, differing from the rest, whose pursuits attracted him not, and so he stayed by the tents with the women, and traced strange devices with a burnt stick on a gourd.

Departing from normal practice in his lecture, Morris for the
first, and only, time conjectured art’s earliest beginnings:

... the period is that of a state of things when society has begun, when every man has had to give up some of his individuality for the sake of the advancement of the whole community ... the strong and young fare afield to hunt or fish, or herd the beasts of the community, or dig and sow and harvest in the strip of communal tillage, while the weak, the women, and the cripples stay at home to labour at the loom, or the wheel, or the stithy.

Above and beyond the fact the Morris’ history is based on a more careful study of contemporary historians than Whistler’s, that the latter quotation is a more scholarly account of primitive society, it is obvious that in Morris’ sketch artistic pursuits were more necessary, serious, and reasonable. In Morris’ opinion, art began with a combination of physical and psychological necessities; it was less a matter of individual choice and more a requirement of nature. The weak or crippled members of the tribe omitted the more active engagements of their fellows because they were weak or crippled. They probably wished for the more active life from which physical debility and tribal division of labour excluded them: ‘Hard indeed it seems for them to forgo the brisk life and stir ...’.

Whistler took an individualist’s view of the artist and his relation to society, whether that society be Victorian or Cro-Magnon:

This man, who took no joy in the ways of his brethren — who cared not for conquest, and fretted in the field — this designer of quaint patterns — this deviser of the beautiful — who perceived in Nature about him curious curvings, as faces seen in the fire — this dreamer apart, was the first artist.

The ‘dreamer apart’ created something apart from and foreign to the world in which he lived. He was ‘chosen by the Gods’ to go ‘beyond the slovenly suggestion of Nature.’ The ‘curious curvings’ were really the product of his own special gift; he saw them in nature ‘as faces are seen in the fire’, they were not really there.

But, for Morris, art was an extension of the functions of nature; its beauties were refinements of natural beauties; its subject matter and technique were deductions made by man from the natural phenomena of his world. Morris’ artist, practical as well as primitive, was no ‘dreamer apart.’ He might dream, or think, as he worked at his appointed job, as he contributed his share to the support of the community; but his dreams were the dreams that
all men dreamed, since his interests were the interests of all men. Even the form that received and held his thoughts was taken from nature and his fellows:

The flowers of the forest glow in his web and its beast move over it: his imaginings of the tales of the priests and the poets might be pictured on the dish or the pot he was fashioning; the sword hilt, the roof beam were no longer dead bronze and wood, but part of his soul made alive forever.

As Morris conceived of primitive society, the artist came to be recognized as a truly valuable citizen: 'and with all this [production] he was grown to be no longer a slave of slaves, but a master; a man looked upon as better and more useful than the hunter or the tiller of the soil, deserving the plentiful thanks of the community.' Human society in Morris' survey had by this time evolved into the epic ages, and he documented the forgoing statement with several references to early mythology and literature. Perhaps he chose the deified craftsmen Hephaestus, Thor, and Weyland as answers to Whistler, who made a low estimate of primitive popular taste. Whistler related how

... the toilers toiled and were athirst; and the heroes returned from fresh victories, to rejoice and to feast; and all drank alike from the artist's goblets, fashioned cunningly, taking no note the while of the craftsman's pride, and understanding not his glory in his work; drinking at the cup, not from choice, not from a consciousness that it was beautiful, but because, forsooth, there was none other.

For Whistler and *Part pour l'Art*, which he represented, art had its origins outside of social conditions and was disconnected entirely from public tastes. It was an ideal, a gift from the gods: 'the people questioned not, and had nothing to say in the matter.' Departing in this from his French master, Courbet, Whistler constructed an aesthetic in which few were called and even fewer chosen; and these few became the breed apart, professionals whose work was beyond the understanding or perception of the common herd. In the period of Greece's greatest splendor, he said, 'the Amateur was unknown — and the dilettante undreamed of'. Art, in short, was never popular. 'There never was an artistic period. There never was an Art-loving nation.'

To this Morris opposed a doctrine of popular art, a doctrine that assumed the general distribution of the artistic instinct. This view as expressed in another lecture, *The Aims of Art*, sees
‘the springs of art in the human mind’ as ‘deathless’ and judges periods and nations with reference to the freedom they provided for the expression of that instinct. Certainly Whistler desired freedom too, but he was concerned with the freedom of the few. For him, the health of art depended only on the autonomy of the professionals, not on a widespread popular art. Moreover, the freedom Whistler insisted on removed the artist from all public censure or approval, making him a law unto himself. In Whistler’s view, only the artist had to be free; in Morris’, the entire society had to be free before art could prosper.

Morris and Whistler agreed in their condemnation of the dominant trends of Victorian art, but they attacked those trends from different directions. They agreed that commercialism, the rise of the philistine, the triumph of ‘cheap and nasty’ in Victoria’s ‘green and pleasant land’ spelled the death of art, but they disagreed as to how these things came about and why they were allowed to continue. For Morris (who was well-versed in the Marxian historical dialectic), social, political, and especially economic tyranny, abridgements of the freedom of the mass of men, prevented the expression of the manlike, civilizing qualities that were, for him, a natural part of man’s being. He argued that human nature always possesses the instinct for art, but at specific points in history—under the rule of imperial Roman ‘tax-gatherers’ or, later, of the English Tudors, under seventeenth-century mercantilism or nineteenth-century capitalism—tyranny surpressed or stunted that instinct. Morris thought that Man is by nature good; he insisted that every man has within him his proper capacity for artistic production and appreciation. Whistler saw the reverse of this picture; ‘cheap and nasty’ was accepted and, indeed, welcomed because it mirrored the un-artistic nature of most men, the nature that produced the Crystal Palace exhibits:

The taste of the tradesman supplanted the science of the artist, and what was born of the million went back to them, and charmed them, for it was after their own heart; and the great and small, the statesman and the slave, took to themselves the abomination that was tendered, and preferred it — and have lived with it ever since!
And now the heroes filled from the jugs and drank from the bowls—with understanding—noting the glare of their new bravery, and taking pride in its worth.

Whistler charged that art died when it became popular: ‘and
the people—this time—had much to say in the matter—and all were satisfied. And Birmingham and Manchester arose in their might—and art was relegated to the curiosity shop.’ Morris, on the other hand, dated the decline of art from the time it ceased to be popular, meaning by popular not ‘mass-produced’ but ‘commonly-produced’ by a people as the expression of their joy in labour. While he believed that in his own day great individual artists still worked with some limited success, Morris did not see this as redeeming nineteenth-century art. He joined Ruskin in stressing the merits of individual expression, but both he and Ruskin also insisted that individual expression depended on other things: The Stones of Venice demanded a society ruled by Christian morality; Morris’ lecture Of the Origins of Ornamental Art placed greater emphasis on social and economic reconstruction. When Morris spoke of morality, he generally meant no more than social justice. But, for him as for Ruskin, individual expression required freedom of expression for the mass of men.

The concept of art as a natural habitus of man, as indeed that part of his nature that is most elevated, became in Morris’ lecture nearly a doctrine of an aesthetic ‘noble savage.’ It should be emphasized that Morris thought man by nature artistically good. To rebut Whistler’s charge that ‘the “one touch of nature” that calls aloud to the response of each . . . this one unspoken sympathy that pervades humanity, is—Vulgarity!’ Morris was forced to make his most careful defence of artistic primitivism. Herein may be the lecture’s greatest significance.

Drawing on his legacy of Pre-Raphaelite ideas, Morris gave them much wider application than any of the Brethren had before, integrating those ideas with what appears to be a cyclic concept of art history. In phrases that remind the modern reader, perhaps unfortunately, of Thomas Gray’s ‘mute inglorious Milton,’ he told his audience that

... in popular art the expression of man’s thoughts by his hand does for the most part fall far short of the thoughts themselves; and this always the more as the race is nobler and the thought more exalted. . . .

Tracing the progression out of this primitive state, he used an argument that, with important alterations, Holman Hunt might himself have used:

... for a long while among Greek and kindred peoples, art was wholly
in the condition of its thought being greater than its expression. . . . then came a period [the age of Pericles, perhaps] when . . . technical excellence advanced with wonderful speed; the standard of excellence in expression grew very high, and the feeling of a people cultivated very highly within narrow limits began to forbid any attempt at expression of thought which did not approach within the limits prescribed something like perfection. . . .

The intensely Christian Hunt would have applied this argument only to the Christian painters who preceded Raphael, with whom he thought the point of highest excellence in painting was reached. Morris broke the medieval, Christian confines of the theory, giving to the Greeks, the Assyrians, and the Egyptians each an ideal, primitive, ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ period, where content held primacy over technique.

In this same lecture Morris explored some of the implications of this theory. He outlined how progression out of primitivism, where matter, or ‘thought,’ was superior to technique, resulted in an early division of the arts into fine and ornamental. With the division, according to Morris, fine art became aristocratic; it was practised only by those few who could master its constantly increasing technical excellences. The aristocracy posited by Whistler as natural to art and the artist was in Morris’ view the product of a gradually increasing sophistication. By hardening rules for the attainment of its sophisticated ideals, the artistic aristocracy came eventually to tyrannize over all the arts with which it was directly concerned.

However directly aimed at Whistler, Morris’ lecture Of the Origins of Ornamental Art explains better than any other his approach to Pre-Raphaelite principles. Without referring to the movement as such, he justified its attempt to avoid the tyranny of technique. It is immediately clear that he did not propose any abandonment of technique; rather, like Hunt and Millais before him, he wished to eliminate the conventions of excellence imposed by an accumulated technical mastery, a mastery that in the decorative arts of his own day took the form of machine precision. Both in this lecture and in the later one on The English Pre-Raphaelite School, the discipline of art is made to rest on nature directly apprehended; this is the same discipline towards which Ruskin had pointed in Modern Painters and his pamphlet defence of Pre-Raphaelitism. All of Morris’ lectures patiently repeat this part of the message by constantly defending the free-
dom from artificial conventions. But, like Ruskin, he wanted no repetition of pre-Renaissance ineptitudes.

The contention with Whistler pushed Morris a step beyond Ruskin, though. By making the Pre-Raphaelite creed explicit and widening its application between technical mastery and the tyranny of technique, he gave that creed a new life. For this, as well as for his own artistic production, he was the leader of what might be called the 'second wave' of Pre-Raphaelites.