
The Stones in the Garden

Matthew Beaumont

At the end of a cheerful letter to Janey written from a trading station in Iceland on 11 August 1871, William Morris mentioned in passing both ‘that an Icelandic bog is not good riding, and that the loose stones on the edge of a lava-field is [sic] like my idea of a half-ruined Paris barricade’.¹

In *Communal Luxury*, Kristin Ross’s superbly inventive and suggestive book about the impact of the Paris Commune on the late nineteenth-century political imagination, she cites this casual, speculative comment. It is a comment which evokes the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary events that had taken place in the French capital during the spring of that same year, because in spite of its apparent insignificance it is, from the perspective of the mid-1880s, when Morris celebrated the Commune’s living memory in numerous ways, pregnant with meaning. She points out that ‘Morris, who, during the 1880s would become Britain’s most vigorous and creative supporter of the memory of the Paris Commune, did not appear to register the event as it was occurring that spring nor note any immediate personal reactions beyond this hallucinatory vision of the vestiges of struggle inscribed in the natural landscape of a country of interest to him mostly because it was “a country of no account whatever commercially”’ (p. 69).² But she implies nonetheless that it is in some sense an anticipation of his future political commitments. In Morris’s sketch of the loose stones there is, it might be said, an incandescent hint of his later revolutionary imagination – as if these boulders, instead of being cold and inert, secretly burn like lava in the petrified field.

The third chapter of Ross’s book, the one from which this anecdote is taken, concerns what she calls ‘The Literature of the North’. With characteristic energy and originality, it excavates the fascination, first, that Finland held for Peter Kropotkin, then that Iceland, and in particular medieval Iceland, held for two of the other great

libertarian socialists of the period, namely Morris and Élisée Reclus. Ross is deliberately forgiving of Reclus's and Morris's shared tendency to idealise the extent to which the ancient Icelandic polity escaped the despotic excesses of European feudalism. This is because she values their attempt to uncover what, in the title of the succeeding chapter, she refers to (in an evocative phrase from a novel by Ignazio Silone) as 'the seeds beneath the snow'. These are the germinal signs of some alternative future buried beneath the weight of a frigid, reified history. 'What is important', she urges, 'is to recognize in Morris's and Reclus's fascination with medieval Iceland their way of going about decentralizing the flow of history' (p. 74). Or, perhaps, returning to the past in order to unblock or free up its frozen forms, and so make some more emancipative history, like an irresistible stream of lava, flow once more.

In their different ways, according to Ross, both Morris and Reclus staged 'encounters in [their] own moment with actually embodied aspects of the past, stranded or land-locked, as it were, but still sporadically perceptible' (p. 74). Here is a politics of anachronism, where the past is not an inert remnant in the present but a contradictory and dynamic part of the dialectical relationship between present and future. In an 1884 lecture on 'Art and Labour' quoted by Ross in a footnote, Morris emphasises that he felt compelled to 'turn back to past times, and even times a very long while passed'; and adds: 'I do so with the distinct purpose of showing you where lies the hope for the future, and not in mere empty regret for the days which can never come again' (p. 75). In light of this dialectical conception of history, Morris's image from Iceland juxtaposing those loose stones on the edge of a lava field with the rubble of a barricade on a Parisian street – effortlessly and unselfconsciously forcing a collision between the ancient and the modern, the rural and the urban, the natural and the cultural – has a quality that, irresistibly, seems Benjaminian. For Morris's letter to Janey, in a formulation from the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', effectively 'seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'. It charges the past with 'the time of the now' and 'blast[s] open the continuum of history'.³

'Historical materialism', Benjamin explains in the sixth of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', which comprise a polemic against the gradualist historiography that remained during the late 1930s one of the legacies of the Second International, 'wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger'. He insists, furthermore, that '[o]nly that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins'.⁴ As a revolutionary socialist, Morris later became acutely conscious of the fact that, to put

it in terms of a cliché, it is the victors who write history; and that, in this official version of history, the victims are indeed far from safe even in death. It is in part for this reason that during the 1880s and 1890s he actively commemorated the Paris Commune – which culminated after two months in the massacre of as many as thirty thousand working-class people – as ‘the foundation-stone of the new world that is to be’. Morris recognised that to focus on its destruction merely as ‘the greatest tragedy of modern times’, a status on which he nonetheless insisted, was to capitulate to ‘the bourgeois legend of it as history’, as he put it in an article for *Commonweal* in 1889. It was to consign the Communards, albeit with lamentation, to those ‘hecatombs sacrificed to the bourgeois god, Mammon’ built by the ‘conquerors’.⁵ Instead, it was the duty of revolutionaries both to memorialise and to attempt to materialise its utopian promise, which he summarised quite simply in a letter written that same year as ‘the abolition of class society’.⁶

Morris evidently understood, to cite Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ again, that ‘every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’; and, more strikingly still, that ‘in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it’.⁷ But this is something that Ross, too, understands. Her previous book on the politics and poetics of the Paris Commune, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (1989), had already amply indicated this. It was a bold reclamation of Arthur Rimbaud, whom she re-embedded in the context of 1871, at the same time the nineteenth-century socialist movement’s *annus mirabilis* and its *annus horribilis*. And it contained several references to Benjamin, in particular the Benjamin of the essays on Baudelaire and Surrealism. The strength of *Communal Luxury*, for its part, at least for readers of this *Journal*, lies in the combativeness and perceptiveness with which, in the spirit of the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, it wrests not only the Paris Commune from the conformism that has always threatened to confine it to an almost unimaginable past but also, though less explicitly, William Morris.

After all, Morris has always been dangerously susceptible to attempts to appropriate his life and work to ‘bourgeois legend’. It is a point that no longer needs to be laboured. In 1934, the centenary of Morris’s birth, Robin Page Arnot complained of the ‘bourgeois myth’ that entailed the ‘sanctification of him as a “harmless saint”’.⁸ In Ross’s book, in contrast to the intellectually disorganised artist beloved by the heritage industry, Morris re-emerges alongside Kropotkin, Reclus and others as an activist strenuously and resourcefully and imaginatively thinking through the immediate and long-term political implications of the struggles of his time. ‘If Reclus and Morris’, she writes, ‘are sometimes thought of as woolly or unsystematic

thinkers, it is because they insisted upon looking on thinking as creating and building a context where ideas might be both productive and immediately effective in their moment' (p. 7). She thus boldly seizes Morris for the purposes of the present instead of simply locking him into the past.

At one point in her Introduction, Ross declares that she has not been 'concerned with weighing the Commune's successes or failures, nor with ascertaining in any direct way the lessons it might have provided or might continue to provide', not least because, as she admits, it is not clear to her 'that the past actually *gives* lessons'. Ross is right, the past does not give lessons; as she recognises, it has to be seized, wrested and stolen. But she affirms instead that, 'like Walter Benjamin', she believes 'that there are moments when a particular event or struggle enters vividly into the figurability of the present'; and that this is true of the Commune in the first ten or fifteen years of the twenty-first century, an epoch distinguished, in the aftermath both of revolutions in the Middle East and protests in the United States against Wall Street's regime, by what she calls 'the figure and phenomenology of the encampment or occupation' (p. 2). Her book brings Morris, too, alongside Kropotkin, Reclus and other libertarians of the time, into the figurability of the present. Ross argues for instance, in an implicit polemic against the current politics of higher education, that 'the extreme do-it-yourself-ism of Morris, the propensity he showed to learn every aspect of the skills and techniques used from the Middle Ages to the present in the art of fabric dying, for example, is itself a reaction against the kind of siloing of skills and knowledges then getting underway in the universities of the era' (p. 136).

Benjamin is, then, probably the major methodological influence on Ross's book (though the theoretical influence of Henri Lefebvre and other materialist analysts of the politics of space is also apparent). Her attempt to grasp the 'political imaginary' of the Paris Commune involves interrupting and undermining the continuum of history sponsored by bourgeois historiography. But, as distinct from *The Emergence of Social Space*, Benjamin's friend Ernst Bloch, the Frankfurt School's philosopher of the future, is also a notable presence in *Communal Luxury*, albeit one that is openly acknowledged only in a couple of places. In the first of these references, Ross cites Bloch's *Heritage of Our Times*, specifically his 'observation that there is no time in national history, only space' (p. 17). In the second, more significant one, which occurs in the course of her discussion of Morris and Reclus in 'The Literature of the North', she writes that the privileged status they accorded to pre-capitalist societies such as medieval Iceland positions them as "'anticipatory designs", "novae", in the words of Ernst Bloch, or "exemplary suggestions" to borrow a phrase from Peter Linebaugh' (p. 75). Although these brief, fairly generic quotations from Bloch are apparently mediated by an article by Florence Boos, they nonetheless go to the core of both

Morris's and Ross's re-appropriation of the Paris Commune.

The Commune in effect functioned for the late nineteenth-century revolutionary movement as what Bloch, in *The Principle of Hope*, calls a 'concrete utopia', 'a methodical organ for the New, an objective aggregate state of what is coming up'.⁹ It was in these terms, I think, that Morris valued the Commune when he distilled from the tragedy in which it was finally engulfed a pure residue of militant hope. At one point in the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', to return for a moment to this text, Benjamin makes an interesting distinction between what he calls 'enslaved ancestors' and 'liberated grandchildren'. He complains that Social Democracy, with its gradualist and reformist historiography, 'thought fit to assign the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength'. Against this orthodox position, Benjamin argues that '[t]his training made the working class forget its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice', and insists that these revolutionary qualities can instead only be 'nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren'.¹⁰ Bloch tried to develop a revolutionary philosophy that sought to evade both the 'abstract utopianism' of the Social Democrats, which was at once fatalistic and excessively optimistic, and the potentially pessimistic politics of Benjamin's position. His contention, so to speak, was that the image of liberated grandchildren is as necessary as that of enslaved ancestors for nourishing revolutionary energies.

The Paris Commune itself might be summarised as the first historical event in which – however momentary the glimpse – the prospect of the liberated grandchildren of the working class was opened up as a material possibility. It embodied a concrete utopia. Morris recognised this, as both *The Pilgrims of Hope* and *News from Nowhere*, in their different ways, affirm; and as the public celebrations of the Commune that he attended annually from the mid-1880s attest. Ross recognises it too. Her book is dedicated to recovering, often movingly, the 'utopian function' of the Commune, as Bloch might have put it. In distinctly Benjaminian mode, Bloch explains that this 'utopian function tears the concerns of human culture away from [the] idle bed of contemplation: it thus opens up, on truly attained summits, the ideologically unobstructed view of the content of human hope'.¹¹ In contrast to the static object of bourgeois historiography, relegated to the late nineteenth century, Ross's Paris Commune emerges as a constellation of unfulfilled promises that impinge on the present.

At the end of the letter Morris sent from Iceland that I cited in the opening paragraph of this piece, he moves directly from the image of 'the loose stones on the edge of a lava-field', which he notes remind him 'of a half-ruined Paris barricade', to a brief, longing evocation, in the sentence or so before he signs off, of 'the sweet fresh

garden at Kelmscott', which he confesses to imagining often with Janey 'and the little ones in it'.¹² Here is a dialectical image that might be said to sum up what I have called Morris's politics of anachronism. The loose stones that conjure up the insurrectionary barricade lie along the border not only of a lava-field, but also of the garden that he loved. As ever with Morris, militant politics are inseparable from a pastoral vision. In this sense, these sentences constitute a momentary anticipation of *News from Nowhere* almost twenty years before it appeared. It is as if during the early 1870s, indirectly under the spell of the Paris Commune, Morris was already inchoately and no doubt unconsciously struggling to articulate the different, perhaps contradictory aspects of his revolutionary imagination, which Bloch might have characterised as its warm and cold currents.

NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996), I, p. 146. (Afterwards Kelvin).
2. All references to *Communal Luxury* will appear in parentheses in the body of the article.
3. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, 3rd edn (London: Fontana Press, 1973), pp. 257, 264-65. (Afterwards Benjamin).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
5. William Morris, 'Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris', in *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal', 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), p. 235.
6. Kelvin, III, p. 45.
7. Benjamin, p. 257.
8. R. Page Arnot, 'William Morris versus the Morris Myth', *Labour Monthly*, 16: 3 (March 1934), p. 178.
9. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), I, p. 157. (Afterwards Bloch).
10. Benjamin, p. 262.
11. Bloch, p. 158.
12. Kelvin, I, pp. 146-47.