William Morris the Socialist Reviewer

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Morris is not renowned as a reviewer. I suspect that even the most enthusiastic Morrisian will be unaware of any of his work in this area with the possible exceptions of his review of Browning’s *Men and Women* in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856), his reluctant ‘puff’ of Rossetti’s *Poems* (1870), his critique of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1889) and his analysis of the *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889). Indeed, if one relied on *The Collected Works* and *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* you could be forgiven for believing that these essays represent the whole of his critical output. However, as is so often the case with Morris, this is far from the truth. The purpose of this article is to consider the other reviews that he contributed to socialist periodicals.

At the outset, it is worth differentiating these formal reviews from the numerous references Morris made in both his ‘Notes on News’ column, and his longer articles, to works of all types that attracted his attention. In April 1884, for example, he devoted a whole article in *Justice* to the American socialist Henry George referring quite extensively to the latter’s influential work *Progress and Poverty*. Yet no systematic analysis was attempted. Similarly, during the summer and autumn of 1886, he took great pleasure in devoting part of his ‘Notes on News’ column in *Commonweal* to ridiculing a paper Matthew Arnold had published in the *Nineteenth Century* on the Irish Question. On this occasion his biting sarcasm precluded any pretence at objectivity.

His formal reviews, however, fall into three groups: those concerned with creative socialist works; those relating to the publication of new socialist periodicals; and those analysing significant new theoretical works. In the first of these categories his thoughtful criticism of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* is well-known, but he also reviewed J. L. Joynes’s *Socialist Rhymes* and, somewhat surprisingly in view of his misgivings about the nineteenth century realist novel, George Bernard Shaw’s *Cashiel Byron’s Profession*. Although Morris described himself as ‘a bad critic’, the reviews of the work of his socialist colleagues show both sympathy and perception. Morris had no illusions about Joynes’s limited creative powers. When he acknowledged a poem Joynes submitted to *Commonweal* he wrote:

> I will print your poem in C. and thank you for it. It is very straightforward and nicely-written . . . but I . . . feel that the lover was rather a duffer to give in so soon and could have had a very slender acquaintance with the ways of womankind.

Nevertheless, Morris appreciated the effort of the comrades who provided regular copy for *Commonweal*, and rewarded Joynes’s undoubted enthusiasm with a short
review of his *Socialist Rhymes* in May 1885. Quoting John Ruskin's aphorism that 'A cause which cannot be sung of is not worth following', he wrote (with rather more kindness than the poems deserved):

> We heartily recommend these rhymes to our readers, the verse is nearly everywhere brilliant and spirited, and in some of the pieces the depth of feeling raises them into the rank of poetry of no mean order. Sincerity and enthusiasm are obvious throughout the whole of them, even if they are not wholly on our side.\(^5\)

Morris's review of Shaw's *Cashel Byron's Profession* is more interesting because it is more unexpected. The novel was originally serialised in *To-Day* during 1885, before being published in book form the next year. This was apparently at the instigation of H. H. Champion whom Shaw described as having 'an unregenerate taste for pugilism'.\(^6\) The novel attracted a number of reviews, and came to the attention of the *Saturday Review*. Shaw himself - in a 'Preface' added to a later American edition of the novel - after referring somewhat ironically to these critical appraisals, wrote:

> ... nothing particular happened except that the ... novel ... made me acquainted with William Morris, who, to my surprise, had been reading the monthly instalments with a certain relish. But that only proved how much easier it is to please a great man than a little one, especially when you share his politics.\(^7\)

Morris's enjoyment of the novel is apparent in his review which appeared in *Commonweal* on 17 July 1886. In this he stated at the outset that whatever else might be said about *Cashel Byron's Profession*, Shaw had at least succeeded in amusing his readers. He praised in particular Shaw's contemporary social comment (most of which was edited out by the publisher Walter Scott when he issued the novel), the effective characterisation of the hero, and the realistic and accurate portrayal of events. Yet Morris made some astute criticisms as well. The first of these concerned the heroine, whom he dismissed with some justification as 'rather the embodiment of the author's view of life than a real personage'.\(^8\) He also felt that despite the variety of interesting incident the novel lacked artistic unity. The scenes, he maintained, were 'isolated and lacking in the power that accumulation gives' with the result that 'the whole story rather leaves off than comes to an end'.\(^9\) This he conceded, however, was less the result of any failing on Shaw's part but more 'a defect which it shares with all novels of this generation that have any pretence to naturalism'.\(^10\)

It is just possible that Morris had an ulterior motive in praising Shaw's novelistic capacities. Once *Commonweal* became a weekly Morris experienced difficulties in finding sufficient good quality copy with which to fill the paper. Although he did manage to coax the occasional article from Shaw - he contributed, for example, a piece on the Industrial Renumeration Conference to the second issue\(^11\) – he would certainly have appreciated the opportunity to serialise a popular novel on the lines of *Cashel Byron's Profession*. In fact in a note he appended to an article entitled 'Coercion in London', he suggested that Shaw might like to attempt a humorous
dramatisation of one of the free speech trials of the period. If this was indeed his intention he was to be disappointed, for after the demise of *To-Day* Shaw became what he termed ‘novelist in ordinary’ to *Our Corner*, a magazine edited by Annie Besant. For Shaw this arrangement had the advantage that Annie Besant actually paid for contributions. Nevertheless, the incident probably contributed to Morris’s later decision to attempt a serialisation of his own.

Although, with the exception of his critique of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Morris did not contribute any further reviews of creative works to *Commonweal* after 1886, he kept abreast of the latest literary developments in his regular ‘Notes on News’ column. During 1888 and 1889, for example, he devoted quite a lot of attention to the debate about the alleged decadent naturalism of Zola and Ibsen. His remarks cast doubt on the claim made by Carole Silver and others that Morris shared Kropotkin’s objections to naturalistic fiction on the grounds that it trivialised reality and presented the proletariat as ‘social and hereditary victims rather than heroes’. Silver has even asserted that Morris went further than Kropotkin and viewed realism as essentially anti-proletarian. It is unfortunate that she decided to use Zola’s *Germinal* to illustrate this particular point. In 1888, Vizetelly, the English publisher of the translations of Zola’s works was brought to trial. Morris—who admitted that the only one of Zola’s novels with which he was familiar was *Germinal*—immediately responded angrily to what he considered to be the ‘trial of M. Zola in absentia’.

Far from judging *Germinal* to be anti-proletarian he praised its realism:

> I must say that whatever grossness there is in it could do no harm except to those who are determined to have harm done to them. I feel sure also that the grossness is there not for ‘nastiness’ sake, but because it forms part of a true picture of the life which our civilisation forces on labouring men; and I hold that ‘What is not too bad to be done, is not too bad to be told about’, though I find no difficulty in imagining that our rulers and masters take a very different view of the subject.

He returned to this issue again in May 1889 when the Vigilance Society began to attack even the expurgated English editions of Zola’s work. On this occasion he praised Zola’s challenge to conventional bourgeois aesthetic values, and argued that in his bawdiness and truth to life Zola was contributing to a tradition which included Chaucer, Shakespeare and Fielding:

> I hold that there are dozens of most respectable works which the Vigilance Society wouldn’t think of attacking, which are far more demoralising and corrupting than Zola. Henry James’ novels for instance; or even in their feeble way, Mr. Besant’s imitation of Charles Reade, whose books, though very amusing, are not specially ‘moral’ (small blame to them) according to the standard of the Vigilance Society.

Morris believed that by shocking middle-class society both Zola and Ibsen were carrying out valuable propaganda work for the socialists. In the summer of 1889 a production of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* opened at the Novelty Theatre in London.
The critics were scandalised that Ibsen had presented his respectable audience with a heroine who was a young woman of declared criminal proclivities. Morris was highly amused by the hypocrisy of their response:

... 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.17

One cannot help reflecting that this assessment of Ibsen's work is equally applicable to Morris's own, suggesting that his later writings may have closer links with the innovative experiments of the continental writers than was previously thought.

The second group of Morris's reviews was devoted to the analysis of the first issues of rival - and generally short-lived - socialist or anarchist periodicals. Two of the most significant of these greeted the arrival of the Anarchist in 188518 and Freedom in 1886.19 The Anarchist was printed by the impressively named International Publishing Company based in Newington Green Road, and boasted articles by writers as diverse as Elisee Reclus, George Bernard Shaw and Henry Appleton (none of whom could be said to have held pronounced anarchist beliefs). Freedom, meanwhile, was a monthly published by Kropotkin's recently formed 'Freedom Group' in September 1886. It was printed at the Socialist League's offices at 13 Farringdon Road and sold alongside Commonweal at open-air meetings. Morris's review of this publication was not his first reference to Kropotkin in Commonweal, as, in an 'Editorial' he wrote with Bax to mark the paper becoming a weekly, mention was made of Kropotkin's Words of a Rebel.20 Morris's comments on these publications followed a consistent pattern: praise and encouragement for a new addition to the socialist propaganda, tempered by reservations about the validity of the views expressed. The following remarks about the first edition of the Anarchist are characteristic of this type of review:

Of course the honesty and enthusiasm of the writers are beyond all question; but we cannot think that they make their position quite clear. In any case we welcome the temperate discussion of differences between various Socialist schools, in the hope that the obvious necessity for revolutionising society will force us all to study the question so diligently that the path may at last become plain to us.21

At this point I must take the opportunity of refuting the claim made recently by Florence Boos - and others - that Morris was an 'anarcho-communist'.22 As far
as Morris was concerned anarchism was not a political philosophy. He made this clear in an interview he gave to Justice in 1894:

But then we have the so-called Anarchist-Communists; a term which seems to me a flat contradiction. In so far as they are Communists they must give up their Anarchism . . . They are engaged in contesting a form of Socialism which exists only in their imagination and which no Socialist would dream of advocating.

The fact that some of Morris's ideas are similar to those of Kropotkin is mere coincidence. As most of Kropotkin's important work post-dates Morris's death, a more pertinent question is whether Kropotkin was a Morrisian.

A final set of reviews concern contemporary political works. These include extensive pieces on Charles Rowley's Social Politics (1885), Annie Besant's Modern Socialism (1886) and H. Kempner's Common-Sense Socialism (1887), as well as the well-known comments on the Fabian Essays published in Commonweal in January 1890. Without exception the texts Morris chose to review were parochial rather than international in outlook, and discursive rather than theoretical in content. Like his reviews of periodicals his comments on these works followed a regular course. He praised the writer's criticism of prevailing social conditions and then proceeded to dismiss their proposed solutions as impracticable. In the case of Rowley and Kempner this approach was simple and effective as their respective panaceas consisted of mass emigration and a reduction in working hours combined with a form of land-tax. In my opinion he was less successful in the case of Annie Besant where the similarities between her views and his own caused him to resort to superficial criticisms.

One observation is worth making about this group of reviews. Why did Morris devote considerable time and energy to reading and analysing peripheral texts such as Social Politics and Common-Sense Socialism, yet completely ignore those works of Marx and Engels which modern critics such as Meier and Abensour have considered crucial to his political development? It is not as if their work was unavailable for criticism. In 1887 an English edition of Das Kapital had appeared, while the following year The Manifesto of the Communist Party was published with specially written additional notes by Engels. Morris never brought either of these texts to the attention of his readers. Nor, indeed, did he mention either Marx or Engels when requested by a reader of Commonweal in November 1887 to recommend works on socialism. For the record his recommendations were Grönlund's Co-operative Commonwealth and Annie Besant's Essays on Socialism.

In fact, Morris made very few references to Marx in Justice and Commonweal. In the many hundreds of articles he wrote for these papers he mentioned Marx on only fifteen occasions. Eleven of these references, including the first on 11 September 1886, are to be found in the various instalments of Socialism from the Root Up where one suspects that the influence of Bax was predominant. With the exception of a discussion of an aspect of Marxist economics in 'Honesty is the Best Policy, or, the Inconvenience of Stealing', the allusions are short and generally unilluminating. The only remark of interest, in Morris's review of Kempner's
Common-Sense Socialism, casts doubt on his supposed acceptance of Marx and Engels's definitions of the terms ‘Socialism’ and ‘Communism’:

It is worth while to note apropos of the attempt some persons make to draw a hard and fast line between Socialism and Communism, that Mr. Kempner uses the latter word in the sense that it is used in the ‘Manifesto’ of Marx and Engels of 1847. A Communist is with him one who advocates the communisation and nationalisation of the raw material and instruments of labour and distribution.  

My view is that Morris was so convinced by the validity of his own ideas that he rarely found it necessary to refer to other prominent thinkers in the movement. In Justice and Commonweal he mentioned Engels in only five of his articles, Owen in four, Proudhon in three and Kropotkin in two. It is this confident independence of outlook which characterises Morris's socialist reviews. Morris was never anything else than a Morrisian.

NOTES

1 Justice, 5 April 1884, p. 4. Morris’s attitude to Henry George changed during the subsequent three years, and by 12 November 1887 he was dismissing him in Commonweal as a ‘traitor’ (p. 36).
2 Commonweal, 8 May 1886, p. 41.
4 ibid., p. 583.
5 Commonweal, April 1885, p. 23.
7 ibid., p. 9.
8 Commonweal, 17 July 1886, p. 126.
9 ibid., 17 July 1886, p. 126.
10 ibid., 17 July 1886, p. 126.
11 ibid., March 1885, p. 15.
14 Commonweal, 10 November 1888, p. 356.
15 ibid., 25 August 1888, p. 265.
16 ibid., 11 May 1889, p. 145.
17 ibid., 22 June 1889, p. 193.
18 ibid., April 1885, p. 22.
19 ibid., 25 September 1886, p. 29.
20 ibid., 1 May 1886, p. 33.

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21 ibid., April 1885, p. 22.
23 *Justice*, 27 January 1894.
24 The reviews appeared as follows: *Commonweal*, May 1885, p. 35; *Commonweal*, 10 July 1886, p. 117; and *Commonweal*, 18 June 1887, p. 197.
26 *Commonweal*, 19 November 1887, p. 375.
27 ibid., 11 September 1886, p. 189.
28 ibid., 18 June 1887, p. 197.