IN 1959, C. P. Snow delivered a Rede Lecture entitled *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* in which he deplored the split between ‘literary intellectuals’ and scientists, tracing it back to the distaste of ‘the traditional culture’ for industrialism. Snow’s thesis was widely discussed and accepted as drawing attention to an important educational and cultural problem. Early in 1962, however, Dr F. R. Leavis made a vigorous assault upon Snow’s position. The controversy that followed generated, perhaps, more heat than light. Since William Morris was referred to by both Snow and Leavis, it is appropriate that students and admirers of Morris should assess their reactions to the dispute.

The most pungent section of Snow’s lecture was the second, *Intellectuals as Natural Luddites*. In it he argued that literary intellectuals ‘have never tried, wanted, or been able, to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it.’ In a sketchy historical account, Snow wrote of the writers’ incomprehension of the new phenomenon:

> Plenty of them shuddered away, as though the right course for a man of feeling was to contract out; some, like Ruskin and William Morris and Thoreau and Emerson and Lawrence, tried various kinds of fancies, which were not in effect more than screams of horror.

Snow then gave an enthusiastic account of the benefits of industrialism, concluding: ‘Health, food, education; nothing but the industrial revolution could have spread them right down to the very poor. Those are primary gains ... they are the basis of our social hope.’

Snow’s final recommendations are therefore for educational reforms which will bring the ‘two cultures’ closer to one another, especially by diminishing the hostility of the literary to industrialism.

In his reply, Dr Leavis did not seek to deny the cultural split,
but was largely concerned to vindicate the critical attitude of the 'traditional culture' to industrial society. He noted the practical influence of the ideas of Ruskin and Morris: 'Yet it was Ruskin who put into currency the distinction between wealth and well-being, which runs down through Morris and the British Socialist movement to the Welfare State.'

Leavis also contested the view that the material benefits of industrialism necessarily lead to an increase of human happiness, referring to the unrest and disquiet among 'our well-to-do working class' and to the 'human emptiness' of the American future that seems to await us all. For Leavis, the challenge of our time is to combine our undoubted progress in 'external civilisation' with a corresponding advance in the quality of our daily lives. The educational implication of this was the necessity of maintaining 'the full life in the present -- and life is growth -- of our transmitted culture.' Literature would play a vital role, because in studying it 'we discover at bottom what we really believe'.

It will be apparent from even this brief summary that Leavis belongs to that tradition of social thought to which Morris also contributed -- the tradition elucidated by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*. This can be seen not only where Leavis invokes Morris by name, but also in his later argument about the extent to which industrial labour may unfit a man for purposive living. So far is industrialism from having solved all our problems that the two which above all concerned Morris eighty years ago are still with us today; the Society of Equals remains a distant ideal (a recent Conservative Party Conference solemnly discussed the continuance of 'two nations' within our community); and industrial work still provides human satisfaction to very few of those who must earn their living by it. In *Useful Work versus Useless Toil* in 1885 Morris put that problem succinctly:

'As long as the work is repulsive it will still be a burden which must be taken up daily, and even so would mar our life, even though the hours of labour were short. What we want to do is to add to our wealth without diminishing our pleasure. Nature will not finally be conquered until our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives.'

Few would want to claim that this has now occurred; much of the evidence points in the opposite direction.

The reply of those who share Snow's outlook would presumably be that this is a Utopian hope, and that against it we should set the 'primary gains' of better health, food and education, which in--
Industrialism has brought. But this would reveal a remarkably inexact piece of thinking, for these benefits are not the result of an abstraction called industrialism, but of human effort. Had no-one uttered ‘screams of horror’ about the appalling misuse of labour in the early days of industrialism, had no Labour movement emerged to claim the support of thousands of dedicated men, including Morris, it is naïve to imagine that we should have achieved the modest degree of social justice embodied in the contemporary Welfare State. The Victorian middle-class had no doubt that the country was more prosperous than ever before, at the height of laisser-faire: the industrial workers participated little enough in that prosperity.

Snow argued in his original lecture that ‘Industrialisation is the only hope of the poor’. This point he stressed again in 1963, when he returned to the discussion with The Two Cultures: A Second Look:

‘The scientific revolution is the only method by which most people can gain the primal things (years of life, freedom from hunger, survival for children) – the primal things which we take for granted, and which have in reality come to us through having had our scientific revolution not so long ago. Most people want those primal things. Most people, whenever they are being given a chance, are rushing into the scientific revolution.’

Although more of us respond sympathetically to Snow’s emphasis on the responsibility of the developed countries to the underdeveloped in this situation, there is still something unsatisfactorily abstract about his way of describing it. He attributes to ‘industrialisation’ and ‘the scientific revolution’ benefits which, in the short term, at any rate, will accrue only if the social philosophy of those in power in the developing countries is similar to his own. The vital question of how the underdeveloped countries can gain the benefits of industry without inflicting upon their people the sufferings of the English – or the Russian – people at a similar stage is simply omitted. ‘Only industrialise’ is inadequate advice to the countries of Asia and Africa: ‘industrialise wisely’ is what needs to be said – and done.

Thus we come back to the importance of formulating an adequate social philosophy for our time. Morris himself remarked in How I Became a Socialist that ‘the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me, luckier than many others of artistic perceptions, from crystallising into
a mere railer against “progress” . . . . He would have shared Snow’s
dislike of those literary intellectuals whose intention is cleverly
to depreciate modern life, because his aim was always constructive
– to form, from the chaos that industrialisation under laisser-faire
conditions had created in the England of his time, a just and
humanly satisfying society. Occasionally, in the eagerness to stress
the complexities of our situation, Dr Leavis comes close to ‘rail­
ing’: more often Snow, in his enthusiasm for scientific progress,
approaches an uncritical ‘progressivism’. Neither of these extreme
attitudes can satisfy for long, and in searching for a social
philosophy which can unify our sense of both the dangers and
the potentialities of the future, it is to Morris and writers like him
that we can usefully turn. Our choice is not between ‘accepting’
and ‘rejecting’ the modern world of science and technology in
which we all live, but between passive and active attitudes to­
wards it. Morris is important at this point because he asked the
most incisive question about his society – how far does it promote
the happiness of all its members? – and asked it in a spirit at once
critical, constructive, and urgent.