

The Immortal Morris

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This phrase, employed by the Socialists of Milan in telegraphing their sorrow at William Morris's death expresses a feeling that must be shared by all who ever came under the spell of his unique personality. Now that he is dead, his greatness is acknowledged even by those who during his life persistently ridiculed and made light of his most serious aims. It was inevitable that he too should be the victim of that hasty newspaper biography wherein half-knowledge and superficial criticism are eked out with self-advertisement. Those who have known and loved him will take time to estimate what they and the world have lost by his death. This much is certain, that as time goes on his life and work will seem more and more significant and extraordinary, and prove him to be, in the possession of enduring fame, indeed immortal. For myself it is impossible to believe that that generous, buoyant, overflowing individuality was only the result of a chemical compound that, with the cessation of physical life, has been resolved into its elements. That is an assumption that would strain my credulity too far.

Morris has been written about from almost every point of view – as artist, craftsman, writer, and Socialist. In this place it will be fitting to consider briefly his religious significance. Regarding religion, he was usually reticent. In this he may have resembled his countrymen as described in his own *Dream of John Ball*: 'They did not want others to see how deeply they were moved, after the fashion of their race when they are strongly stirred.' Like Whitman, he 'argued not concerning God.' Amongst a party of friends, if the discussion turned upon religion, and became heated, as such discussions will, I have seen him quietly get up from the table and walk away. Some three years ago in an article in JUSTICE, he described himself as 'careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it.'

We may truly say that his 'deep love of the earth and the life on it' constituted his religion. How much more religious was it than the attitude of the orthodox, professing to regard Nature as the garment of God and Man as his image, yet content to see that beautiful garment defiled, and that glorious image defaced! Nothing can be further from the truth than to treat Morris's Socialism as an accident, a temporary aberration, or mere matter of sentiment. His public adoption of it was a direct challenge to Society, and was probably the most deliberate and serious act of his life. This act itself was the result of a long process of development, and was not entered upon until he had satisfied himself (with that practical sense for which he has not always received due credit) that the historical and economic basis of Socialism was sound. His later activities as an exponent of Socialism have often been sharply contrasted with his early description of himself in the introduction to *The Earthly Paradise* as 'the idle singer of an empty day.' But without some ideal of beneficent activity, the singer would not have complained of his idleness, nor that his day seemed empty. Moreover, the famous lines –

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?

show that the call to action in the field of social reform was already felt by him, even though the way was not yet made clear. It is one stage earlier in spiritual evolution than that represented by the voice which was heard by Saul of Tarsus: 'It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.' We say then, in no narrow, yet in a very definite sense, that in his espousal of the Socialist cause, and his devotion to it through evil and good report, William Morris was essentially religious. And if it be true he had a religion, it is likewise true that he had a metaphysic; that is, as anyone will see who reads his prose writings carefully, he attributed to thoughts and ideas a real and tangible vitality and continuity.

It is a testimony to his greatness that already there is growing up around his memory what may be called a Morris myth. The following paragraph taken from THE INQUIRER must therefore be accepted with reserve: 'We hear a story, told on good authority, of the time when he was under Puseyite influence at Oxford. It is said that he took his penances very seriously indeed, and that he used to be found chained up to the walls of his rooms in Exeter College, by way of keeping himself awake during the long vigils.' The writer adds, 'We know how completely he grew out of these youthful disorders into a Pagan Idealism in which all Christian virtues were held in "solution".' In this sketch of his religious development there is undoubtedly an element of truth. We may be sure that if Morris ever underwent penance he took it 'very seriously.' But the wave of destructive criticism which swept away historical Christianity for men like Clough and Matthew Arnold affected him also; moreover, his mind was so honest and sincere that he gave full weight to scientific discoveries in which he took no share, and while he allowed nothing to make him permanently miserable, one traces in him a certain wistfulness and lingering sentiment towards the child-like faith of the past. From his Socialist period we may trace a positive faith in life, and an unshaken confidence that out of the weltering chaos of the Present a new life for man would necessarily be born.

To say that during his period of Pagan Idealism the Christian virtues in him were merely held in solution is inaccurate; his active beneficence and painstaking kindness have long been known to his friends and comrades, and since his death many stories have come to light which have revealed it all to the world. When all is said, the truest word about Morris is that he was above everything else an artist. He trusted his instincts, and hated external restraint. His aversion to regimen of all kinds made illness doubly irksome to him. Yet on the whole his instincts led him splendidly right. It was his instincts that led him to revolt against ugliness, whereby he not only revolutionised the decorative arts in England, but lent so workmanlike a hand towards the entire reconstruction of Society. It was his instincts that (almost from the first) repudiated asceticism, which he described with characteristic vehemence as 'the most disgusting vice that afflicted human nature.' We are told that 'he had great admiration for Tolstoy until the Russian novelist began to show to the world his deep-rooted ascetic theory in the *Kreutzer Sonata*. "False through and through" was his comment on that famous book.'

Socialism is reached by many roads. Morris reached it through his love of art: others have done so through religion. All that we of the Labour Church need claim

is, that religion, like art, is a normal factor in human life – is itself an art – and that in this also, the natural instincts shall be trusted. Whether Morris would have admitted the reasonableness of this I do not know; but it seems to me in harmony with the essential ideas that guided his life.

A writer in the DAILY CHRONICLE says:- 'As many things have been said about his religious views, I may [say] that Morris told me he was Agnostic in the sense that there were things of which he felt he *knew* nothing, but that he must not be reckoned amongst those who absolutely deny. For smug, conventional religiosity he felt and expressed contempt, but I never heard him utter a word which could have offended any sincere religious man. No one who has heard him, as I have, read aloud the immortal sermon in the *Dream of John Ball*, could doubt that he had a religious nature of no ordinary depth, however much was his aversion to the ordinary forms of religious expression.' I can add my own testimony that the experience here spoken of was one never to be forgotten.