Rupes Topseia by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
‘Rupes Topseia’: A New Suggestion

Jan Marsh

Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s caricature of William Morris entitled ‘Rupes Topseia’, now in the British Museum, has long been ascribed to the period around 1874 and the dissolution of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. It shows Morris being hurled from the ‘Topseian Rock’ as if from its Tarpeian namesake in Rome, whence criminals were thrown to their deaths. On the hill above, the six other members of the partnership - C. J. Faulkner, D. G. Rossetti, E. B. Jones, F. M. Brown, P. Webb and P. Marshall - sit below a crumbling classical portico labelled ‘... & Co’ holding a banner that reads ‘We Are Starving.’ To the right of this line is a stick figure with his arms raised to the heavens. The face of Jane Morris looks down from a crescent moon, above a sun whose circle holds two bearded, bespectacled patriarchal figures surmounted by a dove. Falling with Morris is a copy of his *Earthly Paradise*, together with a knife and fork.

The caricature was presented to the British Museum in 1939 by Robert Steele, executor to May Morris and the remaining Morris estate. Its previous provenance is not known. Virginia Surtees’s catalogue raisonné of Rossetti’s work (1971, no. 611) ascribes no date to the drawing but tentatively identifies the two heads framed in the sun as those of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Fiona MacCarthy (1994, p. 343) follows this notion, describing the caricature as ‘drawn at the time of the reconstruction of the Firm. The original partners, top left, hold a scroll reading “We are Starving”. Janey, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels watch Morris’s descent to hell.’

Linda Parry, in the 1996 V&A catalogue (no. D.6) does not comment on the bearded patriarchs, but calls the caricature ‘Rossetti’s savage comment on the break up of the firm ... [depicting] Morris as Topsy thrown from the Tarpeian Rock in Rome as a condemned criminal’ and explains that the split between the partners became ‘acrimonious and bitter.’

But there are problems with various aspects of these accounts and interpretations. The first is that the figures in the sun are not Marx and Engels, and the caricature cannot be read as implicitly linking Topsy’s downfall to his Socialist mentors. Rossetti of course died in 1882, somewhat before Morris’s formal commitment to the Socialist movement and is anyway unlikely to have known much of either Communist thinker. Nor do his thumbnail sketches resemble either man. Certainly they can be ruled out of the question if the drawing dates from 1874, when neither Marx nor Engels was a name in the land or connected with Morris.

But does the drawing date from 1874, or relate to the break-up of the Firm? It shows Morris being cast out, rather than taking sole control. The other partners’ slogan suggests that they are starving owing to lack of money because the Firm is crumbling. But while loss of income was an issue during the break-up, the business was not doing badly and driving Morris out was never a proposed solution, even in savage humour.

The dating, at best a plausible guess, is in my view quite insecure. Far more likely,
the caricature dates from July 1869 and is the ‘funny cartoon’ referred to in Warington Taylor’s letter to Philip Webb of 12 July that year, in the National Art Library’s bound volume of letters by and about Taylor preserved by Webb and then by Sydney Cockerell (MS. 86.SS.57).

Warington Taylor became business manager of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1865. His appointment was supported by Rossetti, amongst others. By the close of 1866, he was ‘pensioned off’ to the Sussex coast on health grounds for most of the year. His role was taken first by a man called McShane and then by George Wardle. Taylor was not dismissed, however, and seems to have continued to oversee the firm’s quarterly accounts. In the summer of 1868 he survived a marital crisis, in London, mediated by Webb, Jane, Rossetti and Morris. Thereafter he lived quietly with his wife, mainly away from London, until his death in Fulham in February 1870.

In the bound volume of letters is a sequence dating from July 1869 addressed to Rossetti, Webb and Morris, concerning the financial state of the business. The writing is rather incoherent and the allegations unsubstantiated, but the message is a dire warning of imminent bankruptcy without tighter control of expenditure and in particular the monies owed to the firm by individual partners for goods and services. ‘My dear Gabriel, the members of the firm are ruining it - we cannot go on if they do not pay up their debts. They amount to £266...’ wrote Taylor on 3 July. ‘The personal extravagance of the members used to be spasmodic it is now confirmed and habitual ... every member directly or indirectly eggs the others on to fresh extravagance. “I have got this, you must have one” “order it at once”, that sort of thing...’ Around the same date Webb was warned that Morris ‘will get into trouble if he does not rearrange his expenditure ... he has only £400 capital to draw out of the firm, so that by the end of ’70 he will be over £200 in debt...’ And again: ‘What is absolutely necessary to save the firm from ruin is that - someone must see the books weekly or fortnightly to see that Morris has not drawn cheques for himself and others when he has no money due to him...’

A little later, a second letter to Rossetti spelt out Taylor’s dire analysis:

W.M. has still £200 capital to draw out of the firm. When he has drawn that he has not a farthing to draw save his salary. That £200 he must draw to live on. Next year including his mines, salary, books, he cannot reckon upon much more than half the amount he is currently spending therefore at the end of next year he will be a bankrupt. Remember how I have watched him - how I know his habits. What he will probably do is this - he will draw small cheques for himself then he will pretend to take no notice of it and at the end of the quarter he will express surprise when he is told he is perhaps overdrawn £100 - he will have no means of repaying it and the firm will be the loser - so he will gradually ruin it. The only remedy is for one of the members to inspect the books weekly to see what he is doing. At the next meeting you must look into the debts of members to the firm. How are they to pay up? Can they all pay? W.M. will clear his by drawing another £100 of capital out. What about Howell - will he pay - is there any prospect. You must take some interest in the affairs and you must pay up too... Every kind of thing has been done to try and save W.M. for the last three years - now the only thing is for the members to take him in hand jointly. EBJ is in for £60. What has he got to pay it?
Elsewhere in the volume are estimates, by both Taylor and Morris, of annual living expenses at Queen Square and notes from Taylor to Morris - whether they were sent is unknown - instructing him to cut down, employ only one servant, not use the front room fire so much, drink beer instead of wine, and so on. 'It's no good your screaming and saying you will shut the bloody shop up if you can't afford to do it any longer,' runs one of these memos, 'I told you some years ago it would become indispensable to you.'

Rossetti replied to Taylor's frantic missives with a letter that does not seem to have survived. With it came a drawing, which Taylor found amusing but not consoling, and which on 12 July he forwarded to Webb. 'I send you a funny cartoon of Gabriel's. But after looking at it you will still have to turn to the main question,' he wrote. 'We want from you vigorous stern action if the firm is to be saved... I sent Wardle the other day my views of the Howell debts and how to deal with it...'

I would suggest that the 'funny cartoon' is in fact 'Rupes Topseia', a caricature of ruin facing the firm's partners, and the ultimate punishment due to Morris for criminal mismanagement. He is shown with a single volume of the *Earthly Paradise* (the second was published in December 1869) and the crossed cutlery is a satirical reference to his supposedly extravagant appetite. The gaunt lanky figure throwing up his arms is recognisably meant for Warington Taylor, warning of catastrophe like Cassandra.

This is not so much a savage attack on Morris as gentle mockery of Taylor's fears and accusations. As Harvey and Press point out, at this date Taylor was not directly involved with the management of the business nor necessarily correct in his views of its priorities. The firm did not collapse, though there were no doubt problems - especially if the notoriously slippery Charles Howell had been allowed to run up a serious debt for goods on account. Another letter to Webb alleges that Howell had told Wardle that Morris said Howell could have a new batch of wallpapers at ten per cent above cost: 'are all the women of North End to be allowed to furnish their relations' houses at our expense?' (Howell and his wife had just moved to North End, near the Burne-Joneses).

There remains the mystery of the two bearded patriarchs watching over Topsy's fall from the precipice. If 'Rupes Topseia' dates from 1869, who are they intended to represent?*

*Editor's Note: I am sure that Dr Marsh is correct in dismissing the view that the two figures depicted in 'Rupes Topseia' are Marx and Engels. My own view is that they represent the evolutionists - Darwin and Huxley - and that the cartoon is in part a visual pun on the title of Darwin's book *The Descent of Man.*