Morris and his critics

by Catherine Buckley

Because so many of William Morris' theories on the conditions necessary for creative work are accepted by the twentieth century, the modern reader is likely to find him more persuasive and less radical than his original audiences did. It is interesting to look back to the criticisms made in his lifetime to see what sort of mentality Morris was struggling against.

In January 1891, Morris wrote an article for the New Review entitled 'The Socialist Ideal—Art', one of the few occasions when his ideas on art could be read, rather than listened to. W H Mallock replied in the February issue, and his statement 'The Individualist Ideal—Art' offers the most detailed contemporary appraisal of the socialist consequences of Morris' theory. He admits Morris' contention that,

... the great mass of the people are, under the existing conditions of production, too poor to buy good works of art for themselves and too uneducated to enjoy them; that their surroundings are hostile to the cultivation or the enjoyment of their artistic sense; that their work, as now arranged, is hostile to all exercise of any artistic instinct; and, lastly, that society, as now constituted, is hostile to the exercise or the enjoyment of true art by anyone.

He also agrees that the technique which has divorced manufacturing and art is division of labour:

Art is only possible to workmen generally when the workman generally did what he generally does no longer — makes the whole of some given ware or at all events some part of it which could be recognized as his own.

Yet he feels that this technique is the very source of the wealth of modern England, so that 'as we restore the conditions which make art in ordinary labour possible, the gross product of labour available for distribution will decrease'.

Moreover, he assumes that Morris' socialism is simple re-
distributionism motivated by the fact that 'in the modern world wealth has increased so enormously'. Therefore he concludes that Morris’ aims are contradictory – one cannot be for a redistribution of wealth, but against division of labour:

As we restore the conditions that make art in ordinary labour possible, the gross product of labour available for distribution will decrease. It is, of course, quite open to the Socialists to maintain that a decrease of this kind would be no real evil and that we might be morally much richer while we were materially much poorer... But the position is not tenable which the Socialists actually occupy – the position that wealth should be redistributed because so much of it is produced, but redistributed under conditions that would make its production impossible.

Whether or not the position described in the last sentence was held by any socialists, it certainly was not held by Morris. He would have argued for a decrease in the gross product, but he would not consider that such a decrease would make England materially poorer. What he wanted was an improvement in the quality of the product and of the lives of the workers who produced it, and this he felt would make the people richer both spiritually and materially.

Throughout his article, Mallock misunderstands the means by which Morris intends to rekindle popular art. He did not plan to restore art to the people by giving them a larger share of the profits so that they could buy it, but by changing the conditions of manufacturing so that they could produce it. The confusion arises partly from the critic’s limited notion of what the word ‘wealth’ means for Morris. Mallock assumes that it is material goods – profits and products – the working class share of which had already greatly increased. But for Morris, ‘wealth’ meant much more – education, leisure, beauty – in Ruskin’s words ‘there is no wealth but life’. In all these respects the people had been deprived. ‘What have you done with Lancashire? Were not the brown moors and the meadows, the clear streams and the sunny skies, wealth?’ (Architecture, Wealth and Riches)

In the same way, Mallock does not realize how radical a transformation in the system Morris proposes to gain his end. He assumes that artistic goods must always cost more, and
therefore says that if any respectable artisan must choose ‘whether he would sooner have a vulgar cheap lamp and a vulgar cheap fireplace, or an artistic lamp and no fireplace, or an artistic fireplace and no lamp, he will certainly answer that getting rid of his art is a remarkably cheap way of doubling his practical comforts’. But here Morris would ask why he was to choose – it is only modern production methods that make a choice between cheap and shoddy goods and expensive artistic ones possible. In his utopia every product would be well-designed and none would be over-priced. Mallock’s ignorance of the extent of the changes Morris proposes makes his reply irrelevant.

A more justified criticism was made by a journalist in Manchester who complained of the lack of precision in Morris’ references to past and present art. When Morris condemned the luxurious homes near Bournemouth as ‘blackguardly’ he remonstrates ‘it is just here we want help in details’. (Man­chester Examiner, 12 March 1883) In the same way, if Morris was going to claim that the art of the past fashioned goods better than the nineteenth century, one wants to know ‘What age, what country, what things?’. There is no doubt that Morris was guilty of vague references, first because he assumed that many of his judgments, like that on Bournemouth, were self-evident, when a different sensitivity would not find them so, and second because he had repeated his history of art so often that he may have supposed his audience already knew it. Often, especially in later years, the odd assortment of people he addressed must have been left breathless by his lightning tour of two thousand years of civilization.

A more serious sort of opposition is presented by those critics who attack Morris’ premises. The leader in the Man­chester Examiner for 7 March 1883 described its reaction to Morris as the feeling that ‘your better half is right in her description of facts, but altogether illogical in her state­ments of causes and conclusions’. Another writer in that paper for 12 March 1883 attacked the suggestion that ‘we found museums of household goods of the past because none of our own age’s can equal them’. Instead, the critic argues, museums have ‘historical, archaeological, moral interest quite
apart from the artistic interest’. Therefore it is wrong to infer from the existence of museums that ‘no true art exists today’.

This writer also questioned the primary article of Morris’ creed, asking whether ‘in any country, art has ever been brought home to the great mass of the people’. This elitist theory of art was also championed by Mallock who cited Whistler in objecting ‘it is idle to imagine that, in any age whatever, either artistic power or artistic appreciation could in any sense be said to be general throughout the community’.

A similar notion is put forward by a more sympathetic commentator, Lewis Day, writing in the *Easter Art Annual* of the *Art Journal* for 1899. He pointed out that Morris made articles which ‘are indeed a happiness to the user, and were a happiness to the maker if he was an artist (which not all workmen are)’. No doubt Morris’ theory and practice both assumed that every workman wanted to be more than a machine and could enjoy what Robert Frost has called ‘the pleasure of taking pains’. Morris in one of his letters said that any man of decent intelligence could do his job ‘if he could but get to care about the work and its results’, but he never saw what a big if that was. This is perhaps the most basic criticism that can be lodged against his whole theory of work; that he is assuming that everyone enjoys the same things he does. He might have been warned by the epigram of his friend George Bernard Shaw ‘Do not do unto others as you would have others do unto you; their taste may not be the same’. But Morris can be pardoned for hoping that everyone could share the experience which had been his most constant happiness in good times and deepest consolation in bad. In distributing prizes at an art school he had described the pleasures of an artist’s life: ‘We don’t like to leave off at night and are in a hurry to begin in the morning . . . to be an artist or a husbandman seems to me to be the only quite satisfactory way of living.’ (Cambridge Chronicle, Isle of Ely Herald and Huntingdonshire Gazette, 23 February 1878). In a sense, the whole of his theory of work work is only a desire to share this wealth.

Despite such good intentions, Morris’ recommendations to his own society were received with increasing hostility. In a survey of contemporary views of Morris’ poetry (*Review of 
Karl Litenberg has observed that 'a lack of penetrating social philosophy was considered by many to be a fault in his poetry [but] its presence was not infrequently thought to be a defect in his prose'. This reaction is apparent in a letter to the *Manchester Examiner* in March 1883 complaining that Morris' address 'Art, Wealth and Riches' raised 'another question than that of mere art'. What must have seemed even more disheartening to Morris was that often even those groups who shared some of his liberal sympathies and came prepared to listen to his social philosophy could not accept it. In the year he edited *Justice*, 1884, the newspaper has frequent accounts of his speeches and the remarks that followed, printed without editorial comment. Almost always, those who rose to give thanks found it necessary to state their reservations about his views and sometimes even to contradict his facts. I quote from two reports. After 'Useful Work vs Useless Toil' at the Hampstead Liberal Club:

Mr Bampas in moving a vote of thanks . . . pointed out that there had been great improvement in the last fifty or a hundred years, not only in the middle class but in the poorest class also. There was hope for the future in a scheme that had not been mentioned—and that was patience (*Justice*, 19 January 1884).

After 'Art Under Plutocracy' at the Ancoats Recreation Committee:

Mr Charles Hughes, in proposing the vote of thanks, thought that Mr Morris' remarks on the wretchedness of the workers applied more to those of London than to Lancashire, the improvement of whose condition over that of fifty years ago he thought very great. Mr J. W. Southern, in seconding the motion, thought that Mr Morris had painted the picture in colours a trifle too gloomy and there was a better hope for humanity on the existing system than the lecturer was prepared to admit (*Justice*, 26 January 1884).

That Morris was aware of such antagonism to the real kernel of his message is apparent in the later speeches. In some of those on artistic subjects there are glances at his socialism which he then shies away from, saying he must not speak of that matter there. And in those in which his social philosophy is to be explicit he often confronts the audience with remarks like 'I am here before you as a breeder of discontent'. (British
Museum, Add. MS 45331). Mackail observes of 1883 that under the ‘pressure of opposition’ a ‘hardening of his tone’ became perceptible. ‘I am tired of being mealy-mouthed’ he breaks out in a letter. Yet despite his love of a good fight, Morris could hardly have enjoyed ‘preaching his sermon’ to people who, as the quotes from Justice show, simply refused to believe him. Why then did he not restrict himself to those discussions of aesthetics which his audience was willing to hear?

First, because he was too honest not to follow his observations to their logical conclusions, or, having reached conclusions, not to report them. From his point of view, the condition of art was inextricably bound up with the condition of England and he wanted to tell the whole truth. Second, once he had begun to understand the situation of the working class in his own day, their plight had an urgency even beyond that he felt for the preservation of the art of the past. In justifying his criticism of his own time, he emphasised the gravity of his appeal:

I am not pleading for the production of a little more beauty in the world, much as I love it, and much as I would sacrifice for its sake: it is the lives of human beings that I am pleading for. (‘Art and Its Producers’).

Block of ‘Daisy’ wallpaper pattern (1864)