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Introduction

In: Kocmanová, Jessie. *The poetic maturing of William Morris : from earthly paradise to the pilgrims of hope*. Vyd. 1. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1964, pp. 9-12

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/103981>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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INTRODUCTION

William Morris was the first great English poet to speak directly in the name of the socialist movement. He was also the first great writer in England to become a declared Marxist. In the early eighties of last century, when Morris began to take a direct part in socialist agitation and propaganda, his behaviour caused indignation on the part of middle-class admirers of his poetry. The incident of his lecture on Democracy and Art in 1883 in University College, Oxford, when he shocked his audience by inviting them to join the socialist movement; the horrified reaction of George Gissing to Morris's appearance in a London police court in 1885, are well-known instances of the pained surprise of those who had revered Morris as the author of *The Earthly Paradise*. It was considered "monstrous" that the "Dreamer of Dreams", whose whole interest had seemed to be wrapped up in art and the Middle Ages, should suddenly fling himself into the sordid struggles of the working-class organisations and proclaim his full acceptance of Marxist socialism.¹

The general lines of Morris's intellectual and political development are now well known, thanks especially to the pioneer work of R. Page Arnot, the Cultural Committee of the British Communist Party, several Soviet literary critics and above all the exhaustive and well-documented study by E. P. Thompson.² It is no longer possible for revisionist Labour leaders to claim Morris as an evolutionary, or romantic, or utopian socialist. The basis of his socialist thought on Marxist principle has been shown beyond all doubt or question. Nevertheless, precisely this new light on Morris has revealed further aspects of his life work which still require to be adequately assessed.

One of these aspects appears to me to be the question of Morris's poetic development from the period of *The Earthly Paradise* onwards. My objections to Thompson's virtual dismissal of *The Earthly Paradise*, *Love Is Enough*, and *Sigurd the Volsung* as decadent romantic poetry have been set out in a critical review of *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*.³ In this review I pointed out that while Thompson assessed very highly the realism and vitality of

Morris's earlier poetry (*The Defence of Guenevere*, 1858), he dealt with the main body of Morris's poetry only in a very cursory way. This is in accordance with the general tendency of contemporary criticism of Morris, which focusses interest only on his early poetry. This has been accompanied not only by consistent neglect of the main body of his maturer poetry, but also of the socialist poetry of his later years. Soviet historians have pointed out the extreme importance of the moment when Morris turned to the proletariat as an audience for his writings⁴; but the general neglect of his poetry of the sixties and seventies has not only led to the denial of Morris's central position in Victorian poetry, but also and inevitably to a lessening of the importance of his later socialist poetry. If Morris was not one of the finest poets of the seventies, then we may ask, did it matter so much that in the eighties he turned in literature to the workers?

I do not pretend in the present work to have succeeded in indicating Morris's place in English poetry within the period of the 1860s to the present day, i.e. including his influence on later poets. Critical works on modern poetry since the twenties of the present century are remarkable for the fact that only rare references are to be found to the poetry of Morris. Like Thompson, the majority of critics appear to assume that Morris's poetry remained too much in the grip of late romanticism to have anything to say to the twentieth century and to post-Yeatsian, post-Eliotian poetry; in spite of the fact that the influence of Morris on Yeats is generally admitted. This assumption of course refers above all to the form and technique of Morris's poetry, criticised adversely for its archaic language and romantic method — "romanticism in decay", as Thompson maintains. Perhaps, however, time will show that the complete decadence of reactionary romanticism was reached precisely in the period dominated by *The Waste Land*, in spite of the technical brilliance and innovations of Eliot, and the invocation of "Neo-classicist" critical theories. However this may be, to answer questions raised by twentieth-century English poetry is no part of my present task, which is by means of detailed analysis to reopen the question of the value of William Morris's middle and later poetry and its relevance for to-day, and also to indicate the course and stages of its development. Is it in fact a process of maturing or of degeneration? My choice of title is sufficient indication of my own conclusion. English poetry at the present day seems to be with few exceptions dedicated to the expression of individual reactions. Whatever we may think of the Victorians, they were not exclusively bounded by the horizons of their ego. Above them all, William Morris recognised the need to deal with heroic subjects in poetry; and from *The Earthly Paradise* up to *The Pilgrims of Hope* his poetry shows how his conception of the heroic developed, until he cast out the medieval conception of the individual quest for happiness or fulfilment, and adopted as his heroes those — whether in the world of the sagas or of imperialist England — who voiced the heroic aspirations of the people.

When William Morris began to compose the tales which he combined to form *The Earthly Paradise*, he had already published *The Defence of Guenevere*, poems mainly of his student days in which he expressed his vivid realisation of medieval life. It was this sense of immediate experience, this "poignancy of eager life struggling against overmastering odds"⁵, that struck his first readers and that still remains immediately effective to-day. These poems were the products of his preoccupation with medieval literature, art and architecture, products of his exact, expert knowledge of the Middle Ages. The beauties of this poetry are clearly to be seen and critics have dealt very fairly by them.

What led Morris to attempt a more ambitious work? Mackail suggests that it was the increased leisure which resulted when Morris left his ideal Red House and returned to London to be nearer his daily work in the Firm of artistic craft manufacturers. In the nine years that passed between the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere* and *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), Morris had been composing dramatic fragments, *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*, never published during his lifetime. This poetry is close to the poetry of the *Defence of Guenevere*. *The Life and Death of Jason*, on the other hand, really belongs in conception and method to the *Earthly Paradise* period, and was published separately because it outgrew in length the work for which it was originally intended. I have not included an analysis of *Jason* in the present study, mainly because it was not included in *The Earthly Paradise*, and I especially wished to stress the importance of the structure of *The Earthly Paradise* as a whole. A contributory reason is that it is generally speaking better known and has been more fully treated by critics than *The Earthly Paradise*; while it seems also to demand a comparative study of other modern re-tellings of the tale of the Argonauts, which would be beyond the scope of this work. The orientation of *Jason* is to the traditional classical background of English literature, while the real trend of Morris's most vital poetry stresses the Scandinavian and Germanic background.

Thompson has endeavoured to show that the whole conception of *The Earthly Paradise* arose from Morris's disillusionment, his loss of personal happiness, his despair.⁶ My objections to this formulation I have tried to substantiate in the following pages. It must be remembered that the conception of *The Earthly Paradise* was largely a collective one, involving the illustrations planned for the "book of the age" by Burne-Jones. Although it was found financially and technically impossible to publish the illustrated edition originally planned, this structural scheme had certainly an important influence on the general conception and final execution of the poem. A corrective to the idea that the poem represents the irresponsible outpourings of a personal despair is the realisation that it was not produced in isolation but in an atmosphere of collective interest. "There used to be weekly dinners to discuss 'The Earthly Paradise' while it was in progress,"

May Morris tells us, attended by Morris's closest friends, Burne-Jones, the painter and Philip Webb, the architect.⁷

Above all we may take *The Earthly Paradise*, an undertaking of wide scope, making considerable demands on the creative energy of the poet, as an earnest of the seriousness with which Morris approached his calling. Too many anecdotes suggesting the levity of Morris's attitude to poetic composition have been quoted as a proof of his amateurishness in poetry. On the contrary, Morris had a very serious view of the function and nature of poetry. The anecdotes referred to illustrate not light-mindedness, but the light-heartedness of the born poet for whom poetry is both a pleasure and a necessity. "Horace was right in saying that neither gods nor men can stand mediocrity in a poet . . . Every real poet can do something which no other poet can do, which no other can even attempt," wrote Morris to a comrade who had asked his advice on writing poetry.⁸

In the following study I have endeavoured to assess what was this "something" which William Morris, in his middle and later poetic phase, contributed to English poetry in the latter half of last century.