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Poetry for the revolution : occasional lyrics and later poetry

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POETRY FOR THE REVOLUTION: OCCASIONAL LYRICS AND LATER POETRY

Morris's conversion to revolutionary socialism, which took place as a result of his activities in practical politics at the end of the seventies, has been shown by Thompson to be no regrettable aberration, as Mackail liked to consider it, from the paths of literature and the arts, but the central and most deeply-felt event of his whole life. It is true that immediately before and immediately afterwards he wrote little or no poetry. This was partly lack of inspiration: "The verse would come easy enough if I had only a subject which would fill my heart and mind: but to write verse for the sake of writing is a crime in a man of my years and experience," he wrote in 1879¹⁴⁹; and partly the feeling that English poetry had lost its immediacy. In a letter of 1883 to Mrs. Burne-Jones he expressed his opinion that poetry "has now become unreal: the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again."¹⁵⁰ Thompson has suggested that "The great intellectual effort of his lectures must have exposed to him the facility of much of his verse."¹⁵¹ Morris himself was the severest critic of the smoothness and ease of some of his poetry and as early as 1869 had said of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, "They are all too long and flabby, damn it!"¹⁵² — Yet it is not so much the problem of form that led Morris to neglect poetic composition at this period, but rather the conviction, which was only temporary, that he could no longer say anything in poetry which would be of significance or use to the revolution, and that what he had to say in prose was now his paramount duty.

Morris's socialism was and remained revolutionary, based on his growing conviction that nothing but social revolution could change corrupt capitalist society. It was above all his recognition of the class war in capitalist society that brought him in 1883 to join the only body then in existence with a definitely socialist programme, the Democratic Federation, later the Social Democratic Federation. Up till then, he had no formal knowledge of socialist or Marxist economic theory¹⁵³ — though he certainly had a better foundation for acquiring such a knowledge than all but a few of his socialist colleagues —

but immediately began to study Marx (in French, as there was still no English translation of *Capital*) and other theorists to such good purpose that by 1884 he had become one of the leading propagandists and collaborated with Hyndman in writing a *Summary of the Principles of Socialism*, which is at once a historical survey of society, a statement of the principles of Marxism, and a reasoned political programme. This was published for the Democratic Federation as a cheap, paper-backed pamphlet, the cover of which bears a pen-and-ink design of intertwined leaves, obviously the work of Morris himself. He laid all his gifts with complete generosity at the service of socialism, and this included the gift of poetry.

From now on to the end of his life, work for the socialist cause became the first charge on Morris's time and energy. Only the very serious illness which caused his premature death led him to slacken his efforts in propaganda, organisation and agitation; and in fact medical opinion was that his devoted work for the socialist movement, which shirked none of the less easy or less spectacular tasks, had actually shortened his life.¹⁵⁴ During these years he produced a great bulk of prose work, lectures, essays, reviews, newspaper articles, and finally, his prose romances. As he gained experience in speaking to a wider audience, and often an uneducated audience, he sought for a prose style that would be at once simple and convincing, "swift and telling but not bald, eloquent to move hearts but not flowery or journalistic", as May Morris describes it.¹⁵⁵ He never "talked down" to his listeners, and "could not offer to the workers what he did not himself think good."¹⁵⁶ Morris's prose is simple, straightforward, trenchant, but never bare or dull.

Although May Morris suggests that in later life Morris felt the writing of poetry to be inappropriate — "a feeling that advancing years were incompatible with the qualities he aimed at in poetry and that the things he felt an overmastering impulse to express were now more fittingly said in prose."¹⁵⁷ — nevertheless he did not cease altogether to write poetry. Much of his shorter lyric poetry that has been preserved and published comes from this period. In 1885 and 1886 he endeavoured to express some of his experiences of the socialist movement in a longer poem, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, which, however, was not completed or finally revised. But in spite of its comparatively small bulk, and although overshadowed by the amount of prose work of the same period, Morris's later poetry can by no means be neglected.

Of the poetry of William Morris there now remains to be considered his last narrative poem, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, the songs he wrote for the socialist movement, and some scattered lyrics. The lyric poems which are of importance fall into two groups, those which are of a personal nature, and those which deal with Iceland and saga subjects.

Among the earliest of the latter are two sonnets on the hero of the *Grettissaga*,

presumably composed in 1869, when he was translating the saga with Magnússon. These fully confirm what has already been said of the way in which Morris related the life of the sagas to his own day. In the first sonnet, published at the beginning of the translation¹⁵⁸, Morris shows great mastery of this form, which he rarely used. The octet states the apparent barrenness and poverty of Grettir's life — "A life scarce worth the living, a poor fame, Scarce worth the winning, in a wretched land," — while the sestet triumphantly denies this: "Nay, with the dead I deal not; this man lives." That quality which bore Grettir through his own life, "stern against fate", is also the quality which has preserved his fame down the centuries, which "strives with wasting time" and gives "Another friend to me, life's void to fill." The other sonnet, printed by May Morris in her Introduction to *Grettir the Strong*¹⁵⁹, expresses the same thought with less technical perfection, though it has two memorable lines, the first, "Grettir, didst thou live utterly for nought?", and the last, "Speak, Grettir, through the dark: I am anear." The most striking aspect of these poems, apart from their understanding of the mood of the sagas, is the intimate personal application, the closeness to the heroes of the sagas, which Morris felt so strongly.

Two other poems of this period — before he had seen Iceland — express Morris's attitude to the sagas. These are *To the Muse of the North*¹⁶⁰ and the verses printed as *A Prologue in Verse* to Morris's translation of the *Volsungasaga*, which translation of course must not be confused with *Sigurd the Volsung*.¹⁶¹ Of the first, May Morris states that it was written as an introduction to the *Grettissaga* translation.¹⁶² It belongs thus to the period when Morris was writing or contemplating *The Lovers of Gudrun* and it is written in the same kind of narrative five-stress couplet as *Gudrun*. The outlook expressed is still not quite compatible with the sternness of the sagas. The muse of the North according to this poem is a muse of pity and sorrow, with "lips that smile not though thy children win The fated Love that draws the fated Death", while the sorrow of the protagonists of Icelandic poetry "made life a wondrous dream, And death the murmur of a restful stream". Morris apostrophises the Muse as "Mother, and Love, and Sister all in one", and begs her, in his loneliness, to "wrap me in the grief of long ago". This poem would seem to confirm the theory that Morris turned to the North at least partly for relief from personal suffering; but as a poem it is much less successful than the more objective poems, such as those on Grettir, or *A Prologue in Verse*. The latter is an apostrophe to the English people to learn appreciation of the saga, and has the vigour of some of Morris's political poems:

O hearken, ye who speak the English Tongue,
 How in a waste land ages long ago,
 The very heart of the North bloomed into song
 After long brooding o'er this tale of woe!

Again, however, there intrudes the typical *Earthly Paradise* thought that the saga tale "With echoed grief life's dull pain may beguile". The final verse sums up Morris's conception of the *Volsungasaga* at that period:

So draw ye round and hearken, English Folk,
Unto the best tale pity ever wrought!
Of how from dark to dark bright Sigurd broke,
Of Brynhild's glorious soul with love distraught,
Of Gudrun's weary wandering unto naught,
Of utter love defeated utterly,
Of Grief too strong to give Love time to die!
(Vol. VII, p.289-90)

However, as we have seen, by the time he wrote *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris had widened his conception of the significance of the sagas.

May Morris apparently gives no date for the poem *Iceland First Seen*, published in *Poems By the Way* (1896), and Mackail, who quotes the first verse in the course of his account of Morris's visits to Iceland, simply says that it was written "afterwards".¹⁶³ It would be interesting to know just when it was written, as it may be the first use by Morris of the metre chosen for *Sigurd the Volsung*. The swinging lines are however here arranged into stanzas of 7 lines, with a rhyme scheme ababacc. After describing the grimness of the scenery the poet asks:

Ah! what came we forth for to see that our hearts are so hot with desire?
... Why do we long to wend forth through the length and breadth of a land,
Dreadful with grinding of ice, and record of scarce hidden fire?

The reason for the quest is that the tales of the North are still living there.

However, this poem is not so fine as another, earlier poem quoted by Mackail, which does not seem to have been printed by May Morris. According to Mackail, it was written by Morris "in the beautiful manuscript of his translation" of the *Eyrbyggja Saga* in April 1871. As Mackail rightly says, in this poem Morris expresses simply and sincerely his feeling of kinship with the authors of the saga. "Perhaps he never elsewhere set forth so fully what the meaning of poetry was to him; a help in the darkness until the new day should come, not for one person or another, but for all the world."¹⁶⁴

The verses are written in Morris's "minstrel measure" and celebrate the "ancient chronicle" of that folk, apparently insignificant, whose immortality was nevertheless ensured by the presence among them of the saga author,

Who all these words together brought,
Made shadows breathe, quickened the dead,
And knew what silent mouths once said.

As he felt with Chaucer*, the poet now longs to feel that the saga author is his friend, reaching out a hand to him through the dark,

For we are of one company
To link the dull years straggling by
Their lonely hopes and griefs grown cold,
Into a chain of tear-washed gold
That yet shall cling about the Earth
In dawning of her second birth.

It is the courage of the sagaman, and his command of realism, that Morris most admires, the courage of this

Tale-teller, who 'twixt fire and snow
Had heart to turn about and show
With faint half-smile things great and small
That in thy fearful land did fall,

and the realism of the author who could hear

Earth's voices as they are indeed.

The last of this group of lyrics is *Gunnar's Howe Above the House at Lithend*, published in *Poems by the Way*¹⁶⁵ but presumably of the same date as the poem *Iceland First Seen*, and also written in the early variant of the *Sigurd* metre, which does not yet show the powerful rhythm and masterly use of caesura and substitution. This Gunnar is one of the heroes of the *Njalssaga*, and Morris was deeply moved on his first journey to Iceland when he was shown the places mentioned in the saga at Lithend:

"After this we went about the stead with the bonder, and he showed us the traditional site of Gunnar's hall, a little to the east of the present house, on a space flattened out of the hillside: below it in a hollow is a little mound called by tradition the tomb of Sámr, the dog whose dying howl warned Gunnar of the approach of his enemies. Then he leads us up the hillside into a hollow that runs at the back of the houses, which meets another little valley at an obtuse angle going up which we come at last on a big mound rising up from the hollow, and that is Gunnar's Howe: it is most dramatically situated to remind one of the beautiful passage in the *Njala* where Gunnar sings in his tomb... Then we came down and went slowly back home: it must have been about eleven at night as we passed the howe again: the moon was in the western sky, a little thin crescent, not shining at all as yet, though the days are visibly drawing in, and the little valley was in a sort of twilight now: so to camp and into our tents away from the heavy dew; the wind north-west and sky quite cloudless."¹⁶⁶

*) cf. supra, p.115.

The lyric is obviously closely connected with the experience described in the above passage from Morris's *Journal*:

Ye who have come o'er the sea to behold this grey minster of land,
Whose floor is the tomb of time past, and whose walls by the toil of dead hands
Show pictures amidst of the ruin of deeds that have overpast death,
Stay by this tomb in a tomb to ask of who lieth beneath . . .

Morris recalls the saga incident when the grey mound opened and showed Gunnar "glad-eyed without grudging or pain", and he feels that this song is "death-conquering", and that there is still hope for the world,

When the words of a man unremembered so bridge all the days that have been.

Morris felt that this renewed hope for the world was implicit in the unfaltering firmness in face of death which he found in the sagas: the spirit which will not keep asking for "a little longer to live", but accepts the world as it is without compromise or retreat. This is the spirit of which he wrote in the verses quoted by Mackail, "Well ye have helped me at my need." The passage in the diary is very closely followed in the conclusion of the poem:

Dusk is abroad on the grass of this valley amidst of the hill . . .
White, high aloft hangs the moon that no dark night shall brighten ere day,

While the last line,

For here day and night toileth the summer, lest deedless his time pass away,

emphasises the first syllable of "deedless", and it is in its way a summons to the deeds of the "bursting day" of which Shaw wrote.

Along with the lyrics relating directly to Iceland we may consider Morris's various translations of eddic songs, his attempt at *Beowulf*, and above all, the lyrics connected with or included in his late prose romances. It is not however my intention in the present study to consider in detail Morris's translations in verse, as this raises the additional questions of adequacy and accuracy, which are too specialised to the problem of translation to be relevant to my present purpose. In passing, however, I should like to draw attention to the vivid language in which Morris renders the Eddic poems, language closely connected with his contention that it was the Teutonic element in English which was the poetical element, while the Romance element was that of law, practice and business.¹⁶⁷ An example from the *Second Lay of Gudrun* may illustrate this:

Night methought it,
And the moonless dark,
When I sat in sorrow
Over Sigurd:
Better than all things
I deemed it would be
If they would let me
Cast my life by,
Or burn me up
As they burn the birch-wood.

(Vol. VII, p.437-8)

Morris's translation of *Beowulf*, which was the last work of this kind that he did and on which he worked intermittently from 1892 to 1894, with the help of the Anglo-Saxon scholar A. J. Wyatt, cannot be considered to be a success, but it is perhaps an impossible task to render the sophisticated and often obscure poetry of *Beowulf* in modern English verse. "The Anglo-Saxon scop was able to employ a highly formalized and artificial diction because his audience was trained and accustomed to that kind of idiom."¹⁶⁸ Morris endeavoured to keep too strictly to the form and diction of the original, and the whole task was complicated by the still unsettled state of the text at the time he made his translation. His attempts at rendering the "kennings" were often unfortunate rather than successful.

Nevertheless this sustained effort is certainly not without importance, and the strength of Morris's rendering must make us regret that he did not deal with *Beowulf* as he dealt with *Sigurd*, in an original epic poem, where he would not have been so limited by the need for keeping close to the original. The passage describing the funeral of Beowulf, which is one of the most effective, will illustrate both the faults and beauties of Morris's rendering:

Wrought there and fashion'd the folk of the Weders
A howe on the lithe, that high was and broad,
Unto the wave-farers wide to be seen:
Then it they betimber'd in time of ten days,
The battle-strong's beacon . . .
The earls' treasures let they the earth to be holding,
Gold in the grit, wherein yet it liveth,
As useless to men-folk as ever it erst was.

(Vol. X, p.274)

With this passage we may compare the latest prose translation, written, as its author says,¹⁶⁹ in "contemporary English prose", to illustrate that Morris's aim was obviously to keep as close as possible to the actual words and sequence of thought of the original:

"Upon the headland the Geats erected a broad, high tumulus, plainly visible to distant seamen. In ten days they completed the building of the hero's beacon... They buried the gold and left that princely treasure to the keeping of earth, where it yet remains, as useless to men as it was before."¹⁷⁰

Along with the Icelandic poems, we may also consider the verse written for and in connection with some of the later prose romances, namely *The House of the Wolfings*, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Roots of the Mountains*. Prefaced to the *House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* are two lyrics which express Morris's intention in writing these tales. The first of these uses the image of a traveller on a winter evening passing the brightly lit windows of a homestead "where we were merry years ago", and likens it to the way in which modern man may turn for comfort to certain aspects of the past of mankind:

E'en so the world of men may turn
At even of some hurried day
And see the ancient glimmer burn
Across the waste that hath no way.

(Vol. XIV, p.1)

The "ancient glimmer" is the old spirit of kindred and fellowship, which was for Morris, especially after he had become a Marxist, the most important heritage of the remoter past, and the aspect of the past which above all in those two romances he most sought to stress. Written in 1888, *The House of the Wolfings* expresses more fully the thought which Morris had hinted at in his radical song of 1887, *Wake London Lads*.¹⁷¹ In the verses prefaced to *The Roots of the Mountains*, Morris even more clearly expresses what the writing of these romances meant for him — many of their pages composed as a relief from the endless travelling up and down the country which his socialist propaganda involved:

Whiles carried o'er the iron road,
We hurry by some fair abode;
The garden bright amidst the hay,
The yellow wain upon the way...
How sorely then we long to stay...
And 'neath its changing shadows sit,
And feel ourselves a part of it.
Such rest, such stay, I strove to win
With these same leaves that lie herein.

(Vol. XV, p. xxxv)

However, as I have endeavoured to show elsewhere¹⁷², Morris's achievement in the late prose romances was something much more positive than mere escapist

fantasy. In them he incorporated his mature opinions on human society, morals and relationships. The earliest of the fantastic romances (as distinguished from *A Dream of John Ball*, which was a historical romance, and *News from Nowhere*, a political utopian romance); *The House of the Wolfings* is an exception to its successors in containing a large proportion of verse, which forms an inherent part of the structure, and is used somewhat like the eddic songs in the *Volsungasaga*, as a means of heightening the dramatic tension at moments of crisis. Saintsbury has praised this verse very highly, considering it to be Morris's most successful use of the "Sigurd" metre,¹⁷³ Though some critics have objected to Morris's use of verse in combination with prose as an unwarrantable mixture of styles¹⁷⁴, it must be emphasised that the verse plays an integral part in this romance and is much more than "applied" decoration. The romance is fundamentally based on a materialist interpretation of history and pre-history, and Morris uses the verse especially for passages which express those mystical folk beliefs which he himself does not hold, but which he wishes to include as part of the outlook of the characters and communities of his tale.¹⁷⁵ An example of the verse used in this romance is the Hall-Sun's description of her early education as the dedicated priestess of the tribal home:

I waxed 'neath the Roof of the Wolfings, till now to look upon
 I was of sixteen winters, and the love of the Folk I won,
 And in lovely weed they clad me like the image of a God:
 And lonely now full often the wild-wood ways I trod,
 And I feared no wild-wood creature, and my presence scared them nought;
 And I fell to know of wisdom, and within me stirred my thought
 So that oft anights would I wander through the mead and far away,
 And swim the Mirkwood-water, and amidst his eddies play
 When earth was dark in the dawn-tide . . .

(Vol. XIV, p.37)

Less perhaps an essential part of the tale are the verses included in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, but occurring as they do only at the most tense points of the tale, they underline the emotion of the characters and heighten the atmosphere to the strange blend of saga, ballad and romance which is peculiar to this story. When Hallblithe, the hero, at the outset of his adventures is an uneasy guest at the mysterious hall in the Isle of Ransom, the entertainment closes with a song that catches the essence of this atmosphere:

The land lies black
 With winter's lack,
 The wind blows cold
 Round field and fold;
 All folk are within,
 And but weaving they win.

Where from finger to finger the shuttle flies fast,
And the eyes of the singer look fain on the cast,
As he singeth the story of summer undone
And the barley sheaves hoary ripe under the sun.

(Vol. XIV, p. 239)

A further striking use of verse is at the climax, when Hallblithe is almost in despair and lost in the dreary wilderness beyond the Glittering Land. Ravens circling above the waste of rocks call to mind his own Kindred of the Ravens, and he sings an ancient song of his tribe and regains his courage.

We may say in general of these lyrics and songs related to Morris's love of the Northern heritage, that they uniquely and characteristically express his rare understanding of the past and what it holds of value for the present.

There exist also a number of scattered poems of a personal character — though we should beware of seeing all of them as necessarily a direct expression of some personal situation, since some may well be dramatic lyrics intended for use in some narrative work, and expressing some imagined situation. Thompson has seen in some of these poems confirmation of Morris's personal unhappiness. Of the lyrics now referred to, some were first published in *Poems by the Way* (1891), which also contained a number of his socialist songs and other fugitive pieces, some were published in various contemporary periodicals, others not until Volume XXIV of the *Collected Works* (1915) or Volume I of *May Morris's reminiscences of her father* (1936). In these lyrics we can see the same direct personal approach, civilised restraint, and deep controlled emotion, which we have already noted in the link lyrics of *The Earthly Paradise*.

One of the most striking of these is *Pain and Time Strive Not*, written according to the evidence of the handwriting and paper used, about 1870¹⁷⁶. It is composed in a five-line stanza, a kind of modified ballad-stanza of four-stress lines rhyming abba, the fifth line being a kind of refrain. Like many of Rossetti's poems of this period, the theme is that of farewell:

What part of the dread eternity
Are those strange minutes that I gain,
Mazed with the doubt of love and pain,
When I thy delicate face may see,
A little while before farewell?

(Vol. IX, p.187)

But unlike Rossetti, Morris does not retreat into a subjective, despairing gloom. He sees his pain as part of "the world's yearning-tide", the "long day" must be "toiled through", and his attitude to his love is one of forbearance and trust:

Speak, heed, and pity, O tender love,
Who knew'st the days before farewell!

Certainly some of the lyrics express poignant grief and not all successfully struggle against despair (e. g. *Near But Far Away*, *The Doomed Ship*, *What All Men Long For and What None Shall Have*, published by May Morris in Volume I of *William Morris, etc.*). But the general effect of these lyrics is to confirm the conclusion that, while Morris's shaping of his personal life was too closely bound up with his whole outlook on existence for him to become a prey to despair, his balanced conclusion is however far from the crude optimism of the man who cannot feel deeply. Morris's feeling is no less deep for being reticent, and for being expressed with deliberate economy of means.

In language, imagery and style Morris's socialist songs are close to the main body of his poetry. He did not underrate his working-class audience. A. A. Elistratova in the Soviet Academy *History of English Literature*, has pointed out in what lies the change that came over Morris's poetry in the eighties:

"Throughout all the work of Morris runs that vision of an earthly paradise, of a golden age of free and happy mankind, but from the eighties onward this is filled not with a fantastic content, but acquires a historic living content which the poet draws from the struggle of the working masses for socialism. Even poetry itself now means for Morris not the familiar day-dreaming, but a powerful means of influencing life, a means of bringing the future closer to the present. In the creative method of Morris, then, there prevail features of revolutionary romanticism."¹⁷⁷

Mrs. Elistratova goes on to point out that the fundamental difference between Morris and the earlier revolutionary romantics such as Byron and Shelley is that Morris shows greater profundity of penetration into the laws of social development. The hero of the *Chants for Socialists* is the working class itself. Whereas the earlier revolutionary romantics addressed in their own person the working masses, in Morris's poems the workers themselves speak and express their will.

It can thus be seen that the songs Morris wrote for the socialist movement represent both something traditional and something new in English literature. They are actually the first lyrics written directly for the socialist movement by a poet of the first rank, himself engaged in the day to day struggle of the movement. Though partaking of the heritage of Bunyan, Blake, Shelley and Byron, they are also a flowering from the stem of Chartist poetry.

Besides the longer narrative, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, Morris's socialist lyrics republished in the *Collected Works* consist of some six in Volume IX, originally collected in *Poems by the Way*, and five published in Volume XXIV. They were written directly for the socialist movement and most were first published either in

Justice or in *Commonweal*, some as pamphlets or broadsheets, and are well-known to at least the older generation of socialists and communists in Britain. They are distinguished by the uncompromisingly revolutionary nature of their thought, by the sincerity of their emotion, and by the vividness of their imagery — “cosmic images of elemental nature”, as A. A. Elistratova calls them.¹⁷⁸

The first of these songs, *The Day is Coming*, was published in 1884 as a leaflet, No. I of *Chants for Socialists*, part of the propaganda activity of the Democratic Federation. It consists of a series of couplets in a “popular”, street ballad-like version of the “Sigurd” metre:

Come hither, lads, and hearken, for a tale there is to tell,
Of the wonderful days a-coming, when all shall be better than well.

The couplets have a somewhat gnomic character:

Men in that time a-coming shall work and have no fear
For to-morrow's lack of earning and the hunger-wolf anear.

After pointing out that the wealth of the future will be in common, the poet asks what wealth will remain to humanity,

... when none shall gather gold
To buy his friend in the market, and pinch and pine the sold?

And the answer is, the beauty of nature, the happiness of work, and the rich heritage of the past.

How can all this be achieved, Morris now asks:

O why and for what are we waiting? while our brothers droop and die,
And on every wind of the heavens a wasted life goes by?

The change can be carried out by the will of the people, and it is for socialists to show the people how to bring it about:

Yea, the voiceless wrath of the wretched, and their unlearned discontent,
We must give it voice and wisdom till the waiting-tide be spent.

The song ends with a call to socialists:

Come, join in the only battle wherein no man can fail,
Where whoso fadeth and dieth, yet his deed shall still prevail.

(Vol. IX, p.180-1)

The *Second Chant for Socialists, The Voice of Toil*, was first published in *Justice*, the organ of the SDF, in April, 1884. This song contrasts the misery and apathy of the oppressed workers, in the first part, with their militant collective spirit in the second. It is written in a melodious song stanza (using frequent "feminine" rhymes) which reminds us that these lyrics were usually written for music or set to music, and formed the repertoire of various socialist choirs.

The purport of this song is simple and effective: it expresses first the helplessness of the leaderless workers, their grim fate in the capitalist-dominated machine age,

Where fast and faster our iron master,
The thing we made, for ever drives,
Bids us grind treasure and fashion pleasure
For other hopes and other lives —

as well as the optimism of the militant socialists:

Let dead hearts tarry and trade and marry,
And trembling nurse their dreams of mirth,
While we the living our lives are giving
To bring the bright new world to birth.

(Vol. IX, p.177-8)

All For the Cause (first published in *Justice*, April 1884) is a poignant lyric spoken by those who fight for a better future, i.e. as Mrs. Elistratova points out, it is not addressed to the masses by one standing beyond and above their struggle, but spoken by the militant socialists themselves:

Hear a word, a word in season, for the day is drawing nigh,
When the Cause shall call upon us, some to live, and some to die!

This lyric shows well the way in which the thoughts and images which had been fundamental in Morris's poetry now became transmuted for the service of his socialism:

Oft when men and maids are merry, ere the sunlight leaves the earth
And they bless the day beloved, all too short for all their mirth,
Some shall pause awhile and ponder on the bitter days of old
Ere the toil of strife and battle overthrew the curse of gold.
There amidst the world new-built shall our earthly deeds abide,
Though our names be all forgotten, and the tale of how we died.

(Vol. IX, p.186)

To the early days of Morris's socialism belongs also the lyric *No Master*, first published in *Justice* in June 1884, and republished by May Morris in Volume

XXIV of the *Works*. It is in the same metre as *Wake, London Lads* and equally militant, stressing the growth of the movement. In verse one we are told how

The grief of slaves long passed away
For us hath forged the chain,
Till now each worker's patient day
Builds up the House of Pain.

The second verse shows the first struggles of the movement, "We few against the world", and the last verse illustrates the growth of the massive host of workers — "A lightning flame, a shearing sword, A storm to overthrow." (Vol. XXIV, p.409) From the year 1885 we have *The March of the Workers*, a stirring song written to the tune of "John Brown's Body":

What is this, the sound and rumour? What is this that all men hear,
Like the wind in hollow valleys when the storm is drawing near,
Like the rolling on of ocean in the eventide of fear?
'Tis the people marching on.

(Vol. XXIV, p.410-1)

This song appeared in the first number of *Commonweal* in March, 1885 — the journal which Morris edited for the Socialist League after the split with the opportunist SDF, and in which *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* were published.¹⁷⁹

A further socialist song which deserves mention is the famous *Death Song* of 1887. The *Death Song* was a piece of direct political action by Morris. The agitation for the right of free speech in Trafalgar Square was at its height in the days after the great mass meeting in the Square at which speakers were arrested. On November 20, 1887, mounted police brutally attacked the crowd, and one of the spectators, Alfred Linnell, was killed. "Having killed a man, the authorities did their best to cover up their crime. They denied that anyone had been killed, and even delivered the wrong body for examination by the inquest jury."¹⁸⁰ The London socialist movement however gave Linnell a mass funeral, attended by 60,000 people. One of the most moving orations over the grave was that of Morris:

"There lay a man of no particular party — a man who until a week ago was perfectly obscure, and probably was only known to a few... Their brother lay there — let them remember for all time this man as their brother and their friend... Their friend who lay there had had a hard life and met with a hard death; and if society had been differently constituted from what it was, that man's life might have been a delightful, a beautiful one, and a happy one to him. It was their business to try and make this earth a very beautiful and happy place... they should begin tomorrow to organize for the purpose of seeing that such things should not happen again."¹⁸¹

A broadsheet was published containing an account of Linnell's death, and sold at a penny to raise funds for Linnell's orphans. This sheet was decorated with a fine drawing by the socialist artist, Walter Crane, and gave Morris's poem, *A Death Song*, with a setting of music. According to Thompson, the crowd sang the song at the conclusion of the ceremony, as "the light was growing very dim". This lament is one of the most topical and vivid of all political songs in English literature, and is also one of Morris's finest poems, with its message of proletarian solidarity:

We bear the message that the rich are sending
Aback to those who bade them wake and know . . .
Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken.
But lo! this dead man knocking at the gate . . .
Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

(Vol. IX, p. 124).

Not only was this song part of the socialist propaganda of its own day: it also has a message for present-day England, since the battle for free speech in Trafalgar Square has not yet been won. Though the words of the song have been treasured in the socialist movement, the original pamphlet with the music had been lost and forgotten. Some copies were discovered in a second-hand bookshop several years ago, and the song became part of the programme of the London Youth Choir at a Trafalgar Square demonstration against imperialism in June, 1954.¹⁸²

The poem *Drawing Near the Light* was published in *Commonweal* in April 1888, and shows a further characteristic use of imagery which had always been significant for Morris — the "tangled wood" which had once meant the tangle of emotions and dreams, but with the development of Morris's political and social thought comes to signify the tangled world of capitalism. "Lo when we wade the tangled wood In haste and hurry to be there" we can pay no attention to the beauties surrounding us. But when we have caught sight of the "glimmer of the open light", then we can begin to enjoy even our surroundings. The lyric is perhaps a personal excuse for indulging in interests other than socialist propaganda — to which in fact Morris subordinated all his other imperative and manifold interests in the eighties and early nineties, until his failing health obliged him to take more rest. The poem appeared without a title in *Commonweal*, and is not so much a socialist song, as a personal plea, the third and last verse running:

So now, amidst our day of strife,
With many a matter glad we play,

When once we see the light of life
Gleam through the tangle of to-day.

(Vol. IX, p.188)

Two thoughts are outstanding: "our day of strife" — which in those days of energetic out-door meetings, nation-wide journeyings and militant demonstrations, not to mention distracting committee meetings and nerve-racking negotiations, was no mere phrase — and "the light of life", which was quite literally what the idea of a socialist future meant to Morris.

One of the latest and most intimate of Morris's socialist songs is *The Day of Days*, published in the periodical *Time* for 1890 and republished in *Poems by the Way*. It is not so much a militant call to arms as an expression of Morris's own weariness in the long struggle:

Each eve earth falleth down the dark,
As though its hope were o'er;
Yet lurks the sun when day is done
Behind to-morrow's door.

Morris's "cosmic imagery" has full play in this song. The night is likened to the apparently desolate state of the socialist movement:

We've toiled and failed; we spake the word;
None hearkened; dumb we lie;
Our Hope is dead, the seed we spread
Fell o'er the earth to die.

But night is followed inevitably by day: "Grey grows the dawn while men-folk sleep, Unseen spreads on the light", and the last verse expresses Morris's belief that their cause will triumph:

What's this? For joy our hearts stand still,
And life is loved and dear,
The lost and found the Cause hath crowned,
The Day of Days is here.

(Vol. IX, p.115)

We may offer the criticism that the bringing about of socialism demands more of us than simply wakening up to a new day. No-one was more aware of this than Morris or toiled more faithfully than he, and we may consider the poem mainly as an expression of his weariness of intrigue, pettiness and apparent failure, but also of his unswerving faith in the power of the workers. In a delicate, plangent setting this song also found its place in the Socialist Song Books of the day.

William Morris's socialist lyrics directly influenced the labour movement of his day, expressing what was most militant, most class-conscious, and most enlightened in that movement. Among those who were most strongly influenced by Morris, not only through his speeches, lectures and articles, but also through his poetry, was Tom Mann, one of the outstanding agitators of the nineties, leading militant trade-unionist of the strikes in the first decade of the twentieth century, and founding-member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Mann's "intense realisation of what is and what might be was the mainspring of his unflinching power as a propagandist of socialism. Among the various men and women who spread the new ideas in the 'eighties, he was the one closest to William Morris in the passionate range of his demands upon a new world."¹⁸³ Mann was especially influenced by the link forged by Morris between culture and society. In Mann's notebooks quotations from Morris are mingled with the details of his trade union campaigns. His favourite lines were from *The Day is Coming*, lines which describe how man will enter into his cultural heritage.

Morris in his socialist lyrics not only roused and encouraged his fellow-workers: he also gave them a vision of what socialism might be. "It is to stir you up not to be content with a little that I am here to-night", said Morris in 1885.¹⁸⁴ His high conception of the quality of life under socialism is expressed many times in his socialist lyrics.

The only longer original poem written by Morris in these later years was *The Pilgrims of Hope*. It was written for the *Commonweal* and published in that journal from April, 1885 to July 1886. Morris himself republished only three sections of it, *The Message of the March Wind*, *Mother and Son*, and *The Half of Life Gone*, in *Poems by the Way*. From the outset, the structure of the poem had been rather vague. He writes for example to his daughter May in March, 1885: "I am pounding away at a continuation of my March poem: I want to make a sort of lyrical romance of it: next time I shall try my hand at a versified Socialist meeting. But what shall I do with my couple in the long run?"¹⁸⁵ In 1886, after the last instalment was published, he was contemplating "getting my Pilgrims of Hope in order, so as to make a book of it: I shall add and alter a good deal though..."¹⁸⁶ Morris never did find the leisure to "make a book of it," and though his friend Buxton Forman received his permission to reprint the poem for private circulation, he knew that Morris was not satisfied with the poem: "He considered it wanted more revision than he could give it at the time."¹⁸⁷ May Morris has eloquently described the circumstances in which it was composed:

"Piece by piece it was written, after he had returned home — he wrote late usually — from poor quarters full of sights and stories which had wrung his heart by their sordidness and dull endurance: it was written in sorrow and anger, in revolt at the things he saw and the things he divined, and the slight, effective sketches of the narrative bring home to many of us who

have lived on into the time of tragedy and violence of the Twentieth Century, the meetings and street-corner gatherings of those days of scarcely articulate unrest and discomfort."¹⁸⁸

The first section of the poem, *The Message of the March Wind*, is written in a song metre consisting of alternating dactylic and anapaestic lines of four stresses, forming a stanza that rhymes abab, and uses "feminine" rhymes. It describes two country lovers who might well be Giles and Joan from *Love Is Enough*, as they wander through the countryside in spring. But these latter-day lovers are less certain of their world than were Giles and Joan. The wind blows from London, "And telleth of gold and of hope and unrest; Of power that helps; of wisdom that knoweth, But teacheth not aught of the worst and the best."

Why did Morris choose this particular metre for the opening sections of his poem of modern life? It may have been with a reminiscence of Meredith, for the lush, smooth countryside of this first section, as well as its lingering, evocative rhythm, has some of the atmosphere of *Love in the Valley*. Yet it has not the same pictorial effectiveness of the comparable passages in Morris's own *Love is Enough*, written in the "minstrel measure". Morris has difficulty in places, too, in making this loosely-boned stanza take a load of significant meaning. For example, the stanza beginning "Hark! the March wind again..." (p.370) has a clumsy construction, which does not convey the thought clearly: "If you and I had lived the life of the city proletariat, neither my love nor your beauty could have existed." On the other hand, when the speaker's emotion is heightened and instead of mere exposition, his denunciation becomes impassioned, the stanza attains a certain rhetorical splendour:

The singers have sung and the builders have builded,
The painters have fashioned their tales of delight;
For what and for whom hath the world's book been gilded,
When all is for these but the blackness of night?

(p.370)

Such stanzas relate the poem closely to the *Chants for Socialists* and we can well imagine them taking root in the memory of agitators such as Tom Mann.

The concluding verses of this section seem to be among the best-known stanzas of Morris's poetry:

Come back to the inn, love, and the light and the fire,
And the fiddler's old tune and the shuffling of feet...

Their quality lies in the rather delicate atmosphere of nostalgia and partly perhaps in the catch and break in the first line, like a dancer's changing of

feet, the kind of cross-rhythm that modern poetry-lovers have come to appreciate.

The first section has let us know that these two lovers, wandering through the countryside, are approaching London, and have heard the message of the wind, which is one of hope for humanity, a call to fight, to "the morrow's uprising to deeds."

Section Two, *The Bridge and the Street*, has a memorable passage on London Bridge and the Thames:

On each side lay the City, and Thames ran between it
Dark, struggling, unheard 'neath the wheels and the feet.
... Like a flood flowed the faces, and faster and faster
Went the drift of the feet of the hurrying throng.

(p.371)

This glimpse of the hurrying crowds of London and the sinister Thames (a very different river from the Thames of *The Earthly Paradise*) is not unparalleled in the literature of the time, notably in the profoundly tragic picture painted by James Thomson in *The City of Dreadful Night* (1880). The river as a symbol of capitalist corruption had been used by Blake — "the chartered Thames" — while Dickens, whose novels of London were Morris's constant recreation, had made play with the bridge motif in *Little Dorrit* (1857—8) and with the corruption of the river in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864). The striking feature of Morris's treatment of the motif is the ideological content:

Was all nought but confusion? What man and what master
Had each of these people that hastened along?
Like a flood flowed the faces, and faster and faster
Went the drift of the feet of the hurrying throng...
What sign 'mid all these to tell foeman from brother?
What sign of the hope in our hearts that had grown?

(p.371-2)

Waking in the morning, the hero gazes out in dismay at the "dull houses" that "stared on the prey they had trapped", and asks himself why they have come to London:

... What's this we are doing
In this grim net of London, this prison built stark
With the greed of the ages?...

(p.372)

Nevertheless, along with his beloved, he decides that they should "plan deeds for the morrow, The world crowned with freedom, the fall of the foe."

The Third Section, *Sending to the War*, is in a different metre, as if to emphasise the change of scene and content. The section describes the reaction of the lovers to London under the influence of jingoistic war-mongering. Appropriately, the metre is the "popular" version of the "Sigurd" metre, which has the flavour of a broadsheet ballad. In a few lines Morris sums up the contrasts of class society and the contradictions of the war situation, evidently one of the imperialistic campaigns of the late sixties or early seventies.*

... The gaudy shops displayed
The toys of rich men's folly, by blinded labour made;
And still from naught to nothing the bright-skinned horses drew
Dull men and sleek-faced women with never a deed to do;
While all about and around them the street-flood ebbed and flowed,
Worn feet, grey anxious faces, grey backs bowed 'neath the load.
Lo! the sons of an ancient people! And for this they fought and fell
In the days by fame made glorious, in the tale that singers tell.

(p.374)

The cadences and vocabulary of *Sigurd* have been pressed into the service of ironical comment on imperialism.

The populace have gathered to see the departing soldiers, deceived by chauvinistic propaganda. Depressed and saddened by the crowd's acceptance of the assertion that "a cry from the heart of the nation against the foe is hurled", the hero is nevertheless profoundly stirred by the approaching military procession.

Affected in spite of himself by the martial music and the sweep of the soldiers' ranks, the hero as it were has a vision of the future uprising of the people:

For woe had grown into will, and wrath was bared of its sheath,
And stark in the streets of London stood the crop of the dragon's teeth.

By himself experiencing the effect of the chauvinistic display of arms on the crowd, by himself becoming profoundly affected by it emotionally, Morris's hero excuses the people for being deceived, and becomes one with them, sharing even their illusions. He is no bourgeois intellectual, cut off from the daily life of the people. But he has a vision of something else beyond. Instead of acclaiming the Victorian military procession, he imagines the future, when "the poor and the wall of faces wan", the cowed and acceptant spectators, will themselves be marching in the ranks of the people's army:

*) In order to allow his poem to culminate with the Paris Commune, Morris sets the radical and socialist meetings described more than a decade earlier than they actually took place. This of course does detract from the complete topicality of the poem and illustrates the difficulty Morris had in finding a satisfactory plot structure.

Here and here by my side, shoulder to shoulder of man,
Hope in the simple folk, hope in the hearts of the wise
For the happy life to follow, or death and the ending of lies.
Hope is awake in the faces angerless now no more,
Till the new peace dawn on the world, the fruit of the people's war.

(p.376)

The section concludes by asking what peace can there be at home for the poor under capitalism.

The next section, *Mother and Son*, tells us in retrospect something of the earlier lives of the hero and heroine. It is in the form of a monologue by the heroine to her infant son. Still in the "Sigurd" metre, greater use of alliteration and a flowing rather than a rattling rhythm stress the lyrical character of the episode. Although the structure of *The Pilgrims of Hope* was never worked out to completion, this section, when the mother speaks to her son as the mother of Sigurd had spoken to the infant hero, is evidently related to the conclusion of the poem, when the father is left alone with the son after the mother's death, with the purpose of educating him as a future fighter in the Cause. The connecting links between the sections are however missing, and Section Five, *New Birth*, takes up the story again from the hero's point of view, telling us something more of his early life, and of his first acquaintance with the socialist movement. The hero — we have discovered that his name is Richard — is the illegitimate son of a wealthy man and was brought up by his mother alone in a little village. He had some education, but the most important educational influence was that of a Frenchman, a political exile, a teacher in his school, who befriended him and told him of "the battle of grief and hope with riches and folly and wrong." He became full of bitter feelings against the world until he met the woman he loves, who gave him hope for the future. The two set out together for London:

So we left our pleasure behind to seek for hope and for life,
And to London we came, if perchance there smouldered the embers of strife.

(p.382)

The early part of the section obviously suffers from some lack of clearness as to the background of the hero and heroine. Morris was clearly wanting to bring his characters into immediate contrast with the proletarian movement of the city. We may ask why he took as his hero a character with a country background and an incompletely motivated one at that. Why did he not take an ordinary London workman? One reason is probably the desire for contrast: the peacefulness of the countryside and the restlessness and gloomy despair of the town. The stressing of conscious choice is perhaps an unconscious repetition of his own experience, for Morris's acceptance of socialism and of active participation in the socialist struggle

entailed a very considerable break with his previous life. Certainly the most memorable moment of the poem is that in the present section when the hero is converted from his vague revolutionary radicalism to socialism.

It was of course by no means untypical of the early socialist movement for the most enthusiastic supporters to be newcomers to the great city, since the contradictions of wealth and poverty, privilege and deprivation struck even more strongly on those unused to such great contrasts. We may note that Morris's playlet, *The Tables Turned*, or *Nupkins Awakened* (1887), written for and repeatedly performed by members of the Socialist League — a highly topical and realistic propaganda piece — has as its heroine Mary Pinch, who defends herself before the bourgeois court as follows:

"My husband was a handsome young working man once, God help us! He could live on 10/- a week before he married me . . . And then and for long the place was a pretty place, the little grey cottage among the trees, if the cupboard hadn't been so bare; one can't live on flowers and nightingales' songs. Then the children came brisk, and the wages came slack; and the farmer got the new reaping-machine; and my binding came to an end . . . So up to London we came . . . and when all's said and done, we had better have lain down and died in the grey cottage clean and empty . . ." ¹⁸⁹

"Nupkins" concludes with a country scene after the Revolution when the Tables are Turned and the unrighteous judge is himself judged by the liberated workers. Morris consistently in his socialist writings laid stress on the need to return to the urbanised workērs their heritage of the countryside, as one of the main cultural aims of a communist society.

Like many of the working-men with whom Morris associated in the SDF and the Socialist League, the hero of his poem is a craftsman, a joiner who at first finds no difficulty in plying his trade in London. At first he seeks in vain some way of furthering his hopes:

The life of the poor we learned, and to me there was nothing new
In their day of little deeds that ever deathward drew.

He is critical of "the horror of London", the rich men playing at politics, and especially of wealthy philanthropists and "social workers":

They wrought meseems as those who should make a bargain with hell,
That it grow a little cooler, and thus for ever to dwell.

Time goes on, and it seems that there will be no end to the waiting for the social order to be overthrown:

And ever more and more seemed the town like a monstrous tomb
To us, the Pilgrims of Hope, until to-night it came,
And Hope on the stones of the street is written in letters of flame.

(p.382)

A workmate who knows his bitterness invites him to a meeting:

... "Come over to-morrow to our Radical spouting-place;
For there, if we hear nothing new, at least we shall see a new face;
He is one of those Communist chaps, and 'tis like that you two may agree."

(p.382)

There follows an account of the meeting, evoking the authentic atmosphere of hundreds of similar gatherings:

Dull and dirty the room. Just over the chairman's chair
Was a bust, a Quaker's face with nose cocked up in the air;
There were common prints on the wall of the heads of the party fray,
And Mazzini dark and lean amidst them gone astray.
Some thirty men we were of the type that I knew full well,
Listless, rubbed down to the type of our easy-going hell.
My heart sank down as I entered, and wearily there I sat
While the chairman strove to end his maunder of this and of that.

(p.382-3)

There follows Morris's lively portrait of himself as the speaker of whom the radical chairman seems half ashamed:

He rose, thickset and short, and dressed in shabby blue,
And even as he began it seemed as though I knew
The thing he was going to say, though I never heard it before.
He spoke, were it well, were it ill, as though a message he bore,
A word that he could not refrain from many a million of men.
Nor aught seemed the sordid room and the few that were listening then
Save the hall of the labouring earth and the world which was to be.

(p.383)

Richard is completely won over, and expects the other members of the audience to accept eagerly this new doctrine; but the meeting dissolves in the usual blend of apathy and acrimony:

But they sat and made no sign, and two of the glibber kind
Stood up to jeer and to carp his fiery words to blind...

and the speaker, as frequently happened with Morris himself, grew so "hot and eager" that he could not answer the "sneers and the silence". But the hero of

the poem gives the speaker his name as one willing to join the band of socialists, and is accepted. He now feels no longer outcast in the midst of the "city squalor and the country stupor", but "part of it all". Like many other workers of his time, the protagonist of the poem had been prepared for some time to accept socialism; but his first hearing of a rational Marxist explanation came like a sudden revelation:

I was born once long ago: I am born again to-night.

(p.384)

Section VI, *The New Proletarian*, tells of Richard's first work in the socialist movement. Like all convinced socialists of this time (which as already stated reflects Morris's experience of the eighties of last century, not the sixties or early seventies as the scheme of the poem implies) the hero asks himself how socialism will be achieved: will it come suddenly, or will the process be lengthy and tedious,

Till our hearts be turned to stone by the griefs that we have borne,
And our loving kindness seared by love from our anguish torn.
Till our hope grow a wrathful fire, and the light of the second birth
Be a flame to burn up the weeds from the lean impoverished earth.

(p.384)

Now a testing time comes for the hero's faith. He is not yet a real proletarian, for a small legacy from his father has allowed him to live with more comfort than his craft earnings supplied. But now this legacy is lost, and he is dependent only on his work.* This change in his hero's status is important because it illustrates that in Morris's love of work for work's sake there was no bourgeois cant. He fully realised that the proletarian's attitude to his work could not easily be that of the craftsman:

I take up fear with my chisel, fear lies 'twixt me and my plane,
And I wake in the merry morning to a new unwonted pain.
That's fear: I shall live it down — and many a thing besides
Till I win the poor dulled heart which the workman's jacket hides.

(p.385)

*) 19th-century English bourgeois writers who chose a working-class hero tended to give him a favoured position. To some extent this nullified commitment to the workers and prevented complete identification with the proletariat. When Felix Holt, for example, remains true to his class, it is with the help of the private income of his wife. Middle-class writers were convinced of the impossibility of the factory worker's having any leisure, energy or money to spare for either politics or culture, as the novels of George Gissing abundantly illustrate. But the reality was different. Tom Mann in the seventies after working in a factory from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. went four nights a week to classes, on other evenings to the theatre, Public Library or meetings. (cf. Donna Torr, op. cit., p.40) Morris from the evidence before him clearly felt he must account for his hero's political interests by some special background. The turn of events shows his complete commitment.

Morris was full of sympathy for the workman condemned to a life of dull, repetitive labour: "If I were to work ten hours a day at work I despised and hated, I should spend my leisure, I hope in political agitation, but I fear in drinking."¹⁹⁰ With his wife and child, the hero is now obliged to go and live in a slum. But this is not the end of his degradation. His master warns him that he will be dismissed unless he ceases to take part in socialist propaganda, and he loses his employment.

Meanwhile he has done what he could to educate himself politically and learn the grounds of communism, and becomes a speaker at street-corner meetings, as a result of which he is arrested and imprisoned. Section VII, *In Prison — and At Home* again gives us the view-point of the heroine, alone at home while her husband is in prison. It expresses very beautifully the sorrow and pain of the early socialists who knew they would never see "socialism in their time".

Though they that come after be strong to win the day and the crown,
Ah, ever must we the deedless to the deedless dark go down,
Still crying, "To-morrow, to-morrow yet shall be
The new-born sun's arising o'er happy earth and sea" —
And we not there to greet it.

(p.392)

Section VIII, *The Half of Life Gone*, is an interlude of reflection in the development of the poem, spoken by the hero, in the years after the events which form the climax of the work. He is resting in the country by the side of a hay-field, thinking of his love who is dead, longing for her, yet reminding himself that he still has a task to do in the world. The setting is idyllic, in sharp contrast to the scenes that have just been described:

Wide lies the mead as of old, and the river is creeping along
By the side of the elm-clad bank that turns its weedy stream,
And grey o'er its hither lip the quivering rushes gleam . . .

(p.392)

But this well-loved background is now bereft of the one person who made it real for him, and he feels cut off from the life of the country folk. He tries to imagine his love reappearing to him, but realises it can only be a dream. In his mind there mingle and conflict feelings of despair and desolation:

Like a ghost from the lives of the living and their earthly deeds I shrink.
I will go adown by the water and over the ancient bridge,
And wend in our footsteps of old till I come to the sun-burnt ridge,
And the great trench digged by the Romans; and thence awhile will I gaze,
And see three teeming counties stretch out till they fade in the haze;

And in all the dwellings of men that thence mine eyes shall see,
What man as hapless as I am beneath the sun shall be?

(p.394)

But he immediately chides himself, and contrasts his own full life with the emptiness of those who have never known his happiness, even if it is now gone; while for him there are still waiting deeds and toil. Comparing these lines with some of the link lyrics of *The Earthly Paradise*, we can see how Morris persistently interwove his own knowledge and love of the Southern English countryside with the new ideas and revelation that had come to him.

In Section IX, *A New Friend*, the hero relates what has happened in the meantime. Edward Thompson has rightly suggested that *The Message of the March Wind* "gives a moment of insight into the turmoil of Morris's personal feelings at the time. It suggests to us how strong the grip of his will and his political convictions had to be over his inclinations — inclinations which rebelled at the daily struggle in the heart of industrial capitalism, and which beckoned him back to Kelmscott and the repose of his art. The poem reveals to us the measure of his victory."¹⁹¹ A passage in the present section illustrates a further aspect of Morris's sincerity in relation to the socialist movement, his feeling that it was easy for him to be a socialist compared to what proletarian members of the movement had to endure before they could act politically:

When the poor man thinks — and rebels, the whip lies ready anear;
But he who is rebel and rich may live safe for many a year,
While he warms his heart with pictures of all the glory to come,
There's the storm of the press and the critics maybe, but sweet is his home,
There is meat in the morn and the even, and rest when the day is done,
All is fair and orderly there as the rising and setting sun.

(p.395)

Morris, unlike the Fabians, never indulged in feelings of superiority to the workers. In 1882 he sold a large part of his library, including his beloved collection of early printed books, in order to supply funds for the movement.¹⁹² It never occurred to him to use his financial situation to secure any position of power in the movement, and in fact he continued to subsidise the Socialist League and the *Commonweal* for some time after he was convinced that they had come too much under anarchist influence, so averse was he to using his financial advantage as a lever.¹⁹³ Along with this attitude went his willing acceptance of any task, however minor or however trying, that might be entrusted to him by his comrades.

Section IX goes on to describe the meeting with a new friend, a middle-class intellectual who helps the hero to find work as a writer, and who becomes the close friend of Richard and his wife. But he too is now dead. The period of the

tale is now indicated more precisely, with mention of the Great Revolution in France, i.e. the Paris Commune. We may note that Morris's selection of this event as the central point of his story is justified because it makes clear beyond any doubt whatever that the communism spoken of in the poem is revolutionary communism. The Commune was the only event of contemporary experience which could make it quite clear that Morris was no evolutionist.

Section X, *Ready to Depart*, tells of the hopes for the success of the Commune. In the midst of this excitement, Richard suddenly realises the love that has arisen between his friend and his wife. In accordance with Morris's declared beliefs on love and marriage, expressed clearly in *News from Nowhere* and other writings, in spite of the pain caused by this revelation, the hero has no feelings of "property" in his wife nor desire for "revenge" on his friend. The three remain friends and comrades, and in spite of his sorrow, even now he longs for those days to return,

So sore as my longing returneth to their trouble and sorrow and pain!
(p.399)

The three decide that it is their duty to go to Paris and help the Commune. Jack Lindsay in a study of the Paris Commune and its reflection in English literature, has pointed out that "The Commune was never far from Morris's thought; it was for him the sustaining proof of the revolutionary purpose carried deep in the hearts and lives of the masses. In a stirring essay written for its celebration he said of the Communards, 'We honour them as the foundation stone of the new world that is to be,' and he tells the workers that it would be 'well for them to take part in such an armed struggle within Britain.'"¹⁹⁴

Section XI, *A Glimpse of the Coming Day*, describes their participation in the Commune, their joy when

... from a grey stone building we saw a great flag fly,
One colour, red and solem 'gainst the blue of the spring-tide sky,
And we stopped and turned to each other, and as each at each did we gaze,
The city's hope enwrapped us with joy and great amaze.
(p.402)

Richard is now convinced that the victory of communism is assured, that it is "now, real, solid and at hand". His thoughts immediately go back to his own country, longing for the new joy to spread there too:

O earth, thou kind bestower, thou ancient fruitful place,
How lovely and beloved now gleams thy happy face!
(p.403)

But the situation of the Commune is precarious, and they must learn "the business of battle and the manner of dying at need." Section XII, *Meeting the War-Machine*, describes the tragic end of the Commune, "The hope of man devoured in the day when the Gods are athirst." A magnificent passage of some forty lines apostrophises the Earth, giving a cosmic background and universal significance to the struggle:

O Earth, Earth, look on thy lovers, who knew all thy gifts and thy gain,
But cast them aside for thy sake, and caught up barren pain . . .
In the sordid streets of the city mid a folk that knew them not,
In the living death of the prison didst thou deal them out their lot . . .
Their life was thy deliverance, O Earth, and for thee they fought . . .
Yea, and we were a part of it all, the beginning of the end,
That first fight of the uttermost battle whither all the nations wend . . .

(p.405)

But the bourgeois war-machine moves on ruthlessly, and the Commune is doomed. The final section, XIII, *The Story's Ending*, tells of the defeat, of the death of the hero's friend and of his wife in the fighting, and of Richard's return to England and his young son. In spite of his grief for his wife and his friend, the concluding note of the poem is one of convinced hope for the future:

Year after year shall men meet with the red flag over head,
And shall call on the help of the vanquished and the kindness of the dead.
And time that weareth most things, and the years that overgrow
The tale of the fools triumphant, yet clearer and clearer shall show
The deeds of the helpers of menfolk to every age and clime,
The deeds of the cursed and the conquered that were wise before their time.

(p.406)

The final lines express the hero's resolution to continue in the fight, ignoring his private grief:

I came to look to my son, and myself to get stout and strong,
That two men there might be hereafter to battle against the wrong;
And I cling to the love of the past, and the love of the day to be,
And the present, it is but the building of the man to be strong in me.

(p.408)

The Pilgrims of Hope was a deliberate attempt on the part of William Morris to place his poetic gift at the service of the socialist movement. There were certain objective causes which prevented the full success of this attempt.

In the first place, at the period when Morris wrote the poem it was difficult to see just how the fight for socialism was going to develop. The SDF and the Socialist League still represented only the spear-head of a fight which had com-

paratively little enlightened mass support. Morris was well aware of how much socialist organisation and education would still be necessary before the British socialists would be capable of taking the lead in any revolutionary situation.¹⁹⁵ This led him to place the culminating incident of his poem over a decade earlier, with the consequent loss of topicality and immediacy. It also means that the poem concludes on a note of waiting, waiting for the hero to recover and for his son to grow up. The predominant note of the poem's ending is thus temporary defeat, rather than hope. It must be emphasised that this was not due to any doubt on Morris's part of the ultimate need for revolution: it was the reflection of the actual situation. A contributory factor to this tone of defeat was Morris's subjective feeling that he was too old to be as adequate a fighter for socialism as he would have liked. He expressed this feeling frequently in the last fifteen years or so of his life, being certainly over-critical of himself in this respect. The remarkable thing was that, becoming a Marxist at the age of nearly fifty, he so completely and effectively dedicated his whole life and activity to the cause he had chosen. Thompson has expressed very well what socialism meant for Morris and what Morris meant for socialism: "Morris brought to the movement all the enthusiasm of the convert whose whole life had served as a preparation for conversion: but he also brought something which the youthful convert or individualist in revolt can only learn through experience — an understanding of the subordination of individual differences of outlook and temperament essential to the growth of the Cause... This vision of the Cause was Morris's special, and his most permanent, contribution to the British Socialist movement."¹⁹⁶

The Pilgrims of Hope was in intention more than an attempt to express in epic form the experiences of the British socialist movement. It was also a bid to secure a wider audience for poetry, a poetry addressed to the masses. So far, Morris stands almost alone in this attempt. The main line of development in English poetry since the early decades of this century has been that of a poetry which turns away from the masses and addresses a cultural elite: typified by the poetry of Yeats and Eliot. Only some of the poets of the Thirties can be said to have attempted poetry with a broad political theme, and of these the poet with the widest appeal was perhaps Day Lewis, though even his most politically-conscious poems of the Thirties had scarcely a mass appeal in their formal aspect.

How are we to regard *The Pilgrims of Hope* within the body of Morris's poetic work? Is it a noble failure, or can it stand as a substantial part of his legacy? Perhaps the answer is, both. If it is a failure, it is only because it is incomplete. What is lacking in the poem, compared with his other mature poetry, is not in the method or style of the poetry. Thompson has criticised above all the language of the poem, which relies, he asserts, "upon words,

images, rhythms coined in the romantic movement".¹⁹⁷ However, what seems to be more worthy of note is that Morris, without fundamentally changing either his vocabulary, images or metre, succeeded in expressing so vividly a completely new and realistic content. This is particularly noticeable in the passages describing the city, the city crowds and the socialist meetings. What rather obscures the effect of these passages is that long sequences in the poem deal with the country background already familiar from Morris's earlier poetry. If Morris had still had sufficient energy to expand the passages dealing directly with the socialist movement, and to erect a structure for the whole poem as imposing as that of *Sigurd*, he would have written the first socialist heroic epic in English.

Only in this sense of incompleteness is *The Pilgrims of Hope* a failure, and it was the recognition of this that made Morris object to its republication. Nevertheless, Buxton Forman was right in seeking to republish the poem. "Though Morris himself did not consider this poem to be a finished work, *The Pilgrims of Hope* because of its powerful effect on the reader must assume its place among the first of Morris's poems; a stirring hymn to the heroism of the revolutionaries was a particularly brilliant phenomenon in the field of English literature at that time, a field so greatly filled with the spirit of disbelief and despondency," is the verdict of a recent Soviet critic, Y. F. Shedov, with which we may indeed agree.¹⁹⁸

The question remains, what is the position of William Morris in the history of English poetry? A proper statement of this must probably wait for a reassessment of twentieth century poetry. Meanwhile, I have endeavoured to show by close analysis of the form and structure of the poetry of his maturing years that it has intrinsic value which has too often in the present century been neglected by critics, and that his poetry is neither decadent nor outmoded, but can still teach us much about poetic method and poetic aims.

Certain of the lessons of his poetry are surely fundamental: his emphasis, in his later work, on the Germanic heritage of English as a counterweight to the over-emphasised Romance and Classical traditions; his choice of broad, significant themes; his association of the heroic with the expression of the popular will; and above all, in his later years, his proof by practice that English poetry had not lost contact with the people but could still speak directly to the nation and play an active part in national life.

I have sought to demonstrate that the poetry of his middle years, too, bore the seed of this later poetry, that in spite of escapist and unrealistic elements in the romantic tradition he took over, all Morris's maturer poetry has inherent

in it the qualities of realistic observation, vivid image, narrative power, organising intellect, materialist thought and concern for humanity, which led to the latest flowering in his socialist poetry, and which make it a worthy complement to his mature work in prose.¹⁹⁹

The brilliance and perfection of Morris's later prose works have somewhat obscured the importance of his middle and later poetry. The full stature of this poetry will not be realised until there appears a worthy successor and continuer of his purpose.