

William Morris's Years of Transition, 1881 to 1885: Letters, Lectures and Chants from "the poet's teeming head"

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It sometimes seems to me as if my lot was a strange one: you see, I hope for mere pudding, still less for praise; and while I work I have the cause always in mind, and yet I know that the cause for which I specially work is doomed to fail, at least in seeming; I mean that art must go under, where or how ever it may come up again. I don't know if I explain what I'm driving at, but it does seem to me a strange thing that a man should be driven to work with energy and even with pleasure and enthusiasm at work which he knows will serve no end by amusing himself; am I doing nothing but make-believe then, something like Louis XVI's lock-making? There, I don't pretend to say that the conundrum is a very interesting one, as it certainly has not any practical importance as far as I am concerned, since I shall without doubt go on with my work, useful or useless, till I demit.

Letter from William Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones⁷
17 January 1882

I have only one subject to lecture on, the relation of Art to Labour: also I am an open and declared Socialist, or be more specific, Collectivist, and whatever I say would be coloured by my opinions on these matters: if you think under these circumstances a lecture from me would come within the scope of your scheme, and be acceptable as an expression of opinions for which of course you would not be responsible, I should be very happy to be one of those who lecture to you.

Letter from William Morris to Charles Rowley⁸
25 October 1883

⁷ Georgiana Burne-Jones, wife of Morris's close friend and fellow artist Edward Burne-Jones, was one of Morris's regular correspondents. Their letters, as Philip Henderson notes, reveal that Morris shared with her "his hopes and fears, his moods of despair or insidious melancholy" (xxiii).

⁸ Henderson's footnote identifies Rowley as "a well-known figure in Manchester public life at this time, a courageous reformer, founder of the Ancoats Brotherhood, and author of *Fifty Years Work*. In the Ancoats district of Manchester he provided the poorest cotton workers with concerts of classical music, lectures by distinguished figures and exhibitions of Pre-Raphaelite pictures" (189).

It is entirely understandable that most biographies of William Morris track his highly productive and prolific life by decades, ending with his death in 1896 at the close of the century that he attempted to derail and inadvertently defined. Current sociopolitical and literary critics struggle to reconcile Morris's dualism as they read his Socialist ruminations from the 1880s on "the relation of Art to Labour," which rank among the most impressive of his generation, against his equally impressive reputation as a skilled designer and successful entrepreneur. Literary critics, prompted by Morris's forthright approach reflected in his 1883 letter to Rowley, were less troubled by this seeming conflict of interest than they were by his full-throttled commitment to revolutionary rhetoric. Morris's contemporaries, especially those sympathetic to the Socialist movement, openly questioned the duplicity of a man of "worldly success" (Faulkner, *Critical Heritage* 281) writing for the cause of the workingman. Others, as his personal correspondence reveals, were more upset at his abandonment of poetry writing, which he had successfully sustained in the 1860s and 1870s alongside his design practice and his interests in social reform. The most dramatic juxtaposition of his professional career and political activism, however, was to emerge in the next decade, in the four short years between 1881 and 1885, when he abandoned poetics for rhetoric.

During this intense interval, Morris published his first collection of lectures, joined one official Socialist collective, the Democratic Federation, and founded another, the Socialist League, established and edited that movement's magazine *Commonweal*, ran an interior decorating business in London, opened a new workshop for textile and stained glass production in Merton, designed carpets, tapestries and textiles and supervised their production. Throughout this period Morris was in high demand, catering to the late-Victorian penchant for public lectures, and he was unrelentingly devoted to expressing his opinions. With poetry removed from his agenda, lectures and essays took priority; in numerous reiterations of the troublesome relationship between art and labour, Morris pitted Socialist tenets against Capitalist motivations. When he resumed writing poetry in 1884, he pointedly began by composing inspirational verses, best known as the *Chants for Socialists* that were

published in independent newspapers and pamphlets, as new treatments of Morris's recurrent claim that "it is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be itself pleasant to do" (*Chants* 2).

This essay will examine this core argument of Morris's personal, critical, and creative writing between 1881 and 1885, focusing primarily on one lecture, "Art and the People,"⁹ various letters, and two of his chants, "The Voice of Toil" and "The Day is Coming."¹⁰ The aim is to situate Morris within his own self-declared conundrum—that of being a man of the arts but also a businessman, who believed "art must go under" to serve a political cause. After exploring the content and intent of his work during these four years and questioning the significance of Morris's retreat from writing poetry during this period, I will examine the chants as revived expressions of his pleasure in writing and, most crucially, as evidence of his acceptance of poetry as a purposeful art worthy of his labour. This essay will demonstrate how Morris undergoes a transition, shifting his poetry from being historically meditative and individually motivated towards being meaningful expressions of a Collectivist vision of the future. In the process, the poems materialize alongside other acceptable political and practical manifestations of art reconciled with labour for the common good. Ultimately, Morris's self-deprecating comment to Burne-Jones that his conundrum is far from interesting is proven wrong, since it does indeed prove to have significant bearing on his poetic turn in the 1880s.

The letters to Burne-Jones and Rowley preface this discussion as telling markers of Morris's personal reflection and ideological zeal during the highly charged onset of the 1880s. As Philip Henderson reports, by early 1881, Morris had become increasingly disenchanted with the Liberal Party, its foreign policy and its leader, William Gladstone, who had "come to power on the wave of popular reaction to Disraeli's Jingoism and by vague democratic aspirations not yet formulated into any clear program of social reform" (143 n2). Henderson goes to record that Morris stepped

⁹ "Art and the People: A Socialist's Protest Against Capitalist Brutality: Addressed to the Working Classes" was delivered as a speech on June 12 and 15, 1883, at the Vestry Hall, Haverstock Hill, Hampstead, according to Nicholas Salmon (123-24).

¹⁰ The poems appear in the first and second editions of the pamphlet entitled *Chants for Socialists* by William Morris published by The Socialist League late in 1885 (Waters 129, Salmon 144, 152).

down from his position as Treasurer of the Liberal League at this time, writing in his letter of resignation, “I do so hate ... everything vague in politics as well as in art” (143 n2). As Ruth Livesey explains, socialist discussions of the day were increasingly directed towards the specificity that Morris not only craved but also was directly attuned to:

With the revolution so clearly just around the corner for socialists in the 1880s, the search for a model of selfhood and self-expression outside capitalist individualism had an urgency it has never since regained. One reason why the subject of art and the subjectivity of the artist became important counters in the ensuing debates within socialist circles was the Romantic association of aesthetic production with intense individualism. Two questions, one aesthetic and the other political, thus become inextricably linked in late nineteenth-century socialist debate. First, can art exist without individual genius? And second, to what extent will socialism eradicate individuality in favor of the commune? (602)

Although Morris was not yet a declared socialist, he had certainly been tackling these debates since the late 1870s, most notably in his first public lecture, delivered in 1877 to the London Trades’ Guild of Learning and originally titled “The Decorative Arts: Their Relation to Modern Life and Progress,” later best known as “The Lesser Arts.”¹¹ Morris had already moved beyond questioning the existence of art without individual genius by removing art from its intellectual or class-designated provenance and placing it in the hands of the craftsmen who produced it. In “The Lesser Arts,” citing John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* as inspiration, Morris is careful to align himself with his audience:

Nor must you forget that when men say popes, kings, and emperors built such and such buildings, it is a mere way of speaking. You look in your history-books to see who built Westminster Abbey, who built St. Sophia at Constantinople, and they tell you Henry III, Justinian the

¹¹ The original title, as Mermin and Tucker note, “was retained for pamphlet production in 1878 and changed with some irony ... for inclusion in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882)” (890).

Emperor. Did they? or, rather, men like you and me, handicraftsmen, who have left no names behind them, nothing but their work? (891-92)

For Morris, the tangibility of a building is central to this 1877 discussion (and to the many others that followed in the 1880s) as is the notion of building something with one's own hands, and taking pleasure in doing so. Yet while this may seem to be a highly individualized process, within the contexts of building design and the production of decorative materials no craftsman is an island, and no master can succeed without the craftsman. Morris understood all too well that the design and production of buildings and everyday objects are collective experiences involving interdependent processes and activities.

Morris's own professional practice, along with his alignment with the liberal social thinkers of the 1860s and 1870s, particularly Ruskin, meant that he was primed for socialist discourse on matters aesthetic and political. This was a duality he could not only relate to, but could also exploit to full advantage when engaged in social protest. For Morris, the concrete evidence of capitalist England—"the squalor of London" with its "hideous hovels" ("The Lesser Arts" 893)—was more than material for rhetoric: it was material evidence of a system that ignored the noble production of art to serve the community. That nobility, moreover, had its roots in a specific historical character, the medieval period, duly designated by Ruskin in "The Nature of Gothic." The implicit aesthetic principles of Ruskin's paradigm suited Morris's practice and ideals, linking architecture to ideology and championing his belief in a communal work environment free from division of labour. Morris's own professional commitment to such an environment is exemplified by his 1881 purchase of a property in Merton, Surrey, on the Wandle River that included several buildings and the remains of an abbey. The spacious studio and workshop allowed Morris & Company to produce tapestry weaving on high-warp looms (Faulkner, *Against the Age* 124) and experiment with rigorous fabric dyeing techniques, established in the Middle Ages, that Morris revived with great care.

In concept, at best, the workshop at Merton Abbey was producing wares in an atmosphere meant to inspire and respect its workers, "where the genius of inventiveness and the love of beauty [were] the ruling principles, not the making of money" (Faulkner, *Against the Age* 125). Of

working at Merton Abbey, foreman “George Campfield...has left it on record that conditions in the works...were ‘as near paradise as anything well could be’ ” (Henderson xxiii), and on his part, Morris strove to maintain good working conditions and even tried to establish a system of profit-sharing with senior employees but soon realized, as Coote reports, “that to extend this system to all his employees would not be to bring socialism about since they would still be enmeshed in a capitalist society” (152). Morris’s conundrum at Merton was complicated by the nature of the authentic, yet costly and time-consuming methods of dyeing and printing fabrics that required repetitive labour. Despite his best efforts to counterbalance materialist concerns with Socialist ideals, Morris was forced to manage workplace conditions in an inevitable reproduction of the capitalist model he was coming to revile.

Coote interprets Morris’s grappling with the central paradox of the Merton Abbey factory as a prime motivator for his eventual formal commitment to Socialism:

On the one hand Morris looked back to the Middle Ages for his ideal of labour. On the other he looked forward to an imagined future, equally idealistic, where the workman would again be free. In his own age he was obliged to be a Janus figure. He insisted on such mechanical and repetitious work as hand block printing while his designs were in many respects suited to the infinite multiplication of mechanical reproduction. As a socialist, he saw the machine as a means of freeing men for a fuller life in which they could practise the very arts he so praised. The ideal of the Middle Ages could only finally be realized, he believed, in a future created by the revolution. (154)

This conclusion may sound simplistic, but it does clearly present the central dilemma, “the heart of the paradox” as Coote calls it, in Morris’s life as he set up Merton Abbey in 1881. In practical terms, the reconciliation between past and present was problematic; in creative terms, however, Morris was able to channel medieval culture to his advantage as he moved towards a more revolutionary political stance not only in his critical writing but also in his creative thinking. Morris did more than echo Ruskin’s words; he re-purposed them and applied them to his own design practice, as he continued to champion the preservation of heritage

buildings and collected valuable illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. As Wendy Parkins suggests, “Living with objects from the past was for Morris ... a means of imaginatively recalling a different relation between work, art and daily life as an incentive to challenge current understandings and social demarcations and to envisage an alternative future” (9).

In 1881, having left the Liberal party and not yet aligned with another organization, Morris stood on the brink of an impassioned re-envisioning of the future. He delivered few lectures that year, and those recorded were linked in name to his profession—“The Prospectus of Architecture in Civilisation” and “Some Hints on Pattern Designing” (Salmon 107-14)—but they included his Ruskinian theme and rail against the blight of urban centres, especially manufacturing cities. In a letter dated March 19, 1881, Morris writes to his wife, Jane:

Well I went to Nottingham & was entertained at the house of some good people, whereof the youngers were Ruskinites, & the elders stiffish religionists: my audience at the castle was polite & attentive; but I fear they were sorely puzzled at what I said; as might well be, since if they acted on it Nottingham trade would come to an end: strange to say while other places have been depressed Nottingham has fairly flourished these last few years: albeit it lives on producing a perfectly useless luxury: machine lace. (Henderson 148)

Morris’s disparaging remarks are tinged with a certain resignation, and he notably directs greater insult to the material product of Nottingham than to his apparently disconnected audience. Here again the product serves as the exemplar of the social condition, an indication of Morris’s objections to the “woeful artificiality of Victorian industrial society when compared to what he thought of as the more cooperative world of the Middle Ages” (Coote 143).

Any resignation evident in 1881 disappeared early in 1882, when Morris’s public profile was raised significantly by the publication of a collection of his essays, *Hopes and Fears for Art*.¹² Critical reception was

¹² This collection included transcripts of five lectures written and delivered since 1877: “The Lesser Arts,” “The Art of the People,” “The Beauty of Life,” “Making the Best of It,” and “The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization” (Faulkner, *Critical Heritage* 287).

mixed and surprisingly fixated on Morris's tone: "All who wish to take a hopeful view of the possibilities and future of English art will hail the publication of Mr. Morris's little volume of Lectures as in itself the most hopeful symptom which has shown itself for many years," wrote Edith Simcox in the *Fortnightly Review* (Faulkner, *Critical* 270), whereas an anonymous reviewer in *Century Magazine* cited the "low-spiritedness, not to say hopelessness [that] pervades all his remarks" (Faulkner, *Critical* 280). Interestingly, another unnamed reviewer in *Athenaeum* skirts around the content of the five lectures, by declaring that "[i]t would be difficult to give a general account of them, because they traverse very large and not very clearly defined fields of opinion; but it is easy to indicate what is their tendency, to praise their energy and common sense, and even to illustrate the occasional bits of whim, the genial dogmatism, and the poetic fancy which add not a little to their charm" (Faulkner *Critical* 283). Following the publication of *Hopes and Fears for Art* in 1882, Morris was suddenly in great demand, and he eagerly spread his opinions (ill-defined or not) to audiences across England. He also began attending meetings of the newly founded socialist collective, the Democratic Foundation; when he joined the Federation in January 1883, he signed his membership card, "William Morris, designer" (Salmon 119-20), a gesture that ironically indicated both his means of making money and his method of re-purposing art to serve Socialism.

Correspondence and chronological records of Morris's activities in 1883 attest to his heightened interest in "preaching" (as Morris himself termed it) the socialist cause through his lectures and articles, many of which were modified versions of each other. Morris expresses his interest in changing his writing approach in this letter to his daughter Jenny, dated March 14, 1883:

I am now about a new lecture for a club in connection with the Democratic Federation; if it turns out as I hope I am thinking of printing it for distribution to our members & others: of course it must to a great extent repeat the Manchester one:¹³ only I intend making this

¹³ Both LeMire (238) and Salmon (118) record Morris delivering a lecture, "The Progress of Decorative Arts in England" "at a banquet celebrating the opening of the Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition at St James's Hall, Manchester" (Salmon 118). The lecture was published the next day in the *Manchester Guardian*, and on October 28th in the periodical, *Architect*.

one more plain-spoken: I am tired of being mealy-mouthed ... (Henderson 167)

Morris's intentions are increasingly evident in the language of his 1883 lectures, particularly in his adoption of a more strident position. Most critical attention has been directed towards the speech, "Art under a Plutocracy," which allegedly marked his "public commitment to socialism...first delivered before the Russell Club, a Liberal organization, at Oxford on 14 November 1883" (Faulkner, *Against the Age* 113-14). Interestingly, an earlier lecture, which receives far less attention, not only exemplifies Morris's determination to be "plain-spoken" but also blatantly announces his political position in its title. Morris delivered "Art and the People: A Socialist's Protest Against Capitalist Brutality; Addressed to the Working Classes" on two occasions, June 12 and 15, 1883, at the Vestry Hall, Haverstock Hill (Salmon 123-24).

In "Art and the People" Morris's tone is decidedly reinvigorated, foreshadowing the confident tenor of his letter to Rowley (see epigraph) in a declaration of Socialist values that predates his "coming out" delivery of "Art under a Plutocracy." Morris does not abandon his "one subject...that of the relation of Art to Labour" that he presented so forthrightly to Rowley, but he does apostrophize the "History of Art" and designate it, as Lawrence Lutchmansingh notes, as the signifier of the "deeds of the people" (9), in a manner that suggests the fresh influence of Karl Marx over the familiar Ruskin. "Confirmed as [Ruskin] was in the principle of the power of work to redeem base human nature," Lutchmansingh observes, "[he] showed a cold indifference to the condition of the rest of the worker's life" (13). According to Faulkner, Morris "read *Capital* [i.e. *Das Kapital*] in a French translation in February 1883 and found that its historical analysis supported and enlarged his own view" (*Against* 117); even more significantly, it reflected Morris's increasing indignation at the inequality of the classes. This is not to suggest that Morris became a devoted Marxist but rather that he respected Marx's historical and humanist framework of the history of labour, a framework that did not match but aligned with his own medieval model.

Rob Breton suggests that Morris's reading of Marx provided an "historical (economic and 'humanistic') *confirmation* of the values of labour" (47). Morris takes Marx's framework, Breton contends, to construct artistry, as "Popular Art," an "activity which produces goods that

remain beyond the immediately consumable products of labor” (55 n4), and in so doing he invokes a materialist history, “leaving to future ages living witness to the existence of deft hands and eager minds” (Morris, “Art and the People” 5). Tangible evidence of the past is a key element of Morris’s reformulation of thinking about the present. Morris is also careful to conflate “Art” with all “History” to lead his audience away from conventional concepts of high art towards his own collective viewpoint:

The History of Art! What is that history indeed but the history of the World, since it alone tells us of the deeds of the people, and what they thought of and hoped for? Through this and this alone can we look upon times past as they really were and see them alive. (“Art and the People” 7)

Lutchmansingh asserts that this passage shows Morris pointing “to a concrete, pre-ideological history, in which we relive the very deeds by means of which those who have labored have at once met the demands of necessity and sustained their humanity in giving form to beauty and to the hope of what they might yet achieve” (9). Both Breton and Lutchmansingh acknowledge that Morris’s conflation of art and history allows him to link art directly with the people, to lead them to accept “art” as their own.

Morris also cleverly conflates his argument for the “art of the people” with his own voice, a tactic that supports his contention that art must either be returned to the people, or must fail altogether. At the same time, Morris sets up his debasement of the capitalist system, all the while keeping himself, as speaker, in a position of humble authority. Morris claims that Popular Art will leave “living witness to the existence of deft hands and eager minds,” since it is “not too proud to tell us of their imperfect thoughts and their glimpses of insight into wonders and terrors, as they passed amid the hurry of their daily work through the sunshine and the shadow of their lives” (5) and goes on to introduce himself immediately thereafter. Duly placed alongside the working class, Morris is able to deliver his message with extra fervour:

This, I say is the Art of the People, and on this is founded all Art which is worth anything. I do not believe that Art worthy of the name can long exist, unless it rests on such a foundation: or if it can, if it really be that there can be

an art practiced by and for a few well-to-do rich people, and founded on the slavery of the many, I for one will have nought to do with it: to me it will be contemptible and dishonourable, a rag of luxury and folly. . . . And yet, I must tell you that I am an artist: art is that by which I live; it feeds me body and soul, and without it the world would be empty to me: judge therefore how I must love and long for the Art of the People! (5-6)

Morris's rhetoric is at once embellished, impassioned and far from mealy-mouthed. He is deliberate in presenting himself as an "artist" immediately after decrying the "rag of luxury and folly" not only to align himself with the workers but also to enforce his direct refutation of his contemporary aesthetes' cry of "art for art's sake." During the early 1880s, as Livesey notes, Morris was "deeply implicated in the development of the discourse of the aesthetes" (605) not only because of his respect for Ruskin but also due to the exposure resulting from Oscar Wilde's lectures on his 1882 North American tour, many of which "reflected the sonorous cadences of both Ruskin and Morris" (Gere 88).¹⁴ Working against this implied affiliation, Morris separated himself and his ideals from the aesthetes most purposefully in his 1883 lectures, particularly in "Art and the People," in which he insists repeatedly upon a revolution of the class system itself—a proposal that neither Ruskin nor Wilde, tellingly, ever put forward.

Morris's public conversion to Socialism, and his skilful integration of the disparate concepts of art and the class system effectively liberated him from the aesthetes' mould. He was doubtless still challenged by his own conundrum of being a businessman and an artist, but his transition from undeclared to declared radical social reformer appears to have moved him past the uncertainty he conveyed to Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1882—knowing "that the cause for which I specially work is doomed to fail"—

¹⁴ Gere reports that "[t]here is more than a hint of Morris's forthright talk on "The Lesser Arts", first composed in 1877 and already in print by 1882, in Wilde's more discursive American lecture on "Art and the Handicraftsman," which also proposed a popular and summary version of the strategies laboriously worked out by government commissions and enunciated by Ruskin and Carlyle. Among the most patent plagiarisms Wilde said, 'Have nothing in your house that has not given pleasure to the man who made it and is not a pleasure to those who use it. Have nothing in your house that is not useful or beautiful,' combining echoes of Morris's most quoted instruction, 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful' (*Hopes and Fears for Art*, 1882), with a Ruskinian belief in the dignity of labour" (92).

towards the confidence in the cause that he exudes in “Art and the People.” His strength of conviction and honest attempts to fashion his own workshop into a nurturing and non-hierarchical environment distinguish him from the aesthetes’ portrayal of the elite artist and from the capitalists’ privileging of moneymaking over making art. What is even more remarkable in “Art and the People,” given its consistently charged message—“What but a Social Revolution which shall take away from men at once the power and the temptation of accumulating riches or in other words of keeping a body of slaves to do their dirty work for them?” (27)—is the underlying enforcement of Morris’s own aesthetic through medieval and Romantic allusions that contradict the language of enslavement. In his reminiscence of those artists who lived through labour “as they passed amid the hurry of their daily work through the sunshine and the shadow of their lives” (5) and in his wistful statement that “[g]reen and beautiful places are still left in the countryside of England, but the hand of decay is on them” (25), Morris indirectly identifies “the pure wellsprings of [his] aesthetic [that] lie in man’s primal contest with Nature, when he learned to mimic ‘her’ in her adornment of her work” (Livesey 606). Near the end of the text of “Art and the People” he invokes history and evokes his utopian vision:

In all our work there would be hope, and the greater part of it would be a labour of love, given freely and happily to the commonweal, as the commonweal would freely and ungrudgingly supply our needs for us: the hours of such work would to most of us be the happiest, but mere rest, time for thought, or dreaming even, would not be lacking to us, nor in any wise be grudged to us. ... Then we should have nature beautiful around us again, for surely then no disgrace of foulness in air or water would be suffered, nor would it in anywise need to be, with science set free from the huckster’s fetters: ... Doubt it not that from all this art would spring art in all forms, great and glorious, full of hope with eyes always turned towards perfection. (27-28)

As Morris’s enthusiasm for the cause gained momentum in 1883, he continued to incorporate these potent juxtapositions of derogatory and idealistic language into his lectures. His depiction of “art” sharpened as

well, with increasing emphasis on the need for it to be directly related to labour. In a lecture delivered in Oxford in 1907, only eleven years after Morris's death, J.W. Mackail succinctly explains Morris's understanding of this relationship:

People are apt to think of the sphere of imagination and the sphere of action as separate. Morris taught, because by experience he knew, that just so far as they were separated, both were spoiled. It was only amid a life of action and production that imagination could work properly; it was only through the life of imagination that real action could be carried on, or real art produced. For indeed the very word of art meant to him a combination, a fusion, of the highest imagination with the most common employment. (11-12)

Just as Morris's Socialist philosophy strengthened his rhetoric, so did it sharpen his definition of "art" to exclude poetry, in particular, from his formulations of labour and imagination and action, since it had no place within what Livesey terms "the tradition of the productive hand" (607). Poetry, for poetry's sake, had no place in his program for the aesthetic transformation that must "be led by popular revolution and not by doses of culture *de haute en bas*" (Livesey 607). Livesey's claim is upheld by Mackail's (oft-cited) recall of Morris's take on writing poetry: "If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving a tapestry...he had better shut up; he'll never do anything good at all" (12). Morris endorses his aesthetic principles while subtly putting himself forward as an example, since his own accomplishments as a poet from the previous decades were well known. Mackail, who knew Morris personally,¹⁵ is careful to balance Morris's take on poetry with this next statement: "And conversely, the man who was weaving tapestry or doing any other manual and so-called mechanical labour was not doing any good at all, was being degraded into a mere machine, if he was not doing it with pleasure, with a sense of social sympathy" (12).

It is quite reasonable to deduce that Morris's suspension of writing poetry in 1881 and 1882 is in large part due to his own intense social

¹⁵ J.W. Mackail's biography, *The Life of William Morris*, was published in 1899, only three years after Morris's death. Philip Henderson notes that Mackail, "who married [Georgiana] Burne-Jones's daughter, had access to much material that is either now lost or destroyed" (xx).

sympathy; indeed, several letters confirm his growing ambivalence towards poetry—specifically poetry as literature—and its relevance to the cause. In a letter dated in 1882, to his confidante Georgiana Burne-Jones, Morris reveals that he has had trouble reading Algernon Swinburne’s poem *Tristram of Lyonesse*: “But, to confess and be hanged, you know I never could really sympathize with Swinburne’s work; it always seemed to me to be founded on literature, not on nature” (Henderson 158). Morris’s reflection then turns immediately from his personal reaction to the broader state of the social condition: “Now time was when the poetry resulting merely from this intense study and love of literature might have been, if not the best, yet at any rate very worthy and enduring: but in these days when all the arts, even poetry, are like to be overwhelmed under the mass of material riches...there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man of deep feeling” (Henderson 158). He makes no reference at all to whether he is writing any such poetry himself, but his confession to Burne-Jones indicates an inner struggle. He concludes by saying, “In all this I may be quite wrong, and the lack may be in myself: I only state my opinion, I don’t defend it; still less do I my own poetry” (Henderson 158-59).

Critical treatments of Morris as a poet have relied heavily on his infamous “epic poem writing/tapestry weaving” analogy, on equally persistent comparisons of his poetry with his design work,¹⁶ and on the persistent assumption that William E. Fredeman identifies, namely that “Morris did not regard poetry as a serious enterprise” (xxi). Fredeman tackles these comparisons to explore perceptions of Morris, post-conversion to Socialism, and he identifies what Morris’s personal voice reveals—Morris’s growing ambivalence concerning the relevance of poetry within his increasingly complex theorization of art and labour, imagination and production. Fredeman, who notes that “Morris almost never in his writings speaks specifically about the nature of poetry” (xxii), looks towards Morris’s lectures to better understand the essence of Morris’s ideas:

That he regarded poetry and music as set apart from the lesser or decorative arts, which are the adjuncts of the

¹⁶ One of the most notorious and frequently cited comments came from Henry James, who described Morris in a letter to his sister in March 1869: “Morris’s poetry, you see, is only his sub-trade. To begin with, he is a manufacturer of stained glass windows, tiles, ecclesiastical and medieval tapestry, altar-cloths, and in fine everything quaint, archaic, pre-Raphaelite—and I may add, exquisite” (Faulkner, *Critical* 77).

other Fine Arts—architecture, sculpture, and painting—is implied in several of his lectures on art. Poetry and music, differing in kind from these, seem even more than their visual sisters to have their origin in what Morris describes as “ancient art,” that is, “the art of the unconscious intelligence.” (xxii)

Fredeman quite pointedly notes that “one of the reasons that Morris talks less of poetry and music is that they are less susceptible than the visual arts to the division of labour” (xxii), a fact that lent itself well to Morris’s central arguments in “Art and the People.” The less tangible product of poetry was a more difficult commodity to involve in an aesthetic or political treatise, or to apply to what Lutchmansingh identifies as Morris’s need to connect “to a concrete, pre-ideological history”(9). Fredeman speculates that the great appeal of epic and Icelandic poetry to the pre-Socialist Morris might well have been their roots in “grassroots oral tradition” (xxii). While he may not have documented his conundrum specifically in his lectures, however, Morris’s struggle to reconcile his poetry writing with his political convictions emerges clearly in his correspondence in 1882 and 1884.

Not surprisingly, given the personal nature of their exchanges, Morris’s letter of August 21, 1883, to Georgiana Burne-Jones suggests an ongoing dialogue on the matter of his poetry writing:

...I am touched by your kind anxiety about my poetry: but you see, my dear, there is first of all my anxiety, which I am bound to confess has made a sad coward of me¹⁷ and then, though I admit I am a conceited man, yet I really don’t think anything I have done (when I consider it as I should another man’s work) of any value except to myself: except as showing my sympathy with history and the like. Poetry goes with the hand-arts I think, and like them has now become unreal: the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be borne again. You know my views on the matter; I apply them to myself as well as to others. This would not, I admit, prevent my writing poetry any more than it prevents my doing pattern work, because the

¹⁷ Editor Henderson notes that Morris refers to the health of his daughter Jane Alice (Jenny), who suffered from epileptic seizures (180).

mere personal pleasure of it urges one to the work; but it prevents my looking at it as a sacred duty, and the grief aforesaid is too strong and disquieting to be overcome by a mere inclination to do what I *know* is unimportant work. Meantime, the propaganda gives me work to do, which, unimportant as it seems, is part of a great whole which cannot be lost, and that ought to be enough for me . . . (Henderson 180)

Morris's comment to Burne-Jones that "the arts have got to die" echoes his 1882 declaration to her that "art must go under," but this 1883 letter also suggests his impetus to prioritize his "propaganda" and designate poetry to the fate of other "hand-arts." It is most interesting that during this period of his high profile, public conversion to Socialism and commitment to social revolution, Morris's dilemma regarding the composition and relevance of poetry is expressed mostly in his personal correspondence, and that he appears to finally reach a comfortable reconciliation of his principles in practice when he begins composing his inspirational verse for Socialist publications in 1884.

In December 1884, Morris resigned from the Democratic Federation because he felt its leader Henry Hyndman "was turning it into an autocracy" (Faulkner, *Against* 118); by all accounts he and Hyndman were "unsuited to each other" (Coote 154). Several other presumably dissatisfied executive members of the Federation left to co-found the Socialist League with Morris early in 1885. By mid-1885, the League was publishing its own paper, *The Commonweal*, which Morris edited and subsidized (Faulkner, *Against* 118), and which was one of several radical journals that set the stage for the early modernist "little magazines" of the early 1900s and 1910s. This sequence of events, perhaps in conjunction with his confessional correspondence, signified a turning point in Morris's career: the switch to an organization in which he exerted more creative control, particularly in his literary and editorial stewardship of *The Commonweal*, effectively facilitated his return to writing poetry in 1884. Morris had already contributed what E.P. Thompson calls "occasional propagandist poems" (773) (i.e. "The Voice of Toil" and "The Day is Coming")¹⁸ to the Democratic Federation's paper, *Justice*, and had begun

¹⁸ Salmon records the initial publication of Morris's first chant, "The Day is Coming" on March 29, 1884, and of "The Voice of Toil" on April 5, 1884, both in *Justice*. (131)

to write lyrics for social (and Socialist) gatherings. In these venues, so well suited to his collectivist spirit, Morris was again a poet but one liberated from the convention of poetry as an art “that must go under”—here instead was an art that could serve the cause. Thompson notes, “Morris did not write the Chants for the critics, or even for posterity, but simply for the day-to-day needs of the movement” (774). Morris’s chants were meant to inspire a movement that “stood for ‘life,’” Thompson asserts, “and if his poems helped to feed this life, they found their immortality in the spirit of the movement which they helped to shape” (774-75). In their inaugural year of 1885, the Socialist League and its mouthpiece, *The Commonweal*, published two pamphlet editions of Morris’s *Chants for the Socialists* (Salmon 152); both editions included “The Voice of Toil” and “The Day is Coming.”

Livesey reports on an event organized by the Socialist League in June 1885, at which “there were no lectures and no debates, just popular songs and dramatic recitations that had been carefully rehearsed by the membership in order to entertain for the cause” (601), and Salmon records that on January 30, 1885, “Morris read his poem ‘All for the Cause’ at a Socialist ‘Art Evening’ at Ladbroke Hall, in London” (142). Morris’s chants were tailored for such events; they repeat the recurrent themes of his lectures, certainly, but the distinctive rhythm and lyrics affirm them as “poetry as engaged collective experience” (Livesey 602). In the fourth stanza of the chant, “The Voice of Toil,” for example, Morris alternates tight iambic tetrameter and pentameter lines to accelerate the rallying cry against a familiar enemy:

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. (6)

In the closing stanza, Morris extends the pentameter lines to eleven syllables, still set against tetrameter lines, to accentuate the crucial call to action:

Come, shoulder to shoulder ere Earth grows older!
 The Cause spreads over land and sea;
 Now the world shaketh, and fear awaketh,
 And joy at last for thee and me. (7)

The internal rhymes are equally important to the rhythm of the verses, making them easier to remember, and the incendiary phrasing is tailored to the message; but the verse of “The Voice of Toil” is still distinctly crafted to evoke a medieval past. Morris is pointedly nostalgic, as is evident in the first two lines of the second stanza—“When Earth was younger mid toil and hunger, / In hope we strove, and our hands were strong;” (6)—but he counters that nostalgia with a dramatic image to emphasize the present situation. The hands that “were strong” in the second stanza counter the desperate opening lines in the sixth stanza—“Who now shall lead us, what God shall heed us / As we lie in the hell our hands have won?”(6).

Morris uses a similar strategy in “The Day is Coming” in which he contrasts the present with the future, as Christopher Waters observes, in a particularly vivid manner. This chant is one “full of concrete details of the socialist future,” Waters explains, “full of references to better housing and the joys of work, leisure, shared wealth, security, and communal well-being” (136-37). Yet while his message is distinctly utopian, and the poem points towards the future, Morris still manages to evoke the past with a nostalgic tone. This is partially enforced by the structure of extended couplets that could easily be broken down into brisker quatrains, as found in “The Voice of Toil,” but instead are prolonged to suggest more of an oral account of the past designed to promote a utopian future. Morris opens the chant with this beckoning:

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.

And the tale shall be told of a country, a land in the midst
of the sea,
And folk shall call it England in the days that are going to
be. (3)

By the last third of the poem, however, Morris’s language rises to a more dramatic pitch:

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.

How long shall they reproach us where crowd on crowd
they dwell,

Poor ghosts of the wicked city, the gold-crushed hungry
hell!

Through squalid life they laboured, in sordid grief they
died.

Those sons of a mighty mother, those props of England's
pride. (5)

Thompson cites these lines to demonstrate his contention that despite its inspirational qualities, Morris's "*Chants* cannot be said to lay the foundations of a poetry of revolutionary realism" (775) due mostly to their inherently traditional verse. "They rely upon words, images, rhythms coined in the romantic movement" (775), Thompson writes, and with them Morris assigns vitality only to the cause, not to the working class itself. In his evaluation of "The Day is Coming" Thompson uses this astute observation to support his other side of his argument, namely that with this type of verse, albeit Romantic in nature, Morris intentionally liberates himself from the burden of traditional expectations, and from the "art for art's sake" credo, wielding technique and language from his past to shape the future. Thompson insists that this does not signify that Morris's revolutionary poetry is the "first example of an altogether new and changed art" (780), but rather that it is an example of where Morris saw himself in the midst of this revolution:

He no longer saw his art as the central battlefield: if he could strike a blow there for the Cause, so much the better. The immediate task—as he saw it—was to change life itself: he was too old, too busy, too much a romantic bred and born, to concentrate his faculties at the end of his life upon transforming his art. (781)

The implication here, which Morris's *Chants* certainly prove, is that conventional poetic format and language were a means towards an end, and that Morris had reached a stage of reconciliation between his work as an artist and his political passions.

What Thompson does not acknowledge, however, is the aspect of "The Day is Coming" that alludes to Morris's struggle with the relation of art to labour and the position of the artist within that struggle—the crux of so many of his lectures and essays. This aspect of the poem attracts more critical attention today than it did in Thompson's day, perhaps, because of

the current interest in materialist culture and the production of art. Waters, for example, observes that Morris's chants take a significant turn in direction from his lectures despite the recurrence of "familiar romantic imagery" (141). Moreover, Waters notes, the abstractions of "tyranny" and "slavery" that appeared in Morris's earlier works (certainly most evident in "Art of the People") have been replaced by his "emphasis on the concrete struggles of real people" (141). Livesey, perhaps best read alongside Waters, argues that the central struggle of Morris's work, pre-and post-conversion to Socialism was an abstract mission described by a concrete metaphor, namely "to overcome the boundary between aesthetics and politics, leisure and labour" (602).

This boundary, along with others like it that had isolated artists and their aesthetics as privileged and esoteric (heeding the persistent cry of "art for art's sake"), were to become increasingly loosened at the close of the nineteenth century, especially in the pages of independent publications where poetry, even if it was not truly revolutionary in form, was a catalyst for social transformation. This is exactly what Morris envisions in the following lines of "The Day is Coming," when such a transformation would enable all the arts to become accessible to all the people:

And what wealth then shall be left us when none shall
gather gold
To buy his friend in the market, and pinch and pine the
sold?

Nay, what save the lovely city, and the little house on the
hill,
And the wastes and the woodland beauty, and the happy
fields we till.

And the homes of ancient stories, the tombs of the mighty
dead;
And the wise men seeking out marvels, and the poet's
teeming head;

And the painter's hand of wonder; and the marvelous
fiddle-bow,
And the banded choirs of music: —all those that do and
know.

For all these shall be ours and all mens', nor shall any lack
a share
Of the toil and the gain of living in the days when the
world grows fair. (4)

Publications like *The Commonwealth*, collective movements like the Socialist League, and artists like Morris are all implied in the inclusive language of this verse; Morris lays out this utopian condition for “us,” “ours and all mens’ ” that integrates the work of “all those that do and know” in a hopeful framework—“nor shall any lack a share.” These lines constitute Morris’s unfettered call not only to social revolution but also to a revolution of artistic spirit. As Livesey suggests, and as Morris’s chant confirms, “the tradition of the productive hand, rather than the culture of the consuming, tasteful mind was the source of aesthetic transformation” (607). Most importantly, moreover, Morris reformulated that tradition within the new “morality of anti-individualism” (Dowling 62) that he embraced and championed in his aesthetic and political pursuits.

In “The Day is Coming” Morris’s poetics transpire into a distinctly paradoxical blend of archaic images and anarchic messages. He deftly combines the deliberate materialization of aesthetics with an aura of wonder—attributed, most pointedly, to the “painter’s hand”—surrounding the process of their creation without privileging the individual artist. In this, and indeed in all his chants, Morris demonstrates an ease of expression and clarity of purpose that indicate that his struggles with the relevance of poetry had passed, despite the fact that his own “teeming head” had been troubled by the swarming of literary, visual, and political pursuits around his urgent call to social revolution. During the four intense years of his conversion and dedication to the cause between 1881 and 1885, the composition of the chants—in all their deceptive simplicity—and their usefulness to his fellow artists and laborers, proved powerfully cathartic for William Morris, the poet.

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