



This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository (<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/>) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

 **creative commons**
C O M M O N S D E E D

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

 **Attribution.** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

 **Noncommercial.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

 **No Derivative Works.** You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the [Legal Code \(the full license\)](#).

[Disclaimer](#) 

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

Chapter

Morris, Watts, Wilde and the art of everyday life

Introduction

“Great art”, Maya Angelou wrote, “belongs to all the people, all the time—indeed it is made for the people by the people”. In conditions of adversity, such as the virulent racism of the American South, art is a source of strength and solace and a means of resistance. And in all times, it is a humanising force, Angelou contends (1998, 130). William Morris would have agreed with this view: “Real art” was “art made by the people and for the people” (Morris 1994a, 46). In periods of hardship or oppression, art—in poetry and songs for example—was a focus for collective struggles. Over time, it gave shape to social identities and forged an ideal of material culture. The true meaning of the “word art”, Morris argued, is that “life should be pleasant, generous, and beautiful” (Morris 1994b, 21). Morris concluded from this view that art was wholly incompatible with commerce, or what we might now call consumer capitalism, where life is a matter of “existence” rather than “being” (Ginsborg 205, 57-8). Commerce had killed art, replacing it with makeshift and leaving would-be artists like himself floundering, torn between a desire to practise their arts and the knowledge that their aspirations would always be frustrated. Only revolutionary socialism, leading to communism, offered the platform for art’s re-birth.

The radicalism of Morris’s answer might be gauged by reflecting not just on his own output but on the range of modernist and avant-garde movements which flourished after his death and which, even if provoked by capitalism also were often absorbed by it. Morris died in 1896 at the cusp of this flowering, but his treatment of impressionism (which he described as an empirical science that consciously flouted ideas of beauty) indicated the tenor of his view:

however “honest and eager” the impressionists were, their “pursuit of art under the conditions of modern civilisation” was misguided and hopeless (Morris 1996, x). Impressionism was a result of “an impulse in men of certain minds and moods” and produced only a particular, idiosyncratic idea of art, not art itself (Morris 1996, x). And until “civilisation” was “transformed” art would give way to mere “eclecticism” (Morris 1996, x).

Morris’s uncompromising stance not only links the possibility of art to sweeping structural change, but suggests that “the art of the people” described something more than just the extension of existing artistic practices to common—apparently un-artistic—people; that it involved fundamental change in our conception of art and its role. Yet what Morris understood by the concept is not immediately apparent. For example, it is not clear how Morris conceived the possible or legitimate constraints on art. What did the art of the people imply for individual expression or the autonomy of artists? And what were artists expected to sacrifice in struggling against capitalism? To investigate these issues, I outline Morris’s understanding of art’s relationship to socialism and consider the conception of art this supports by examining the thought of two of his contemporaries: G.F. Watts and Oscar Wilde. Both shared many of Morris’s worries about the degeneration of art and the conditions for its flourishing but they developed contrasting perspectives in confronting them. Although the exploration of their ideas can provide only a flavour of the richness of late Victorian aesthetic/social criticism, the discussion usefully highlights the peculiarities of Morris’s position in these debates. In particular, the contrast helps indicate the boundaries of Morris’s libertarianism and the radicalism of his ideal of art in everyday life.

Art in communism: the transformation of labour

Morris’s political thought was driven by his conviction that the future of art depended on the realisation of communism: a condition of near anarchy, famously depicted in *News From Nowhere*, structured by a binding commitment to resist exploitation or what he termed slavery and a deep sense of fellowship. Morris distinguished this condition from mere socialism, which signalled only a change in the existing patterns of ownership (that is, the abolition of capitalism and the socialisation of production) and implied a basic continuity in the use of

modern, industrial methods of production. Socialism provided a ground for communism, but it did not provide a foundation for the re-birth of art, which commerce had destroyed.

The transition from socialism to communism was accomplished when the familiar distinction between work and rest disintegrated to give way to a notion of pleasurable labour or productive leisure. Morris's idea taps a deep seam in socialist thought, running from the utopian socialism of Charles Fourier to the contemporary anarchistic writing of Bob Black, and it was at the core of his socialism. In *News From Nowhere*, Guest observes that the transformation of work is a "far greater and more important" change than any other, notwithstanding the dramatic shifts in the treatment of crime, politics, property and marriage. Hammond, his wise guide to *Nowhere*, agrees (Morris 203, 79). Indeed, he tells Guest that the realisation of pleasurable labour is foundational: it was this change that "makes all the others possible" (Morris 2003, 79). Elsewhere Morris explained:

When class-robbery is abolished, every man will reap the fruits of his labour, every man will have due rest – leisure, that is. Some Socialists might say we need not go any further than this; it is enough that the worker should get the full produce of his work, and that his rest should be abundant. But though the compulsion of man's tyranny is thus abolished, I yet demand compensation for the compulsion of Nature's necessity. As long as the work is repulsive it will still be a burden which must be taken up daily and even so would mar our life, even though the hours of labour were short. What we want to do is to add to our wealth without diminishing our pleasure. Nature will not be finally conquered till our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives (Morris 1994b 107).

Morris was aware of the practical difficulties involved in transforming work into leisure and was at times ambiguous in his treatment of the principle. On the one hand, in common with Fourier, he suggested that the problem of labour was largely a matter of removing the structural constraints which prevented individuals from taking pleasure in their work and then liberating them to do the things they were good at and which they enjoyed. To use two of his highly gendered examples: the onerous chore of domestic labour and laborious effort of higher mathematics would both disappear once women were free to follow the desires that modern society repressed. On the other hand, behind this optimism was the nagging doubt

that some categories of work were inherently unattractive, always and forever beyond the scope of art (Morris and Bax 1994, 614). Midwifery was one of the curious activities Morris chose to illustrate his point. Apparently not even liberated women (still less men) could ever find this work attractive (Kinna 2000). So admitting the limits of productive leisure—or perhaps his own imagination—Morris attempted to convince sceptics how necessary but unpleasant tasks would be fulfilled in communism, finding the solution in a desire for honour and a willingness to share burdens (Morris 2003, 79). The ambiguity is captured in the account of labour Hammond gives Guest. Guest is told with some assurance that “*all* work is now pleasurable” but that it falls into three categories: work done which “causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant”; work that “has grown into a pleasurable *habit*” and work in which “there is conscious sensuous pleasure” (Morris 2003, 79). Yet whilst Morris wavered on the practicalities of his scheme, he remained committed to the principle: what a “holiday our whole lives might be”, he argued, “if we were resolute to make all our labour reasonable and pleasant” (Morris 1994b, 108). And he himself was resolved: “for no half measures will help us here” (Morris 1994b, 108).

Consistent with his admission that some categories of labour were pleasurable in different ways to others, Morris acknowledged that not all tasks could be described as art, even in communism. Indeed, speaking through the exchange between Hammond and Guest, he suggested that only the third category of work would be “done by artists” (Morris 2003, 79). Yet in parallel to his general position on the desirability of productive leisure, he also argued that art provided the key to pleasurable labour as a whole—that is, to all categories of labour. Without qualification, in 1879 he defined real art as “the expression by man of his pleasure in labour” (Morris 1994a, 42). Elsewhere, he elaborated on his theme. Art, he argued, was “sensuous pleasure”; and this pleasure “increases in proportion to the freedom and individuality of the work”. The rule did not just apply to the production of “works of art only, like pictures, statues, and so forth, but has been and should be a part of all labour ...” (Morris 1994b: 84). Performed as art, he argued, work became a sphere for individual expression, something intelligent and imaginative which individuals could not help but enjoy. Even if the work remained mentally challenging or physically demanding or, to borrow Morris’s terms, full of “pains and perplexities and weariness”, the joy that individuals took in the creation of the

thing mitigated all the effort involved in its creation (Morris 1994a, 145). The challenges of this work were only the “troubles of the beautiful life ... they are the romance of the work and do but elevate the workman, not depress him” (Morris 1994a: 145-6). The trick, then, in transforming labour into leisure was to find the art in it and to provide the conditions in which this discovery might be sustained. Later artists, notably Eric Gill, believed that even the most trivial, apparently unchallenging exercises, the sharpening of a pencil for instance, were open to the discovery of art. And to find the art in labour was not to reduce people to “pettiness” but instead to raise a job “to nobility” (Gill 1940, 45).

Morris’s commitment to the principle of pleasurable labour or productive leisure was forged in the 1870s through the process of his radicalisation and it had a number of dimensions. Morris did not consciously demarcate the lines of his thought, but the ethical, practical, aesthetic and political aspects of pleasurable labour reflected different sets of concerns which together help elaborate the complexity of the concept.

The ethical aspect was rooted in the delight and pride Morris took in his own art, particularly his craftwork, and his awareness that the quantity and quality of the leisure time that this work afforded was a privilege denied to the majority of workers. The practical side of the idea stemmed from Morris’s reading of the history of art and his identification of craftwork with the genius of ordinary labourers—a genius that he believed reached its high point in Europe in the late Middle Ages. The artists honoured by the collections held by the South Kensington Museum, Morris noted, were not men of “cultivation, highly paid, daintily fed, carefully housed, wrapped up in cotton wool” but ‘common fellows’” (Morris 1994a, 40). Putting this knowledge together with the deep satisfaction he derived from his own work convinced Morris that art could be democratized as it once had been.

Morris’s faith in the aesthetic value of pleasurable labour was informed by his study of the principles of design that emerged from the fusion of different styles—Greek, Byzantine and Scandinavian—during the Gothic period. For all its social constraints and historically-conditioned ideas, this period was a model for the creation of “social, organic, hopeful progressive art” (Morris 1994b, 89). Carefully describing these principles for a variety of different arts, Morris argued that the value of this art lay in its emotive power, linking this in turn to the beauty of the natural world. Yet believing that art was compromised by modern

preoccupations with theory, on the one hand, and perfection, on the other, Morris argued instead that genuine art emerged from a concern with technique, learned over time, and from pride in turning out “a creditable piece of work” (Morris 1996, viii). Art was not a conscious or deliberate “aim towards positive beauty” (Morris 1996, viii). This conviction, as Walter Crane observed, lent his aesthetic an open-textured quality. Morris’s art was “[e]ssentially Gothic and romantic and free in spirit as opposed to the authoritative and classical” (Crane 1911, 36). It supported his judgement that the “shorthand for a field of flowers of the Persian weaver, or the rough stone-cutting ... of the mediaeval mason” was preferable to “the highly finished and ... perfect ingenuity of a piece of Japanese drawing or lacquer” (Morris 1969, 144). Similarly, it underpinned his refusal to enter into debates about the future “aspect of art” or whether or not what emerged would be genuine “art” (Morris 1994b, 91-2). After the revolution, whatever people produced “will at least be *life*; and ... that is what we want” (Morris 1994b, 92). In *News From Nowhere*, Guest is disabused of the idea that the “new form of art was founded chiefly on the memory of the art of the past”, though there was some continuity between pre- and post-revolutionary forms, especially in music and poetry (Morris 2003, 115). New art simply assumed the form that the people, working roughly at first and from instinct, spontaneously gave it. Morris might have been surprised and perhaps disturbed by the continuity that Herbert Read traced between his conception of art, surrealism and the sculpture of Henry Moore (albeit mediated through the Gothic), but his openness to the idea of transformation points up the malleability of his aesthetic (Read 1964, 29-30). Considering once more the new and as yet unimagined forms that art was likely to assume, Morris predicted:

It may lead us into new splendours and beauties of visible art, to architecture with manifold magnificence free from the curious incompleteness and failing of that which the older times have produced – to painting, uniting to the beauty which mediaeval art attained the realism which modern art aims at; to sculpture, uniting the beauty of the Greek and the expression of the Renaissance with some third quality yet undiscovered, so as to give us the images of men and women splendidly alive, yet not disqualified from making, as all true sculpture should, architectural ornament. All this it may do ... (Morris 1994e: 92).

The fourth aspect of Morris's theory, the politics of pleasurable labour, sprang from his critique of commerce. In commercial society, he argued, art was posited on a cultural distinction between high and low art and a system of elite patronage, usually mediated by the academies, itself rooted in an iniquitous class system that forced workers to work as wage slaves, freeing the idle rich to indulge their love of ostentatious display in vulgar consumption. As the ruling classes filled their lives with expensive frippery, in ignorance of "what art means", they reduced art to an activity "practised by a few for a few ..." (Morris 1994a, 123), debasing it in the process. Morris's analysis of the relationship between culture and class society was central to his conception of art. In deciding to give up art for revolution and further the destruction of commercial society for the sake of the art, Morris not only attacked the academies for their intellectualism and vacuity but specifically as institutions of class society. From his perspective, the cause of art could not be served by attacking the institutions alone or by challenging the standards of excellence they imposed, a position that some avant gardists later adopted. For as long as the concept of elite art remained intact, genuine art would be forever stifled. Capturing perfectly the distinction that lay at the heart of Morris's work, Eric Gill contrasted his own lack of faith "in Art" and "the art world" with his belief "in the arts—with a small a and an s" (Gill 1940, 173).

Defining the aim of art to be the realisation of productive leisure and identifying the abolition of capitalism as its necessary condition, Morris treated these four aspects of his understanding in one relation. Individuals, liberated from exploitation and drudgery and enabled to take delight in their everyday activities, would learn skills and techniques that would produce beautiful things, creating in the process beautiful environments in which to live in fellowship with others. With luck and determination, courage and hope, the promise of art would lead commercial society to erupt in revolution and to the destruction of both the social hierarchies and the polluting, alienating industrial methods of production which it had introduced. Communism would provide the conditions for art's re-birth and the world would become an earthly paradise. Morris's dreams were revolutionary. But they were so not merely because he argued that a violent revolution was necessary for art's realisation—a position he reaffirmed in *News From Nowhere*. In communism, art would be democratized to ensure that necessary labour became joyful and the division between work and leisure was transcended.

Everyone would become an artist and art would be embedded in the ordinary activities and behaviours of everyday life.

Art and socialism in Watts and Wilde

It is often pointed out that John Ruskin was one of the most powerful and abiding influences on Morris's thought. Indeed, G.D.H. Cole once described Morris's socialism as a result of his grafting Marx on to Ruskin (Cole 1974, 421). Yet the pervasive influence of Ruskin combined with the cultural concerns voiced by writers like Matthew Arnold and a general interest in social reform drew a number of nineteenth-century artists to consider the complex relationship between art and politics and specifically art and socialism. Walter Crane and Edward Carpenter are two well-known artists who shared many of Morris's principal interests and concerns. George Frederick Watts (1817-1904) and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) fall into the same category. Both are useful foils for Morris and their alternative ideas about art and socialism help to highlight the sweep, richness and limits of Morris's understanding of the art of everyday life.

Of the two men, Watts seems more distant to Morris than Wilde. Whereas Wilde's early lectures on art drew extensively on Morris's historical account of the decorative arts and the crushing impact of commercial mechanisation (Ellman 1988, 183), Watts established his reputation as a painter and high artist; and his openness to classical and Renaissance traditions earned him the nickname (from William Blunt) of the English Michaelangelo. Indeed, Watts was a royal academician and a friend of its president, Frederick Lord Leighton. Like Wilde, however, he not only admired the Pre-Raphaelites, especially the work Edward Burne-Jones, Morris's life-long friend, he knew them all. His extensive *Hall of Fame* series (Watts' portraits of Victorian intellectuals and public figures that he bequeathed to London's National Portrait Gallery in 1895) numbered Rossetti, Swinburne, Burne-Jones and Morris, among its subjects. Perhaps, as Gaunt suggests, Watts' acquaintance with the Pre-Raphaelites was "never quite as an intimate" and forged "always from the other side of the impalpable barrier" (Gaunt 1942, 94). Nevertheless, his attitudes and concerns paralleled Morris's in several important respects.

Like Morris, Watts rejected realism in favour of romance (both had a deep love of Scott) and preferred poetry to empiricism. “The age”, he declared in 1880 “is analytical and unsatisfied” (Watts 1880, 244). The close link that Watts found between painting and literature was starkly different to that explored by post-impressionists like Degas and Lautrec, or, for that matter Wilde. Whereas Wilde’s strong dislike of realism informed his high regard for poets like Baudelaire, Watts was no more excited by the “spectacle of pleasure” that animated the French than Morris was impressed by the science of the impressionists. Rather, Watts was moved by moral, religious, mythical and historical subjects and drawn to concepts of heroism, death, courage, hope and fortitude in the face of disappointment or defeat—themes close to Morris’s heart.

Ruskin characterised Watts as a social dreamer, once commanding him to “[p]aint ... as it is” the detritus left by a down-and-out on the street in Piccadilly (Gaunt 1942, 196). Morris had a similar reputation. His self-characterisation as the “dreamer of dreams” in the four-volume *The Earthly Paradise* supported an idea of listless, weary romanticism which wrongly helped convince friends like Burne-Jones that he not only clearly demarcated art from politics but that he would also always prioritise the former. Yet for both, dreaming was a melancholic activity, linked to resistance not surrender. As Vincent Geoghegan writes, Watts’ painting *Hope*, which pictured a blind-folded female figure sitting on top of the world, straining to hear the music of her badly broken lyre, captured his sense of “the praxis of survival in a world inhospitable to dreams” (Geoghegan 2008, 33). Though he did not cross Morris’s “river of fire” to embrace revolutionary socialism, he no more used art as a means of withdrawing from the real world than Morris. On the contrary, sharing a deep concern with social issues he fought against the escapism of Leighton (and what Gaunt described as the cultivated physical and mental delicacy of Burne-Jones) to confront head-on what he saw as the social evils of the age. The obvious ugliness and distress created by industry and commerce could not, Watts argued, be ignored or made bearable by the promise of an alternative dreamlike existence. So whereas others “used sleep as a metaphor for their retreat into the numbing power of beauty” Watts used it to depict the unhappy, unconscious stupor bred by commercial success (Stewart 2004, 38).

In addition, Watts embraced a number of the still utopian ideas of radicals and reformers to inspire some of his most positive images. The “woman question” was high on his list of priorities, just as it was for Morris, though both men adopted contentious assumptions in framing their concepts of liberation. Watts became president of the Anti-Tight Lacing Society, decrying as “deluded” mothers who corseted their daughters on the misguided assumption that in so-doing they were attempting to satisfy men’s desire “for the gratification of a most depraved taste” rather than safeguarding them from seduction (Summers 2001, 85). In a similar vein, he protested against “titillating”, voyeuristic treatments of the female nude (Stewart, 36). He included the women’s campaigner Josephine Butler in his *Hall of Fame* and created an image of new womanhood so powerful as to be described by the feminist and socialist writer Olive Schreiner as a “great new ideal” (Stewart 2004, 36).

Casting his eye more generally on the condition of Victorian Britain, Watts believed that commercial success and material well-being had wrongly attained the status of virtues and that meaningful human sentiment or sensibility had been sacrificed as a result. This concern, too, sounded like Morris. Yet as G.K. Chesterton noted, Watts was not so much concerned with the vulgar drives of capitalism which Morris, coached by Ernest Belfort Bax, wrestled with. Watts took Biblical themes of greed, extravagant luxury and mammon as the mainsprings for his paintings (Chesterton 1914, 53). This emphasis on moral decline enabled him to cast art as a primary victim of commercial development and, at the same time, an instrument for social transformation.

Watts acknowledged the significant structural problems facing art. In an echo of Morris he recognised that there was no lack of artists in the world but “the ugliness of modern life” and “passing away” of “the sense of beauty ... as a natural possession”, meant that “art must die” (Watts 1880, 240). “It must be remembered” Watts noted:

that the artist ... should speak the language of his time, not only because he can only naturally find expression in it, but because of the direct appeal it makes to those whom he addresses ... yet the alternative to the artist in these times is analogous to restricting the poet to slang or words of one syllable. If the visible language by which alone an artist can make his thought intelligible is out of tune with beauty, the painter ... who is prompted by aspirations outside material life, is

forced to invent his language or imitate what has been done in, for art, happier times, for he cannot press into his service what is around him (Watts 1880, 240).

If art offered a cure for the ugliness of modern society, its “plea” Watts concluded, “rests on much wider and more solid foundations than mere amusement for moments of leisure” (Watts 1880, 238). Looking at the poor state of Victorian society—particularly the urban centres—he found the cure for the social ills in the “taste for art and music generally developed” (Watts 1880, 238). “Nothing” he commented “but the general practice of the latter can now effect anything in that direction” (Watts 1880, 238). In another echo of Morris, Watts noted: “The taste and practice were common in England in the Middle Ages: and the artistic sensibility was not wanting” (Watts 1880, 238).

Yet where Morris called on the working class to destroy the class system on which the corruption of art was based, Watts believed that social ills might be tackled by “widely spread and judicious co-operation of those who have leisure and means at their disposal”—notably, artists (Watts 1880, 239). More optimistic than Morris about the conditions for art’s rebirth, he also argued that “pressed into the service of general education, as once it was into that of religion” art “might again be great, and become a vital power” (Watts 1880, 239). With this in mind, Watts became involved with the Home Arts and Industries Association, an organisation which shared much in common with the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and the Art Workers’ Guild with which Morris was associated. Set up in 1885 its purpose was to bring art “within the surroundings of the common people” and “substitute the beautiful for the prosaic and ugly” (Bateman 1902, 15). This interest resulted in the construction of a Chapel at Compton in Surrey, an initiative led by his wife Mary, and it was reflected in one of Watts’s pet projects, the creation of an “open-air book of worthies” (Bateman 1902, 20).

Watts’s inspiration for this idea, which eventually gave rise to a tiled memorial in London’s Postman’s Park, was prompted by the celebration of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. In September 1887, a few months after the official celebrations, Watts wrote a letter to The Times suggesting that the collection of “stories of heroism in every-day life” would be fitting way to highlight the real virtue of her period of rule. The conviction that underpinned his view was that a Franciscan “sympathy will fellow-men” was “the real root” of social behaviour and that the essential “divinity” of this truth was knowable both through reason or, where intellect

failed, by intuition (Watts 1880, 245). The thought was epitomised in his painting Love and Life—his favourite work. Depicting Love as a strong, dark, masculine angel who bows his head towards the small, slightly timorous, naked white girlish body of Life, to benevolently guide her from the edge of a high cliff, Watts's hoped to show "that love by which, of course, I mean not physical passion, but altruism, tenderness, leads man to the highest life" (Bateman 1902, 34). And the same sentiment inspired his appeal in *The Times*, though when he first made it, it was the action of Alice Ayres, "the maid ... who lost her life in saving those of her master's children" in a fire, that Watts had uppermost in mind. In the preface to a collection of poems, (which included one to Alice Ayres), entitled *Ballads of Brave Deeds* Watts elaborated on the theme:

These poems were inspired by deep and reverential admiration for affecting and splendid self-sacrifice, even unto death, and for brave endeavours to save the lives of others, often unknown, and in no way connected save by the brotherhood of need. This sublime sympathy, in the highest degree and beyond all else human, receives only the transient record afforded by a paragraph in the daily papers, and is forgotten! (Watts 1896, vii)

Watts's understanding of brotherhood resonated with Morris's idea of fellowship. As Crane remarks, Morris's own life was an example of "self-sacrificing enthusiasm" (Crane 1911, 8). Yet Morris's point of departure was usually the individual's commitment to the collective struggle against commerce, slavery and oppression. This is one of the leading themes of his poem *The Pilgrims of Hope* and it runs through many of the late prose romances. Moreover, whereas Morris identified fellowship as a constant in history—it was a prominent theme in *The Dream of John Ball*, for example—for Watts, the sacrifices of ordinary people bore testament to the progressive tendency toward "social perfection" (Watts 1880, 243). Further, this tendency not only off-set the destructiveness of commerce, it was also its necessary complement. "Decay follows up behind advance", Watts argued (Watts 1880, 243). Thus at the same time that "[m]aterial prosperity has become our real god" we discover that "this visible deity does not make us happy" (Watts 1880, 243).

In order to make altruism the power it should be in the world, Watts concluded that the mantra of endless consumption had to be combated through faith. This did not imply a return

to the church, however. Indeed, the truth of fellowship which modern society had uncovered was “something outside and beyond the Church” (Watts 1880, 245): it was for artists to bring to the fore.

The one thing which is more than ever clearly perceived is the density of the veil that covers the mystery of our being, at all times impenetrable, and to be impenetrable, in spite of which conviction we every passionately yearn to pierce it. This yearning finds its natural expression in poetry, in art, and in music. (Watts 1880: 243-4).

Watts’s monument in Postman’s Park, which he constructed in spite of the lack of public funds, is a strong visual reminder of Morris: the fifty-three ceramic plaques were designed by the company founded by William de Morgan one of Morris’s former colleagues. But it embodies Watts’s thought, uniting some of the leading strands of his critique of commerce and defence of art: his faith in the altruism of ordinary people and his strong sense that moral duty of artists was to help provide a condition, through the extension of art and the philosophical articulation of divine mystery, for its expression. Chesterton argued that Watts’s art was informed by a refusal to subscribe to the “astounding modern dogma of the infallibility of human speech” and language (Chesterton 1914, 43). Whether or not this was an accurate description of Watts’s view, the artist made plain that his intention was “not so much to paint pictures that will charm the eye, as to suggest great thoughts that will appeal to the imagination and the heart, and kindle all that is best and noblest in humanity” (Knight 1910, 133). Whereas Morris saw art as the alchemy that would transform labour into leisure, Watts argued that it was the bearer of morality; and rather than simulating life in common by enabling each individual to express their pleasure in labour, Watts argued that artists had a special duty to uncover art’s moral message.

Like Watts, Wilde also hinted at a lack in everyday life that art alone filled, but his conception of art’s role could not have been more different to Watts’s: Wilde abhorred duty (Wilde 1912, 85). The difference was striking since Wilde also seemed to endorse some of Morris’s key themes. As if matching Morris’s call for whole-scale revolution, Wilde argued that the majority were “beginning to know” the injustices of a society divided between rich and poor (Wilde 1912, 10). The latter were “ungrateful, discontented, disobedient, and rebellious”

and they were “quite right to be so” (Wilde 1912, 10). Anyone who failed to discontented with “a low mode of life would be a perfect brute” (Wilde 1912, 10). Wilde held back from the language of class struggle, but nevertheless believed that history taught that social progress depended on disobedience, calling this “man’s original virtue” (Wilde 1912, 10). Like Morris, Wilde identified mere socialism as a progressive step towards the artistic ideal, not the end of social transformation. As he put it: “[w]e try to improve the conditions of the race by means of good air, sunlight, wholesome water, and hideous bare buildings for the better housing of the people. But these things merely produce health, they do not produce beauty” (Wilde 1889, 48).

Wilde’s concern for art and beauty was shaped by what he called individualism. He defined individualism as the possibility of realising “personality”, an understanding that linked it to labour since the majority were denied personality by the system of private property that forced them “on the brink of sheer starvation” to work as “beasts of burden” (Wilde 1912, 7). Art was “the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known” (Wilde 1912, 45). Indeed, in the past the “full expression” of personality had only ever been realised “on the imaginative plane of art” (Wilde 1912, 21). Even in the midst of private property, “Byron, Shelley, Browning, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, and others” had realised their personality “more or less completely” (Wilde 1912, 16). From here, Wilde argued that socialism was a condition in which the “Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally” might be released (Wilde 1912, 17). His general principle was that every man “must be left quite free to choose his own work. No form of compulsion must be exercised over him. If there is, his work will not be good for him, will not be good in itself, and will not be good for others” (Wilde 1912, 15). And by “work”, Wilde added, he meant “activity of any kind” (Wilde 1912, 15). There was an undoubted similarity with Morris. Yet Wilde’s claim was misleading in that his analysis did not support a strong link between any freely chosen activity and art, as the idea of pleasurable labour implied. Indeed, it was based on a clear division between unpleasant labour, on the one hand, and art on the other.

Wilde argued that the aim of socialism was to provide space for the development of “true personality of man” (Wilde 1912, 23). The words “Be thyself” would be written “[o]ver the portal of the new world” (Wilde 1912, 24). This brand of individualism, Wilde argued, did not

require private property or riches – as individualists in capitalism usually argued. But it did require an understanding (which he attributed to Christ) that the highest perfection of man was realised “entirely through what he is” (Wilde 1912, 27). The key to this condition was the attainment of inner peace and the ability to live an “untroubled life”, true to oneself and free from the judgements and interference of others (Wilde 1912, 29).

Living at odds with prevailing moral codes and flouting legal prohibitions on homosexuality, Wilde was perhaps acutely sensitive to problems of transgression and the repression of moral codes. In his literary works, this sensitivity found an outlet in the coded use of language to express “same-sex eroticism” (Koven 2006, 213). In his political writings, his defence of individualism gave rise to a generalised suspicion of public opinion. Art, he argued, “should never try to be popular” (Wilde 1912, 46). Insofar as it could be democratised, Wilde added: “The public should try to make itself artistic” (Wilde 1912, 46). Perhaps the sentiment was not so different from Morris’s: it was Morris after-all who famously told a customer critical of the lack of upholstery on his chairs, that he should seek comfort in bed, and not pester the artist to meet the whims of the consumer. And in a nod to Morris’s achievements, Wilde celebrated the promotion of the lesser arts in the 1860s as a victory for artistic creativity over popular taste (Wilde 1912, 76). Yet Wilde pushed the case for the autonomy of artists further to argue that art’s flourishing depended on the leeway artists had to free themselves from the everyday world. In “The Decay of Lying” Wilde made the case for the removal of art from life in an attack on realism. Insofar as the specific critique was concerned, Morris had little disagreement with it. Yet Wilde’s essay had a broader sweep: first, he argued, art should have nothing to do with life; second, the richness of life depended on the scope for art.

On the first point, Wilde might have shared the worry that Morris expressed at the point of his conversion to socialism, that art was no longer “a serious help to life” and had been reduced in commercial to the status of “a toy” (Morris 1994a, 123). But breaking with Morris, Wilde rebalanced what Rudolf Rucker called art’s communal and expressive element in the latter’s favour (Rucker 1978, 480). Morris’s view was that “art is and must be, either in its abundance or its barrenness, in its sincerity or its hollowness, the expression of the society amongst which it exists” (Morris 1994b, 84). In contrast Wilde argued that “[a]rt never expresses anything but itself”; that it “has an independent life” which “develops purely on its

own lines" (Wilde 1889, 55). Admittedly, this position was one that he explored as part of a dialogue in which he kept "a little apart from both sides" (Ellman 1987, 287). Yet claiming that its "fanciful form" concealed "some truths, or perhaps some great half-truths, about art" (Wilde 2000, 389) and a determination to "put his new view or art" in a form that the public "could not understand" Wilde intimated that his own position veered toward the "artistic" side of the argument (Wilde 2000, 387).

The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for art. The only beautiful things ... are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affect us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art (Wilde, 1889, 41).

Second, Wilde argued that art never imitated life and that, in fact, the reverse was true. Thus the nihilist, "that strange martyr who has not faith", was "a purely literary product ... invented by Tourgénéieff, and completed by Dostoieffski" (Wilde 1889, 48). Likewise, "Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau" (Wilde 1889, 48). If this was the case, the obvious conclusion was that art provided the means for dynamic change and social renewal; and artistic creativity fashioned social life.

Notwithstanding the implications of this view, Wilde remained committed to the democratisation of art and called for the opportunity for contemplation to be extended to all. Indeed, boldly endorsing the Greek view that "civilisation requires slaves" he predicated his own Hellenism on a new "mechanical slavery" (Wilde 1912, 42). In socialism, he argued, all the "ugly, horrible, uninteresting work" would be performed by machines (Wilde 1912, 42). Although this arrangement challenged Morris's conception of pleasurable labour and begged important questions about the sustainability of socialist art, it seemed to promise universal space for reflection and creativity. Yet a tension remained, for Wilde failed to show how the boundary between normality and transgression that the idea of artistic experimentation assumed, might be reconciled with it. As Matt Cook observes in his discussion of *The Picture*

of *Dorian Gray*, the aristocratic and bohemian figures of Wilde's imagination reaffirm the boundaries they cross by and through their transgressions (Cook 2003, 116). Similarly, in his political writings, Wilde openly embraced the possibility of an artistic people but he also at once argued that the terms of art's extension must be determined by artists and that the concept of an un-artistic people necessarily existed beyond this sphere.

Wilde's understanding of art's proper relationship to commerce and socialism was thus strongly divergent from Morris's and in a very different manner to Watts's. For Wilde, art was the medium of expression from which social life developed and not as Morris thought, the instrument through which labour is transformed; but whereas Watts's idea was to use art as a instrument to ameliorate social injustice and commercial degeneration by fostering strong social relations based on altruism, Wilde's was to realise a condition of beauty by giving free reign to artistic creativity. The division between artists and everyday life that Wilde hinted at was not based on moral cultivation. On the contrary, it was a plea for the artist to be released from moral concerns; set free to use "right and wrong indifferently as colours of his palette" (Harris 1997, 68). Disobedience was not merely directed against exploitation and the degradation of labour, it was also an individual artistic rebellion, central to self-realisation and inner peace. Art's "immense value", Wilde argued, was that it gave expression to personality by disrupting "monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (Wilde 1912, 50-1).

The political ramifications of this position were significant. In the political realm, Wilde argued that the successful extension of art required that individuals be insulated both from repressive law and from disapproval or the clucking of public opinion. Morris's view was that artists should enjoy the widest possible sphere for individual expression but that this freedom was bounded. In *News From Nowhere*, Guest is told that in what are called "merely personal" matters - "how a man shall dress, what he shall eat and drink, what he shall write and read, and so forth" - everybody is free to do "as he pleases" (Morris 2003, 75). In matters deemed to be of "common interest to the whole community", individual interests could be overridden (Morris 2003, 75). Morris's distinction between personal and common interest echoed J.S. Mill's formulation of the harm principle and the concept of self- and other-regarding action. And like Mill's principle, it was prone to difficult boundary problems. At what point did an issue

become a community concern? Morris's answer was based on his commitment to resist slavery (by which he meant wage-slavery and bondage) and his accession to a principle of deliberative democracy. Morris proposed to root the power of resistance in a "central body whose function would be ... the guardianship of the *principles* of society" (Morris 1984, 769). As to the second, his hope was that communism would support the emergence of a public or social "conscience" such that simple majoritarianism was transformed into a negotiated process (Morris 2003, 76). Conscience described an ethical commitment to negotiate differences and, in the case of irreconcilable difference, legitimise coercion. In the long term, Morris believed that in communism conscience might become sufficiently developed to make "coercion impossible"; but in the short term he acknowledged that where there was "variety of temperament, capacity, and desires ... amongst man" authority might be required to settle disputes (Morris 1996a, 64; 85-6). The example Morris gave was being forced "'for the sake of life to cast away the reasons for living": to sacrifice his own aspiration for beauty to the utilitarian wants of the majority (Morris 1996a, 63).

From Wilde's perspective, Morris left the artist in a precarious position. The formal protections he envisaged in communism did not guarantee that artists would be protected from the law and his conviction that art was constrained primarily by class divisions rather than social mores meant he was unable to offer guarantees against the possibility of social ostracism. Eric Gill's questioning of the limits of art provides a useful illustration of the limits of Morris's idea. "[P]ornographic photographs", Gill argued "are generally photographs of things very good in themselves" (Gill 1940, 97). What, then, could be "wrong with a naked girl that you shouldn't look at a photograph of one? What's wrong with sexual intercourse that a picture of it should be considered damnable?" (Gill 1940, 97) Morris's community might conceivably decide that Gill's art was an instance of slavery or simply an other-regarding act of relevance to the community. Either way, the activity could legitimately be constrained. It was possible that working within the diverse social context that Morris imagined, the community might have learned to tolerate the widest possible range of activities, treat the art as self-regarding, resist interference and bear the costs of potential offence. Alternatively, the success of the social conscience in overcoming the need for coercion raised the possibility that the Gills in Nowhere might assimilate prevailing norms and repress personality for fear of

disapproval. If so, the harmonious working of the art of the people militated against the liberation of Wildean socialist souls. And if Wilde was right about the consequences of this failure, there was a possibility that the transcendence of work through art might in fact lead to the death of art rather than its re-birth. Once liberated from the ugliness of commerce, they risked being smothered by the harmony of the earthly paradise.

Conclusion

From a similar concern with the ugliness of commercial society, Morris, Watts and Wilde developed very different conceptions of art and socialism. For Morris, the aim of art was to give all people pleasure in labour. Art provided a foundation for social life in common, empowering individuals to express their creativity in everyday activity and encouraging contemplation in production to realise beauty in the mundane. Watts associated art with cultivation. Artists had a duty to foster altruism by encouraging reflection on the mysterious essence of the world. For Wilde, art was a vehicle for creative self-expression which offered individuals a means of challenging social norms so that they could define who they were and live comfortably in the world. Watts's moral conception of art highlighted the apparent latitude that Morris was willing to give artists in communism, Wilde's individualism instead suggested its limits. Morris might quite rightly have found both Watts's and Wilde's positions attractive, yet his own stance meant that he could not reconcile all the various strands of their arguments with his own. Morris's aestheticism asserted the centrality and power of art and beauty in social life, but unlike Watts, it was premised on the belief that this power belonged with us all and unlike Wilde, it insisted on art's necessarily moral and social function (Koven 2006, 230). What did the choices he made imply?

The essay started off asking three questions: how did Morris conceive the possible or legitimate constraints on art? What did the art of the people imply for individual expression or the autonomy of artists? And what were artists expected to sacrifice in struggling against capitalism? The answers are complex. Morris's expectation was that art in communism would be dynamic. Movements of people and cultural shifts suggested that it would be diverse and open to change. He shared a commitment to artistic expression but rejecting the possibility that art could *degenerate* in craft work he argued that the cultivation that Watts associated

with high art could survive the abolition of the division of artistic and un-artistic labour. Similarly, unlike Wilde he did not define autonomy as a form of rebelliousness or reflect on the problems of dislocation and the pressures of conformity that Wilde's thought highlighted: there were limits to experimentation. In seeking to abandon the division between the high and lesser arts, Morris did not set his face against cultivation, genius or particular talent – technique remained primary and the status of art did not depend on the artist's intention, moral or political. Morris targeted the power relationships that existed between the few designated as artists and the aristocratic or commercial elites. Whereas both Watts and Wilde hinted at the desirability of preserving special role for individuals of particular talent or vision, albeit for different reasons, Morris saw no difficulty in leaving questions of cultural improvement and experimental expression to the good sense of the common people. In his view, the threat of degeneration came principally from corruption bred by patronage: the desire to amplify the power of ruling elites, satisfy the vanity of the rich, and feed the vulgar tastes of the middle class. The apparent autonomy that artists had won in the modern age was easily outstripped by the general dependence of art on the whims of the idle rich and the compromises and affectation of culture that this entailed (Sennett 2008, 73). The choice, as Morris saw it, was between the preservation of the freedom of the few and the exploitation of the majority, which meant the death of art, and the construction of a social space in which everyone was able to realise their creative potential, within the limits of their talent. Casting the choice in these terms and seeing no other gap between artists and audiences that art might fill, he called on fellow artists to fight for art's destruction, perhaps not fully appreciating the sacrifices he was asking them to make.

I'd like to thank Vincent Geoghegan, Laurence Davis and Anna Vaninskaya for comments on an earlier draft of this essay and Wendy Parkins for her thoughtful suggestions for improvement. Davis' treatment of Morris and Wilde ("Everyone an artist: art, labour, anarchy and utopia") inspired part of the analysis presented here, though he takes a different view of the relationship between Morris and Wilde.

References

- Angelou, Maya. 1998. *Even The Stars Look Lonesome*. London: Virago.
- Bateman, Charles T. 1902. *G.F. Watts*. London: George Bell. [Facsimilie edn. Elibron Classics 2006].
- Chesterton, G.K. 1914. *G.F. Watts*. London: Duckworth.
- Cole, G.D.H. 1974. *A History of Socialist Thought, vol. II, Marxism and Anarchism 1850-90*. London: Macmillan.
- Cook, Matt. 2003. *London and the Culture of Homosexuality 1885-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crane, Walter. 1911. *William Morris to Whistler: Papers and Addresses On Art and Craft and the Commonweal*. London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd.
- Davis, Laurence. 2009. "Everyone an artist: art, labour, anarchy and utopia". In Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna eds. *Anarchism and Utopianism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ellman, Richard. 1987. *Oscar Wilde*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gaunt, William. 1942. *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Geoghegan, Vincent. 2008. 'Pandora's Box: Reflections on a Myth', *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 9 (1): 24-41.
- Gill, Eric. 1940. *Autobiography*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Ginsborg, Paul. 2005. *The Politics of Everyday Life: Making Choices, Changing Lives*. New Haven: London: Yale University Press.
- Harris, Frank. 1997. *Oscar Wilde*. London: Robinson Publishing.
- Kinna, Ruth. 2000. "William Morris: Art, Work and Leisure". *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61 (3): 493-512.
- Knight, William. 1910. *Nineteenth Century Artists English and French*. Edinburgh: Otto Schulze and Company.
- Koven, Seth. 2006. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Morris, William. 1969. *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris* ed. Eugene D. LeMire. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

- Morris, William. 1984. *The Collected Letters of William Morris* vol. II: 1885-1888. Norman Kelvin ed. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Morris, William. 1994a. *Hopes and Fears For Art*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Morris, William. 1994b. *Signs of Change*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Morris, William. 1996. "Preface" to *Arts and Crafts Essays*. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Morris, William. 1996a. *The Collected Letters of William Morris* vol. III: 1889-1892. Norman Kelvin ed. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Morris, William. 2003. *News From Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morris, William and Bax, Ernest Belfort. 1994. *Socialism From the Root Up*. In *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commnweal 1883-1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon
Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Read, Herbert. 1964. *Contemporary British Art*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Rocker, Rudolf. 1978. *Nationalism and Culture* trans. Ray E. Chase. Minnesota: Michael E. Coughlin.
- Sennett, Richard. 2008. *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane.
- Stewart, David. 2004. 'Watts, The Royal Academy and Leighton in Conflict'. In Veronica Gould ed. *The Vision of G.F. Watts OM RA (1817-1904)*. Watts Gallery.
- Summers, Leigh. 2001. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Oxford: Berg.
- Watts, George Frederick. 1880. "The Present Conditions of Art", *The Nineteenth Century*, 7 (36): 235-55.
- Watts, George Frederick. 1896. "Preface" to H.D. Rawnsley, *Ballads of Brave Deeds*.
London: J.M. Dent & Co.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1889. 'The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue'. *The Nineteenth Century* 8 (149): 35-56.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1912. *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. London: Arthur L. Humphreys.
- Wilde, Oscar. 2000. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis eds. London: Fourth Estate.