

THE LIVING LANGUAGE OF WILLIAM MORRIS

1

From the first publication of the late prose romances of William Morris, reviewers reacted violently against their prose style. E. P. Thompson, in perhaps the most important work on Morris of recent years, quotes the *Pall Mall Gazette*, with its clumsy and inept parody of *The Roots of the Mountains* — a parody which in fact fails to perceive the fundamental quality of Morris's prose.¹ Similar objections remain and are frequently repeated, even by those who are most anxious to justify William Morris. Philip Henderson, for example, speaks in his Introduction to the *Letters* of the "artificially archaic prose" of these "long prose romances", which are "very nearly unreadable to-day",² thus echoing the attitude of the *Pall Mall Gazette* both as regards style and matter. One of the most recent writers on Morris, Paul Thompson,³ goes even further, refusing any value or relevance to most of the late romances and taking particular exception to the language. On the other hand, those who find praise and comprehension for the late prose romances, such as Shaw, Yeats, Saintsbury, May Morris, Page Arnot, C. S. Lewis, A. L. Morton, Lionel Munby,⁴ in general accept the style as appropriate to the purpose. This may suggest that in fact what some critics find objectionable is the purpose of Morris's writing; the style, being the appropriate, essential vehicle for the thought, and thus necessarily as much out of the common run as the thought itself, came in for immediate condemnation as the

¹ Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, London, 1955, p. 786, footnote.

² Philip Henderson (ed.), *The Letters of W. Morris*, London, 1950, p. lxii.

³ Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*, London, 1967, p. 158, seq.

⁴ See esp. G. B. Shaw, "Morris As I Knew Him", in May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, London, 1936, Vol. II; W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London, 1926; George Saintsbury, *The History of English Prose Rhythm*, London, second impression, 1922; May Morris, in *W. Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, and Introductions to individual romances in *Collected Works of W. Morris*, ed. May Morris; Page Arnot, *W. Morris, The Man and the Myth*, London, 1964; C. S. Lewis, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, London, 1939; A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, London, 1952; Lionel Munby, "W. Morris' Romances and the Society of the Future", *Zeitschrift f. Anglistik u. Amerikanistik*, Berlin, XI, 1962.

easiest and most obvious way of condemning the thought along with it.

In any case, the bulk of Morris's prose writing is so considerable, and what he said of such importance to his own and to future times, that it is necessary to devote some attention to the English prose style whereby he expressed himself.

One of Morris's most consistent and informed admirers was George Saintsbury.⁵ Saintsbury's appreciation was based on his detailed analysis of Morris's language and form in the context of his, Saintsbury's, profound and apparently limitless knowledge of English poetry and prose. He contrasts the prose of the late romances with the intentionally poetic prose of De Quincey or Pater, "both of whom deliberately endeavour to put non-metre on a level with metre". Though Morris's prose is "written by a poet who was a quite exceptional master of metre", yet "there is less that is decidedly metrical about it" than there is in De Quincey or Pater. "The medium 'comes', as the gardeners say 'true' . . . It is a real *mimesis* of its original, and not a mere stealing, copying, or 'faking' of an imitation of another kind". "It is part also of the 'truth' of the revival that there are few distinctly purple passages . . . The rhythm is simply narrative or conversational with the due tone and colour of romance thrown in." "It is quite pure and continuous prose, though exquisitely, however quietly, musical".⁶

The writer of one of the best and most thorough recent examinations of English prose, Ian A. Gordon, in his study *The Movement of English Prose*, published in London in 1966, devotes less consideration to Morris than did Saintsbury. In his final analysis, Gordon distinguishes by the end of the 18th century three styles which "have remained the basis for virtually all later writers". These were the "speech-based prose"—the central tradition—"to which the present-day reader can return with little fear of meeting archaism or obsolescence", secondly, the "prose of neo-Quintilian rhetoric, which was to provide the model for most 'serious' writing in the nineteenth century". This "demands a parity of background between writer and reader", and "has remained the source of much prose of dubious acceptability". The third variety is "the prose which I have called romantic, though its limits extend well beyond any normal definition of the romantic period. In contradistinction to the other two styles, it is marked by the continuous use of syntactical and metaphoric devices, designed to excite an affective response". "Of the three it has in the past century and a half been subjected to the greatest degree of variation and experiment. The process is still going on, with the result that the criteria by which one may judge romantic prose are still not easy to determine".⁷

We are thus faced at the outset with one major difficulty—the decision as to what, if any, accepted variety of English prose William Morris wrote, and this difficulty arises from the ambiguity of the whole theoretical position with regard to English prose style. However, this is not the only difficulty. We cannot study the prose of Morris's late romances (which has

⁵ See *The History of English Prose Rhythm*, London, 2nd imp., 1922.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 433–436.

⁷ Gordon. *op. cit.*, p. 152.

most commonly been subjected to criticism) apart from the prose which he wrote in other contexts. On the contrary, if we are to arrive at a just opinion of the prose of the romances, we must compare it to the other varieties of prose employed by Morris in the course of his maturing as a writer.

I would suggest that the absence of such a comparison is perhaps the only lack in Swannell's excellent study, *William Morris and Old Norse Literature*, in which he demonstrates that the prose of the romances derives "transmuted" from the style which Morris worked out to translate the sagas.⁸ I tentatively suggest the following categories of prose style which can be found in Morris's published work. Firstly we have the utilitarian, that of the most general workaday communication, to be found in letters and notes dealing with purely practical matters, perhaps in some letters to the press; secondly, the informal, friendly, frequently humorous, unguarded style, expressive of immediate and often emotional reaction, to be found in his letters to family and friends, recorded conversation, diaries, odd scraps of notes. We may expect this to approximate to the first category of Gordon, the tradition lying closest to common speech. Thirdly we have prose of intellectual content, intended either to convey abstract information exactly, or else to convince. This we may expect to find in his more serious or formal personal letters, letters to acquaintances or unknown persons, letters to the press, his lectures and articles on art and on socialism, his manifestos, and the expository parts of his prose fiction. Fourthly, the language of his translations, especially of the sagas, may be considered separately, and finally we have the prose which he intended to fulfil the highest purpose of art and to achieve the complete synthesis of form and content, the prose which we find in his late romances, but which also occurs in parts of his lectures and even, in places, in his letters. Perhaps by examining samples of these various kinds, we may arrive at some general conclusions about the nature of Morris's prose.

It will also be necessary to consider Morris's prose as it developed in the course of his life. For a man whose early letters make such interesting reading, and among whose early creative works were the prose romances published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Morris was exceedingly diffident and modest about his own prose. He considered that the writing of poetry came naturally to him (this must not be confused with the mistaken idea that his poetry was written without effort or thought.)⁹ His first serious attempt to write a prose which he was willing to place on an aesthetic level, as an equivalent to poetry, came with his struggles to achieve a vehicle for the translations of the Icelandic sagas which he began with Magnússon in 1868. As Magnússon says of this prose style, "It is not 'pseudo-Middle-English', as some critics have thought. It is his own, the result of an endeavour by a scholar and a man of genius to

⁸ J. N. Swannell, *W. Morris and Old Norse Literature*, W. Morris Society, London, 1961, p. 20.

⁹ Cf. my critical review, "Some Remarks on E. P. Thompson's Opinion of the Poetry of W. Morris", *Philologica Pragensia*, No. 3, Prague, 1960.

bring about such harmony between the Teutonic element in English and the language of the Icelandic saga as the not very abundant means at his command would allow... That Morris's style generally has affected written English will hardly be denied".¹⁰ J. N. Swannell, in the sympathetic study of Morris's language just mentioned, arrives at the conclusion that Morris's style of translation is a hindrance, rather than a help to the modern reader, but that "the labour of translation... was not wasted. Morris steeped himself in the literature and language of Old Norse, and was able to transmute it into the strange and wonderful prose romances of his later years, where the style—so much a part of Morris, yet so utterly at variance with the spirit of the sagas—finds its true home".¹¹ Now, while it is true that the language of the prose romances owes much to the discipline of the saga translations, this is not the whole story. Morris had been fighting to develop what he considered to be an adequate prose style at least since the creatively critical years at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, as we may see from his letter of 1872 to Mrs. Alfred Baldwin: "Herewith I send by book-post my abortive novel... since you wish to read it, I am sorry 'tis such a rough copy, which roughness sufficiently indicates my impatience at having to deal with prose".¹²

In fact, the prose of the late romances, which must be considered as forming a large part of the artistic achievement of these works, was not merely the result of his saga translations. It was the culmination of all the levels of all his prose writing throughout his life.

This prose was as much a part of him and as natural to him as his own particular ways of thinking. Even the most utilitarian of his letters rarely stays on the level of mere communication; here he is for example in 1861 writing to the Rev. F. G. Guy, his former tutor, a request for a list of clergymen who might patronize his new Firm, dealing in passing a typical Morrisian blow: "You see we are, or consider ourselves to be, the only really artistic firm of the kind, the others being only glass painters in point of fact... or else that curious nondescript mixture of clerical tailor and decorator that flourishes in Southampton Street, Strand; whereas we shall do—most things".¹³ The final phrase is also typical in its flung-away piece of modesty and understatement, which calls to mind Shaw's remark: "Morris was a very great literary artist: his stories and essays and letters no less than his poems are tissues of words as fine as the carpet on the ceiling; but he was quite often at a loss for a critical word in dealing with some uncongenial modern thing. On such occasions I would hand him the appropriate adjective and he would grab at it with a gasp of relief. It was like giving a penny to a millionaire who had bought a newspaper and found his pockets empty".¹⁴ Perhaps it was not only with regard to uncongenial modern things that this block occurred;

¹⁰ From Magnússon's own account, specially written for May Morris and published by her in the Intro. to *Grettir the Strong, Works*, Vol. VII, p. xviii.

¹¹ Swannell, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹² *Letters*, p. 46—47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴ G. B. Shaw, "Morris As I Knew Him", p. xii.

we find it, too, sometimes, when he is writing about things which, either artistically or personally, are very near the bone: "The separate parcel, paged 1 to 6, was a desperate dash at the middle of the story to try to give it life when I felt it failing: it begins with the letter of the elder brother to the younger on getting his letter telling him how he was going to bid for the girl in marriage," comes from the above-quoted letter of 1871 on his abortive novel,¹⁵ and many similar almost evasive under-statements can be gleaned from letters and records of conversation. One of the most poignant of his letters, quite, perhaps, without any literary form apart from the bare bones of statement, typical in their practicality, he writes to Ford Madox Brown, whose wife had been attending Mrs. Morris in her first confinement: "My dear Brown, Kid having appeared, Mrs. Brown kindly says she will stay till Monday, when you are to come to fetch her, please. I send a list of trains in evening to Abbey Wood met by bus, viz., from London Bridge, 2.20 p.m., 6.0 p.m., and 7.15 p.m. Janey and kid (girl) are both very well."¹⁶ There was of course not the slightest trace of off-handedness in Morris's actual attitude to his family, which the casual language might suggest, but deep feeling, whether about life or art, especially when it had to be expressed in prose, tended to reduce Morris to inarticulateness. I would suggest that this block sprang at least in part from his recognition of the inadequacy of contemporary, current language. We may recall his condemnation of Wagnerian opera—"the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedle-deeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express".¹⁷ Rather than use the outworn currency of "educated" speech, he preferred in self-defence an offhand slang.¹⁸

But when Morris found himself in a situation where his deepest feelings as well as his profoundest thoughts had to be fully communicated,¹⁹ then he forced himself to find a language at once sufficiently simple and sufficiently sophisticated to express his meaning and to reach his audience. This is the language of his socialist lectures, his socialist romances, and his fantastic romances, which, I should like to show, is basically one language, allowing for the different purpose of the literary kinds in question.

2

We can see that this interpenetration of the most business-like communications, hard-fact statements, feeling for the beauty of inanimate things, insistence on desirable propriety in things for daily use, historical

¹⁵ Cf. *supra*, n. 12.

¹⁶ *Letters*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Letter to H. Buxton Forman, Nov., 1873, *Letters*, p. 61.

¹⁸ In fact, this was rather a tendency of the "Brotherhood" as a whole. The beautiful girls who became models for Rossetti and others were "stunners".

¹⁹ Fully communicated, because he intended his words to lead to informed action on the part of his hearers.

perspective, love of adventure, and flair for what was important and fundamental, along with the assumption of a sympathetic hearer which was the basis of Morris's friendships and personal relationships, can be traced throughout the whole fabric of the letters, from the earliest to the latest, from the most personal and unselfconscious to the most public and deliberate.

In 1849, aged 15, he wrote to his sister Emma about his visits to Avebury and Silbury Hill:

"On Tuesday morning I was told of this so I thought I would go there again, I did and then I was able to understand how they [the stones] had been fixed; I think the biggest stone I could see had about 16 feet out of the ground in height and about 10 feet thick and 12 feet broad the circle and entrenchment altogether is about half a mile... after we had scrambled through this meadow we ascended Silbury Hill it is not very high but yet I should think it must have taken an immense long time to have got it together I brought away a little white snail shell as a memento of the place and have got it in my pocket book I came back at 1/2 past 5 the distance was altogether about 14 miles I had been out 3 hours 1/2 of course Monday and Tuesday were whole holidays. As [you] are going to send me the cheese perhaps you would get Sarah to make me a good large cake and I should also like some biscuits and will you also send me some paper and postage stamps also my silk-worms eggs and if you could get an Italian pen box for that big box is too big for school..."²⁰ which after all contains a large proportion of the human elements and motifs which form the specific individuality of the prose romances; however greatly these are enriched by the study and knowledge and thought and human relationships of almost half a century, the quality of life, the vitality, remain constant, and certainly something of the prose rhythm, too.

I have selected two further examples from the prose of mere communication, one of 1877 and a later one of 1888. The first, a purely business letter to Thomas Wardle, the dyer, about engaging a French brocader, passes from the severely practical, with details of the contract, to: "The tapestry is a bright dream indeed... I have had it in my head lately, because there is a great sale on in Paris... much too splendid for anybody save the biggest pots to buy. Meantime much may be done in carpets: I saw yesterday a piece of ancient Persian... that fairly threw me on my back: I had no idea that such wonders could be done in carpets..."²¹ We need not doubt here that the characteristically Morrisian turns of phrase: "bright dream indeed", "great sale", "save the biggest pots", "Meantime much may be done", "fairly threw me on my back"—where we may presume most of his contemporaries would have expressed themselves differently—were used without any deliberation, that this in fact was the way he naturally expressed himself. To trace the precise origins of this language, in the letters just quoted so obviously the echo of the writer's speech, is perhaps impossible, since they must lie deep in the speech traditions of his own family and in his own most familiar early reading,

²⁰ *Letters*, p. 4-5.

²¹ *Letters*, p. 89.

based ultimately on the Bible, probably Bunyan, and certainly Scott,²² whom he read at a very early age, and later strongly influenced by Ruskin, whom he loved to read aloud.²³

Even at its most utilitarian, when Morris was replying to perhaps troublesome queries, this bare style was at the same time a loaded one, with the sheer weight of information it conveyed, nothing put in deliberately for effect, but the fullness of statement demanding a certain way of expression:

"The book which I have in the press is called *The House of the Wolfings*. It is the story of the life of the Gothic tribes on their way through Middle Europe, and their first meeting with the Romans in war. It is meant to illustrate the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes: I mean apart from the artistic side of things that is its moral—if it has one. It is written partly in prose and partly in verse: but the verse is always spoken by the actors in the tale, though they do not always talk verse; much of it is in the Sagas, though it cannot be said to be performed on their model."²⁴ This paragraph from a letter to T. J. Wise of 1888 contains more information about the purpose and sources of the *House of the Wolfings* than much criticism. In fact, it tells us all we need to know of the writer's purpose.

The same stylistic characteristics persist throughout his life in those intimate letters, written certainly without deliberate desire for effect, but with the need to convey his immediate experiences to those who knew and loved him best. In 1887, from the midst of his exhausting propaganda and agitation for socialism, he writes to his wife from Scotland: "... On Saturday we went to Coatbridge and held an open air meeting there; 'tis an iron working place where at night the flaring furnaces put out the moon and stars: the men are seldom out of work there; but work 7 days a week in this Devil's Den: Sunday working not seeming to hurt the Scottish conscience though Sunday playing does. There we were in rivalry with the Salvation Army and a cheap-jack, but had a good meeting only disturbed by a drunken Irish man, who insisted with many oaths on our telling him the difference between a Home-Ruler and a non-Home-Ruler, and swore by Christ that he would teach us Socialism he would: but the crowd soon put him down. All this we did by star and furnace light, which was strange and even dreadful."²⁵

Here there is no lack of keeping between the humorous observation, irony, trenchant thought, and image of moon, star and furnace, while the rhythm and word-order, if not exactly that of speech, is certainly not "literary" language, certainly does not belong to or indeed have anything in common with the second category of Gordon, and while its images are doubtless indebted to the romantic tradition, it is still closest to the first

²² Cf. J. W. Mackail, *The Life of W. Morris*, one-vol. ed., London, 1922, account of early childhood, and also W. Morris, *The Lesser Arts of Life. Works*, Vol. XXIII, p. 85.

²³ Cf. Morris, *Works* XXII, Intro. by May Morris, p. xxvii.

²⁴ *Letters*, p. 302.

²⁵ *Letters*, p. 270-271.

category, the category based on speech, however more distinguished it is than the rubbed-down coin of normal daily intercourse.²⁶

We can see something of the development of Morris's prose if we compare a distinctly purple patch from his early letters with later passages dealing with similar experience. In 1855 he wrote to his intimate student friend Cormell Price from Normandy a long letter describing his travels:

"So gloriously the trees are grouped, all manner of trees, but more especially the graceful poplars and aspens, of all kinds; and the hedgeless fields of grain, and beautiful herbs that they grow for forage whose names I don't know, the most beautiful fields I ever saw yet, looking as if they belonged to no man, as they were planted not to be cut down in the end, and to be stored in barns and eaten by the cattle, but that rather they were planted for their beauty only, that they might grow always among the trees, mingled with the flowers, purple thistles, and blue corn-flowers, and red poppies, growing together with the corn round the roots of the fruit trees, in their shadows, and sweeping up to the brows of the long low hills till they reached the sky, changing sometimes into long fields of vines, or delicate, lush green forage; and they all looked as if they would grow there for ever, as if they had always grown there, without change of seasons, knowing no other time than the early August."²⁷

While this is undisciplined "Pre-Raphaelitism" in its enthusiasm, nevertheless it contains not only typical features of observation and emphasis, but also typical stylistic features such as inversion, rhythmically cumulative sentences and phrases, the delicate melodic line.²⁸ We may contrast it, however, with a considerably later letter of his mature years, written in 1878 to Mrs. Burne-Jones from Verona:

"'Tis a piping hot day, not a cloud in the sky. I have just been into Sta Anastasia,, which is hard by: a very beautiful church, but appeals less to the heart than the head, and somehow doesn't satisfy that: also though 'tis meant to be exceedingly Gothic and pointed, it is thoroughly neo-classical in feeling... Many times I think of the first time I ever went abroad, and to Rouen, and what a wonder of glory that was to me when I first came upon the front of the Cathedral rising above the flower-market... Even the inside of St. Mark's gave one rather deep

²⁶ Morris throughout his writings shows a preference for the contraction "'tis". Perhaps this is one of the details leading to the charge of artificiality, literariness. But is it not rather a persistent echo of dialect usage from boyhood? A variant which Morris felt was closer to the roots of English?

²⁷ *Letters*, p. 12.

²⁸ The melodic development strongly recalls a passage from *The House of the Wolfings* describing Hall-Sun sitting by the hall door: "She had been working in the acres, and her hand was yet on the hoe she had been using, and but for her face her body was of one resting after toil: her dark blue gown was ungirded, her dark hair loose and floating, the flowers that had wreathed it, now faded, lying strewn upon the grass before her: her feet bare for coolness' sake, her left hand lying loose and open upon her knee.

Yet though her body otherwise looked thus listless, in her face was no listlessness, nor rest: her eyes were alert and clear, shining like two stars in the heavens of dawntide; her lips were set close, her brow knit, as of one striving to shape thoughts hard to understand into words that all might understand." (*Works*, XIV, p. 75.)

satisfaction, and rest for the eyes, than that strange exaltation of spirits, which I remember of old in France, and which the mountains give me yet."²⁹

Here, mere description has been subordinated to communication, and this in turn has disciplined not only image but also style. Even more typical of the development of Morris's prose is a still later letter to Philip Webb of 1891 from Laon:

"... I did not see the inside of the cloisters, because I quarrelled with the sacristan who wanted to sell me photos as soon as I came into the church, telling him I didn't want photos of restored churches: so he said he was going away until next Saturday. The outside of the cloisters are in the street and have little dwellings of folk in them, so they are unrestored: nothing could be more beautiful: we saw them this morning with the market people sitting up against them, like old times."³⁰

In this whole letter we see the mental discipline of selection of what is essential, combined with Morris's self-critical wry humour (we can imagine the course of his quarrel with the sacristan) and the immediate consolation he can find in the humanity of the "little dwellings of folk" and of the "market people" in their traditional place.

Still more suggestive of the elements which made up Morris's style is the very disciplined, taut prose, which he could use most readily when he knew that the recipient was in sympathy, was in fact waiting for what he had to say:

"Now for local news: the waters are out a little, owing to the melting snow. It is a cold rather windy day, but not unpleasant, brilliantly sunny at first; now cloudy with gleams of sun at times. It froze last night; but took to a sharp shower in the morning. As to the house, it seems in good order. The green-room has had its rotten woodwork removed, and smells mouldy no longer; the whole house is clean and neat,"³¹ he wrote in February, 1892, from Kelmscott to his daughter Jennie.

Even when his last illness had broken down his great strength, the letters he wrote with his last effort of will betray nothing of the prolixity we might associate with illness and increasing age. They confine themselves strictly to the bare bones of communication—even the most intimate.³² The sparsity and economy of style, saying nothing but what had to be communicated, which is to be found in his very earliest letters, had overcome the immature tendency to romantic lushness present in some of his writings of his student years, and had become second nature. It is on this sparseness and economy, however wonderfully transformed, that the prose of the romances is based.

3

When we come to the prose which was to be a vehicle of conviction, we again find a distinct connection between the early and late

²⁹ *Letters*, p. 124.

³⁰ *Letters*, p. 345-346.

³¹ *Letters*, p. 347.

³² Last letters to Philip Webb and to his daughter Jennie, *Letters*, p. 385.

methods—whether it lies in selection of vocabulary, selection of concepts, structure of sentences, turn of thought of whole paragraphs, the sense of fun which is interwoven with the whole texture, and the unconquerable seriousness inherent in the whole mental process lying behind it, either for purposes of family discussion or public indignation. In November, 1855, he wrote from Oxford a very important letter to his mother which marks a decision fundamental to his whole career: he is explaining formally his decision to give up Holy Orders, and at the same time feels he has been too abrupt in personal contact:

“... You said then, you remember, and said very truly, that it was an evil thing to be an idle objectless man; I am fully determined not to incur this reproach, I was so then, though I did not tell you at the time all I thought of... I wish now to be an architect... I think I can imagine some of your objections, reasonable ones too, to this profession—I hope I shall be able to relieve them. First I suppose you think that you have as it were thrown away money on my kind of apprenticeship for the Ministry; let your mind be easy on this score; for, in the first place, an University education fits a man about as much for being a ship-captain as a Pastor of souls: besides your money has by no means been thrown away, if the love of friends faithful and true, friends first seen and loved here, if this love is something priceless, and not to be bought again anywhere and by any means.”³³

Even at this period, when his principles were still in process of formation, we see the love of the concrete and the cast of mind which conceives the world in terms of man's work and so assumes that education is in fact an apprenticeship, this in turn enabling him to perceive and rate at their actual value the pretences of Oxford. So, thirty years later, thinking back again to those Oxford years which meant so much to him, and yet which never blinded him to the truth of the end and function of Oxford in the Establishment world, he wrote to the *Daily News*:

“I have just read your too true article on the vulgarization of Oxford and I wish to ask if it is too late to appeal to the mercy of the ‘Dons’ to spare the few specimens of ancient town architecture which they have not yet had time to destroy, such, for example, as the little plaster houses in front of Trinity College or the beautiful houses left on the north side of Holywell Street. These are in their way as important as the more majestic buildings to which all the world makes pilgrimage... The present theory of the use to which Oxford should be put appears to be that it should be used as a huge upper public school for fitting lads of the upper and middle class for their laborious future of living on other people's labour. For my part I do not think this a lofty conception of the function of a University; but if it be the only admissible one nowadays, it is at least clear that it does not need the history and art of our forefathers which Oxford still holds to develop it. London, Manchester, Birmingham, or perhaps a rising city of Australia would be a fitter place for the experiment, which it seems to me is too rough a one for Oxford. In sober truth,

³³ *Letters*, p. 15.

what speciality has Oxford if it is not the genius loci which our modern commercial dons are doing their best to destroy?"³⁴

The criticism of society has become sharper, the irony more pointed, but the questions at issue and their graphic representation have not changed their direct and uncompromising basic nature.

4

In spite of his various diatribes against the unfamiliarity or difficulty of writing in prose, Morris certainly never made the mistake of thinking that prose was a less worthy medium than verse. On the contrary, all his prose utterances, whether oral or written, from the least to the most formal, were subjected, as I have tried to show by the selection offered here, to an aesthetic selective process which was second nature, in that its functioning at the lowest level was apparently unconscious, that is to say, he would express himself with this characteristic selection of vocabulary and syntax even under the greatest emotional stress, whether private or public—for Morris's public emotions, regarding what he considered to be the common weal, were no less direct and unaffected than were his innermost private feelings.

However, we know that two developments in his life obliged him to come to grips with this prose style in the endeavour to forge it into a deliberate weapon of artistic power. The first development was his work with Magnússon on the Icelandic translations (1868 on), the second, his struggle to express his ideas on art and on socialism when he entered practical politics. The first, which was an attempt to render ideas and a way of life which for that time were foreign to the whole Victorian cultural and social background, resulted as far as the translations go, in an exotic and not readily acceptable language. The current tendency in English translation is to demand a level of language which stresses the nearness, the common experience to that of everyday modern life of whatever is being translated, emphasising the relevance to today and here in whatever is ancient or foreign. It is true that much of the usual 19th-century run-of-the-mill translations perpetrated in the second of Gordon's styles actually set up yet another block between the present-day reader and the original. And yet the argument for the plain, throw-away modern style is not the only one. C. S. Lewis, in addressing a Conference of Classical Teachers in Cambridge in 1956 condemned the current tendency to regard "archaism and poetic diction" as "cardinal sins". "It was almost, he complained, as if there were a set of people who did not want the modern man to know there had once been a language different from our own."³⁵ The only real danger implied in Morris's style in the Icelandic translations was surely that anyone else might think he could

³⁴ *Letters*, p. 243.

³⁵ Quoted in the *Scottish Educational Journal*, 15th August, 1958.