Morris and Yeats

by Peter Faulkner

The generous personality of William Morris made a lasting impression on many of those whom he met, and they carried his personal influence, as an inspiration, into the twentieth century. Of these, many were in sympathy with the whole of Morris' outlook, sharing his Socialist convictions: Bernard Shaw, as Mr Stokes interestingly showed in the first number of this Journal, stands in that kind of relationship to Morris. But there were others, of whom the Irish poet W. B. Yeats is a striking example, who admired Morris without sharing his Socialism.

When Yeats first came to London in 1887, he was only twenty-two, while Morris was a well-established figure as poet, craftsman and social critic. Morris befriended Yeats, entertained him at Kelmscott House, and encouraged him to write. Consequently whenever Yeats came to write about Morris in later years, long after he had broken with what seemed to him the soulless materialism of the Socialist League, he did so with warmth and affection. The review of The Well at the World's End soon after Morris' death in 1896, the 1903 essay entitled 'The Happiest of the Poets', and above all the vivid portrait of Morris in the autobiographical volume Four Years in 1921, all show the same feeling for the humanity and vitality of Morris. It is interesting therefore to review the relationship of the two men, asking where the basis of it lay.

The most obvious link between the two men is that suggested by Yeats' anecdote of having met Morris soon after publishing his first volume of poetry, The Wanderings of Oisin, in 1889:

"You write my sort of poetry", he said and began to praise me and to promise to send his praise to the Commonweal ... and would have said more had he not caught sight of a cast-iron lamp-post and got very heated on that subject'.

Certainly there is a similarity of mood between the early poems of Yeats and much of Morris' verse: in both there is the late-Romantic tendency to the picturesque rather than the dramatic, the dreamy rather than the intense. Yet it is impossible to narrow
down the Pre-Raphaelite influence on Yeats specifically to Morris, whose poems he nowhere speaks of in detail. And as early as 1891 Yeats was praising another Irish poet, Katharine Tynan, for turning from the tapestry-like scenes of Rossetti and his imitators to the Clondalkin fields and the Dublin hills. This realistic impulse, which had a nationalist basis, led Yeats' poetry a long way from the late-Romantic tradition in which he began, and thus a long way from Morris.

Indeed, the most interesting of Yeats' comments on Morris' poetry are those in which he shows an awareness of its limitations. The criticism is most fully and thoughtfully made in 1906, in an essay entitled 'Literature and the Living Voice':

'Modern literature, above all poetical literature, is monotonous in its structure and effeminate in its continual insistence upon certain moments of strained lyricism. William Morris, who did more than any modern to recover medieval art, did not in his "Earthly Paradise" copy from Chaucer, from whom he copied so much that was naive and beautiful, what seems to me essential in Chaucer's art. He thought of himself as writing for the reader, who could return to him again and again when the chosen mood had come, and became monotonous, melancholy, too continuously lyrical in his understanding of emotion and of life. Had he accustomed himself to read out his poems upon those Sunday evenings that he gave to Socialist speeches, and to gather an audience of average men, precisely such an audience as I have often seen in his house, he would have been forced to Chaucer's variety, to his delight in the height and depth, and would have found expression for that humorous, many-sided nature of his.'

That Morris' poetry, with its relaxed rhythms and monotony of effect, did not express 'that humorous, many-sided nature of his', is the limitation which subsequent critics have noted. Yeats became aware of it by 1906, at an early stage of his development from a Pre-Raphaelite into a recognisably 'modern' poet. Thus it is important not to over-emphasise the influence of Morris as a poet. Indeed, even when he is telling of Morris' literary achievement, Yeats normally gives more attention and praise to the prose-romances.

In the sphere of social ideas, however, Morris exerted a much stronger influence. Yeats must have been familiar with the main lines of Morris' thought from his attendance at the Socialist League. Indeed in 1921, he wrote that he had 'turned Socialist because of Morris' lectures and pamphlets'. But this is surely a retrospective hyperbole. In fact, the nearest Yeats came to being a Socialist is suggested in a letter of 1887 - 'though I think Socialism good work, I am not sure that it is my work'. Never-
theless, though Yeats never shared Morris’ democratic hopes, he did take over his criticisms of late-Victorian industrial society. In an article on ‘Ireland and the Arts’ in 1901, Yeats urged Irish craftsmen to follow the example of Morris, and to bring art closer to life by a determination to produce Irish work:

‘I would have Ireland recreate the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood in Judaea, in India, in Scandinavia, in Greece and Rome, in every ancient land; as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business.’

Yeats felt that this ideal had a better chance in Ireland because the country was, unlike England, not industrialised.

In 1902 Yeats wrote a long essay on Spencer, which again shows the influence of Morris in its attack on ‘the timidity and reserve of a counting house’, that are said to have become characteristic of England since the Elizabethan period. Spencer’s achievement as ‘a poet of the delighted senses’ is related to a whole way of life: ‘He was of a time before undelighted labour had made the business of man a desecration’. ‘Undelighted labour’ was the ‘useless toil’ which Morris saw as the principal evil of capitalism.

A similar note was struck in a lecture Yeats gave in America in 1911 in which he defined the kind of society which he hoped would come about in Ireland. Mr Ellman has noted the influence of Ruskin and Morris here:

‘Ireland will always be in the main an agricultural country. Industries we may have, but we will not have, as England has, a very rich class nor whole districts blackened with smoke, like what they call in England their “Black Country”! I think that the best ideal for our people, an ideal very generally accepted among us, is that Ireland is going to become a country where, if there are few rich, there shall be nobody very poor. Wherever men have tried to imagine a perfect life, they have imagined a place where men plough and sow and reap not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke. Ireland will always be a country where men plough and reap.’

Morris’ *News from Nowhere* was just such an attempt to ‘imagine a perfect life’, and its ideal was a primarily agricultural community where wealth was evenly distributed.

Yet criticisms of modern industrial society may come from both left and right: the difference is in the direction in which hope is believed to lie. Here there is a great contrast between Morris and Yeats, of which Yeats was well aware. In 1919, he was arguing...
that all the optimistic social thought ultimately deriving from Rousseau, including that of Wordsworth, Shelley, Ruskin, Morris and Shaw, was inadequate because of its failure to recognise the fact of 'original sin'. Of Morris and Shaw he wrote:

'It has been the lot of both men, the one a great many-sided man, the other a logician without rancour, and both lovers of the best, to delight the Garden City mind.'

Yeats came to place his hopes for the survival of civilisation on 'the best', an aristocracy of the 'educated classes', who would force the 'uneducatable masses' to submit to their rule. For him there was no substance in 'British Liberalism and all its dreams'. Thus, although Yeats continued to criticise aspects of modern society which Morris had also reprobated, he lacked altogether the latter's Utopian faith in the coming of a day when 'mastery' would change into 'fellowship'. A debt to Morris remains, but it was not one of simple agreement. This suggests that it was not after all, the social criticism which furnished the most important link between the two men.

In the end, then, we return to Yeats' response to Morris' warm and generous personality: this is what lasted after other influences had passed. In 1896 Yeats paid his tribute to the recently-dead Morris, stressing above all his single-minded vision of the perfect life: 'Almost alone among the dreamers of our time, he accepted life and called it good.'

This positive attitude of Morris, his profound humanity, led Yeats to give the title 'The Happiest of the Poets' to the essay he published about Morris in 1903. Again we feel Yeats' response to Morris' capacity to enjoy life, in a well-known anecdote:

'I often see him in my mind's eye as I saw him once at Hammersmith, holding up a glass of claret toward the light and saying, "Why do people say it is a prosaic to get inspiration out of wine? Is it not the sunlight and the sap in the leaves? Are not grapes made by the sunlight and the sap?"'

And finally it was personal affection that enabled Yeats, some twenty-five years after Morris' death, to create the vivid and sympathetic portrait of him in *Four Years*:

'It was Morris himself that stirred my interests, and I took to him first because of some little tricks of speech and body that reminded me of my old grandfather in Sligo, but soon discovered his spontaneity and joy that made him my chief of men. Today I do not rate his poetry very high, but
for an odd altogether wonderful time, or thought; and yet if some angel offered me the choice, I would choose his life, poetry and all, rather than my own or any other man's.'

His 'spontaneity and joy' were qualities that struck all who met Morris. For the highly self-conscious Yeats, there was splendour in Morris' capacity for self-forgetfulness, his unconcern for the timidities of convention. The Morris who, Yeats recalled, flung 'a badly baked plum pudding through the window upon Christmas Day', was gloriously himself.

Thus it was above all to the image of Morris as a creative and spontaneous man that Yeats returned, and which made it possible for him to write to May Morris in 1927 saying, 'Your father is still my chief of men'.