Dr. Paul Meier

Our good friend, the Morris scholar, Paul Meier, died in May. Born in 1911, of a non-practising middle-class Jewish family, he was sent to a Jesuit school — more flattering to their social pretensions than the ordinary municipal lycée. Highly gifted, he worked hard and well, to become at twenty one of the youngest ‘agrégé’ (qualified to teach, on the first rung of the academic ladder — so different in France from our own.) His career began in Nîmes. In 1935, moved to Marseille, a centre of Mafia corruption commercial and political, he helped to found a provincial section of the Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, and joined the Communist Party. The following year saw him active in creating a ‘Maison de la Culture’ whose wide-ranging activities — theatre, choral and instrumental music, exhibitions, a monthly magazine — spread across Provence.

1937 saw him in St. Etienne, where he set about developing a similar ‘Maison de la Culture’ — but also, as the shadow of Nazism spread across Europe, he engaged in more direct political activity. The War came. Like hundreds of thousands of others, he was mobilised, and, after the collapse of France, imprisoned in Stalag IIIC, spent four years as a ‘Kommando de travail’ until, liberated by the Red Army, he returned home to resume his academic life: his political life had never ceased. The work of the ‘Maison de la Culture’ began again, and under the aegis of the CGT (the French TUC) he took the lead in founding a ‘Workers’ University’ which attracted hundreds of students to its courses, in teaching which he took part. Elected a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, he directed the ‘Commission des Intellectuels’ and, moving to Paris in 1950 joined the editorial board of the influential magazine La Pensee, in which he published many articles and reviews. He began also his important translations for Les Editions Sociales, including most notably for English-speaking readers, his fine News from Nowhere of 1962. Not the first French version, it was far above earlier attempts by translators who may have had equal skill in the language, but did not understand, as he did, Morris’s uniqueness.

In 1965 he became a lecturer at the University of Nanterre, and in 1971 was awarded a doctorate for his great thesis, La Pensee Utopique de William Morris, published the next year under that title by les Editions Sociales, and in 1978 in English, by Harvester Press, as William Morris, the Marxist Dreamer. At Nanterre, he gave courses on Victorian literature until his retirement in 1976, while continuing to research and to publish.
A rigorous and penetrating scholar, he remained always the poet: his densely packed sentences are bright with imagination no less than full of the fruit of meticulous research: he had a love of language all too rare in criticism, whether of poetry or other arts: and second to Paul’s love of poetry was his love of visual art, ranging from romanesque architecture to cubist painting. He seldom missed an important exhibition, and, holidaying in Italy, visited every gallery. It was Morris’s art and poetry, as much as his politics, that drew him to *News from Nowhere*. As a young man, believing poetry his own vocation, he had written much, classical in form, winning many awards. These poems were often on Old Testament themes, through which, reacting against his Jesuit schooling, he sought his deeply felt but non-religious Jewish identity.

His translation of *News from Nowhere* was what first made him known in this country, which he nevertheless had known and loved since student days. It brought him into contact with Morris scholars and enthusiasts here, such as Chimen Abramsky and Leslie Morton, and with the William Morris Society. The long years of work on *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris* greatly widened his range of friends in England. The French edition is dedicated to his wife Olga, who worked with him and with Yvonne Kapp, translating Yvonne’s work on Marx and his Daughters.

The dedication page, below Olga’s name, carries a passage from the nineteenth century liberal Pisarev: “The rift between dream and reality is harmless if only the dreamer believes seriously in his dream, if he observes life attentively, comparing his observations with his castles in Spain and if, generally, he works conscientiously to realise his dream. If there is a connection between dream and life, all is well.” On which Lenin comments in *What is to be Done*?: “of this kind of dreaming there is too little in our movement.” And then follows Morris’s word on the subject, from ‘Art and Socialism’ of 1884: “A man must have time for serious individual thought, for imagination, for dreaming even – or the race of man will inevitably worsen.”

The disturbing events of 1968 in Europe, Britain, the USA, bruised Paul much, and his retirement in 1976 coincided with other conflicts to make it less happy than it should have been. He found himself less and less able to write, still less to research, withdrawing to the quiet of home in Versailles and, in summer months, to cultivating his beloved garden by the sea at Fromentine. That garden, and his family, now extended to grandchildren in France and in Israel, gave him in spite of growing ill health, tremendous pleasure: and he died surrounded by them, his daughter Miriam repeating for him some of the poems he loved best – no word of which, even on his last day, did he forget.

My own friendship with him dates from the arrival here of his *News from Nowhere*, and my writing to him, excited by the fine essay with which he prefaced it. So too did Leslie Morton. Let this end with the last sentence of Leslie’s review of the great *Pensée Utopique*: “This magnificent study reinforces the conviction that the society of the future may be much closer to the imagining of William Morris than we had once dared even to hope.”