CHAPTER 8

'The Whole Man'
Morris's Public Lectures

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Writing in *Culture and Society* in 1958, Raymond Williams made the following claim about what he considered to be the most important parts of William Morris's work:

> I would willingly lose *The Dream of John Ball* and the romantic socialist songs and even *News from Nowhere* … if to do so were the price of retaining and getting people to read such smaller things as *How We Live, and How We Might Live*, *The Aims of Art*, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, and *A Factory as it might be*. The change of emphasis would involve a change in Morris's status as a writer, but such a change is critically inevitable. There is more life in the lectures, where one feels that the whole man is engaged in the writing, than in any of the prose and verse romances.[1]

Williams's analysis here is based on a broader contention about what was most valuable in Morris's work and how this had been subject to 'dilution'.[2] He argues that Morris's reputation had been too much associated with 'a campaign to end machine-production'.[3] For Williams, there are two problems here. Firstly, the emphasis on Morris as handicraftsman with his supposed opposition to machines enables readers to imagine him as sentimental, nostalgic, and impractical, rather than to take seriously 'the scale and nature of his social criticism'. Secondly, there is a problem in some of Morris's actual work in that 'the prose and verse romances [are] so clearly the product of a fragmentary consciousness', and, more generally, 'his literary work bears witness only to the disorder which he felt so acutely'.[4] So, if his work as a handicraftsman and as a literary figure are compromised for these reasons, then what is left are the lectures and Morris as 'a fine political writer': 'it is on that, finally, that his reputation will rest'.[5]

If Morris's lectures, as part of his work as a 'political writer', are his central achievement, then it is obviously important to take them very seriously. Williams sees his other work as in some way a displaced activity whilst the lectures are 'directly in the heat and bitterness of political struggle', a place

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where 'the whole man is engaged in the writing'.[6] In that sense, Williams is producing a vision of Morris as 'the Hero as Man of Letters', as Thomas Carlyle had described it in his lecture on the topic in 1840, where Morris enters into the public sphere of political debate and attempts to win victories for his cause. The mode is therefore manly and chivalric: 'the whole man' going into danger against a known if rather generalized enemy, putting both his mind and body at risk. Whilst important elements of Williams's ideas here are insightful – Morris certainly did see his lectures and political speaking as a central task once 'I fell into *practical* Socialism' (xxiii.278) – a more complete portrait would see the lectures as themselves also composed of the uncertainty, ambiguity, and tension that we also find – along with his confidence, artistry, and skill – in his other works.

One place to start would be to think of Morris's ambivalence about taking up the role of the public lecturer. This ambivalence was in fact widely shared amongst such 'public men' as Victorian men of letters. Whilst Carlyle had seemed to announce the inauguration of the era of 'the Hero as Man of Letters', he himself seemed to have had very mixed feelings about both the phenomenon in general and his own embodiment of it in particular. After his first lecture in the series of what would become, on book publication, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, Carlyle wrote to his sister:

> I thought I should get something like the *tenth part* of my meaning unfolded to the good people; and I could not feel that I *had* got much more. However, *they* seemed content as need be; sat silent, listening as if it had been gospel: I strive not to *heed* my own notions of the thing,—to *keep down the conceit* and ambition of me, for that is it! I was not in good trim; I had awoke at half past 4 o'clock &c. … What the papers say for or against, or whether they say anything, appears to be of no consequence at all.[7]

This passage discloses a series of key reasons for that ambivalence. Firstly, the fear that the audience will not understand you completely: that either through their levels of education or intelligence or sympathy, it will not be possible for the lecturer to communicate their message. Behind this, of course, may also lie a fear that the lecturer could also be at fault for the fact that the audience may only get 'something like the *tenth part* of my meaning'. Secondly, there is a relation here between the figure of the public lecturer and that of the preacher or religious minister. Carlyle's audience seem to be at church: they 'sate silent, listening as it had been gospel'. This may be useful in terms of a respectful hearing but perhaps they will end up being too 'content', and will not be thinking hard enough about what is said. Just as the audience may dutifully go to church or chapel,

they may dutifully go to a public lecture and the effect may be roughly the same. On the other hand, the public lecturer may also feel that they are something of an impostor in their imitation of the position of the religious minister, and that there may be an ungodly element in that. Furthermore, it is noticeable that Carlyle is fearful of the temptation of the sin of pride if, in fact, the lecture does go well: 'I strive not to *heed* my own notions of the thing, *to keep down the conceit and ambition of me*, for that is it.' The Devil seems to be somewhere in the lecture room, drawing Carlyle towards 'conceit and ambition'. And then the passage considers the stress and anxiety that goes into the process of lecturing that is felt in the body: 'I was not in good trim. I had awoke at half past 4 o'clock.' And, finally, there is the concern about the broader reception of the lecture, which would have been attended by representatives of a series of newspapers and periodicals, who would write up their own accounts of what Carlyle said and how he said it: Carlyle may appear not to care 'what the papers say for or against', but as a proponent of what would come to be called 'social criticism', who wished to have his criticism not just understood but in some sense acted upon, we know that the not caring really does not apply.

All of these questions – about reception, delivery, and the capacities of the audience – would press on William Morris too. There is an additional element of comparison that applies not just to Carlyle and Morris, but also to other social critics such as John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. This is the fact that each turned to this kind of direct intervention in the public sphere in middle age after having established their reputations in related but more specific domains: for Carlyle as an essayist and historian, for Ruskin as a critic of art and architecture, and for Arnold as a poet and as a writer of literary criticism. Morris had established his reputation as both a poet and as a handicraftsman, although this position was in itself ambiguous in the case of Morris, as he shared both some of the characteristics of the artisan and those of the bourgeois, capitalist man of business. But, unquestionably, through these various endeavours Morris had established his 'title to be heard',[8] so in that sense the lectures were indeed the culminating and central point of his whole career, the point at which the hero as man of letters literally came before the public, to take up the cudgels, and to right public wrongs. So, the timing of Morris's first taking up of this position can be dated precisely: to 4 December 1877, when Morris delivered 'The Lesser Arts' before the Trades Guild of Learning. The Guild itself was a combination of middle-class philanthropy and trade union organization: initiated by the Revd Henry Solly, a Unitarian clergyman, it intended to provide vocational and further education supported by the

funding and organization of affiliated trade unions. Morris's lecture came after the trade unions had asserted themselves in terms of controlling the activities of the Guild, following the resignation of Solly – as representative middle-class philanthropist – at the end of 1873.[9] So, in that sense, the split nature of Morris's identity as a worker was also reflected in the nature of the organization that he was addressing on that night in 1877.

Morris's feelings about this movement into an explicit engagement with public life were complex. 'The Lesser Arts' was delivered as Morris's engagement with public controversy was heightening – via both his work for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and through his engagement with the Eastern Question Association, a liberal pressure group that sought to promote resistance to Benjamin Disraeli's alliance with Turkey. On 24 October 1876 he had written to the *Daily News* about his fear that 'England' was drifting into war, giving the following insight into how his feelings were developing:

> I who am writing this am one of a large class of men – quiet men, who usually go about their business, heeding public matters less than they ought, and afraid to speak in such a huge concourse as the English nation, however much they may feel, but who are now stung into bitterness by thinking how helpless they are in a matter that touches them so closely. (MacCarthy, 380)

Evidently, Morris felt that his position as one of the 'quiet men' must now end. It is noticeable as well that Morris connects political articulation with feelings of 'bitterness': implicitly, he seems to be saying that it should not be necessary for him to speak out, but, as that is not the case, he will need to speak out whilst carrying the feelings of bitterness with him. In that sense we can also see the repressed temper of Morris who really wishes to be 'quiet'. So, in that sense the quietness partly generates the bitterness: in a better ordered state, it would not have been necessary for him to speak. But speaking in public, even bitter speaking, has become a duty. As Fiona MacCarthy wrote in her biography of Morris, 'it seems as if Morris, through the late 1870s, was shedding one persona and making himself a new one, deliberately preparing for a new role in the world' (MacCarthy, 382) and public speaking was the articulation of that role.

However, 'speaking out' is not quite as straightforward as this implies. There are many factors that have to be borne in mind: the nature of the audience you are addressing (which may also be divided in their views in different ways), the question of the content of what the speaker is trying to relay and the question of the modes to be used by the speaker, which in Morris tend to move between explication, lyricism, and denunciation.

'The Lesser Arts' in its published version begins with the first of these categories, as Morris begins to establish his reasons for focusing on the decorative arts, making his key claim that 'it is only in latter times' these arts have become harmfully separated from architecture, sculpture, and painting, from their previous position of unity with them (xxii.3). Morris then attempts to combat this condition of separation by, firstly, showing why the decorative arts are important in themselves and, secondly, by showing how the condition of separation between those arts and these more elite aesthetic modes is in itself a problem and a crucial indicator of the 'signs of the times' in contemporary England. To do this, he first needs to establish that his audience of artisans at the Trades Guild of Learning are the contemporary practitioners of these arts, who like those arts themselves, need to be appropriately valued, and that he, Morris, declares himself to be one of them:

> Nor must you forget that when men say popes, kings, and emperors built such and such buildings, it is a mere way of speaking. You look in your history-books to see who built Westminster Abbey, who built St. Sophia at Constantinople, and they tell you Henry III., Justinian the Emperor. Did they? or, rather, men like you and me, handicraftsmen, who have left no names behind them, nothing but their work? (xxii.6–7)

The radical lecturer must therefore be concerned with getting beyond the 'mere way of speaking' which makes us think that Henry III and Justinian built Westminster Abbey and St Sophia rather than the 'handicraftsmen' who have left 'no names' but who have left these great works of architecture. Of course, Morris is deviating here from any 'great man' theory of history (as expressed by Carlyle himself) to refocus on the people and their creative labour. He is also trying to reforge solidarity between the elite practitioner, in the form of Morris, and these artisans, 'men like you and me', and to see all of them as involved in a singular creative practice. His reasons for his desire for such a reunification become clear in a later moment of the lecture:

> The artist came out from the handicraftsmen, and left them without hope of elevation, while he himself was left without the help of intelligent, industrious sympathy. Both have suffered; the artist no less than the workman. It is with art as it fares with a company of soldiers before a redoubt, when the captain runs forward full of hope and energy, but looks not behind him to see if his men are following, and they hang back, not knowing why they are brought there to die. The captain's life is spent for nothing, and his men are sullen prisoners in the redoubt of Unhappiness and Brutality. (xxii.9)

The metaphors here are expressive of Morris's position. Through a process of economic change, the artist has become separated from the handicraftsman, from their previous position of similarity. Morris does not describe the process here, but it bears a relation to how Ruskin had described the transition from the collective, social world of the Gothic to the individualized, and also prideful and sinful world of the Renaissance, where artists become feted as 'great men' or geniuses. Morris's second metaphor is a martial one: he imagines the artist as the captain leading his company onward into an attack on a 'redoubt' (a type of temporary fort), where he runs forward, but 'they hang back, not knowing why they are brought there to die'. The artist dies 'for nothing', and the handicraftsmen end up as the 'sullen prisoners' of the 'redoubt of Unhappiness and Brutality' that they were supposed to be attacking.

It is worth breaking down some of Morris's thinking here. The captain (who we could assume is some version of Morris himself) is left as a fallen hero, a kind of heroic failure, whilst it is his men who are the source of his betrayal. Morris does not elaborate on ideas of betrayal in the lecture, but it is clear that whilst the artist and the handicraftsmen may have been originally the same, the artist is now in this position of lonely leadership, vulnerable to the lack of confidence of his troops. He worries that their attacks will not lead to success but to death and separation. In one sense this is exactly what is at stake in Morris's public lecture. As the days of equality between artists and handicraftsmen are now over, Morris has to lead the charge, but fears his ventures into the 'heat and bitterness of political struggle' will end up as stories of failure and betrayal. And whilst Morris desperately wanted to be one of the 'handicraftsmen' he cannot help but imagine the artist (and himself as a public lecturer) as in this solitary role of fateful leadership.

In these senses, a public lecture was always possibly an experience of failure for Morris. Rereading these lectures, we can always feel the changing temperature of Morris's thoughts, through confidence and ringing assertions to doubt and anger. Towards the end of 'The Lesser Arts' we hear one of Morris's most famous formulations that confirms the new prospective that Morris was trying to create – 'I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few' (xxii.26) – but lectures are composed of more than such moments of lucidity and incision. It may be worth considering the fact that whilst Morris from the late 1870s thought of public lecturing and political activity as a public duty that he had to take up, he also felt very great resistance to this particular role. This resistance can be seen in various aspects of both his lectures and his expressed

attitudes towards them. Firstly, it should be noted that lectures are an explicitly rhetorical form, in that they use various techniques to educate, cajole, and persuade their listeners to agree with the speaker. On the other hand, Morris tended to feel resistance to rhetoric as such.[10]

What was this resistance to rhetoric about? It should be considered that, for Morris, rhetoric and the rhetorician are closely related to everyday politics and the politician, modes in which the speaker is trying to achieve some limited short-term gain, possibly through the use of deceitful or underhand methods. As, and increasingly into the 1880s, Morris wished to overthrow rather than honour the modes of public speech that were associated with parliamentary democracy, he did not wish to use rhetoric as such. This is a problem as lectures are necessarily rhetorical, even if the modes used can be very various indeed. And as we reread his lectures, we can see that this resistance shapes the lectures themselves, in the sense that Morris tends not to be concerned with the overall organization of his argument. This means that in a lecture such as 'The Beauty of Life' that argument can become quite discontinuous: we move through various fascinating thoughts on the failures of the Renaissance, the nature of Birmingham (where this lecture was first delivered), his hope that the nineteenth 'Century of Commerce' will be replaced by the twentieth 'Century of Education', his fears of the development of the 'residuum' ('an ugly word for a dreadful fact' [xxii. 65]),[11] before we arrive at the central and memorable peroration (another rhetorical form) on how 'if you want a golden rule that will fit everything, this is it':[12]

> *Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.* (xxii.76)

'A golden rule', presumably, is a rule that cannot be argued about, that is not to be subject to the contestation of politics, but Morris's statement can also be viewed as what would become a political 'slogan'. This term had by the late nineteenth century moved from its earlier definition as 'a war cry or battle cry' to its contemporary meaning as 'a motto associated with a political party or movement or other group, or a short and striking or memorable phrase used in advertising' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). We can see that Morris would have seen his golden rule having something in common with both definitions of the word slogan – he wanted both the 'war cry' and the 'memorable phrase'. He is trying to make a type of affirmative speech that somehow changes normal speech, which is of course implicated in the disastrous society in which Morris lived. Writing about the figure of the poet, Morris had said that 'before he can even begin

his story he must elevate his means of expression from the daily jabber to which centuries of degradation have reduced it. And this is given to few to be able to do' (*CL*, ii.483). Morris's assertive 'golden rule' may not seem necessarily to be a type of elevated speech, but its emphasis, clarity and confidence is an attempt to challenge an everyday language too much exposed to 'centuries of degradation'.

Morris's attempts to escape this 'daily jabber' are also connected to his growing belief that ordinary democratic politics should be overwhelmed. Current constructions of both language and politics limit human capacity, to his mind. This was particularly the case after he was fully 'converted' to the socialist cause in the early 1880s. As he later wrote in 'How I Became a Socialist', Morris viewed even extra-parliamentary politics of the type that he had been involved with as 'cumbersome and disgustful', even if 'necessary' (xxiii.278). It is also true that Morris thought of rhetoric as having a class basis that he would altogether wish to avoid. For George Bernard Shaw, the issue was one of how Morris saw his fellow participants in the social struggle: 'He could be patient with the strivings of ignorance and poverty towards the light if the striver had the reality that comes from hard work on tough materials with dirty hands, and weekly struggles with exploitation and oppression; but the sophistications of middle class minds hurt him physically' (*WMAWS*, ii.xviii). In the same light, Morris wished his lectures to be more concerned with questions of justice, with the struggle between social good and social evil, than with the fine calibrations of rhetorical sophistication.

In practice, though, an opposition between justice and rhetoric is a false one. Morris's lectures are works of rhetoric even as they are concerned with justice. His socialist conversion had the effect of stabilizing his lectures as he by then knew at which point he always wished to arrive. But, on the other hand, they could also have the effect of making them repetitive: as he wrote, 'after all I have only one thing to say and have to find divers ways to say it' (xvi.xv). The most striking of the lectures tend to be those that had the most dramatic quality, where Morris was particularly focused on the audience and occasion he was speaking to, rather than feeling he was repeating old material. A particular example of this is his lecture on 'Art and Democracy', given at University College, Oxford in November 1883. Morris wrote before the lecture: '… I intend making this one more plain-spoken; I am tired of being mealy-mouthed' (*CL*, ii.175). At the mid-point of the lecture, Morris makes a symbolic unveiling: 'For I am "one of the people called Socialists" …' (xxiii.172). Morris is trying to speak clearly and directly, and without the mask imposed upon him and others by class

society. But of course at this point he is also enjoying the tension that existed between him and the Oxford setting: Oxford being both a place he dearly loved and an extreme embodiment of the divided society he wished to criticize. At the lecture's conclusion, he begins his final paragraph with an almost plaintive, defeated hope: 'Art is long and life is short; let us at least do something before we die' (xxiii.191). He then tries to establish the terms of his appeal to his audience, using, perhaps surprisingly for Morris, a type of flattery: 'Help us now, you whom the fortune of your birth has helped to make wise and refined ….' The attempt is to ally this audience with Morris's 'us' of the workers and the socialists so that together they can 'break the spell of anarchical Plutocracy'. This is the very end of the speech:

> One man with an idea in his head is in danger of being considered a madman; two men with the same idea in common may be foolish, but can hardly be mad; ten men sharing an idea begin to act, a hundred draw attention as fanatics, a thousand and society begins to tremble, a hundred thousand and there is war abroad, and the cause has victories tangible and real; and why only a hundred thousand? You and I who agree together, it is we who have to answer that question. (xxiii.191)

We go from the isolated single man 'in danger of being considered a madman' through these developing dimensions of engagement before the revolutionary cause becomes a general and dynamic one. And, by the end, the pronouns demonstrate that 'you and I' have now become 'we'. Morris's hopes for the future are now not fragmented but present in the room.

It was of course difficult to maintain the revolutionary upsurge of the end of 'Art and Democracy'. Ordinary life swiftly resumed, even if socialist agitation became a characteristic part of that daily life for Morris. In 1887, in his 'Socialist Diary', Morris writes of giving his 'Monopoly' lecture at the Borough of Hackney Club, 'a dirty wretched place enough': 'the meeting was a full one, and I suppose I must say attentive, but the comings and goings all the time, the pie boy and the pot boy, was [*sic*] rather trying to my nerves: the audience was civil and inclined to agree, but I couldn't flatter myself that they mostly understood me, simple as the lecture was' (*Socialist Diary*, 45). Here, the romance of the cause is not present, and the condition of separation of 'you and I' obvious. Such moments led Morris to doubt whether this type of political engagement could ever work; after one lecture Morris wrote that 'I felt very down cast amongst these poor people in their poor hutch …' (*Socialist Diary*, 33–4). On another occasion, following an exchange at a lecture with a member of the audience, the sympathy could turn into a kind of depressed social Darwinian contempt:

'A fresh opportunity (if I needed it) of gauging the depths of ignorance and consequent incapacity of following an argument which possesses the uneducated averagely stupid person' (*Socialist Diary*, 42). Equality seems to fade away as Morris despairs of the capacities of his audience. What he seemed not to realize was that his grand presence itself could have intimidated his working-class audience and prevented them from showing their intelligence, or at least in a way that he would have recognized. Morris came instead to prefer speaking at open-air mass protests, distant from the 'pie boy and the pot boy': according to MacCarthy, 'he could communicate most forcefully, and most emotionally, at a little distance from the crowd' (MacCarthy, 559). Speaking in Northumberland in 1887, political life seems to be turning into a medieval pageant:

> Then we started without any show or banners or band, and consequently without many with us: about halfway however we picked up a band and a banner and a lot of men, and soon swelled into a respectable company: the others had got there before us and lots more were streaming up into the field: the day was bright and sunny, the bright blue sea forming a strange border to the misery of the land. We spoke from one wagon Fielding of the SDF in the chair, then Mahon then me then Hyndman then Donald. It was a very good meeting … (*Socialist Diary*, 53)

In this case, Morris seems to be more engaged with the assembling of the company, a 'Gideon's band' of adventurers (xxii.117), than with the speaking itself: the portraiture of the scene here reminds us of the printed books of Kelmscott Press, with 'the bright blue sea forming a strange border to the misery of the land'. But the whole scene is dynamic and alive, as if Morris can imagine this event itself as the crossing of a 'strange border': he has finally arrived at a place where art, public speaking and the condition of the people are now integrated and not separated. But the entry ends and 'the next day I went up to London and got to the Council in time to come in for one of the usual silly squabbles about nothing …' (*Socialist Diary*, 54). Hope for this utopian potential future turns back into the grind of routine, contestation and disappointment. Morris's lectures are, as Raymond Williams argued, a central achievement, where 'the whole man' did both speak out and make available for others similar tools for understanding the world in which they lived. Looking back at these lectures now, in a world so full of the very concerns that Morris tried to grapple with, we can agree and disagree with many of his lessons because 'it is good for a man who thinks seriously to face his fellows, and speak out whatever really burns in him, so that men may seem less strange to one another, and misunderstanding, the fruitful cause of aimless strife, may be avoided' (xxii.49).

Notes

1 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (London: Hogarth Press, 1992), 155–6.
2 Ibid., 155.
3 Ibid., 155.
4 Ibid., 155, 156.
5 Ibid., 156.
6 Ibid., 155.
7 Thomas Carlyle, letter to Jean Carlyle Aitken, 6 May 1840, in *Carlyle Letters Online* (dukeupress.edu).
8 Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 199–202.
9 For details on the Guild, see W. P. McCann, 'The Trades Guild of Learning', *The Vocational Aspect of Secondary and Further Education*, 19.42 (Spring 1967), 34–40.
10 See, for example, Morris's views on John Milton: 'I did not care for Milton; the essence of him was rhetoric, though he was of course a wonderful versifier' (xxii.xxxi).
11 'residuum': The late Victorian term for the 'underclass', initially defined by John Bright MP in debates over the Second Reform Act in 1867 as 'those of almost hopeless poverty and dependence' (*3 Hansard* 186: 636–7, 26 March 1867).
12 'peroration': 'A concluding part of a speech or written discourse which sums up the content; a rhetorical conclusion, esp. one intended to rouse the audience' (*Oxford English Dictionary*).