

WILLIAM MORRIS'S "OUR COUNTRY RIGHT OR WRONG":
A CRITICAL EDITION

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William Morris apparently intended this manuscript (British Library Add. MSS. 45,334, ff. 51-76) for presentation to an audience of Liberal critics of Benjamin Disraeli's foreign policy, and signed it "W. M. Jan 30th 1880 | 2:30 a. m. | Kelmscott House | Upper Mall Hammersmith." His daughter, May Morris, later printed about a third of it in her two-volume retrospective *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (2:52-62) (see sections cited below). The two texts are identified in the notes as [BL] and [MM].

In its original form, "Our Country Right or Wrong" anticipated aspects of more formal political essays such as "Monopoly" or "How We Live and How We Might Live," but Morris never revised it for publication in his lifetime – in part perhaps because the Congress of Berlin in 1878 rendered imminent European conflict less likely, and in part because his expressions of faith in quickly abandoned Liberal promises later may have seemed to him naive.

Naive or not, Morris's colloquial periods and imbricated clauses drew on years of narrative poetic composition, and one can find eidetic analogues of them in the pages and templates of his Kelmscott Press designs. They abounded in the pointed questions and personal allusions of his *Commonweal* editorials and "Notes on Passing Events," and twenty-first-century dissidents may also find flashes of insight in Morris's mordant remarks about Britain's 'preemptive' imperialist wars.

A few textual remarks: I have retained the manuscript's folio pagination, regularized Morris's inscriptions of the expression "National Vain-glory," noted some other departures from his original spelling and punctuation, and distinguished explanatory annotations from textual emendations by adding an asterisk to the footnote number for each of the latter. I am indebted to Donna Parsons for the initial transcription of Morris's autograph, and to Sean de Vega for identification of the "Bremen bomber."

The following passages from Morris's manuscript were not included in May Morris's *Artist Writer Socialist* and appear therefore in print for the first time in this edition:

- folio 51 (Looking down the columns ... for its stupidity.);
 52 (Yes, that is National Vain-glory ... natural and hereditary enemy);
 53 (Well, it was France ... desires for advancement.);
 55-57 all;
 58 (some of us to have sat ... what it will grow to?);
 (And what is the cost ... as for me,);
 59 (Yes, yes, how we wrap ... it really means:);
 (But what other ... the actors in it.);
 60 (Now if people say ... to pinch and peel.);
 62 all;
 63 (amiable passion, ... throat of the nation.);
 64 (I say this ... gun has been fired.);
 65 all
 66 (bade them get us ... use those words);
 (or on Lord Beaconsfield ... Lord Salisbury.)
 (No, we cannot even plead ... our own forgetfulness);
 67 (Well, you at least ... learn from misfortune);
 (We are a great ... was the petty folly);
 68 (we played off on ourselves.);
 (Now mind if I dwell ... get rid of that.)
 69 (Meantime our respectable, ... about that civilization.);
 70-74 all;
 75 (fellows must be ... to do the same.).

Our Country Right or Wrong
[William Morris]

[51] Looking down the columns of a newspaper the other day I saw an advertisement of certain songs, and among the titles of them I noted this one: "Our country, right or wrong."¹ This set me a thinking, for though the words were harmless in themselves, or indeed might be interpreted to mean a noble sentiment, yet I cannot help thinking that what they did mean was something neither noble or even harmless: I don't think I am wrong in supposing them to have been taken as the motto² of a banner, as it were: the banner of a tribe clamorous once, now somewhat subdued by force of circumstances,³ but which may as circumstances change become clamorous once again, and unless they are well looked after dangerous also: that tribe has been called the tribe of the Jingos.⁴

Now if that be so, those words are the cry of a false patriotism, and I do not think I shall waste your time if I say a few words to warn you to be on your guard now and for ever against this sentiment and what comes of it: for you know how dangerous an enemy is a vice disguised as a virtue; and this particular disguised vice must be called a wolf in sheep[']s clothing for its danger rather than an ass in a lion's skin for its stupidity.

I should say then that when stripped of its borrowed gear false patriotism becomes National Vain-glory, which is both begotten of ignorance and begets it: a legacy of the injustice of past times, it breeds injustice in us in the present that we may be unjustly dealt with in the future: it gabbles of the valour of our forefathers, while it is busy in undoing the deeds that their valiant lives accomplished: it prates of the interests of our country, while it is laying the

1. This was the original title of an American song by George Pope Morris, first performed in New York in 1861. The song managed to avoid all mention of slavery or emancipation in its summons to the Union cause, in the doggerel of the second stanza, for example:

It is the duty of us all, To check rebellion's sway! To rally at the nation's call, And we that voice obey! We like a band of brothers go, A hostile league to break! To rout a spoilt encumber't foe, And what is ours retake! Then come ye hardy Volunteers,	Around our standard throng! And pledge man's hope of coming years, Our country, right or wrong! Chorus: Our country, right or wrong, Inspires the burden of our song! It was the glory of our sires, Our country, right or wrong!
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2*. *motto*] mottoe [BL]

3. The 1878 Congress of Berlin's repartition of the Balkans temporarily obviated war in the region as an instrument of British mercantile interests.

4*. *Jingos*] Jingoos [BL]. Political senses of this word apparently derive from the refrain of a ditty sung by proponents of British engagement in the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78): "We don't want to fight, but, by Jingo, if we do, We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money, too!" The word itself seems to have been one of the language's many corruptions of "Jesus."

train⁵ of events which will ruin the fortunes, and break the hearts of the citizens: it scolds at wise men and honest men for what it calls a policy of isolation, while itself it would have nothing to do with foreign nations except for their ruin and ours: [52] its great office is for ever to cry out for war without knowing what war means: all other nations, it deems[,] pay the price of war; but we never do, and never can pay it, and never shall. The price of war – a heavy price is that; confusion and reaction at the best, ruin at the worst.

Yes, that is National Vain-glory: we, as well as other nations, have suffered heavily enough from it before now: but perhaps some of us had got into our heads the idea that this folly was of late years so much abated among ourselves, that it would scarcely do more in our time than help after dinner orators to a few stock phrases which one sits and listens to with one[']s tongue in one's cheek: we know better now: we have found out the power of phrases, even when they do not seem to mean much, when they are used to tickle the longing for excitement and self[-]glorification of thoughtless people: we have found these phrases of little meaning turn into actions that have shamed us all without rebuke from the British nation.

We have found out, in short, that it is still possible to convince John Bull that he must have an enemy abroad whether the Fates will have it so or not: once he had got to think that France and her people had been created to fulfill that office, to satisfy that necessity: and it really ought to encourage us to remember that, dead and buried as that folly is today, it has been vigorously alive (or seemed so) long after our beards were grown – nay[,] after some of them were turning grey: well in spite of warmongers & fools, who more than once in our life-times would have set us by the ears, France can no longer be looked upon as our natural and hereditary enemy; so Russia must serve our turn: our nearest neighbour having so grossly disappointed us, I suppose we have now tak[en]⁶ the huff with the Fates, and so nothing further off will serve our turn but the furthest. [O]n my word I think that is as good a reason as any I have heard put forward in favour of the new choice of a natural and hereditary enemy.

[53] Well, it was France yesterday, it is Russia today that must serve National Vain-glory for a bogie to hang sham hatred and fear upon, and whoever can guess what or who it is to be tomorrow is a conjuror indeed; but I fear indeed that the bogie will be invented: I fear that there will always be plenty of excuses for a cry to thrust ourselves into positions where neither Nature nor our own real desires ever called us; and it is our duty who think we love our country as well as the best, to get ready to turn the light of day on every new bogie that is thrust forward, to keep fast hold of Nature's hand and

5.* *train*] trail [MM]

6.* *tak[en]*] taking [BL]; *tak[en] the huff with*] taken offence at

to look steadily to [our] own real welfare and our just desires for advancement. For after all[,] what is our country? is it that part of Earth's surface that geographers call the British islands, or the knot of officials that diplomatists call England? or is it not rather the great mass of the lives of all the men[,] women and children of our race; their hopes and fears and aspirations that we perforce share, their joys and sorrows that we know more of than of other peoples' joys & sorrows? Yes, this is the country that we love; this is what we must serve lifelong if our own lives are to be the lives of men; yet for all that it is a familiar thing, and not some mysterious unapproachable altar of an unseen God: and so, meseems, we are as much bound to rebuke it when it is wrong, as to cheer it when it is right, since we ourselves, whether we will or no, must share its shame as well as its glory.

To serve our country? Yes[,] that is as plain duty to my mind for each man - as to maintain his own family, though doubtless it is a duty much forgotten now a days: but what service can we do worth the having if we shut our eyes, and tie up our hands, as our Jingo friends would have us do.

Those lives of our countrymen, and ourselves are what they are by dint of the influences of many past centuries[:] [54] it is that which has made the mass cohere, has made it our country: those influences are various enough, there is light and there is darkness among them: both have been busy in making the England of today: they have made the English character forcible certainly, but, as with all great nations, dangerous also by very virtue of that force: there is always a danger to great nations of some of their best qualities becoming overmasterful, and urging them first to make slaves of other nations & then of themselves: such dangers nature will in the end deliver the world from: but woe be to that country that does not look to it in time to guard against them by the forethought of her own citizens: if any tendencies to our natural force becoming maleficent are not checked by ourselves, they will burst out full-blown some day, and will have to be smothered by men not of our race and nation; and what widespread ruin will come with that we may perhaps imagine.

Surely, therefore, real patriotism bids us to be keen-eyed to note whether at any time the public opinion of our country sways towards justice or injustice, and to resist both in ourselves and in others blind and ignorant impulses that drive men on to grasp at phantoms of gain and glory created long ago by follies dead or half dead. Those impulses, indeed, the legacy of past sloth[,] cowardice and compromise among us[,] will stir whenever occasion serves; and one could scarcely dare to think of the danger with which they are rife, of the revenge which they might pull down on our heads, if one did not remember that at each re-awakening of them there are to be found more and more of those true patriots, who are ready to brave opprobrium by resisting the windy lies, that

7. *men, women*] men and women [MM]

on such occasions become, as it were part of the public creed, and who will insist on seeing men and things as they are, not as National Vain-glory has bidden them to be.

[55] Such patriots as this the first word of the motto we liberals inscribe on our banner specially calls on us to be: it bids us in difficult times, in such times as these, instead of bawling out, 'Our country, right or wrong!' to cry rather, 'May the right prevail!' and to act strenuously to bring no less than this to pass. But if any one should cast in our teeth that in longing for the right to prevail, we are longing for the confusion or defeat of our own country; if in short men chide us, that we do not wish to see our country bring a crime to a successful issue: I can only say, that it is a hard word to have to utter that our country is on the wrong side if even for a while; and yet that if it be so, we as good patriots should choose for the country we love the speedier revenge of check and foil on a wrongful course, rather than that longer delayed and more terrible revenge that comes at last to a long victorious land satiate with glory[,] violence and injustice, long after the victors have forgotten not only why they grasped and conquered, but even almost where and when: rather shame, repentance and fresh hope springing from it in our days, than shame without repentance, and ruin without hope in the days of our childrens' children[.]

Now you see, I think it is not without reason that we put that word Peace first in the motto of our party⁸: in these days indeed, and to us the heirs of such sore struggles for freedom and civilization, to us, who have learned, or ought to have learned, so much from history and many troubles, it means more, surely[,] than mere ease and comfort to ourselves: patience & industry, forbearance & goodwill, justice at home and abroad; these things I seem to read in that word peace: on the other hand, to us and in these days[,] those three letters, war, mean much more than the death of a few men, the loss of a few millions of money, much more than a mere struggle with no consequences but the immediate and obvious ones. Yet I am not saying that all wars are [56] necessarily and positively indefensible at all times of the world and to every people. There have been peoples, whose life for years has been constant fighting for freedom; the Greeks of the last generation, the Poles, the Montenegrins⁹ of our own time will give us examples of these without further seeking: now you may scold at them as you please, call them cheats, brigands, anarchists, what you will; yet prejudice must have knocked a good deal of

8. *Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform*] A well-known slogan of Gladstone's Liberal Party.

9. Serbia and Montenegro declared war against Turkey in 1876, and their soldiers subsequently defeated much larger Turkish forces in battles extensively reported in the British press. Gladstone praised the Montenegrin insurgents in a *Nineteenth Century* article in 1877, and eulogized them in Parliament as "a bunch of heroes such as the world has rarely seen." Tennyson's poetic characterization of the Montenegrins as a "race of mightier mountaineers" appeared in the same issue of the *Nineteenth Century*, and the Congress of Berlin included a provision for Montenegrin independence subject to Austrian control over the port of Bar.

manhood out of you, if you do not feel some exultation at the triumphs of such peoples, some real sorrow at their overthrows: you must admit, that whatever they may be, they have at least an ineradicable love of freedom. I should be sorry indeed even to seem to class together the hero Garibaldi with the scoundrel Napoleon.

Nor can I fail to understand that things may take such a turn even in fully civilized and settled countries, governed by men of their own blood, that actual physical force would have to be used by the rational people of such countries against the irrational: an example again will show better what I mean: take the case of what might have happened in France the other day if Macmahon had allowed himself to be used by the reactionists to the utmost: the great mass of the nation was determined on freedom and republican institutions¹⁰: the executive and a knot of partizans were merely acting as obstacles to the well-understood will of the nation; but they had or seemed to have the army at their backs, and if they had carried their madness but a little further, they would have carried it into crime; and that crime would have actually forced the reasonable and orderly part of France into mere necessary war. Furthermore I can conceive of some country, a member of Civilization, going crazy and being such a danger to its neighbours, that it would require coercion from the other members of the civilized world; only I should say in this case the craziness should be very undoubted, the danger very clear before any other state had a call to move in the matter. [57] But cases of these kinds of war are not common: with the first kind we ourselves happily can have nothing to do as principals: such wars grow out of outstanding wrong and anarchy become at last unbearable: they belong indeed properly to earlier stages of the world's history, to times when peoples were slowly toiling out of barbarism. With all that, even these long-fought wars of liberation, much as we may sympathize with those who battle for the right in them, are even they unmixed gain, even among the rough populations among whom they are carried on, even when fought by newly born or newly reborn nations?

Look you, when any such war has been brought to a happy end, when, for example the Montenegrins have gained their well[-]deserved freedom, do we not pause in anxious expectation, & ask, what will they do next? They have learned war, can they learn any thing else: our hope is strong that they can, since we can hardly think that it is for nothing that their children are born longing for freedom; but if they cannot, how will they have disappointed our hope; what a woeful, what a poor dull ending it will be to a tale so fairly begun; how will they seem to have been fighting in a land of shadows for nothing! So, you see, it is by their fitness for peace and not for war that we must judge them in the long run: we look to them to make peace out of war.

10. Maréchal (Marshall) Patrice MacMahon, French general and monarchist President during the Second Empire, made a vain effort to thwart a Republican electoral victory when he dismissed the National Assembly in May of 1877.

As to those other kinds of necessary war[,] what is there to say? Who doubts the loss and confusion they bring about? The same injustice that individuals have to bear, the things done in haste that have to be undone at leisure, the slowly earned gains that have to be thrust into the fire of rough & hasty violence. Did we not feel as if we could once again breathe freely when we heard th[at] Macmahon had demitted in those threatening days of France¹¹; though indeed that would have been a war in which we should have had such sympathy for one side at least, that it would have been hard for [58] some of us to have sat quietly here at home, if it had gone on as we feared it might, and France had been wrapped in civil war.

Or again was there nothing to be mended after that mighty struggle across the Atlantic, though it ended in a gain so prodigious for the whole human race that we have scarcely realized it yet or what it will grow to?

Whatever the gain and whatever the loss may be of even a necessary war[,] it is obvious that we ought most seriously to count the cost of it; if we do not we shall one of these days be entering with light hearts on some war or other, which before it is over will make the whole world heavy-hearted enough.

And what is the cost, or how shall we reckon it; how get to think about it? Well, as for me, I suppose I am somewhat of an egotist: for what happens to me when I think of the relative gains of peace and war is, that I can't get out of my head thoughts of how I should like it myself if real war were here in the land; and what if it were a war in the cause of which I (and a great part of my fellow citizens) took no particular interest? How should I like it: I, a man of peace, a craftsman, with a wife and children to take care of: a man with longings to bring certain things to pass, which would please me, & as I think benefit my fellows; in short with what people call worthy ambitions and a pleasant life: I can't help thinking what confusion actual war present in the land, in London and its suburbs[,] would make of all this! What a face I should pull for instance when I came back to my house after it had been occupied by our own troops for a morning! What words I should use as I hunted for my M.S.S. & drawings among the ruins of my furniture: how I should cry out at having to begin life over again at 46 because of the stupid whim of a half-educated subaltern. And yet such a thing as this would be [59] such a trifle amidst the great tragedy, that no one could so much as say, I'm sorry for you.

Yes, yes, how we wrap up facts in meaningless phrases till we forget most often what the facts are that they represent, and thus deaden ourselves to terrible realities. Take to pieces for instance a very common sort of phrase that is used in despatches of battles, and let us note what it really means: 'the enem[y's] ¹² skirmishers annoyed us a little as we advanced.' There's for you

11. MacMahon resigned ("demitted," *démisiona*) the presidency in 1879.

12. *enemy's*] enemies [BL]

a phrase that does not stick in your memory two minutes as you read your newspaper in the morning train: if you had been among the 'annoyed,' a lifetime would not wipe it out from your memory: an army-surgeon would interpret the words for you best perhaps, yet we as we sit here can imagine it all pretty well if we try:

Say 3 men shot stone dead: no great harm to them perhaps: but how would your hearts have been frozen with horror if you had seen that done in the New Road¹³ this afternoon, or if their bodies with the ragged holes in them through which the life had ebbed away had been brought into the place where you were at work and resting, and laid among the familiar things of common life: or was there no one waiting for them to come home again?

But what other annoyance would there be: a man with his wrist shattered: a skilful right hand destroyed maybe: another shot through both legs – a wretched cripple henceforth[,] he had better never been born he thinks often afterwards: a dozen such or worse; or tortured with mangling wounds (I remember a doctor once horrifying me with describing some of our last scientific inventions in that line, & I shall never forget it)[.] with hurts that will perhaps finish them off in a week or month of careless (necessarily careless) hospital treatment, or will at any rate and at the best leave them much less than the men they were and ought to be.

And this is an annoyance only, which no man thinks of but the actors in it. [60] Now if people say, as they do, such talk as this is but of commonplace truisms: all men know that such things happen, and think of them seriously; but they are so brave that they are content to risk them; or so wise that in their forethought they will buy advantages to their country at the price of these horrors befalling their friends[,] relations and countrymen generally: if people say that I answer, it is not true: people do not think of such things:

"Half ignorant they turn an easy wheel,
That sets sharp racks at work to pinch and peel."¹⁴

Men's imaginations do not reach very far in conceiving of the evils that are not likely to happen to themselves: let me give you an illustration:

Of course you remember that man who tried to blow [up] a ship with a dynamite¹⁵ which was ingeniously timed to act when the doomed craft was in

13. Morris may have referred to a central London artery south and east of Regent's Park, now known as "Marylebone."

14. Morris's allusion to aristocratic exploitation is a quotation from Keats's "Isabella and the Pot of Basil" (stanza 16).

15. *blow a ship* blow up a ship [MM]; A failed capitalist and would-be insurance swindler – not an anarchist revolutionary – seems to have been the first multiple dynamite-murderer. Keith Alexander, alias William Keith Thomas, an American merchant burdened by gambling debts, consigned a heavily insured barrel of dynamite labelled "caviar" for shipment on the North-German Lloyd steamer *Mosel* in December 1875. A prematurely tripped trigger-mechanism killed

mid-ocean, but which exploded somehow as she lay by the quays at Bremen and amongst others wounded the author of the plot himself: now would you not have said that such a man was utterly remorseless, senseless – no man in short? Yet mark what happened, and how he claimed his share in our common humanity; he had schemed & carried out his horrible crime as a matter of business: he thought he should make money of it, and did not think of anything else: well he was carried to the hospital, and tended there amidst his victims, and when he heard their groans as he was lying amidst their misery, a dreadful lurid light broke in upon him; his own anguish and despair taught him what he had done, what results¹⁶ he had schemed for in his ignorance, and he tore his wounds open, and died in Judas-like remorse.

That is a strange story, and I bear it ever in my mind, as the very type of the blind folly that besets mankind, & makes so many lives hopelessly toilsome and unhappy.

I do believe that the great crimes of nations, as of individual men[,] have been caused [by] stupidity chiefly, not [61] by malice. Therefore, I say, enlighten the minds of men on war; let them understand all that it means; let them see its worst details uncloaked by conventional words; let them know what they are doing by it: in other times, or in other countries, it came home more to every man: every man then might¹⁷ have to catch up his weapons and run down to¹⁸ the battle[,] offering at least his own body to be hacked and mangled: that is past now, & well passed; for doubtless such scenes recurring often made men callous to the evils they lived amongst: but we who live amidst happier days[,] how base it is of us if we let the carelessness of ignorant contentment take the place of that callousness of habit; and by no other way can we avoid that baseness but by every man getting to feel *himself* responsible for any war that the country wages: I say men are not generally malicious or ill-natured or even hard-hearted, and once let a man know what war is and feel that he himself must share the shame of every war his country wages unjustly, and then see if he will cry out for glory, or want to make a deadly quarrel of every chance wind of ill-feeling that may drift from nation to nation.

If we do not see to this, we are thoughtless fools with all that that word means, and amongst other things it means cowards: but if we get to live with our minds really enlightened on the certain loss of even necessary war, and our consciences clear from the craving after glory; then if the day should ever come

81 people and gravely injured 200 more as the ship lay in the Bremerhaven docks, but Thomas's apparent intention had been to kill its full complement of 800 passengers and 200 crew-members without a trace in the North Atlantic. He attempted suicide before his 'perfect crime' was exposed, but survived four days of intermittent interrogation before he muttered "*Pech gehabt*" ("Bad luck") and died (Susanne Wiborg, *Die Zeit*, 52 [2002]).

16. *results*] result [MM]

17. *then might*] might then [MM]

18. *run down to*] run to [MM]

when irrepressible justice, or the hard need of self defence drives us into this portentous and monstrous plague of mankind, we should then cleave our way through it with the well-assured hope of coming to better days beyond it; of its leaving no revenge behind to fall upon us at some indefinite time: perhaps in the very days when we should be going fairly and smoothly on the path of progress, and were conscientiously trying to do our best.

[62] Let me put the matter before you once again thus:

All wars that are not merely wanton take place when matters are so bad, when the strain has become so unbearable, that the patience of patient men is exhausted; when even wise men are brought to such a pass, that they can see no remedy save in destruction: they who have been hitherto laboriously heaping up good things for the use of men, are now driven to devote themselves to destroy the health[,] the wealth and the lives of men: instead of spending their lives in striving to make their neighbours live happier and more reasonably, they must now spend them in ruining & killing the[ir]¹⁹ next-door neighbours. That is just and necessary war.

Surely, Sirs, it must have been but seldom in the world's history that things have been so bad as positively to drive worthy and thoughtful people into such straits as this.

In good sober truth not often: just and necessary wars are not so common as that. In how many wars I wonder has the right been clear on either side – to standers by, or even to the combatants two years after the war is over. And in how many[,] when at first there did seem to be clear right on one side[,] has not the right been sorely obscured before the end of it.

Stupid prejudice and greed have been at the bottom of most of those that have been fought by the will of the people even[.] As to those set on foot wholly in the interests of the kings and potentates of the world, I don't think we common people can enter enough into the feelings of such august persons as to be able to understand them: so we will e'en leave them alone for a while.

But apart from the necessities and family quarrels of Potentates – which are not our business – I say that the wars of civilization have mostly been set on foot by two powers, greed and National Vain-glory: you see it [is] chiefly the latter most mischievous & stupid vice which I have been combatting. As to the first, greed of gain, it is certainly not a very [63] amiable passion, or one that we would wish to see pandered to, since we understand clearly that national morality both springs up from and reacts upon individual morality, and is in fact the very bond of decent society; yet I know that as that society is at present constituted it would be unreasonable to scold over much at either individuals or nations for pushing their fortunes to the utmost, so long as they do it without too much lying or too much overbearing, so long as they show a little respect for the rights of the weak as well as those of the strong; the question is rather, does the greed of gain lead to real gain?

19. *the[ir]*] they [MM]

It is not uncommon, and is a very instructive spectacle to see a man growing richer and richer day by day, and unhappier & unhappier therewith: and we know the reason why when we come to think of it: it is because he has not advanced all parts of himself together: some parts of his mind & his soul are left long behind in their earlier poverty: nay, worse off than then, because they have lost hope, while the advancing parts of him go on toiling with huge apparent energy and mechanical excitement, that they may come at last to – nowhere –

Yes, Sirs, and as it is with greedy men, so shall it be with greedy nations: for, look you, that lust of gain by external violence cannot carry a whole people with it; for it would be too transparent a lie to pretend that the whole people could really share in the gains, and nobody intends that they shall, & people in general cannot fail to understand that: so that when some opium-selling, or Turkish bond holder sowing war, or some piece of land-filching is planned, the pill of greed must of necessity be gilded with flimsy stuff about the advancement of civilization, the spread of the beneficent influence of the Anglo-Saxon Race, and the like, before it will go down the throat of the nation.

National Vain-glory, in fact, must be appealed to, before any set of men in this country can get us to start them off [64] in the quest of gain by foreign conquest or foreign embroilment: people at large do instinctively feel that a war in which one side at all events cannot appeal to the highest principles of truth and justice, is a scandal to the world, a ruinous blow to the hopes of humanity. I know that it is unhappily true, that over and over again we have allowed ourselves to be satisfied, to be gulled, by wretched travesties of justice, and, I am ashamed as I say it, seldom more grossly than in the luckless year we have just passed through: and yet, since I do not believe it altogether or chiefly hypocrisy that has made our nation so gullible, but rather want of interest in the subject, want of thought – ignorance in fact – there seems to me no lack of hope that this may be greatly changed, nay is changing now, and that in [the] future it will be very difficult for any class or set of men in the country to jockey us either into a big unjust disastrous war, or a little unjust disgraceful war.

I say this because I cannot hide from myself or you, that whatever slips there may be in our constitution, that might lead under possible circumstances to dead-lock and confusion between the people and the executive, it is really, & always must be, the people that makes war: even a thoroughly despotic prince must screw some enthusiasm or appearance of it out of his people before he can venture to face a serious struggle: and with us the sov[e]reign power and its advisers could no more dare to go to war except under certain conditions than a man who couldn't swim would dare to jump into 12 ft water. If we and they are so unlucky or so thoughtless that they have a whim for an unnecessary war (think what *unnecessary* war means!) they must venture to carry their whim through either because they think the war they aim at will be so small and easy

that we shall not notice it, or because they think that with the help of the noisiest part of the population of all classes they can just push us into one so big that we must join in heartily when the first gun has been fired.

[65] Now I say that if the nation, if we, if any of us are contented to accept those conditions from carelessness on the one hand, or from dread of being considered unpatriotic on the other, we shall have little wars leading to big wars, and big wars leaving us their legacy of little wars, lies and revenge breeding lies and revenge in endless succession, till we shall become the paupers and slaves we shall richly deserve to be because of our sloth and cowardice[.]

There is no escaping from the inference; the last 6 years have taught us the lesson too well: the theory has been that we put Lord Beaconsfield and his tail into office in '74 because we wanted to 'rest and be thankful'²⁰: I can only say that if [we] are thankful for that rest we are thankful for small mercies indeed: and I for one do not agree with that theory, but believe rather that a vague desire for military glory had bitten us about that time: even from the first, I think, the shadow of that desire lay cold over the parliament then chosen, and paralyzed all usefulness in it: the parliament we then chose felt quite sure of our approbation so long as they neglected our business to attend to our – pleasure, I suppose I must call it.

Well even for this six years of such 'pleasure' in prospect and in fact we have surely paid quite dear enough: enough of pressing questions have been left to take care of themselves, and grow awkward and awkward to answer: enough of vague fears have been let loose upon industry & commerce: enough of vague threats of undoing the work of our fathers have been scattered about, to take root in the hearts of narrow-minded men, & bear fruit bitter enough both now and in the future: enough of all this has been done to show us how speedy reaction might become, if we could be got for a really long time (six years is not long luckily) to withdraw our attention from what some people call 'parish affairs': that is[,] from our own affairs.

Luckily however, those who took us at our word when we [66] bade them get us into trouble, saw their advantage even too clearly, and, being over eager to find us in a serious reaction, have hurried the matter, and frightened many of us awake, who might otherwise have slept till the noise was well over all our heads; so that we may hope we have indeed learned our lesson, & that before long we shall set the clock agoing which has been stopped for the past 6 years.

I say us and we, & shall continue to use those words: it is unfair to lay the blame of the dreadful deeds of the past year, of the anxious toil of two years ago on the Tory House of Commons or on Lord Beaconsfield, and his ardent

20. Morris wryly alludes to the title of William Wordsworth's 1831 poem, "Rest and Be Thankful! At the Head of Glencoe."

friend, admirer, & follower Lord Salisbury.²¹ Lord Beaconsfield and his tail rule England at present? Too true – but why? Who made the House of Commons a Tory one? Who made the Tory brain, that sham shifty Ulysses, king over us? Who made that queer whimsical fancy a terrible reality to Greek, Bulgarian & Servian[,] to Zulu and Affghan: – and to English widows and orphans too for that matter?

It was ourselves, Sirs, Ourselves.

No, we cannot even plead that we didn't know any better than our government that Sir Bartle Frere²² was about the land-filching business in S. Africa till it had become a war of which the very soldiers are heartily ashamed: we cannot plead that we could not guess that any man who was trusted by us with the tremendous office of Governor General of India would sliily shame us through lies & treachery in the hapless city of Cabul,²³ that we might at last have the honour and glory of performing a great act of generosity, the pardoning of men who have fought against us in open battle in defence of their native country – and their own necks: All that has happened is but the natural & necessary consequence of our own folly, our own forgetfulness.

[67] Well, you at least will not forget the state of feeling that was abroad at and about the time of the general election of '74: and I beg you never to forget it, but to remind our party and the great mass of the electors of it and what came of it, facing the disgraceful facts with courage, so that we may at least learn from misfortune.

We had a great statesman leading us then: he had led us through a time of unexampled progress: I defy anyone to state that the nation generally did not heartily approve the important measures that were passed in that parliament under Mr. Gladstone[']s leadership – these²⁴ things were not done in a corner – Has anyone pretended that after those measures were passed, Mr. Gladstone changed his principles, the principles on which those measures were based, the principles that were professed in '68²⁵. Did we pretend to think that we were

21. Robert Gascoyne-Cecil (1830-1903), Third Marquess of Salisbury, served as Disraeli's Foreign Secretary and Britain's chief negotiator at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and the Queen awarded him the Order of the Garter for his public and secret undertakings before and during the Congress. During three subsequent terms of office as Conservative prime minister, Salisbury's advocacy of Disraelian "peace with honour" led him to block Irish Home Rule, co-brokered the partition of Africa, and preside in his last tenure over British entrance into the Boer War.

22. Governor of Bombay, member of the India Council and later Governor of the Cape Colony in southern Africa, Sir Henry Bartle Edward Frere may have been best known for a war he precipitated when he tried to seize Zulu territory in 1879. Waves of Zulu warriors armed only with spears charged into British gunfire and overwhelmed their opponents at the battle of Insandhswana, the striking nature of this charge stunned British public opinion long after British troops defeated their enemies later that year. See note 30 below on "Cetewayo."

23. Kabul in Afghanistan. See note 32 on the origins of the "Second Anglo-Afghanistan War."

24*. *these*] those [MM]

25*. '68] 1868 [MM]

going to be governed in a different way[,] to be led in another direction to that in which we had declared by our votes in '68 we wished to be governed & led[?]

You know we pretended no such thing, yet in '74 Mr. Gladstone would no longer suit us, nor would his principles[.] And why? apparently because we were wearied with prosperity, and wanted to see what the other thing would be like.

Just think of a crew of mariners sailing happily with a fair wind under a captain & officers whom they trust and with whom nothing has gone wrong hitherto; think of them saying: nothing is going on, it is dull, and then turning to,²⁶ pitching captain and officers overboard, and choosing instead of them some country-bumpkin passengers headed by a stock jobber to sail their ship for them; and then down they sit all hands, get drunk, and whistle for a gale – the gale they'll get without much whistling I imagine. That's what we were like in '74.

We are a great nation, and sometimes think ourselves even greater than we are perhaps: but that was the petty folly [68] we played off on ourselves.

We were wearied of doing right, wearied of prudence, wearied of setting our house in order, and so we fell to fooling for our pastime: there was the disgrace, believe me; what has happened since has been but the visible token of our treachery to ourselves – a pity only that when a great nation goes astray others are involved in its punishment!

Peace, Retrenchment, Reform, modest words indeed and unromantic, but we know well, we had proved it, that these were necessary to us if we were to lead the van of civilization, if we were to fulfill the promise of our country's youth to

– Rise on stepping stones
Of our dead selves to higher things;²⁷

Yet I say such bewilderment had come over us that we found Reform dull, retrenchment mean, and peace inglorious: we had ready to hand men and a man who could easily mend all this for us, and give us amusement: we put him in his present place to do it: has he given us less than we bargained for? How do you like the merriment, the generosity, the glory for which we craved?

Now mind if I dwell at all upon this past disgrace, it is because I want to stir up hope in you and myself for the future: it is true that we cannot get rid of the consequences of past folly, nay who can say what we shall yet have to pay for it: but the folly itself[,] we may get rid of that.

In the mood in which we were weary of prudence we made for our amusement a strange sort of monsters out of some commonplace, and, I

26. *to* too [BL]

27. Morris quotes this well-known passage from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (section 1.3-4).

daresay, rather decent men, and called them our rulers; we made them ridiculous to the world and ruinous to ourselves too if it should last: but it need not last; we can unmake their monstership, & restore them to themselves: let us do it, though it will be hard work; and let us when it is done not forget our former folly lest we repeat it, and thereby ruin many a hope & break many a heart.

Do not above all let the change of rulers come about by the [69] mere swing of the pendulum, and because we have now in turn grown tired of them, but let thoughtfulness & principle make the change: let them be our leaders henceforward.

Meanwhile our respectable, but misled & misleading Tory government will with the help of adversity have taught us something. They have given us a glimpse of the terrible abyss into which we might, if we went quite mad, cast all our gains of the last 3 centuries: they have gone so far even as to show us that we might once more bring artificial starvation on the great mass of our population for the benefit of this, that or the other class: they have taught us that we must watch carefully as our fathers did, lest the letter of our constitution should be strained till our sov[e]reign power becomes a danger to us and to itself: and in short they have showed us the machinery of a trap baited with the wretched carrion called National Vain-glory: a trap for catching us and holding us fast in one place; lest we should go on too fast and do to them and to ourselves all sorts of dreadful things, I know not what – live happily great and small perhaps.

It is indeed a hopeful sign of things bettering since '74 that we have been only partly caught – a bit of our tails, as it were[,] still fast in the teeth: if they had had their machinery ready sooner I believe in good earnest we should have gone headlong into the midst of it: for once more (excuse me for singing that burden again) I can't forget what a thrill of exultation went through the country when the mountains were in labour, & produced that wretched little mouse of the Suez Canal shares²⁸: after that, you know England was to take her place again amidst the Councils of Europe.

England[']s place – what is England[']s place? To carry civilization through the world? Yes indeed the world must be civilized, and I doubt not that England will have a large share in bringing about that civilization.

[70] And yet, since I have heard of wine with no grape-juice in it, and cotton-cloth that is mostly barytes²⁹; and silk that is two thirds sumach, and knives whose edges break or turn up if you try to cut anything harder than butter with them[,] and many another triumph of Commerce in these days, I begin to doubt if civilization itself may not be sometimes so much adulterated as scarcely to be worth the carrying – anyhow it cannot be worth much, when it is necessary to kill a man in order to make him accept it.

28. Disraeli had heavily invested British currency in such shares.

29. Barium sulphate, a low-grade ore, was often sold as a powder.

Doubtless our once dreaded foe, poor Cetewayo,³⁰ has learned so much of the blessings of civilization within the last year, that it is hardly worth while to bring him over here to complete the lesson; otherwise we might show him in London some strange things: might he not say: 'poor devils! They treated me ill enough certainly, but I can forgive them since I have seen what a dog[']s life so many of their people lead at home! no wonder it maddens them.'

In short civilization has this in common with charity, (from which apparently it otherwise differs much) that it begins, or should begin at home: our first duty is to our own people, who to my mind are (all classes of them) by no means so well civilized as they should be: for instance it was common to hear apparently educated people the other day gravely insisting on the necessity for the utter destruction of Cabul as a matter of revenge: if I am not mistaken one of those not very edifying publications called Society Journals was busy over this; probably the only serious thing it had printed for months. [P]ray is such senseless stupidity aping wickedness a product of civilization, or a relic of barbarism?

Nay that is a little thing[,] for it has to do only with a few comparatively: this is neither the time nor the place to go into the matters that one cannot choose but think of when one touches on such a subject, but well you know how the heart faints when we think of all the evils of the complicated society of this huge city, this densely peopled country, nor dare anyone deny that England's place is above all things to show the [71] world her people one and all free[,] thoughtful[,] just & happy. That is her duty and her glory.

And how have our representative government helped her to perform that duty, to earn that glory? it is no slander to say that their help has been scarcely worth having. I don't say that it is their fault but it is much their misfortune – and ours: I do not say that the gentlemen who make up the government don't wish prosperity to all classes of the community; only they do not understand, & with their principles cannot understand what the great mass of the people really need, what a great number of them are constantly crying out for: they very likely, who actually deal with affairs, would if they could, do more: but remember the mass of Stupidity that they represent, and that will not let them move if they would: stupidity, and the selfish fear of democracy that is bred of it is, I say, what they represent: they have to be afraid of us, & being afraid of us, they cannot understand us, and failing to understand us, they must necessarily fail in their duty; which is bad: But what is worse is that in order to keep office[,] which is necessary for their conception of our welfare, so that they may stave off democracy, they are obliged to make a pretence of fulfilling their duty.

30. Cetewayo, the absolute Zulu monarch whose warriors had annihilated their British opponents at the battle of Insandlwana in 1879 pled the cause of his people in person as a captive before Queen Victoria. He led them against the British one more time after Her Majesty did not keep her promises, and he died in 1884.

What are they to do? The world *is* moving: that is hateful to them, and yet if they do not make a show of moving with it, out they go, and it will move a deal faster then: they can't do what they would, and they won't do what they should, and yet they must do something, or else – out they go: so heavy are abuses to the nation that has once begun to move on the path of progress; so intolerable are our wrongs when we have once found out that they can be righted[.]

What must they do? Again I say[,] they must find a foreign enemy a rival; if in fact the enemy is not so much an enemy as a customer, so much the worse for the facts: some country must be made an enemy of which people in general can know nothing; they themselves (our rulers) get almost to believe in the humbug; well enough at all events to [72] be able to speak fiercely on the subject: National Vain-glory is kindled, and millions are made to believe, or to pretend to believe that, for instance, a country with crippled finances, a discontented population, amongst whom wild changes are brewing, a huge unwieldy thinly populated territory, and an enormous corrupt official body is a serious and increasing danger to the richest and most settled country in the world. I think it will seem almost incredible in time to come that such an attempt could have been made on the credulity of a great nation: at all events I believe that history will put down the matter to its right cause, an attempt to amuse the people with dramatic events abroad, while the drag is being put on democracy at home.³¹

I repeat that I do not accuse all or most members of the Tory government of consciously meaning this; but sure I am that unconsciously at least the idea has ever been stirring in their minds: it must have been; for practically it is the policy of the great Tory party since that party has in these latter days been driven to its shifts; and it always will be its policy till that party is extinguished by the general enlightenment of the people of all classes.

Well[,] enlightenment even as far as it has gone did this for us, that the greater attempt failed, owing to the good sense, and I will add the morality of what was at least the better part of the nation, though it may not have been the larger: having failed, still something had to be done, and where was there a shadow of excuse for doing anything: India would do it seemed: people at home don't bother their heads what becomes of the rights and wrongs of a set of barbarians: and if an attack were made on Affghanistan it would look like an attack on Russia, without being so dangerous or costly[,] even if it really rather furthered her ambition than not: it could be slipped into without notice almost, and would be sure to be successful – *brilliantly* successful it might be called without any extra expense: –

31. Parliament had recently passed a series of "coercion acts" ostensibly designed to repress Irish radicalism, then sharpened them as Morris anticipated it would in the 1880s.

So to work we went at making a scientific frontier, which it seems is [73] the modern name for carrying fire & the sword (say murder & fire-raising) among a people who have done us no shadow of a wrong.

On my word I cannot explain the Affghan war³² otherwise than thus: if ever war was waged for war[’s] sake that has been – that democracy might be checked in England: I can only say of it further, that the end proposed was ruinous folly, and the means employed villainous injustice.

But meantime, and setting aside the shame and disgrace of our present little wars, how have we been faring at home? As people must fare who irresolutely chase the phantom of military glory about the world; only lucky if we can give up the chase in time to look to our own house before it catches fire.

At our own doors is a curious specimen of the blessings of conquest: when I hear people scolding at those who should be our fellow citizens of Ireland as monsters of ingratitude and the very fools of anarchy, I feel inclined to wish that some man of accurate knowledge and acknowledged rectitude and impartiality would draw up a plain account of all our dealings with Ireland from Strongbow’s time³³ to Beaconsfield[’s] – for the use of Englishmen: it would not be either short or pleasant reading I fear; but it might teach us that it is not very wonderful if they find it hard to forget, though we forget, and that we may well try to give them further opportunities to forgive us, and they at the very least may well claim a patient hearing of, & just dealing with their grievances.

Is our own country-side[,] in spite of its beauties & pleasures[,] too pleasant a place for an intelligent man to live in, if he be neither a game preserver or a game keeper: pheasants are beautiful creatures & good to eat; but I wish there wasn’t a head of them left in the country.³⁴

Five years ago, nay a year ago when the election was further off, and we were still rejoicing in Peace with Honour,³⁵ [74] what do you think a Tory M.P. would have said to a bill that struck a blow at entail³⁶ and land-hunger? and now (if the ministry lasts as long) he will have to vote for it it seems,

32. In response to the Afghanistani ruler Amir Sher Ali Khan’s denial of entry to Britain’s envoy General Sir Neville Chamberlain in 1879, her Majesty’s government attacked Afghanistan in force, and an army commanded by Ayub Khan defeated British troops at Maiwand and besieged the British garrison at Kandahar. Ten thousand British soldiers marched from Kabul to break the siege and end the “Second Anglo-Afghan War” in 1880.

33. Richard Fitz Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Pembroke and Lord of Leinster, was a twelfth-century warrior and warlord noted for his skill with the longbow. He harrowed Ireland with the Lord of Leinster, Dermot MacMurchada, and seized Dublin as well as much of southeastern Ireland in 1170. Henry II later appointed him the king’s personal representative in Ireland in reward for these and other military services.

34. Morris refers to 19th-century destruction of farmland to create game preserves.

35. Disraeli’s government employed this slogan to characterize its gains at the Congress of Berlin.

36. An 1880 bill severely weakened “entail” (“life-tenancy” with “fee-tail”), a law which had permitted testators to will “contingent remainders” of large landed estates to unborn descendants (usually grandsons).

comforting himself, I suppose, with hoping that it is so drawn that it will not work: well I must say I didn’t think that we were as strong as that.

But I think we, and not the Tory tail to which he belongs[,] had better educate him on the subject of the anomalies in our Parliamentary representation: and then perhaps he will one day see that the state need not patronize religion in the form of a heavily endowed body of majestic status which it is a mere farce to call any longer the Church of England, but whose existence in that form, & under that patronage casts a slur upon all who belong to other religious bodies, bidding them and their members consider themselves outside of the pale of respectability. But while he and his are in power do we not still tremble for the small modicum of national education that has been granted us,³⁷ while every man of us who respects himself has to fight tooth and nail against the grossest stupidity and injustice in the district in which he lives to keep it uninjured.

I have named really but a few of the questions that our government ought to help us with; as to most of them & many more the clock has stopped for six years; when will the hands move forward again[?]

The government must make them move, but what government I won’t say, for I don’t believe in the miracle of sudden conversions in the seventh year of existence: and as I said before I think those who are now in have done all we asked them to do, & can do no more; and I hope that we have got our wits back and shall keep them & shall no longer need a conjuror to swallow swords & to jump backward over his chair for us[.]

For the rest, if we can’t have the absolutely best man at our head, let us at least have the best we can get; and he and his [75] fellows must be such men as look forward with hope not backward with regret; that at least, and yet that will be enough if they understand withal that they need not manufacture enemies of England’s glory on the banks of the Neva,³⁸ or the highlands of Affghanistan, when there are plenty of them between the narrow seas.³⁹

But what England’s glory is, and what all political action should tend towards in the long run, if politics are not to be a mere game to be played at, I will tell you my idea of that, & see if it square with yours⁴⁰:

[I]f it does not, and you think me a crochetter (as the phrase goes)[,] well I understand clearly that my crochett has no chance of being heard till Peace, retrenchment, & reform are abroad, and that I intend at the coming election to vote for any good man & true who will help me to those, and to let my crochett bide its time; and to any others of you who are, like me, crochetteers⁴⁰[,] I give the advice to do the same.

37. For the first time in Great Britain’s history, the Education Acts of 1870 (England) and 1872 (Scotland) mandated basic instruction for children up to the age of 13.

38. This Russian river traverses St. Petersburg.

39. Here at home.

40. Malcontents.

I think of a country where every man has work enough to do, and no one has too much: where no man has to work himself stupid in order to be just able to live: where on the contrary it will be easy for a man to live if he will but work, impossible if he will not (that is a necessary corollary): where every man's work would be pleasant to himself and helpful to his neighbour; and then his leisure from bread-earning⁴¹ work (of which he ought to have plenty) would be thoughtful and rational: for you understand he would be thoroughly educated, whatever his condition might be: such a man as this, (and there should be but very few else among us) would never fail in self-respect; he would live honourably, and as happily as national external circumstances would allow him, and would help others to do likewise: you may be sure he would take good care to have his due share in the government of his country and would know all about its dealings with other countries: justice to himself & all others would be no mere name to him, but the rule of all his actions, the passionate desire of his life – What King, what potentate, what power could prevent such a man from [76] both taking and giving his due?

Well, some people today would think that dull, would prefer more gambling in life so to say; more contrast of condition, of thought[,] of aspiration: it seems to them right, nay a law of nature, that many people should be boiled down as it were body and soul for the sake of one glorious one: in short they cannot do without slaves: nay they would themselves rather be slaves than free men without them – it would save so much trouble.

Would it? Well, I don't know: in the long run I think not: but then, you see, such men don't trouble themselves about the long run; or they would understand that ignorant & unhappy people are dangerous people; that they desire ignorantly, hate ignorantly, revenge themselves ignorantly, and not unseldom confuse in one ruin those who have wronged them with those who indolently refused to right them, and those that could not right them though they strove sorely.

For my part, Sirs, so that we may have no strife in the land save what may be carried on with the printing-press & the ballot-box, I say let us take the trouble – any trouble to live like free men. And now, look you, it is some 6 years that I have scarcely felt like a free man, and that lies heavily upon me; and in spite of all my good wishes for your welfare I hope it does upon you also, & upon all those whose principles bind them to Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform.

For in that case I know it will not be long before we shall all be free again, and shall see the England that we love once more moving on the forward path, and with a clear conscience shall be able to cry, May the Right prevail!

W.M. Jan 30th 1880

2:30 a. m.

Kelmscott House Upper Mall Hammersmith

41. *bread-earning*] bread earning [MM]

POP ART, MODERNISM, AND MORRIS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID MABB

Rosie Miles and David Mabb

David Mabb is an artist, based in London, who has been working with William Morris wallpaper designs and fabrics for several years. His concern has been to engage with Morris's designs in the light of post-modernist aesthetic paradigms, as well as to "rescue" them from the conservatism with which they are now associated in terms of interior decorating. The following interview accompanies Mabb's current exhibition and installation at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, UK, which draws on the Whitworth's extensive collection of Morris designs.¹

Miles: To start, would you like to say something about how you came to be interested in Morris from your perspective as an artist? You make the point in a piece you recently wrote in the *Journal of William Morris Studies* that Morris's designs are anathema to contemporary art aesthetics (Mabb 11), so what got you into them?

Mabb: There were two reasons. The first was that I had been working with fabrics when I was in the States – Canadian fabrics, cheap American fabrics – and when I came back to the UK I wanted to make something which was quintessentially English. So I was casting around for something that seemed to me to epitomise Englishness. I also always like painting on grounds which aren't blank; most artists start off on a white ground and I wanted to work on something that already existed, as it provides a starting point to work off against. Prior to that I'd read E.P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, so I knew about Morris's politics, and when I came across the fabrics and the wallpapers I didn't quite understand at that point what the relationship was between the two; in fact, they seemed to me contradictory. It's only through working with them that I've begun to understand the relationship between Morris's political, ideological beliefs and the way his designs function as a set of beliefs as well.