



Fig. 3. Thomas Woolner. Detail of *Love*: the loose twist of hair to be pinned up, as in fig. 1; Colchester & Ipswich Museums Service.

## WILLIAM MORRIS'S "COMMERCIAL WAR": A CRITICAL EDITION

Florence S. Boos

William Morris drafted "Commercial War" in 1885 as part of a series of critiques of capitalism written shortly before and after the period of his break with the Social Democratic Federation and co-foundation of the Socialist League.<sup>1</sup> He offered variants of the lecture to the Croydon branch of the Socialist Democratic Federation, the Labour Emancipation League at the Academy Schools in Hoxton, and the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League at Kelmescott House. He did not reprint it in *Signs of Change* (1888), however, and May Morris reproduced only one of its more powerful paragraphs in the second volume of *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936).

The mid-1880s were a period in which mass meetings of angry workers accelerated passage of a Voting Rights Act in 1885; the imperialist campaign in the Sudan reached its height (General Gordon and other British soldiers were killed in the siege of Khartoum on 25 January 1885); and crofters rose up against the Highland Clearances in the north in sporadic armed conflicts such as "The Battle of the Braes" (1882). It was also a period in which, in response to some of these events, Morris composed a long narrative poem, "The Pilgrims of Hope," as well as several "Chants for Socialists"; participated in manifestos and demonstrations which demanded wider voting rights (26 October 1884); condemned the British invasion of the Sudan (Socialist League resolution, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 February 1885); protested unemployment (16 February and 12 April 1885); and commemorated the anniversary of the Paris Commune (22 March 1885).

The striking title of "Commercial War" reflects Morris's view that capitalism is not only a self-justifying form of armed theft, but a mercantile variant of Hobbes's "ceaseless war of man against man" (f.121), and that only a complete change in the social order of this Leviathan will bring lasting respite from its internecine extension of armed conflict by other means.

As the proprietor of Morris and Co. he was himself a capitalist of a relatively benign and limited sort. More relevantly, perhaps, he was the son of a wealthy banker and his wife, and had put in time as a member of the board of the family's copper and arsenic mine from 1871 to 1875, perhaps at his mother's request.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these experiences conferred a certain autobiographical resonance on the following lines in his essay:

While this commercial war lasts we are all the slaves of it, not the working-classes only, but all of us[,] however grand we may think ourselves; men of science, literary men, artists, we all wear the chain. I know it by sad experience, that intelligence[,] enthusiasm, knowledge of history, patience, years of hard work can contrive or accomplish nothing outside the charmed circle of that slavery: here is your one hope of success[,] to tack yourself on to the skirts of Commercialism, do its bidding, accept its morality and – despise yourself and the whole human race. (f.119)

The Devon Great Consols, incorporated in 1847 by Morris's father and several associates, finally closed its doors in 1903 when it could no longer profitably extract copper and arsenic.<sup>3</sup> As for his interior-design firm, Morris and Co. quietly dissolved when, in the absence of Morris's ability to create new designs, its creations and reproductions no longer found favour with purchasers of the 1930s.

In any case, in his everyday and familial life Morris would have met many people whose self-satisfied views he describes in his first paragraph:

[W]e find that the rich and well-to-do, the usurpers of property[,] try to wiggle out of acknowledging this fact by all kinds of ways, and mostly protest loudly that they are friends of the workers and wish them well.... I have been almost forced to believe in the genuineness of such professions as far as individuals are concerned: I have talked with people who, at least for the moment, believed that it was not only good and right in the abstract for the mass of mankind to be overworked & underpaid[,] to dread starvation daily, to be forced to have neither education or leisure or pleasure or hope, that it was not only good for the universe, but good for the slavelings themselves, and that the wise among them see it to be good, the ignorant among them feel it to be so, and that they have nothing to gain & everything to lose by any possible change in the basis of society. (f.109)

At a deeper level and more generically, Morris identifies three great taints of corporate capitalism: its enormous waste, the widespread destitution which follows in its wake, and its role as a willing abettor of imperial wars. Five years later, in chapter 15 of *News from Nowhere*, Old Hammond succinctly characterizes the latter as follows: "the countries within the ring of

'civilisation' (that is, organised misery) were glutted with the abortions of the market, and force and fraud were used unsparingly to 'open up' countries OUTSIDE that pale" (125).

In "Commercial War" Morris also identifies one of the guiding principles of corporate capitalism and its propaganda ministry:

[O]ur newspaper and periodical press are little more than puffing sheets ... sugared with a little news, a little politics & sometimes a little literature.... everything must be puffed; not only the rotten wares, or the low medium, as manufacturers phrase it, but even the reasonably good ones.... (f.114)

As an artist as well as the editor of *Commonweal*, he also observed the great power capitalist "taste-makers" have over people whose freedom to think and design for themselves has been blunted or traduced: "[W]hen I see the kind of thing which does duty among [poor people and even shabby genteel people] for art and ornament, I confess I feel an indignation I have no power to express that people should have had such things thrust upon them for money ... such travesties of beauty[,] such wretched twaddling folly as they are" (f.117). And these, he reminded us, were the *lucky* ones. Somewhere – preferably out of sight – is a factory-floor where these commodities had been made by people who "lead a life that offers them no interest or variety save the interest which is inspired by doubts about next week[']s food, and the variety of living for a month or two on the pawn-shop instead of the mill" (f.130), and who are "overworked[,] made to fear starvation, live in hovels..., herded and jammed in foul places called towns, while the houses in the countryside fall into ruins, and once fertile fields go uncultivated" (f.130).

The "once fertile fields" Morris had in mind lay in southern England, but he was well aware that the abuses of capitalism are readily exportable, that "imperialism" leads inevitably to ruthless competition between competing "empires," and that "England[,] once the undoubted head of that system[,] is losing her leadership" (f.126).

These observations naturally led Morris to consider a current example of Britain's imperial dominion, and offer a 'scandalous' expression of sympathy with the Madhists who resisted a particular extension of that domination in Khartoum and the Sudan:

Nobody I think finds it very difficult to understand why those Arab men and boys threw their lives away so resolutely: we may give the feeling different names, & call it fanaticism, patriotism, love of liberty: for my part it seems to me much the same spirit as that which held the long-haired Greeks at Thermopolae, or the Swiss at [Morgarten,] and if we praise them for the manner of their death, and the cause they died for, I cannot see how we can

withhold praise from the desert warriors whom we have been slaughtering lately. (f.125)

In February the Socialist League had passed a resolution condemning the invasion of the Sudan, and circulated a proclamation expressing pleasure at the fall of Khartoum. (For a present-day comparison, imagine a hypothetical resolution which expressed pleasure at the failure of a 'coalition' attempt to 'secure' Marjam in Afghanistan.) As for Britons' 'patriotic duty,' "it is for [the capitalists] that we let our money, our name, our power, be used to drag off poor wretches from our pinched fields & our dreadful slums, to kill & be killed in a cause they know nothing of" (f.130).

At this point he shifted registers, paused to honour pioneers of socialism such as the cooperator Robert Owen – "the most generous and best of men" (f.122) – and criticized Positivists and liberal humanists such as Frederic Harrison<sup>4</sup> (whom he characterized as the "distinguished Priest of the Religion of Humanity," f.11), who opposed imperialism but embraced slightly reformed facades for Victorian capitalism. For Morris at least, such liberal reformists offered little or nothing to ordinary workers, who must above all be able to "see ... how far we are bound by mere folly and superstition which we can shake off..., and first of all by the means of knowing it for what it is" (f.120).

Five years before he drafted his hopeful account of "The Great Change" in chapter 17 of *News from Nowhere*, Morris also seemed to understand that no single form of organization or mass movement can determine such outcomes, much less render them inevitable: "I suppose nobody, however rash he may be, can suppose that such a change can be brought about suddenly, or by the conscious efforts of a few or even a great many people" (f.121). One might compare this passage with his attempts to describe the protean nature of such change in *A Dream of John Ball* – through a glass, darkly, first, and somewhat later in the homiletic dialect of his heroic fourteenth-century 'hedge priest' John Ball, who saw that

men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about despite their defeat, [but] when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name....

[G]reat and grievous shall be the strife in those days, and many the failures of the wise, and too oft sore shall be the despair of the valiant; and back-sliding, and doubt, and contest....: till ... the Day will have come.<sup>5</sup>

More grimly, Morris conjectured (with Marx) that such a "Day" might be preceded by a complete collapse of the current system beneath the weight of its internecine enormities:

It is the commercial system itself which will kill the commercial system...  
... if by chance the great capitalist & despotic communities are to meet in a huge all embracing conflict, I don't believe for one that the new heavens and the new earth that will arise from that Ragnarók or Twilight of the Gods will turn out to be the paradise of exploitation which the Imperialist liberals have figured to themselves. (f.128)

... though slaves suffer pain because they feel their degradation, and machines do not: yet there is hope in that; because slaves can at least rebel when the opportunity serves: and now the opportunity draws near. (f.131)

But what if the weaponry and technology of the "commercial war" were to destroy *us* as the "system" destroyed itself? (Where were the ordinary mortals during the Ragnarók?)

The military and civilian death-tolls in the First and Second World Wars have been estimated at sixteen million and sixty million, respectively, and it would be impossible to estimate the (fortunately counterfactual) casualties of the Cuban Missile Crisis. There have also been at least two more relatively 'low-technological' genocides in the last forty years, and no one can attach any honest upper-bound to the casualties of global economic injustice.

These bitter historical facts might have stunned Morris at least as much as his *sending's* descriptions perplexed John Ball. But they might also have strengthened his ethical convictions. For tenable arguments can be made that

1. Morris's anti-capitalism expressed a deep opposition to political, military, and economic dominance-hierarchies of all sorts and that this opposition was what Ball (and Morris) "meant under another name";
2. that the only lasting remedy he saw for this pervasive "illth" was to give ordinary people "the means of knowing it for what it is," and hope therefore that "the truth would (not "will" but "would") make them free"; and
3. that egalitarian education offered the sole tenable hope for this remedy for Morris (who disliked conventional agitprop), and an ethical common ground for the enlightenment he hoped would flow from efforts to "make social-ists."

Informed that this hope has arisen again from the ashes, Morris might – like Ball – have been pleased to learn that individuals, groups, enclaves, communities, and even sovereign nations have striven, at their best, to put these insights and principles into practice – often, of course, "under another name."

## Notes

1. Other critiques included "Slaves and Slave Holders," "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," "Work As It Is and As It Might Be," "Art and Labour," and "Socialism."
2. For more details, see Florence Boos and Patrick O'Sullivan, "Morris's Socialism and the Devon Great Consols," forthcoming in *The Journal of William Morris Studies*.
3. See Charles Harvey and Jon Press, "The City and Mining Enterprise: The Making of the Morris Family Fortune," *Journal of William Morris Society*, 9 (1990), and J.C. Goodridge, "Devon Great Consols: A Study of Victorian Mining Enterprise," *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, 96 (1964). For details of conditions and labour disputes, see Goodridge; Gerald Woodcock, "Strike!," *Tavistock's Yesterdays: Episodes from Her History* (Callington, Cornwall: Woodcock, 1993); and Frank Booker, "Devon Great Consols Mine," *The Industrial Archaeology of the Tamar Valley* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971, revised edition).
4. Martha Vogeler, *Frederic Harrison: The Vocations of a Positivist* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984). Among other things, Harrison designed and promoted a set of Positivist rituals for worship designed to serve as a secular humanist alternate to organized religion.
5. *A Dream of John Ball* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1892), 27; 108-09.

## The Text

"Commercial War" is the sixteenth of 23 essays on socialism preserved in the May Morris Bequest (B.L. Add. M.S. 45,334, ff.109-31). Morris wrote the manuscript in ink on large ruled pages, and used infrequent paragraph breaks to conserve space, and elongated spaces to mark lesser pauses or shifts between sentences.

I have inserted a number of bracketed punctuation-marks but preserved the colons and long sentences which cadence the parallelism and natural rhythms of Morris's speech.

"Commercial War"  
[William Morris]

[folio 109] When we Socialists point out to people that under our present system of capital and wages the workers are and must be defrauded of their due, that they are robbed of their property in fact, we find that the rich and well-to-do, the usurpers of property[,] try to wiggle out of acknowledging this fact by all kinds of ways, and mostly protest loudly that they are friends of the workers and wish them well, and that they dread a change in the basis of society quite as much in the interest of the workers as in their own interests: some of them will even tell you that they feel keenly their duty of being mere trustees of the wealth which law and custom gives to them and takes away from those who have produced it: I have been almost forced to believe in the genuineness of such professions as far as individuals are concerned: I have talked with people who, at least for the moment, believed that it was not only good and right in the abstract for the mass of mankind to be overworked & underpaid[,] to dread starvation daily, to be forced to have neither education or leisure or pleasure or hope, that it was not only good for the universe, but good for the slavelings themselves, and that the wise among them see it to be good, the ignorant among them feel it to be so, and that they have nothing to gain & everything to lose by any possible change in the basis of society.

That's a strange story certainly[,] but as they talk, it is the apparent position taken up of the well disposed of the possessing non-producing classes at the present day, and I really think that the individuals among them believe that the poor like being poor and wouldn't be otherwise if they could. In fact they have made, some of them at least, an article of faith[,] a religion indeed of this queer story and call it the Moralization of Capital.<sup>1</sup>

[110] But though the individuals believe in this astonishing theory, I must needs say a hard word, that after all the whole thing is hypocrisy, not individual hypocrisy but class hypocrisy. Just as in past times the wealthy classes fortified their position with haughty priggish superciliousness, or with aristocratic insolence and superstition, so do they at present with hypocrisy, which as a matter of course in a commercial age is at once the great instrument & the great vice of the time. In its heart of hearts the modern wealthery[?], the possessing[,] non-producing class[,] holds the same opinion of the necessity & beauty of the contrast between rich and poor, which the slave owners of Greece & Rome and the serf masters of Medieval Europe held: this namely[,] that it [is] a beautiful arrangement of God or nature that the great mass of men should be poor and toilers in order that their labour may produce that fine flower of civilization[,] the well to do man with superfluous

money[,] which will by ever fresh and fresh acquisition of unpaid labour produce more money; that it is orderly and right that the masses should be overworked, in order that a certain class may obtain immunity from productive toil: this has always, and very naturally been, the view of the dominant class; only in older days they stated it plainly and without hypocrisy, they now have to veil it with hypocrisy enough in public at any rate, though of course you will find the rougher members of the class stating it with perfectly natural brutality in private, and the whole class acting it always & steadily[,] whatever their words may be.

The maxim therefore of the dominant class is now no less than of old, it is expedient that the many should toil & suffer for the few<sup>2</sup>; nor does the maxim which [111] I have heard in the mouth of a distinguished Priest<sup>3</sup> of the Religion of Humanity (the Positive Religion)<sup>4</sup> really differ from it: quoth he[,] a great man has said 'Everything for the people, nothing by them.'<sup>5</sup> The idea that runs through all this tyranny now so decently veiled, is that it is possible and expedient to train a few men up to be Gods or heroes by putting them above the lot of the common herd; that thus a standard of superexcellent humanity is held up to the world which furthers the progress of the race. Well, it may be there once was something in the idea, though for my part I hope I should always have borne in me the heart of a grimy hard[-]handed rebel against this hierarchy: The Athenian citizen did something worth remembrance with the leisure which the unpaid labour of his chattel slave gave him (prig): the medieval baron appears to us at this distance of time to have lived a romantic life on the unpaid labour of his serf (school bully): and surely one might think that the capitalist of today could do something with the life free from labour which he wins from the unpaid labour of his slave – the wage earner. Something he does do certainly, but the question is whether that something is of any great use to the world; does he waste the free noble life he has – stolen? That is a serious question I think: I remember another saying of my friend the positivist priest in which he formally stated the question: said he: "A great man has said, It is of no importance how a man has acquired his wealth, so long as he uses it properly." Perilous morality[,] you may think[,] for even a capitalist society! but never mind that; how does the capitalist use his wealth which he has acquired – never mind how? that I say is the question.

[112] Well[,] of course he spends some of it in real leisure which is good for him at all events; idleness if you enjoy it and don't hurt your neighbor by it is always a good thing; but you know the capitalist is always telling us that he is a busy man, and truly he is; though he sometimes overdoes his account of his laborious sufferings. What does he do with all that business? Well, what did the Greek citizen do, what did the Medieval baron do? They made war and so does our modern capitalist: I am not now thinking of his occasional

spurts of vicarious war, his collecting bands of hard[-]pressed labouring men, putting muskets in their hands and the ghost of a worn out superstition, called patriotism, in their hearts and setting them to kill people with whom they have no quarrel for the sake of winning fresh markets for him: that is only an incident in his life of continuous warfare. For indeed that is his life: if he is busy, as he is, and he does not produce, as he doesn't; what can he do but spend his life in fighting[?] His business is to contend with the other individuals of his class for the amount of the share of the product of unpaid labour which he shall individually possess: this war is technically called competition, and of course you will hear it spoken of as a beautiful & providential thing[:] the stimulus to exertion, the friend of liberty, nay the very bond of Society itself: but don't be deceived by the mere words; for this Commercial war has all the essential elements of the gunpowder war in it.

And first of all comes its waste, which indeed has no limits, and is carried on with immense variety. [B]ecause it goes with this as with other kinds of war that everything must be subordinated to it; a victory won in it is a real success, no other kind of success is thought anything of: so as all [113] the most powerful part of society is engaged in this war[,] nothing else is, as I said, considered worthy to be thought of: the convenience, the happiness of society at large may go hang, so as only commerce may be brisk, and money turned over quickly: and you may take it as a curious familiar illustration of the waste of Commercial war that poor countries are by far the most comfortable to live in for all except the distinctly rich; that is[,] they are on the outskirts of the war and don't feel it so much: people in the rich countries don't live better, or healthier[, or] don't have better goods; they simply have the advantage of seeing greater contrast between their own moderate lives, or their own poverty and the rich people above them.

Now as to the forms of waste which Commercial war drives us into; I think they may chiefly be classed under three heads: 1<sup>st</sup>[,] the waste involved in the mere conduct of the war. 2<sup>nd</sup>[,] the forcing useless wares on the public, and 3<sup>rd</sup>[,] downright cheating, if indeed it is worth while making a separate heading of this last.

[A]s to the first: there is all the work that goes to watching lest the interests of each individual should be injured by the other combatants; safeguards against risk: book-keeping, insurance, checks against fraud in commercial houses and the like; not an inconsiderable waste, I should say: and there is also the waste incurred by competitive salesmanship: not a little one that: I have [114] given it one name, I will now give it another and call it puffery: just consider what that means. You must all of you know that there are many articles in these days of machinery which cost a great deal more to sell than they do to make; for we have got to be so stupid, or so overworked,



that everything must be puffed; not only the rotten wares, or the low medium, as manufacturers phrase it, but even the reasonably good ones still have to be puffed. I say again consider what all this means; amongst other things it means that our newspaper and periodical press are little more than puffing sheets, when they are successful, sugared with a little news[,] a little politics & sometimes a little literature. Take these for types of this kind of waste, I dare say many of you can call to mind more such things; but they may all be classed I think under these two subdivisions of precautions against fraud and risk, and puffery of wares; all this waste would disappear at once with Commercial war: and I hope you understand that this is no light matter: I can't give you the statistics of either of these subdivisions of waste, and of the latter one[,] the puffery[,] I suppose it would be hard to do so; but at any rate 'tis quite clear that its discontinuance would set free a vast number of people from absolutely useless work, that is[,] would enable them to keep themselves instead of being kept perforce by the labour of others.

The second form of waste that competition imposes upon us is the production of useless wares made simply to sell, that is[,] forced on the public owing to their poverty, want of leisure[,] ignorance or folly[.] I know this is a wide subject, and also that in treating it I lay myself open to attack from [115] economists of all schools unless I tread lighter on eggs than I am likely to; that at least I may [not] be accused of sentimentalism: I can only say that in treating of it I don't want to be unreasonable or over sentimental or superfine. One thing you must remember[,] that though the 'captains of industry' do depend on us the public as their customers and seem to be in our hands, they really are our masters in the matter, because I say again they can expend all their energy[,] set free for that purpose by their monopoly of unpaid labour, in working on our poverty[,] our want of leisure, our ignorance, and our folly; using these as their instruments they can force on us such goods as they please, and they use them unsparingly without any other aim than the monopolising as much of the product of unpaid labour as they can.

Our poverty is the vice which serves their turn best because so many of us are poor: here I think I can't be accused of being sentimental: it's quite clear that we cannot desire cheap wares on their own merits, or demerits; we have to take them[,] as Marx says[,]<sup>6</sup> not because they serve our needs best as men but as workmen, as poor people in short: and here clearly we are wholly in the power of the capitalists; these cheap wares are just the bones thrown to the dog: nay by means of cheapening our necessaries they get our labour cheaper, and thereby are able to carry on their war with the greater vigour, and roll up capital into greater heaps and keep it in fewer hands: because there being more workers than there is work for them to do, more mouths than meat

under our present system of war, the ordinary wages of the worker[,] as you probably know[,] is kept down by competition among them to<sup>7</sup> something not much more than will enable them to work tomorrow as they have worked today, & to [116] breed fresh machines for the turning out the product of unpaid labour; so that the very cheapening of the things considered as necessaries by the workers, which is hailed as a blessing in some quarters[,] does nothing in the long run but keep the wages down, and the mills a-going, and makes the war of money against money the brisker, and as I said tends to accumulate capital in fewer & fewer hands, since cheap wares can only be made on a large scale and [with] improved organization of production of all kinds: moreover the necessity of using the weapon of cheapness against competing manufacturers as against the public forces the capitalists to ever fresh improvements in machinery, thereby making them ever more and more independent of skilled labour, and allowing them to avail themselves of the competition of women's and children's against adult male labour, and so still more surely keeping down wages, and making their system stronger till at last[,] but for causes of disruption of which more presently[,] it looks as if it might last forever, and the worker be like a ball thrown from hand to hand of the capitalists in their ceaseless game of commercial war.

Beautiful thrift of the 'captains of industry[,]'<sup>8</sup> this forcing the worker by cheap wares to forge his own chain; no wonder they should exalt that skinny virtue to [a] seat beside the old fashioned ones of fair-dealing and trustiness, and kindness.

After this stupendous waste of forcing poor wares on poor people in order to perpetuate their poverty[,] the exploiting of the other vices I named seem[s] colourless and feeble: it seems a little thing that they should take advantage of the ignorance of real life, of the conventional [117] stupidity of their own class; or of the vacant desire to spend money somehow which is bred of their idleness and fullness of bread: besides one of the things one seems to see clearest in the coming change is the manly simplicity which must come of people living in equality of condition, and facing daily the reality of work for the benefit of the community, for the developing of the fullness and abundance of life: and yet though I could easily pass over with silent contempt the ugly inanities of the drawing-room of civilization as a mere passing phase of idiocy like bag-wigs or crinoline[s] or high-heeled shoes, I cannot help remembering that poor people and even shabby genteel ones are furthermore exploited by a kind of reflection of these gentilities: when I see the kind of thing which does duty among them for art and ornament, I confess I feel an indignation I have no power to express that people should have had such things thrust upon them for money and that 'captains of industry' should make their fortunes by them, such travesties of beauty[,] such wretched

twaddling folly as they are.

And all the while with decent leisure & decent surroundings the workman[']s own brain & hands might have served his turn and expressed his desire for beauty[,] however small it might have been: how different such things are from these drivellings of commerce those only know who like myself have followed the hand of the English workman from the Cathedral & palace to the little village church and the yeoman's house, and learned his ways of work and thought in the days when his work was free and his exploitation was the obvious tyranny of the strong hand which happily he did not always submit to tamely. [R]emember they have these trumperies thrust on them and cannot have elbow room [and] good housing.<sup>9</sup> However all I know full surely will right itself [118] when we no longer work for the profit of the monopolist, but for the livelihood of ourselves and each other: if we might but live to see the day: how many days of folly[,] corruption & misery are to pass between this day & that, it is for you working men to decide.

A few words about the direct cheating which is part of both of the war material and the drill of Commercial War: 'tis got to be an old story now though it[']s growing every day[,] so I need not say much about it; only this[,] it is mere delusion for any one, I won[']t say, to get rid of it, but to lighten the load it lays upon us to any considerable extent: meantime the waste in this kind of industry is not hard to note even for the dullest, although on the grounds of the mistake that the cheapening of wares by itself makes life easier for the workers you won[']t lack people to defend it; of course it is inextricably interwoven with the forcing of useless wares both on the poor and the rich, but 'tis followed with such cool scientific energy that one can hardly help looking upon it as a distinct kind of the waste caused by Commercial War: and mind you when Mr. Frederic Harrison<sup>10</sup> sets about moralizing capital in good earnest he will find his captains of industry pull rather long faces when he bids them leave off the industry of adulteration<sup>11</sup>: 'tis really an invention like the invention of machinery: you might theoretically have had competition without it, but once started it would be like going back to the middle ages to give it up: the first few who try [to] be moralized on this point will certainly & swiftly be ruined and in short – it can't be done while competition lasts. Besides I have sometimes almost [119] thought that our morality has been forced down to such a low point by commercialism that the public as a rule, at all events the well-to-do part of it[,] rather likes to be cheated: you see that is one of the worst sides to this Commercial War: the captains of industry fairly conquer a population native or foreign, and having done so, treat the conquered people as other conquering Lords do; make them their slaves, [and] force them to live the kind of lives their masters may be pleased to allot them. While this commercial war lasts we are all the slaves of

it, not the working-classes only, but all of us[,] however grand we may think ourselves; men of science, literary men, artists, we all wear the chain. I know it by sad experience, that intelligence[,] enthusiasm, knowledge of history, patience, years of hard work can contrive or accomplish nothing outside the charmed circle of that slavery: here is your one hope of success[,] to tack yourself on to the skirts of Commercialism, do its bidding, accept its morality and – despise yourself and the whole human race.

Well if you think of it, it must be so; now as always industrial production must settle what kind of lives we are to live: our struggles to feed[,] clothe and shelter ourselves, from those struggles with nature who gives us nothing gratis, must come everything that orders our daily life: this it is which creates our desires, shapes our hope, directs our energies, imposes our morality upon us, and as it were paints our religion for us [as]<sup>12</sup> a man paints a picture of past events – or future ones, using the material which lies all about him familiar & well known[,] to express scenes and characters of which he knows nothing. Well since it is so[,] let us briefly before we go further sum up the present condition into which [120] our struggle with nature for livelihood has drifted, so that we may see how far it is necessity which compels us to accept our sad slavery, a necessity which we cannot fight against; and how far we are bound by mere folly and superstition which we can shake off by some means or another, and first of all by the means of knowing it for what it is.

Our present manner of wresting our livelihood from nature, then, is that we should waste two thirds of all the advantages which we have won from her in a ceaseless struggle with each other: it is a necessity of this contention carried on in one form or another for so many centuries that the strong should form themselves into a strong class, and that the weak should be crushed together into a weak or servile class, and that there should be constant war between these two classes, since while the strong class would throw all the burden of the waste of commercial war on the workers if they could, the workers are unable altogether to submit to that, and in one way or other strive to better themselves at the expense of their masters.

I have been trying to show how the masters wage war against each other since they can use for that end their energies as they are set free from the necessity of producing what they consume, and compel the weaker or servile class to produce whatever is produced, a great part of which product of labour is only useful to people living in a degraded & falsely artificial society: but, as I have hinted, the workers themselves, are not only set on by the masters to contend mass against mass for their benefit, as in the rivalry of national trade competition, and the wars of nation against nation; but are also driven by the fact that they have no property of [121] their own except their labour-power to contend with each other for their livelihood, for their position as

privates in the great industrial army<sup>13</sup>; especially since the captains of industry[,] like other captains[,] cannot always keep their armies on the highest war footing, and at times are obliged to disband a great many of their men, as too many people know practically at the present moment.<sup>14</sup>

This then is the constitution of industrial society at present[,] that is to say of the society in which we live; and I think there can be no question if this is admitted[,] that it is a state of society which should be changed from its basis if that be possible: if it be not possible it is no use trying to do anything toward the progress of humanity, & perhaps we had better hunt up some delusion, new or old, and try to believe in it, and so wear away our days toward the grave.

But if it be possible to turn this ceaseless war of man against man, I will not say into peace, but at least into a condition of things in which war should be spasmodic and incidental – if this be possible, how or by what means can the change be brought about?

Now<sup>15</sup> first I suppose nobody, however rash he may be, can suppose that such a change can be brought about suddenly, or by the conscious efforts of a few or even a great many people: It is true that in times past there have been great men who have noted the wo[e]ful way in which the mass of people live, and who from the depths of their own insight & benevolence have imagined schemes for a better life, and in some of them enthusiasm & energy have been so strong that they have tried to realize those ideals, & for a time have seemed as if they might succeed; but the relentless march of the [122] Commercial Army has crushed those schemes, & the ordinary shrewd bourgeois intelligence that can see no further than a limited part of its own time has cried out mockery against Socialism over their ruins. Robert Owen<sup>16</sup> thought that if the advantages of a communal or cooperative life were only shown to people clearly enough, they would embrace it as people take to a new form of theology; forgetting that the chain which binds them is real enough and that mere hope & example of the success of such a life on a small scale will not break that chain which it has taken so many centuries to forge. That on the one hand, but on the other the bourgeois rejoicing over the ruins of New Lanark and the failure of the schemes of the most generous & best of men has had no eye for the cloud as big as a man[']s hand which has been gathering & growing while he has been hugging himself over the cleared heavens of his commercial 'do or you will be done brown' paradise: It is the commercial system itself which will kill the commercial system, and we Socialists[,] hard as we shall have to work[,] shall only have to assist nature in that operation.

But as the change from commercial war to comparative peace cannot come artificially or with real suddenness (though the last act of the change may be sudden) so also it will be no easy thing to bring about; it will die hard.

Now I will make a kind of confession, and say that whereas I in common with others of our persuasion have spoken of our present society as being a mere state of confusion, I have used the word inaccurately; perhaps rather as expressing a horror at the external results of it, than qualifying the system at all: it is not an anarchy; it is unjust, burdensome, wasteful, a tyranny, but not properly speaking an anarchy. [123] I have been calling it an army; that implies strict organization, though it be only organization for destruction, which is unconsciously to itself the end it aims at; to create wealth and distribute it according to the needs of the community one would think should be the aim of organized industrialism; to create wealth and waste it, that is to destroy it as [if] it never existed[,] would seem to be the end of our organized Commercialism.

But its destructive tendency is now at last beginning to react upon itself, and therein really lies our hope: no man can respect more than I do the ideal of a better state of things which is now beginning to form itself in the brains of many men of good will, or the obvious budding of a new morality all the more obvious when seen against the dark shade of the ever increasing corruption of bourgeois society: but I do not think this is the cause but rather the effect of the change which commercialism is preparing for itself; the hope is growing, and we can dream with some chance of our dream coming true: nay with a certainty of its general features being realized[,] though it may be not after the full manner of our dream.

For what after [all]<sup>17</sup> is happening? What has become of the confident tone in the perpetual commercial prosperity of this country[,] for instance[,] in which there was scarcely a break some twenty years ago? As far as outward appearances go there is not so very much to account for the feeling now abroad that our commercial prosperity is on the wane: true there is depression in trade at present, but so there has been before and it has recovered [from] that depression: as far as mere mechanical signs go I do not see any reason why we should not recover from it: but I venture to say [124] that few people really believe that we shall do so, or see any way out of [the] blind alley that our commerce has gotten into. It seems to me that the truth is that the new society is forming underneath the old; as has been often said[,] the workers are being forced into recognizing the fact that they are a class of themselves, not a mere appendage to capital, but a class from which a true society can be developed: capital has treated them as labour, as a mere commodity, to be bought and sold in the market under the laws of supply and demand: it is forcing them to see that that labour power which is a part of themselves and their sole possession need not be bought and sold by hucksters at all but be used for their welfare, that is to say[,] for the welfare of society; for it is easy to understand that when once commercial war has exhausted



itself the classes which consume without producing will have nothing to exercise their energy upon and must come to an end, so that society becomes a society of workers producing what they consume. All this the workers are beginning to see, or at least are ready to see: though they are collectively the great machine which grinds out profit for the monopolists of capital, yet they are not machines themselves, but men with men's desires which will force them one day to claim to live not on the footing of workmen, that is[, as] parts of a machine, but on the footing of men: you know well how by a kind of instinct the masters have resisted the first signs of this claim being put forward; how the thrift cry for instance has been raised, so that people feeling less anxious about their livelihood might be more contented, and be more ready to acquiesce in such a standard of life as would leave a margin for profits to the employer.

But while the workmen on their side are being driven into a position [125] which will enable them to take their due place when change comes, their masters, or their master[s] capital, are gravitating towards the certain end. And still I must speak about the outlook as regards England, for as modern commercialism first culminated here it is only reasonable to suppose that here it would show its first signs of disintegration: but though I am speaking of our national affairs, I will take you out of England for a moment or two, to the scene of those desperate skirmishes which have been going on on the shores of the Red Sea<sup>18</sup>: Nobody I think finds it very difficult to understand why those Arab men – and boys [ – ] threw their lives away so resolutely: we may give the feeling different names, & call it fanaticism, patriotism, love of liberty: for my part it seems to me much the same spirit as that which held the long-haired Greeks at Thermopolae or the Swiss at [Morgarten],<sup>19</sup> and if we praise these for the manner of their death, and the cause they died for, I cannot see how we can withhold praise from the desert warriors whom we have been slaughtering lately: it is no paradox to say that they died for the life they knew and loved, the only life which they could bear[,] for the life that made them a real living part of humanity and not drilled & ordered machines.

But if they died for this, and so must ever be accounted as champions of the people, for what did our soldiers die, men once fellow workmen with us? I don't say they do not deserve the name of brave men, though the risk of death to them is nothing as compared to that of their enemies[,] but one would like to be clear as to what they are fighting for: you can easily run over in your minds some of the causes of the quarrel, all of which do certainly seem at first sight utterly disproportionate [126] to that spirit of fanaticism[,] patriotism or liberty which drives their Arab foes to death. However we will pass by various explanations of why our people are fighting over there, and admit if you please the cause which people give when they are hard driven;

we are fighting in the cause of civilization; add to it our particular form of civilization and I quite agree to it that that is what we are fighting & slaughtering for, & quite plainly say that I think the other cause the better one. For this cause of civilization simply means spreading to countries which are developing on their own lines, and which as long as they do so offer some refuge from the tyranny of commercialism, of spreading into barbarous countries the curse of exploitation which we ourselves are suffering from. This kind of Commercial War it is true is by no means a new manipulation of this decade in itself; but there is something new in the way in which it is set about, which to my mind shows among other things that the great commercial system is shaken, or at least that England[,] once the undoubted head of that system[,] is losing her leadership.

For first you cannot fail to have noted the frequency[,] persistency and bare-faced cynicism of these wars of exploitation of barbarous countries amongst all European nations these last few years; and next as far as we are concerned we are not merely contented with safe little wars against savage tribes with whom no one but ourselves wanted to meddle, but will even risk wars which may or indeed must in the long run embroil us with nations who have huge armies[,] who no more lack the resources of civilization than ourselves: Still more noteworthy it is that the Commercial liberals[,] 'the Manchester School'<sup>20</sup> as it has been nicknamed[,] [127] which once at least looked coldly on all war[,] is aiding and abetting this war, and crying out for annexation of whatever is annexable, and is not ashamed to take up one after another all the old jingo cries, finishing up with a grand scheme for creating a new fanaticism[,] a new religion, the foundation of a holy race, mongrel indeed in fact, but in theory and name Anglo-Saxon, which should be prepared to contend for the mastery of the whole world against all comers.

Now I can understand your being inclined to laugh at this as merely a magnificent piece of nonsense concocted in the addled brains of a few newspaper writers; but there is more in it than that: it is simply the agony of capitalism driven by a force it cannot resist to seek for new & ever new markets at any price[,] at any risk. Time was when however fierce the competition was between rival manufacturers at home, they had as a nation of manufacturers no rival abroad, and they went on recklessly & blindly expecting it to last for ever: I well remember when any one suggesting the possibility of that slackness of trade happening which every one now admits is happening was simply laughed at as a fool. But now all the great nations are England[']s rivals in trade, and are growing every day more successful rivals: and what are our capitalists to do? They have created a huge industrial army for the manufacturing of profits, and it is failing them in that aim, it is ceasing under the present conditions of civilized nations to produce profit for

them: what is to be done? Change the conditions; conquer new markets from day to day; flatter and cajole the men of our colonies to consider themselves what they are not, Englishmen responsible [128] for every quarrel England may lead them into: conquer valiant barbarians all over the world; rifle them[,] rum them[,] missionary them into subjection; then train them into soldiers of civilization, sepoy of a new honourable company, the company for forcing everybody to buy everything English; and what for? That we may be slaves for ever to the profit-grinders[,] the monopolists.

Don't be afraid! It can't be done: even if we at home were to be for ever the sheep which some of our shearers think we are, and indeed I fear that we give them some cause to think us so, even then all European nations are engaged in the same enterprise, and a holy all-conquering race has now become impossible. And if by chance the great capitalist & despotic communities are to meet in a huge all embracing conflict, I don't believe for one that the new heavens and the new earth that will arise from that Ragnarök<sup>21</sup> or Twilight of the Gods will turn out to be the paradise of exploitation which the Imperialist liberals have figured to themselves.

Here then you have the two sides of the tokens which show the approaching change: on the one hand the workers, the machine created by the capitalist middle class[,] beginning to feel their community of interest[,] beginning to feel that society[,] which can do without everything else[,] cannot do without them, growing in intelligence[,] education and political power: and also now growing poorer or soon to do so: in E[ngland] at least[,] on the other hand[,] the capitalists who hitherto have been triumphant conquerors checked in their course and turning desperate. It has been said of the Turks, that as soon as they cease to be conquerors their decline begins: and the same thing is true of a capitalist community that has once gained ascendancy: its prosperity depends on its keeping [129] the machine going at high pressure: Nay it is worse than that, the old fable is wholly applicable to capitalist England: a magician raised a devil who consented to be exploited on the terms that he should never lack work an instant: all went well for a while & the happy magician grew richer and richer; till at last came 'overproduction,' the magician's wits failed him and he gave no orders; whereon the devil wrung his master's neck and went his ways grinning at the folly of mankind.

Fable apart[,] here are two classes face to face with each other: [a] working class driven into cohesion, growing in education and political power, and depending as things now go, on employment from the other class, who are beginning to fail in employing, and are rushing about hither & thither to see what can be done before it is too late. Don[']t you think that under these circumstances some change must take place? [B]e assured it will, and that no man or body of men can prevent the change.

That however is no reason why we should sit with our hands before us in the first place we cannot do so: no man can exist in society and be neutral nobody can be a mere looker on; one camp or another you have got to join you must either be a reactionary and be crushed by the progress of the race and help it in that way; or you must join in the march of progress[,] trample down all opposition & help it in that way.

What is there then to do? I have told you what the position of the workers is: the one thing they need besides the pressure which is most surely coming on them, is to know their position, and to under[130]stand that they are no mere appendages to capital, but the living germ of the new society which is forming while men wrangle and devise means to prevent the seed of it being sown. When they understand that they can employ themselves and live in comfort and hope, each one free to choose the life that suits him[,] do you think that they will submit to be drilled into machines for the conquering capitalist and lead a life that offers them no interest or variety save the interest which is inspired by doubts about next week[']s food, and the variety of living for a month or two on the pawn-shop instead of the mill?

For once again I tell you that our present system is not so much a confusion in spite of its inequality and injustice, as a tyranny: one and all of us in some way or other we are drilled to the service of Commercial War; if our individual aspirations or capacities do not fit in with it, so much the worse for them; the iron service of the capitalist will not bear the loss, the individual must: everything must give way to this; nothing can be done if a profit cannot be made of it: it is for this that we are overworked[,] are made to fear starvation, live in hovels, are herded and jammed up into foul places called towns, while the houses in the countryside fall into ruins, and once fertile fields go uncultivated<sup>22</sup> 20 miles from London\*: it is for this that we let our money, our name, our power, be used to drag off poor wretches from our pinched fields & our dreadful slums, to kill & be killed in a cause they know nothing of.

[131] Can it be that we like all this, that it is our ideal of life? Happily not so: Capital has tried to turn us into the machines of Commercial War but it has failed; we cannot sink lower than its slaves, and though slaves suffer pain because they feel their degradation, and machines do not: yet there is hope in that; because slaves can at least rebel when the opportunity serves: and now the opportunity draws near.

\*MS: Morris's original note: It is for this that we let half Scotland be depopulated<sup>23</sup> and produce a few pounds of venison & [sic] instead of tons of beef & mutton, & still worse that we turn its stout peasants & herdsmen into mere flunkies of idle fools.

## Critical and Textual Notes

1. The creation of regulated, and presumably socially responsible, markets. The expression is still in use: French President Nicolas Sarkozy opened an economic symposium in Paris, 8 January 2009, by calling for the "moralization of the capitalist system."
2. Compare Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy": "Ye are many – they are few."
3. MS: "Pos." is crossed out [for Positivist].
4. The London Positivist Society, founded by Richard Congreve in 1867, promoted the principles of rational ethics derived from the writings of Auguste Comte. "Radical" in politics, they supported liberal economics, equal civil rights, and non-intervention in the affairs of other nations. For example, they were in favour of Irish Home Rule and opposed British imperialism in Africa and India. Morris here refers to Frederic Harrison (1831-1923), jurist, historian, man of letters, and president of the English Positivist Committee 1880-1905. In 1885 Harrison published his lectures "The Ghost of Religion" and "Politics and Human Religion" (London: E.W. Allen). Four letters from Morris to Harrison written between 1881 and 1884 are extant, relating to fundraising or public events, but indicating a polite sense of their political differences. In perhaps January 1881 Morris wrote acknowledging a contribution; on 30 April 1881 he declined an invitation to hear a talk by the French Positivist Pierre Lafitte but promised to visit the group's recently leased quarters in Fetter Lane; on 22 January 1884 he wrote to express regret at having been asked to petition Harrison for money on behalf of a French refugee, and takes the occasion to point out that socialists also disagree with the views of Henry George; and on 14 November 1884 he mentions that delegates from the Social Democratic Federation will attend a January 1885 "International Remuneration Conference" in Edinburgh which Harrison was then organizing (*Letters* 2:7, 35-46, 260, 335-36). Martha Vogeler records that Harrison joined a committee headed by Morris to appeal against a proposed memorial in Westminster Abbey to Napoleon II's nephew, the 'Prince Imperial,' killed in the Zulu War in 1879 (135), and in 1887 he gave an address to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings opposing alterations to Westminster Cathedral. Morris would also have heard of Positivist activities through Vernon Lushington, his friend from the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* days.
5. Sentiment ascribed to Emperor Joseph II of Austria (1741-1790), in support of the concept of enlightened absolutism.
6. Morris's emphasis on the low quality of goods workers must buy is an extension of Karl Marx's protest against low wages (*Communist Manifesto* ch. 1: "Bourgeois and Proletariat").
7. MS: "to" is repeated.
8. An honorific term for factory owners and other capitalists, used by Carlyle in *Past and Present* (1843).
9. MS: This sentence is a pencil interpolation.
10. For Harrison, see note #4.
11. Throughout the 19th century foods were commonly mixed with other, often harmful, substances; a first Adulteration of Foods Act in 1860 was never enforced. The 1872 Adulteration of Food, Drinks, and Drugs Act, which required that the composition of foods be declared to the purchaser, was followed by The Sale of Food and Drugs Act of 1875, with numerous amendments, which set up legal machinery for the suppression of adulteration, and thousands of convictions ensued. Gradually standards for spirits, milk and butter were legislated before the First World War (John Burnett, *Plenty and Want* [Penguin, 1968], 263).
12. MS: "as" is interpolated in pencil.

13. A term from Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1889), which Morris had reviewed unfavourably in *Commonweal* on 22 June 1889.

14. In 1879 unemployment in Britain was recorded at 11.4%; in 1886, it remained over 10%. (Derrick Murphy, Richard Staton, Patrick Walsh-Atkins, and Neil Whiskerd, *Britain 1815-1918* [London: Collins Educational, 1998], 273. In addition 1873-79 was a period of agricultural depression (274).

15. This paragraph is the one which May Morris printed in her *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936), 2:311.

16. Robert Owen (1771-1858) was a reformist factory owner in New Lanark, Scotland, philanthropist, and author of *A New View of Society* (1813), who promoted co-operative stores, early childhood education, and the founding of socialist communal societies.

17. MS: "all" is added in pencil by an editorial hand, possibly that of May Morris.

18. An independence movement which opposed British rule in the Sudan, led by Muhammad Admed Al Mahdi, or "the Mahdi," began violent resistance in 1881. A series of victories over government troops and British reinforcements culminated in the successful siege of Khartoum in 1884-85, and when the city fell in January 1885, British leader General Charles Gordon and his followers were killed. The British were forced to cede control of the Sudan until 1898, when an army under Lord Kitchener invaded Egypt, and British control was established with various forms of limited power-sharing until Egypt gained full independence in 1956.

19. MS: With space left in the text, "Morgarten" is inserted in pencil in the margin by an editorial hand, possibly that of May Morris. At the Battle of Morgarten on 15 November 1315, Swiss Confederation forces defeated a much larger Austrian Army under the command of Duke Leopold of Austria.

20. Richard Cobden, John Bright, and other Parliamentary supporters of economic liberalism ("free trade") had also opposed war and Britain's imperial ventures; under Gladstone's second administration the Liberal Party instituted an Irish Coercion Act and followed its predecessor in promoting British military interventions in Afghanistan, South Africa, and Egypt.

21. According to the Elder Edda, the world and most of the Norse gods will be destroyed in a series of final disasters and battles, but from this conflagration will be born a new order. Morris alludes to this myth throughout *Sigurd the Volsung*, and it influences some of the imagery of his political poetry.

22. 1870-1914 was a period of agricultural depression in England, as imported food products undercut British farm produce.

23. During the 18th and 19th century, decline in agricultural prices prompted Scottish landlords to evict their hereditary farm tenants, the "crofters," in favour of raising sheep or maintaining "deer parks" for wealthy hunters. The Highland Clearances witnessed a series of brutal evictions, in some cases resisted, as in the 1882 "Battle of the Braes." Although the Crofters' Holdings Act of 1886 restored tenants' rights to their land, depopulation continued due to low yields and prices and the high death rate in foreign wars.