

A Universal Man

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William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends

by Philip Henderson, with a Foreword by Allan Temko
McGraw-Hill, 388, 92 illustrations pp., \$9.95

The Work of William Morris

by Paul Thompson
Viking, 300, 24 illustrations pp., \$10.00

William Morris as Designer

by Ray Watkinson
Reinhold, 84, 90 illustrations pp., \$16.50

William Morris is about the last Victorian figure, one would think, who could appeal to the present age; for the fashionable oppish and poppish forms of non-art today bear as much resemblance to the exuberant creativity of Morris's designs as the noise of a premeditated fart bears to a trumpet voluntary by Purcell. For all that, three books about Morris have come out this past year, and none of them treats him in a patronizing way as if he were only a romantic arts-and-craftsy dilettante who finally turned into a sentimental socialist. He is still too big to be either patronized or dismissed.

Though Morris called himself, accurately enough, a dreamer of dreams, born out of his due time, he was also a resolute realist, who refused to take the sordid Victorian triumphs of mechanical progress as the ultimate achievements of the human spirit. Who but a realist could have ended his medieval *Dream of John Ball* with these



William Morris; drawing by David Levine

words: “Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes, turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.” That sentence should be almost enough to explain why Morris’s life and work hold more meaning for the present generation than for his actual contemporaries.

The main outlines of William Morris’s life were well presented in 1897, the year after his death, in a single volume by Aylmer Vallance; and this was followed in 1899 by a two-volume biography, almost a model of its kind, done by J. W. Mackail. The latter work, unfortunately, had been commissioned by Mackail’s parents-in-law, the Burne-Joneses, both lifelong friends of Morris; and Mackail was curbed at critical points by the presence of too many living people. Mackail’s inevitable discretions and reticences have hampered every later study of Morris, though, had he only taken the pains, he might have left a memorandum of his omissions, to be opened, like the correspondence between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane, Morris’s wife, two generations later.

The many studies that have followed since have, till now, added little except by way of historic background and ideological interpretation. The most weighty of these is that of E. P. Thompson, the Marxist author of an excellent study of the English working class, who has sought to establish that Morris during the last decade of his life was no genteel revolutionary but a wellgrounded follower of Karl Marx. Thompson devoted almost 600 of some 900 pages to this aspect of Morris’s career: a solid, but disproportionate mass of documentation. Of the new studies before us, that of Philip Henderson, the editor of Morris’s letters, is commendable for both its insight and its balance; and it is supported by an abundance of illustrations, some in color, not only of Morris’s wallpapers and prints, but also of his friends and his family, whose sad faces reveal something more than mere Victorian gravity. Paul Thompson’s study—not to be confused with that of the Marxist Thompson—is of slightly more modest dimensions; and it centers on Morris’s career as designer, seeing him no longer as a rebellious isolated giant, but as a well-patronized professional in the mainstream of romantic Victorian design.

Ray Watkinson’s book focuses even more sharply on Morris as designer. Half of it, happily, is devoted to illustrations; and indeed the illustrations of all three books, although they overlap a little, taken together form a rather comprehensive exhibition of every phase of Morris’s work as artist and craftsman. (For some inexplicable reason, none of these studies refers even in passing to the work for which Morris became most famous in America—the “Morris” arm-chair, possibly because it was not Morris’s personal design. But I remember coming upon an

illustration of the original chair in an old number of the *Craftsman* magazine, and marveling over its superb lines and functional convenience—so radically different from all the bastard Morris chairs that were turned out by Grand Rapids. There is not a single chair by Breuer, Eames, Le Corbusier, or van der Rohe that can compare with it in adroitness, elegance, and adaptability to the body.) Thanks to these new books, Morris has been firmly placed in his Victorian setting. But for all that, the man himself remains strangely elusive. How was it that such a backward-looking mind produced so many forward-looking disciples? On what terms did the pre-Raphaelite romantic become the successful Victorian manufacturer? Why did the aristocratic William Scawen Blunt call him “the most wonderful man I have known.” For long it was difficult to fit the parts of Morris’s life together and attach them to his visible personality.

IN ONE ASPECT, Morris seems a Dickensian character, almost a caricature: one whose manly simplicity recalled Joe Gargery, the blacksmith in *Great Expectations*. Gargery’s “Wot larks!” was one of his household expressions; and he had a liking for healthy, hearty authors, in the same style—not only Dickens but Scott, Borrow, Surtees, and above all Cobbett, whom he knew almost by heart—another confident, self-taught, obstinate, explosively indignant soul like himself, or at least part of himself. But this superficially bluff, busy, extroverted man, unflappable except for his sudden outbursts of childish rage—often vented against himself—was not all of one piece. Actually, he harbored three different *personae* which were never, through any single work, so completely fused that he could utilize to the full his magnificent native gifts.

The central Morris *persona* is that of the Master-Craftsman, a figure of towering competence and enormous energy. In his revolt against Victorian kitsch and shoddy, Morris mastered personally one traditional art after another: textiles, stained glass, wallpaper, embroidery, tapestry, rugs, printing type, and every manner of ornament and decoration. The Gothic revival could with propriety be called the medieval Renaissance, for it showed all the characteristic features of that early classic Renaissance which Morris detested. Just as the sixteenth-century Renaissance was an attempt, prompted by newly recovered monuments and books, to restore erotic vitalities and intellectual curiosities that had been suppressed in Christian myth and practice, so the eighteenth-century medieval Renaissance was an attempt to recover vital components of folk culture that purely upper-class groups, princes and artists, inventors and industrialists, had left out of their system. The medievalists were against classic book learning, esthetic formalism, and sophistication. Organic complexity, freedom of adaptation, respect for materials and processes, simplicity and sincerity—these were the new notes.

Though Morris became a passionate medievalist, he actually broke through the medieval rules of craft specialization, precisely as the Renaissance artists had done. He was as much a “universal man” as Leonardo or Alberti. Despite his firm’s success in church decoration, Morris ceased to be a Gothic revivalist: indeed, as an opponent of “historic restoration”—he founded an anti-restoration society—he even condemned some of his own early works. He was rather what Henry-Russell Hitchcock, in his pioneer book on modern architecture, once happily called a New Traditionalist, seeking not to revive the past but to nourish and develop what was still alive in it. He valued excellence where-ever he found it in a Persian rug, an Indian print, or a Chinese pot. Those who best understood Morris’s work and caught his spirit from the 1880s onward never became medievalists.

The second *persona* was that of the Romantic poet and fiction writer, who wrote verse so spontaneously that he was at first hardly aware of his special gift, or alert enough to guard himself against his dangerous facility. Yet his earliest volume of verse, *The Defense of Guinevere* (1858), had poems in it equal to Keats’s and Tennyson’s work in the same vein. Unfortunately, Morris’s later popularity as a Victorian poet came through a series of long, flaccid romances, like the *Earthly Paradise*, whose sleepy rhythms served, we now have reason to suppose, a private purpose in his life: a poultice on a grievous marital wound. In the Seventies, Morris’s emotional needs drew him, not to the high Middle Ages, but to the barbaric and brutal Norse past; and his translations of the Icelandic sagas sought to create a readable Northern equivalent for the Aegean epics of Homer. Possibly this retreat into primitive fantasy and archaic poesy saved Morris’s life; but the roundabout method kept him from approaching the depth of psychological insight that Melville or Dostoevsky achieved under similar stresses. Though no one can doubt the richness of Morris’s inner life, that innerness brought no deeper insight into his own self: significantly he would not tolerate a wall mirror in his house. Though he could produce the most intricate patterns of wallpapers and prints, he had the extrovert’s reluctance to confront the darker intricacies of the human soul, even though they tied his own life in knots.

IN THE LAST DECADE of Morris’s life, the fluent poet and the indefatigable craftsman were joined by a third *persona*, that of the revolutionary political agitator, waving the red banner of socialist idealism. This change took place during the same dark decade when the author of the *Princess Casamassima* felt close enough to these stirrings of revolt to picture, with not a little insight, the anarchist revolutionary movement. Morris’s political conscience had been roused to activity by the Russo-Turkish crisis in the late Seventies, when Tory England

threatened to play an ignoble part. But from his Oxford days on Morris was the natural enemy of an economic system that was reducing all work to monotonous, machine-paced drudgery, starving the workers, housing them in ugly, crowded slums, stunting the minds and bodies of children, befouling the land and poisoning the air, threatening to create a race of white, proletarian moles, like the Morlocks whom Wells was to describe in *The Time Machine*. Once committed to socialism, Morris gave himself completely to it, tasking himself with endless lectures, soap-box harangues and polemic articles. He even struggled to master the tortuous scholasticism of Marx's surplus value doctrine. And he might have said of Marx as he had said of Blake, that he admired "the part of him which a mortal man can understand."

Morris's climactic involvement with socialism brought forth his real greatness both as a writer and a man; but though it came too late to alter the texture of his dream life, which kept on gushing forth in archaic fairy tales, it bestowed a fuller social content and a larger human purpose on all his private achievements as an artist, and gave him the confidence to work for a future in which all men might know the joys of creative labor that he himself had experienced. In his speeches and essays on Art and Socialism, as in his *Vision of John Ball* and his *News from Nowhere*, Morris not merely summed up his beliefs and experiences as an artist-craftsman, who cheerfully mastered every detail of each technical process, but sought to outline the kind of life that would still be possible, if other men shared his vision and his hope. Here a mature and chastened Morris speaks to us, still hating the age he had so early turned his back to, but now appreciating the genuine contributions of its mechanical facility in collective organization.

Better than most, Morris understood the ravages of a profit-driven technology, wantonly wiping out the traditions of a thousand years, so that the Javanese or Indian craftsman could "no longer ply his craft leisurely, working a few hours a day, in producing a maze of strange beauty on a piece of cloth." But so far from wishing to abolish all machines and return to hand labor, Morris thought that it would be possible "to reduce the work of the world to a minimum till at last pretty nearly everything that is necessary to men will be performed by machinery." When my old master, Patrick Geddes, showed him an ocean liner being built in the shipyards of Glasgow, Morris observed appreciatively: "These are the Cathedrals of the Industrial Age." So perhaps the clearest and most realistic picture of the kind of life that Morris approved will be found, not in the golden tapestry of *News from Nowhere*, but in two books by his contemporary, Peter Kropotkin: *Mutual Aid*, and *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*.

Since work was part of the joy of life, Morris did not propose to surrender all of it

to the machine. If the forge, the potter's wheel, the handloom, the dye-vat, the turner's lathe, the garden could no longer provide a sufficient livelihood, they were still a vital mode of human activity, and what is more, a necessary underpinning for human freedom and autonomy. Looking ahead to our time almost a full century ago, he clearly saw where our exclusive preoccupation with automatic machines, quantity production, and corporate profits was leading us. "By that time," he noted, looking backward from his ideal "Nowhere," "it was as much as—or rather more than—man could do to fix an ash pole or rake by handiwork; so that it would take a machine worth a thousand pounds, a group of workmen, and half a day's travelling, to do five shilling's worth of work." That day has in fact arrived. Because we failed to foresee as clearly as Morris the consequences of automation, we now lack competent artisans or even fumbling handymen.

Instead of accepting either megatechnics or monotecnics as inevitable, Morris sought to keep alive or if necessary to restore those forms of art and craft whose continued existence would enrich human life and even keep the way open for fresh technical achievements. He realized from his own experience that only the rich could now buy hand-made products, and that the arts he himself so joyfully practiced had priced themselves out of the market. But once the machine was put in its place and used to save labor not just to create superfluity, there was no reason why everyone should not be rich—rich not mainly in material abundance alone, but better still, in opportunities for enjoyable and self-rewarding work. To put up with a colorless and monotonous working day solely for the sake of what one could buy and spend afterwards, was for him a miscarriage of human purpose.

Certainly, Morris was no friend of the Expanding Economy and the Affluent Society. He had little use for bourgeois comforts and luxuries and still less for status, symbols. Despite the intricacy of arabesque in his own decorative patterns, he was all for simplicity; and he even held that a plain distempered wall was better than most wallpaper. Do you suppose, he once asked Yeats, that he prized the kind of house his own workshop helped to decorate? "I would like a house," he said, echoing Thoreau, probably quite unconsciously, "like a big barn, where one ate in one corner, cooked in another, slept in a third, and in the fourth received one's friends." It was this aspect of Morris, his demand for functional forthrightness and simplicity, that passed, along with his ornate floral patterns, into the Art Nouveau movement, and later into the concepts of a thoroughly humanized functional architecture, expressed by architects like Lethaby, Mackintosh, and Barry Parker. In typography, too, his medieval example was soon simplified and purified by Updike and Cobden-Sanderson.

BY FORCE OF his own technical mastery and his passionate social concern William Morris did more than any other single worker to repair the damage to our whole technical tradition inflicted by those who, in the pride and insolence born of their control of power-driven automata, sought to destroy every rival art, particularly any art that was still supported by ancient traditions and held a warmer human appeal. Morris, a whole generation before the anthropologists began their belated work of salvage with surviving stone age and tribal communities, performed a similar task for the arts and crafts of the Old World past. And if he had been more sympathetic with the peculiar triumphs of his own age, he might not have had the copious, concentrated energies necessary to perform this important salvage operation.

Part of this energy and concentration, we can at last say with some confidence, was a desperate overcompensation for the great flaw in Morris's life: his marriage to the pre-Raphaelite beauty, Jane Burden. If until recently no one had succeeded in putting together the three *personae* of Morris into a single credible picture, it is because one of the keys to his life, though vaguely suspected and hinted at by earlier biographers, was missing. While all the cards seemed on the table, one card was hidden: the dark queen that lay concealed under an exposed king. Morris married Jane in 1859, when he was twenty-five and she eighteen. Two children were born of this marriage; but the marriage itself seems to have been still-born. Before a decade was over, Morris lost his wife to Dante Gabriel Rossetti: she became his favorite model; and to her he openly addressed many of his later love poems. Jane turned out to be, for Morris, the Snow Queen whose heart was made of ice.

Few of Jane's contemporaries had a good word to say for this exotic beauty, or, for that matter, any word at all: she is conspicuous by her absence, for even in the two-volume biography by Mackail there are precisely four references to her in the index of a book of over 700 pages. She remains a creature of fairy tale: enigmatic, impassive, with-drawn, self-absorbed, with her pursed cupid bow lips, as if anatomically arrested in a prolonged kiss. In our ignorance, it would be unfair to ascribe the failure of their marriage to Jane alone: a glacier and a volcano do not easily unite. Perhaps it was only an accident that it was Jane, not William, who fell out of love, and endured to the end what seems for both to have been a friendly but tepid relationship.

Because of Morris's personal reticence, coupled with the discreet silence of everybody in the pre-Raphaelite circle, we shall always lack sufficient positive knowledge of what caused the ice to form and how Rossetti melted it. Even Philip Henderson's fine chapter, "Queen Square: Of Utter Love Defeated Utterly" leaves

one with only a keyhole peep through the locked marital door. But the trail of evidence spreads all through Morris's work, from *The Earthly Paradise* right on to *News from Nowhere*. For it was in the depths of depression, confronting his wife's love for Rossetti, that Morris wrote *The Earthly Paradise*. Henderson quotes three significant lines from this poem:

*Time and again across his heart would stream
The pain of fierce desire whose aim was gone,
Of baffled yearning, loveless and alone.*

And he notes that in the collected works of Morris, May Morris left unprinted these clinching lines, now in the manuscript in the British Museum:

*Why seem the sons of men so hopeless now?
The love is gone, poor wretch, thou art alone.*

DESPAIR AND DEATH haunt Morris's poems as they haunt the Icelandic sagas to which, during the critical years of his marriage, he turned to find his own life given back to him as in a darkened mirror. His absorption in his writing, his craft work, and his public lectures were all in part efforts to drain off the poisons that his frustrated love life threatened him with; and even these might not have been enough but for his affectionate friendships with sympathetic women, especially Georgie Burne-Jones and Aglaia Coronio—friendships of which teasing glimpses are left in the admirable volume of letters Henderson published in 1950.

Passionate man that he was, Morris's personal problem was to cope with both his active need for love and his choking sense of marital frustration, maddened by the lurking presence of Rossetti. Both Rossetti and Jane succumbed to a neurotic invalidism, born probably of guilty inner conflicts. Morris saved himself by sealing off his torment with strenuous activity, and canalizing the overflow of murderous or suicidal fantasy into his long poems, romances, and translations.

On this central relationship, the chapter "Concerning Love," in Morris's utopia, *News from Nowhere*, written in the decade before his death, seems to me to offer the weightiest bit of personal evidence. In a real sense, Morris's own life had itself been up to a point a kind of full-blown personal utopia. Born to a comfortably wealthy family, spending a happy boyhood near the Epping Forest, awakened to a lifelong ecstasy over the art of the Middle Ages by his first encounter, at the age of eight, with Canterbury Cathedral, finding himself as an Oxford undergraduate with an unusual gift for writing verses, drawing and working with his hands, soon falling in love with and marrying a beautiful girl, becoming a success at every task he set his hands to—what was all this but the

most dreamlike utopia? Even Kelmscott Manor, the house on the upper Thames he acquired in 1870, was, despite its bitter marital associations, so close to his imaged ideal that when he wrote *News from Nowhere* he could find no happier terminus for his journey through that idyllic land than this very house.

The England that Morris pictured in *News from Nowhere* unrolls a kind of wallpaper print of pastoral happiness, too decorative and static to be convincing. W. B. Yeats properly described Morris's fantasy as the "make-believe of a child who is remaking the world, not always in the same way, but always after his heart.... He has but one story to tell us, how some man or woman lost and found again the happiness that is always half of the body." But significantly, love is the one thing that still goes wrong in Morris's socialist utopia. In this cloyingly amiable society, where every form of exclusiveness and possessiveness, of tension and frustration, has disappeared, the one kind of conflict Morris allows for is sexual conflict, and the only serious failure is a failure of erotic response. In this one dark corner of *News from Nowhere* there is not only unhappiness, but rivalry, jealousy, anguish—to the point of physical violence and murder. "All this," says the witness in the story, "we could no more help than the earthquake of the year before last."

That volcanic violence must often have been close to the surface in Morris's relations with his wife and Rossetti, he who had originally been his mentor and close friend. Since many witnesses have told tales of Morris's rages on trifling provocation, even in the Oxford days, there must have been occasions when one or another of the lovers was in deadly danger from Morris's convulsive anger. The puzzling line of verse in which Morris, still courting his wife, begs for forgiveness is almost inexplicable, except in reference to some such terrible homicidal moment. Yet miraculously all three lovers remained alive. By pouring all his energies into metrical fantasy and decorative art and incessant manual work—often beginning his day with a couple of hours at the loom, with its soothing monotonous motions—Morris got the better of his dangerous impulses; while his growing concern over political and economic conditions in imperialist England helped restore his sense of realities outside his personal life—realities he had ignored so long as his private utopia remained intact. Probably no better example of sublimation and autotherapy is on record.

GIVEN Morris's extroverted temperament, one can hardly doubt that this tragic flaw in his marital relations limited his emotional development: more than anything else, possibly, it kept the three *personae* from coming together for their mutual support and enlargement. Even after Rossetti's death, no deeper understanding seems to have brought Morris and Jane closer; for his wife barely

tolerated the motley group of socialist and anarchist comrades that Morris would gather in his Hammersmith house on a Sunday afternoon. The hollow, Shelleyan optimism of Morris's hortatory socialist songs betrays a failure on his part fully to assimilate his experience or come to terms with the complexities of human character, his own above all.

"I do not," he wrote in 1874 to Mrs. George Howard, "grudge the triumphs that the modern mind finds in having made the world (or a small corner of it) quieter and less violent, but I think that this blindness to beauty will draw down a kind of revenge one day: who knows? Years ago men's minds were full of art and the dignified shows of life, and they had but little time for justice and peace; and the vengeance on them was not the increase of the violence they did not heed, but the destruction of the art they heeded. So perhaps the gods are preparing troubles and terrors for the world (or our small corner of it) again, that it may once again become beautiful and dramatic withal; for I do not believe they will have it dull and ugly forever."

The man who could contemplate this possibility in the midst of The Century of Progress—Peace and Progress!—would not have been daunted by the evils that threaten our own age; and even about the socialist future he had struggled so earnestly to establish, he was more of a realist than Marx himself, with his pathetically juvenile picture of a final dictatorial triumph in which the dialectic process that, as Marx believed, had so far moved the world would disappear, and the State, that armored paragon of collective power, would "wither away."

"Socialism," Morris observed in an article in *Commonweal* in 1890, "will not indeed enable us to get rid of the tragedy of life...but will enable us to meet it without fear and without shame." In that spirit, Morris had faced the frustrations and defeats of his own life, without losing his grip in maudlin self-pity. Perhaps this is why he still has something to say to the present generation.