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Representations of William Morris

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'Never before has such a comprehensive study on Morris been published, and ... it will stand as the standard work on Morris long after the exhibition it commemorates is over.' The book/catalogue that accompanies the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert M useum marking the centenary of Morris's death makes a large claim for itself. So too does the exhibition, the largest display of Morris's work ever mounted. I had looked forward to that exhibition for some time. I went to it, a week after it opened, for m y birthday treat. I was ... disappointed; and then surprised that I expected anything else.

The exhibition provides an unparalleled opportunity to revel in Morrisian artefacts. It includes massive pieces of painted furniture and huge carpets and tapestries, as well as the architectural plans for Red House, and of course a range of textile, ti le and wallpaper designs. Among the smaller delights are Rossetti's hostile cartoons of Morris. The exquisitely illuminated, tiny volume of the Rubaiyat lies open at the right quatrain:

> Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
> To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,
> Would we not shatter it to bits and then
> Remould it nearer to the heart's desire?

Despite this, in the exhibition as a whole, Morris's social and political thought hardly gets a look in. There is, to be sure, a section labelled politics, complete with an audio tape of snippets of lectures and chants for socialists, the latter sung in dulcet tones befitting the drawing room rather than the political demonstration. But it is a very tiny corner of a very large exhibition - and moreover so placed that it would be easy to miss it. As you leave the exhibition, there are four small panel s noting that Morris's legacy includes his socialist and ecological vision, and that there are some people who think this the most important aspect of his work. Am I among those? Well, yes, but ... for me, the whole point about Morris has always been the integration, in his mature socialist vision, of art and politics. So the disappointment was not just at the marginalisation of the politics, not that they should have had a bigger bit of the exhibition, but that there was no synthesis of these elements. T hose who visit the exhibition will come away knowing Morris's merits as a designer, craftsman, and poet. They will also (probably) notice that he was a socialist. They will not, I think, be brought even to a curiosity about, let alone an understanding of, the integrity of Morris's vision.

So what of the accompanying book? It suffers, I think, from the same problem. A series of eighteen essays by recognised experts accompanies the catalogue entries on aspects of Morris's work. They include pieces by Linda Parry on domestic decoration an d on textiles, Fiona MacCarthy on Morris as designer, Peter Faulkner on Morris's writing, Ray Watkinson on Morris as a painter, Charles Harvey and Jon Press on the firm, Chris Miele on the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. They are useful p ieces, informed and informative, and easy to read; and accompanied by illustrations of the exhibits. Politics gets a slightly higher profile here than in the exhibition, with an essay by Nicholas Salmon - who, in editing Morris's contributions to Justice and Commonweal for the Thoemmes Press William Morris Library, has done so much to make the journalism and political writing available. But even this is primarily an account of Morris's political activities, not of his political ideas. Three essays - by No rman Kelvin, editor of the collected letters, and Clive Wainwright, and Paul Greenhalgh, both from the V&A's research department - address the question of Morris's legacy.

Of these, Kelvin's essay is the most interesting. Because it is not required to convey information about a particular body of material, it is able to be reflective, in a way that the other essays cannot. It touches indirectly on one problem for the exh ibition, perhaps for any Morris exhibition, which is that in addressing facets of Morris's work, the whole, that which is more than the sum of the parts, is lost. But what are we to make of the claim that 'In the late 1990's, it is Post-Modernism that exp resses Morris's commitment' because Post-Modernism begins from desire and pleasure, as Morris did? It is an attempt to establish Morris's relevance for an age defined by Kelvin as 'post-Marxist'. In so doing, it becomes necessary to distance Morris from M arxism: by qualifying Morris's own commitment to Marxism as 'non-ideological', whatever that may mean; by describing his vision as anarchist; by, indeed, radically misrepresenting Marxism. Kelvin tells us that 'For Morris, work is essential; but what is a lso essential is that it be carried on under social conditions that allow the natural pleasure in work to be experienced'. Quite so. But this is not an 'idea which intuitively broke with Marxism and its vision of labour abolished'; it is an intuitive and indeed cognitive grasp of the difference between alienated labour and unalienated, self-actualising work - a difference which is at the core of Marxism as it is of Morris.

This misunderstanding of Marxism is reflected in other writers. Greenhalgh similarly tries to separate Morris from Marxism: 'Whilst many thinkers - not least Karl Marx - believed work to be the key site of political struggle, Morris separated himself from other left-wing thinkers by postulating creative work as the end, not the means to an end'. Fiona MacCarthy posits Morris's goal as 'integration', with Morris 'working passionately for an end to class divisions'; while Linda Parry notes that Morris was ' not able to provide the short hours and increased pay that he advocated for workers'. No-one can read Morris's political lectures or his journalism without noticing that Morris believed the whole system of capitalism must go, so that unalienated work migh t be possible, and so that art might be genuinely and generally possible. The failure to insist on the relationship between Morris's analysis of capitalism and his understanding of what constitutes creative human work allows Morris's views to be rendered acceptable and unchallenging to the design-conscious middle classes of contemporary Britain. It also makes possible the breathtaking complacency of the Sponsor's preface at the beginning of this volume. Michael Blakenham, Chairman of Pearson plc, notes th at it is Morris's preoccupation with the nature and quality of work in an industrial society which is of greatest contemporary significance: 'That freedom is easier to grasp today and we at Pearson pride ourselves on nurturing the talent and originality o f all the people who work within a group whose success ultimately depends on its continuing creativity'. Morris, whose avowed aim was to get humbug out of the world, would, I think, have had little time for such cant.

I started reading Fiona MacCarthy's biography of Morris on the day of publication. I was riveted by it, found it hard to put down, was sorry when I finished it. MacCarthy clearly shares Morris's strong sense of place; and she writes about places passionately and evocatively, conveying their importance to Morris. To produce such a book, packed with information about the details of Morris's life, is a huge undertaking; it would be ungenerous indeed not to salute the achievement, and welcome this notable addition to scholarship on Morris. Indeed, I enjoyed the book so much tha t I was almost inclined to forgive the fact that the treatment of Morris's politics is relatively weak; for a project of such scale is bound to be better on some matters than on others. (It is bound too to contain mistakes; it is to be hoped that a subsequent edition will sort out the peculiar muddle of dates surrounding Morris's death.) Morris's polymathic skills and interests present a rare challenge to a biographer. Nevertheless, in the present political climate, and taken together with general representations of Morris, it is significant that the main weakness of this book, which looks set to be the most widely-read book on Morris for a long time, is a political weakness.

On a second reading (also enjoyable), for this review, those reservations were accompanied by more considered questions about the nature of the book. There are different kinds of biography: so the question is, what kind is this? What aspects of Morris doe s it reveal, and what does it not reveal? In the introduction, MacCarthy observes that people tend to take particular views of Morris, and to appropriate him to their own position. 'The layers of theory have obscured his 'whole' personality' (viii). Her i ntention is to 'unwrap' Morris from this theorising, to present him whole. It is an intention both welcome and naive. Welcome, because it goes beyond the process of looking at facets of his work, and potentially enables the relations between these to beco me clear. Naive, because it does not acknowledge that any narrative of any life, whether biography or autobiography, contains an implicit theory - not necessarily an overt political position to which the subject/object is assimilated, but a theory of what it is to recount a life, to write a biography. The subtitle of the book is apt: *A Life for Our Time.* The ambiguity is, of course, deliberate: is Morris's life relevant to our time, or is this an account for our time? This is indeed very much a bio graphy for the 1990s. It is intensely personal, focused on the detail of where Morris was and what he was doing, and especially on his personal relationships and what can be gleaned or constructed of his feelings. Narratives of this kind focus on emotions , responses, motivations. They involve inference, even at times speculation. Above all, they rest on an assumption that interior narratives are somehow more authentic than exterior ones, that the personal and private life is a better measure of the 'real' person than the public or political life. The strength of such accounts is that they can offer a real insight into the driving forces in an individual's life. The potential weaknesses are many: too much gossip, which makes for a fascinating read, but in the end adds little to a real understanding; the temptation to make inferences and extrapolations beyond the evidence; the temptation to indulge in amateur psychoanalysis, and even to intrude too far upon the privacy of a subject

who cannot protest but un doubtedly would if they could; and, most importantly, a tendency to displace the public persona, to focus so much on the subconscious life that the conscious one is marginalised.

The Morris MacCarthy offers us is a sensitive Morris: bullied by Rossetti; dependent on a male camaraderie, despite being cast in the role of buffoon; a man deeply sexually insecure; a 'semi-feminist' in his expressed ideas on women's emancipation and in his actual behaviour towards his wife; a devoted father to Jenny, his epileptic daughter. The detail of this is fascinating, though variously convincing. Rossetti comes across as thoroughly obnoxious, although references to his 'southern melancholy' (219) , 'southern European callousness' (128), and being 'southern European in temperament and looks' (114) add little. Morris's sexual insecurity, though plausibly argued, is necessarily an inference. In relation to Jenny, MacCarthy is carried away by her own image of Morris: on his death, she says, Jenny lost 'not just her father but her main companion and in a sense her last real link with the outside world' (678). But Morris's affection for his daughter is partly known because of the frequent letters he wro te her - precisely because he was not with her; the brunt of caring for Jenny fell on others. This does not detract from the importance of the relationship for both of them, but it flies beyond - indeed in the face of - the evidence.

Differences of interpretation are inevitable in any biography, and particularly so in those that seek to re/create a whole persona. But part of this whole was Morris's politics, and here I think there are serious problems with MacCarthy's book. Morris's p olitical activities are given their due place. There is no attempt to suppress, nor to pretend that Morris changed his mind about socialism in later life. Indeed, at the outset MacCarthy remarks on the need to beware those 'anxious to play down - or even up - his revolutionary Socialism' (x). However, in various ways MacCarthy seeks to distance Morris from Marxism, while incorporating the reader to a supposedly consensual position. She says that 'we can feel quite certain that the world collapse of Marxis m would have overjoyed him' (xix); and 'perhaps in the light of our own mellow post-modern eclecticism we can accept Morris more readily as the conservative radical he really was' (605). She stresses Morris's closeness to intellectual anarchism, arguing n ot from Morris's political writing, but from his friendships with prominent anarchists, notably Stepniak and Kropotkin.

What is missing is a real grasp of the political thought, and the connection Morris saw between this and his attitudes to skill, craftsmanship and human work; and it is missing, I think, because MacCarthy has no fundamental grasp of the critique of capita lism embodied in socialism, including (but also pre-dating) Marxism. This underlies the repeated return to the question of Morris's supposed inconsistency, the gap between his theory and his practice, between his image of a factory as it might be, and how his own workshops actually were, notwithstanding the fact that he was a 'good employer'. But the whole point of a Marxist analysis of alienated labour is that it cannot be overcome voluntarily by individuals, only by a transformation of the relations of production. Indeed, Ruth Kinna has argued that it is precisely on this point of voluntarism that Morris parted company with anarchism. And Morris himself made the point on numerous occasions: socialism required social transformation, collectively wrought, not individual philanthropy. Morris's concerns about art, skill and work led him to a fundamental critique of capitalism - a critique which is as relevant now as then. To say this is not to 'claim' Morris for Marxism, but to claim that he cannot be under stood without a fundamental, felt grasp of an essentially Marxist critique of capitalism.

But MacCarthy's book is not, after all, an intellectual biography, but a personal one. It is notable that she writes: 'In these years of his conversion Morris changed his personality, withdrawing from his old haunts and his old friendships. It is to some extent a hidden period' (480). Since there is ample information about what Morris was doing and thinking - after all, there is a mass of lecture material and journalism, as well as letters, on which MacCarthy draws - this can only arise from an assumption that the political is not personal enough. The only account of Morris to deal primarily and thoroughly with Morris's socialist years and with his political thought remains Edward Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary,* first publishe d in 1955, and revised in 1977. How does Thompson's account seem in the late 1990s? Is this a 'life for our time'?

Although Thompson's book is sometimes referred to as a biography, it isn't. It isn't even an intellectual biography in a conventional sense of a chronological account of the development of an individual's thinking.

Returning to it, I was struck by how lit tle of Morris's personal or artistic life appears in this account. It is a very specific account, with two main aims which govern the selection of material. Firstly, to show Morris's movement from an essentially romantic rejection of industrial society to a revolutionary socialist position; and to show how in this shift, Morris created a novel synthesis, characterised by what Thompson calls 'moral realism'. Secondly, to provide an account of Morris's political years which is not focused simply on Morris, but on his place in the emergent and evolving socialist movement of the 1880s and 1890s. Morris's political thought is read against the actual issues and conflicts which he was confronting. It becomes impossible, confronted with what Morris says about his own position, to suggest that he was more of an anarchist than a Marxist. But Thompson makes two points which are of crucial significance here. One is that while it is indisputable that Morris read and was influenced by Marx (and indeed recommended Marx' s work to others), there is a certain anachronism in simply dubbing Morris's own analysis of capitalism as Marxist. Ideas about the fundamentally exploitative nature of capitalism were in the early 1880s common to those calling themselves socialists. (Ind eed a reading of the Owenite journal *The Pioneer* from the 1830s would demonstrate how central this economic analysis was to pre-Marxist socialism). Secondly, however, Morris was always seeking for points of unity. Thompson's account emphasises Morr is's attempts to avoid sectarian squabbles as far as possible - attempts which did not always succeed, but which contributed to the general respect in which he was held by the socialist movement.

As Thompson observes in the postscript written for this second edition, he has been read as attempting to claim Morris for Marxism, when this was not his intention. (Or if it was his intention in 1955, it was no longer so in 1977.) Thompson's postscript i s one of the most powerful pieces of writing about the relationship between utopianism and Marxism in general, and in particular between utopianism and Marxism in Morris's socialism. Thompson insists that Morris is both a utopian and a Marxist, without 'e ither a hyphen or a sense of contradiction ... between the two terms', and that 'Morris may be assimilated to Marxism only in the course of a re-ordering of Marxism itself' - a re-ordering away from economism towards precisely that moral realism which Mor ris represents (806-7). And even then, assimilation is not possible, since utopia and Marxism represent different operative principles, of desire and knowledge, which need to be held in relation to one another, but can never be reduced to each other. Morr is's particular contribution was to sustain this synthesis; and socialism - and the world - are poorer without it.

This statement has, however, to be read in the light of Thompson's own changing political affiliations, which emphasise the inadequacy of the label Marxist. For what Thompson is trying to do is to distance himself from Stalinism, from economism and from A lthusserianism, while holding on - like Morris - to an essentially Marxist analysis of capitalism. It is not theoretically necessary to place the moral/utopian strand in socialist thought outside Marxism: Ernst Bloch places it inside, the 'warm stream' o f Marxism which must always be dialectically related to the 'cold stream' of analysis. But it was politically necessary for Thompson. And in the case of Morris, it emphasises the fact that this element came from the romantic critique, to be integrated wit h the economic analysis of revolutionary socialism into a very particular, and particularly compelling political vision.

Thompson's book remains essential reading for anyone who would understand Morris's politics. But it is a partial account, and it omits elements which are of particular interest today. There is almost no discussion of the ecological element in Morris's tho ught, and the relationship of this to his analysis of capitalism. And there is, surprisingly, not very much discussion of Morris's ideas about work, skill, craftsmanship and art. There is certainly room for a new study of Morris's social and political the ory. But such a book can only be satisfactorily written, I think, by someone who has an intuitive as well as cognitive grasp of Morris's far-reaching critique of capitalism and its consequences - for human relationships, for work, for art, for the environ ment. It may be hard for a committed socialist to summon up the cheek to follow Thompson; but we too need a 'life for our time'.

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