Evelyn Waugh, Morris, and the Ideal of Craftsmanship

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'The influence of any writer or artist on his successors is always difficult to trace, and with someone so various as Morris the situation is particularly complicated'. So begins the 'Epilogue' of Peter Faulkner's introduction to William Morris, Against the Age, and like most commentators on Morris's influence, Faulkner singles out his achievements as 'an exponent of crafts' and as 'a social thinker' to outline the lasting impact of Morris's life, work and ideas.1 Morris's literary output receives plentiful attention in Faulkner's study, but this is not a dimension of Morris's work where there is a strong case to be made for 'influence'. In literary terms, Morris is usually seen as a late Romantic rather than a forward-facing innovator. But, as Faulkner rightly says, influence is hard to trace, and I would add that it is sometimes transmitted by indirect routes. In this article I shall suggest that Morris's legacy as an exponent of crafts is not restricted to the direct transmission routes in the visual and practical arts, but that it has contributed to an ideal of craftsmanship that is applicable elsewhere, too, including the literary sphere. Specifically, I want to argue that Morris's influence contributed to the personal and artistic development of one of the supreme English prose stylists of the twentieth century, Evelyn Waugh.

This is, admittedly, not a likely-seeming connection. In fact, at first sight it is hard to find two more dissimilar figures than Evelyn Waugh and William Morris. It hardly needs saying that Morris's name is everywhere respected, for the kinds of achievements that Faulkner and all Morris's biographers emphasise, and for his sincerity, vitality and, in the words that appear inside the back cover of this Journal, 'his robust and generous personality'. Evelyn Waugh's reputation is far more
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equivocal. Although most critics will concede that his early novels demonstrated a satirical brilliance that still sparkles, and more than a few will acknowledge him as a great stylist, he is still widely regarded as a reactionary bigot and a monster of a man.

However, the accounts of Waugh's life and work that were current for several decades after his death in 1966 have been challenged by later biographers and critics. Although Waugh developed political views that were far removed from Morris's socialism, his reputation as a cantankerous conservative has detracted from the frequently acute nature of his insights. Where Morris was an optimistic idealist, with a utopian vision, Waugh was a pessimist, and a perverse one at that. But pessimism is not incompatible with prophecy, and Waugh's satire goes behind and beyond exposing the follies of the contemporary world. In an essay on Waugh's reputation '100 years on', published in 2003, Geoffrey Wheatcroft claims that Waugh 'was not behind his time, but in so many ways far ahead of it'. Wheatcroft argues that the breadth of Waugh's vision, his political insight and his achievement as a writer have been largely underestimated, a view that several recent critics and biographers would support.

So it is in the spirit of continuing to lift the shadow that hangs over Waugh's reputation that I trace here the limited but undoubtedly benign influence that Morris exerted on Waugh. I shall describe the way that Waugh as a young man was drawn to Morris's work and values, and touch on some shared feelings about Englishness. Later in his career, long after his development as an artist had taken him down paths quite different from those of the mature William Morris – after his conversion to and increasing emphasis on Catholicism had filled the space that in Morris was occupied by political faith – Waugh continued to insist on a kind of artistic integrity that is, I want to argue, embodied in an essentially Morrisian ideal of craftsmanship.

We can certainly infer, from Waugh's own writing, that he admired Morris. This is particularly evident from Waugh's biography of Rossetti, which I shall discuss in more detail later. But there are other striking aspects of Waugh's life, before he became established as a writer, that suggest affinities with Morris. Since Waugh described himself, until quite late in life, as a reluctant writer, the 'roads not taken' can be seen to exert a particularly strong pull. Part of Waugh's attraction to paths other than the literary one must have derived from
a desire to dissociate himself from family expectations, and a need to stave off further comparisons with his brother Alec, who, in the words of a magazine article Evelyn wrote in 1937, 'took to the trade [of writing] without a moment’s reluctance. He wrote a best-seller before he was 18 and has been at it uninterruptedly ever since'. In fact Evelyn’s early inclinations took him outside the purely literary world and into some of the arts that had energised Morris.

Waugh would have known of Morris and his circle from a very early age, since he was distantly related to two members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Holman Hunt and Thomas Woolner: three generations back, one aunt had married Woolner, and two of her sisters married Holman Hunt (in succession). Evelyn Waugh’s father Arthur, himself a writer and managing director of Chapman & Hall, treasured his family’s personal links with the worlds of Victorian art and literature: his book-room at the family home in Hampstead was stocked with inscribed copies of books ‘from almost every English writer of eminence’, according to Evelyn, and one of his most prized possessions was a high-backed chair that had once belonged to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Although Evelyn Waugh sought in many ways to distance himself from his father – he rejected his sentimentalism and, certainly as a young man, deplored his theatricality – he also recognised that in many ways they were alike, and there is no doubt that Arthur’s taste for Victorian art influenced Evelyn. Arthur also encouraged his younger son’s interest in draughtsmanship and, particularly, book illustration. Whilst Evelyn was still at school, Arthur used his influence at Chapman & Hall to obtain some commissions for him to design book jackets, and also agreed to Evelyn having lessons in calligraphy and sketching outside of school. Evelyn’s passion for illustration, printing and books as material objects in general continued throughout his student years at Oxford. His biographer Selina Hastings comments that ‘at Oxford Evelyn had a greater reputation as a graphic artist than as a writer, and as such was much in demand, designing covers for magazines, for OUDS programmes,’ and so on; he went to classes at the Ruskin School of Art in Oxford and during one vacation he also took lessons in wood-engraving.

Waugh left Oxford in the summer of 1924, rather ignominiously, having failed to get his scholarship renewed for his final term. He
records in his diary for 30 June 1924, going with his friend Alastair Graham to the Palace of Arts at the Empire Exhibition, Wembley, where ‘The William Morris [room] was the best’. His diary entry goes on: ‘I saw sculpture and desired with all my heart to be a sculptor and then I saw jewels and wanted to be a jeweller and then I saw all manner of preposterous things being made in the Palace of Industry and wanted to devote my life to that too’. There is no indication here, or for several years to come, that Waugh would follow a writing life. In the autumn of 1924 he started a course at Heatherley’s Art School in London, but gave it up after a month, convinced that he ‘lacked skill or interest in figure-drawing’. He was also, even more briefly, apprenticed to a printer called James Guthrie, who owned the one-man Pear Tree Press at Flansharn, Sussex. In his autobiography, *A Little Learning*, Waugh describes his disappointment at finding Guthrie’s processes depended on trade photography: ‘It was not the dedicated world of the handcraftsmen to which I aspired’.

After these several false starts, he earned his living as a schoolmaster in a succession of prep schools, storing up plenty of material for his first novel, *Decline and Fall*, but without much personal satisfaction, and then had a brief spell working for the *Daily Express* as a probationary journalist. This was in 1927, and from then on literary opportunities started opening up for Waugh, but he still hankered after a more practical kind of fulfilment. In October 1927 he enrolled for a carpentry course at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Southampton Row, intending to make a career in cabinet-making. This was much more successful than his brief experience at Heatherley’s had been, and in the 1937 magazine article quoted earlier, Waugh recalls the delight of working with wood and observing the skill of the ‘completely speechless little cabinet-maker’ who taught him.

The furniture-making course was abandoned only because Waugh needed money: by this time he was seriously thinking of getting married, and writing books seemed to offer better financial prospects, especially since he had received an advance for a biography of Rossetti and in fact had completed the writing by the autumn of 1927. He records in his diary for 6 October 1927 going with Mrs Graham, his friend Alastair’s mother, to see Kelmscott, as part of his research for the book. They had tea with May Morris, whom Waugh described as ‘a singularly forbidding woman – very awkward and disagreeable
dressed in a slipshod ramshackle way in hand-woven stuffs. A hermaphrodite lives with her', he adds, by way of reference to Mary Lobb, the former land-girl who was for many years May Morris’s companion at Kelmscott. He was surprised to find the house much smaller than he expected: ‘I had imagined it all so spacious – perhaps it is just because it lacks Morris and has that extraordinary woman and her hermaphrodite’.10

It seems that Kelmscott made a deep impression on Waugh. He devotes a good deal of space in the seventh chapter of his book on Rossetti to describing the house where Morris ‘found sacramentally embodied all that he held of high account of beauty and sweetness and dignity’.11 He reinforces his own account of the house and garden with a long quotation from News from Nowhere in which the house in the country is still, in the projected twenty-first century, ‘a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer’.12 This is an English summer, of course, and English countryside, evoked with deepest affection which Waugh clearly shared.

The English country house would come to occupy an important place in Waugh’s fiction. Even before the publication of Brideshead Revisited, in which the baroque house stands for hierarchy, tradition, and a longing for social and religious security, Nigel Dennis was noting, in the Partisan Review, the centrality of houses in Waugh’s fiction, from Decline and Fall (1928) to ‘My Father’s House’, the first part of Work Suspended (1943):

My Father’s House. It is the most meaningful of all Waugh’s titles and, with its summons to lament the past, it could stand as an invisible title to everything Waugh has written … Always the house has made the man; man has not existed apart from his roof any more than the rat has failed to swarm into the apartment house.13

There is an interesting example of ‘the house making the man’ in A Handful of Dust (1934), one of Waugh’s most critically admired novels. Tony Last’s beloved Hetton Abbey is an impractical house rebuilt in ‘English Gothic’ style in 1864, and thus ‘essentially a fake’.14 Hetton is decked out with all the stock elements of a Tennysonian dream-world, the bedrooms taking their names from characters in Idylls of the King, and decorated with friezes of Gothic text and tapestries. Here Tony
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Last lives with his wife and young son amongst the relics of his own childhood, adapting the routines of his parents and grand-parents and cherishing the ‘things of tender memory and proud possession’ around him. Tony’s acceptance of tradition is as unquestioning as his trust in his wife; the latter is tragically misplaced, and there are no solid values to shore up Tony’s crumbling world. We come to see that Hetton’s Victorian Gothic is merely a hollow fantasy, not an emblem of a lasting tradition. Despite his evident enthusiasm for Victorian art, in this novel Waugh suggests through the metaphor of Hetton Abbey the shallowness of the Victorian picturesque; he is far from being an uncritical admirer of Victorianism.

But the idea of the English country house was important to Waugh in life as well as in his fiction. After a childhood spent in ever-growing suburbs of north-west London, he was very attracted to his friend Alistair Graham’s elegant family home in the Warwickshire countryside, as well as other houses he visited, such as Kelmscott. Eventually, in the summer of 1937 Waugh and his second wife, Laura Herbert, moved into their own Cotswold house, Piers Court, a Tudor house with an eighteenth-century facade near Stinchcombe in Gloucestershire. 20 years later, when Stinchcombe was beginning to be built up, they moved to an even more secluded eighteenth-century house at Combe Florey in Somerset. One of Waugh’s recent biographers comments that these houses were ‘his places of refuge, where his order would reign and from which, as much as possible, the modern world would be excluded’. Waugh was not the least interested in country sports, and not very interested in socialising with his neighbours, but he seems to have valued in his own houses the same qualities that he described in Morris’s Kelmscott: architectural beauty, a strong sense of the past, the repose of the English countryside, all conducive to a life of ‘order and dignity’.

Waugh had to wait for these things. In his mid-twenties, having given up the cabinet-making course, he and his first wife (also Evelyn) were very short of money and rented a largely unfurnished flat in Canonbury Square, Islington. Rossetti: His Life and Works had just been published, and the manuscript of Waugh’s first novel Decline and Fall was with a publisher, but Waugh was still deeply absorbed in the practical arts. His friend Harold Acton, to whom Decline and Fall was
dedicated, describes in his *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (1948) Waugh’s interest in domestic decoration as being touched with a kind of transforming innocence. He enjoyed buying various pieces of furniture from local second-hand shops and painting them himself. Acton goes on:

> When Evelyn could devise nothing further to paint he bought innumerable tuppenny and threepenny packets of assorted postage stamps at the Islington Stationers, and I would find him squatted on the floor, deeply preoccupied, surrounded by confetti-like pools of these bright little stamps which he would stick in elaborate patterns on an ugly old coal-scuttle, his hair all tousled and his fingers dabbled in glue. Later he would give the object a coating of varnish, endowing it with the patina of a Sir Joshua Reynolds. He devoted infinite care to such domestic arts and crafts. Perhaps he would soon take to designing tiles, fabrics and stained-glass windows … It was even possible that he might develop into another William Morris and solve some of our more pressing social ills with a similar faith.¹⁷

Acton wrote this account of the young Waugh in 1948, by which time it was perfectly clear that Waugh was not travelling in the same direction as Morris, so it is all the more striking that he chooses to make this surprising connection. Even with due allowance made for the sometimes fanciful tone of Acton’s memoir, there are some very suggestive phrases in this account. The link made at the end of the passage between awareness of social ills and a ‘faith’ that is needed to tackle them actually becomes broken in Waugh’s case, but both elements remain strongly present in his work and his character. Another telling phrase is the ‘infinite care’ that Waugh took over his domestic craftsmanship, and although this comes just before the reference to Morris, we can see, perhaps, where Acton is heading with his choice of words here. Earlier in his book, Acton also refers to Waugh’s remarkable ‘artistic integrity’;¹⁸ this idea of integrity, linked with care and craftsmanship, is arguably where we can see the lasting influence of Morris’s work on Waugh.

Waugh himself placed considerable emphasis on the idea of integrity in his book on Rossetti. This was a remarkable book for a 25-year-old to have published: not only does its style combine readability with authority, but Waugh engages with modernist aesthetic theory head on, debating and ultimately rejecting Roger Fry’s emphasis on
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'significant form'. The final chapter of the book, 'What is wrong with Rossetti?', offers a sustained discussion of aesthetics in which Waugh firmly asserts that art has a moral basis. The root cause of Rossetti's failure, he argues, is 'not so much that as a man he was a bad man ... but there was fatally lacking in him that essential rectitude that underlies the serenity of all really great art'.

Although Waugh does find Rossetti interesting, and greatly admires some of his paintings, his final verdict is that 'there is a spiritual inadequacy, a sense of ill-organisation about all that he did'. He has no such reservations about Morris. Naturally, the interesting case of Rossetti, the flawed artist, takes centre-stage in this book, but Waugh also establishes the figure of Morris as an exemplar of all that Rossetti was not. He gives due weight to the influence of Rossetti on Morris in the years after he left Oxford, but presents it as a largely negative influence. He quotes from a letter Morris wrote to Cormell Price in July 1856:

Rossetti says I ought to paint; now, as he is a very great man and speaks with authority and not as the scribes, I must try ... I can't enter into politics or social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see things are in a muddle, and I have no power to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another.

To which Waugh adds the comment: 'How those last two sentences smack of Gabriel'. Even more explicitly, he describes the two years that Morris studied painting under Rossetti as 'by far the two least profitable years in his life ... It was by no means a healthy connection for “Topsy,” despite the robust mythology that has grown up about it'.

Throughout the book, in fact, Waugh emphasises the range and extent of Morris's talent, and also his originality in the pursuit of craftsmanship. The 'Kelmscott' chapter begins with Morris's own later description of himself, in the Thames Police Court, as 'an artist and literary man pretty well known throughout Europe', and continues:

His literary work, which alone would have been the life's task of any ordinary man, was done in the intervals or during the actual exercise of the business of the Morris firm. One by one he rediscovered, learned, and taught the processes of ancient craftsmanship, and poured into
them his own abundant vitality and invention. He composed pages of
verse, any ten lines of which it would have prostrated Rossetti to pro-
duce, as he sat at the loom at Merton Abbey. If a man could not com-
pose poetry as he was weaving, he used to maintain, he could not do it
anywhere. This contrast in productivity is only the start of the comparisons
between the two men that run through this chapter. Waugh seems to
find in Morris's life at Kelmscott a serenity and order that are quite the
reverse of the 'spiritual inadequacy', the 'ill-organisation' that ulti-
mately doom Rossetti. Waugh lays considerable emphasis on Morris's
'genius and industry'—the latter being a quality of indisputable
value; Rossetti's reputation, on the other hand, is bedevilled by the
issue of whether or not he was a 'real' artist. It comes as no surprise,
then, to find that when Waugh writes about his own practice as a writer
he aligns himself time and time again with the industrious craftsman
rather than one who aspires to the problematic status of artist.

We find Waugh adopting this apparently self-deprecating persona
of craftsman in an early newspaper article entitled 'People who want to
sue me'. Apropos criticism, he complains that 'A novelist's trade ... is
the only one in which his acquaintances insist on coming right into the
workshop and playing with the tools.' Then, pursuing the metaphor
further with regard to the novelist's raw material ('that vast, smoulder-
ing rubbish-heap of experience'), he describes how the novelist has to
'assemble these tarnished and dented fragments, polish them, set them
in order, and try to make a coherent and significant arrangement of
them'.

Much later in his life, Waugh was still justifying his own practice as
a writer in terms that placed the major emphasis on craft. In April 1962
he gave an interview with Julian Jebb for the Paris Review, in which he
asserted: 'I regard writing not as an investigation of character, but as an
exercise in the use of language, and with this I am obsessed. I have no
technical psychological interest. It is drama, speech, and events that
interest me'. This was a striking claim to make in 1962, when 'psy-
chological interest' was what many readers and critics looked for. In
fact Harold Acton had put his finger on an unusual feature of Waugh's
work when he remarked, in 1948, that his was 'an applied art, and he
cannot rely entirely on imagination'. Although Waugh insisted that
the artist ought not to be the subject of his art, there is very little in the way of sheer invention in his novels, so in an indirect way much of his writing is about himself, his acquaintances, and what he sees of the world at home and abroad. As he explained in his 1930 newspaper article, he takes the raw materials of what he experiences and observes (as most novelists do to some extent, but Waugh even more than most) and re-shapes them into new, revealing patterns. In Waugh’s case these patterns offer a largely absurdist view of the world; as he grew older his pessimism took root and grew itself exaggerated masks, but he continued to explore his chosen medium, language, with an integrity that has its roots in a Morrisian approach to craftsmanship.

In the Paris Review interview Waugh was disparaging about his first published book, Rossetti: His Life and Works, but, whatever its merits or de-merits as art criticism, the biography is actually quite revealing in its rejection of modernist aesthetics and insistence on moral and spiritual integrity. In his portrayal of Morris in that book Waugh also applauds the craftsman’s qualities of hard work and application – qualities that he frequently claimed for himself. In a newspaper article on the subject of ‘Sloth’ published in 1962, he characteristically deplored the current ‘lamentable’ state of literature, with writers intent on debasing and impoverishing language, or offering ‘rough notes and sketches as finished work’. When he asks, ‘How many [of us] resolve that nothing shall leave the workshop which is not as perfectly finished as our talents allow?’ he again aligns himself Morris’s values.

Perhaps Waugh’s supreme achievement was to have found a distinctive prose style to embody his largely absurdist vision of the world, and in an article of this length I can only assert rather than demonstrate the superlative quality of Waugh’s writing. In the newspaper article just quoted he states simply: ‘You must know us by our works’, and in Waugh’s writing we can find those qualities of precision, fittingness, consistency – and inspiration – that we admire in Morris’s work as a craftsman.
NOTES

12. Ibid., p. 184.
18. Ibid., p. 127.
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20. Ibid., p. 227.
22. Ibid., p. 84.
23. Ibid., p. 182.
24. Ibid., p. 198.
25. Ibid., p. 224.
27. Ibid., p. 73.