Reviews

Peter Fuller, Theoria. Art, and the Absence of Grace.

Theoria, despite its austere title, is a lively, stimulating, and intelligent book: it is also deliberately controversial. In it Peter Fuller continues the arguments of his previous book Images of God, which raised the question of how modern man could live without the consoling power of the 'lost illusions' of religion. Here the discussion is taken further by a consideration of the ideas of Ruskin in this area (which inevitably leads to consideration of Morris); but the book also contains elements of autobiography, and an attack on modernist art and its consequences for us today. The three elements interpenetrate in illuminating ways, and Mr. Fuller always writes with clarity and often with force. It is good to read a work of art criticism articulated from so personally committed a position.

First a word about the intellectual evolution described in Theoria. Mr. Fuller presents himself as having grown up in an evangelical family in which discussions of the Bible were not unusual, and as having himself read St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and other Fathers of the Church (p.73). In 1961 he was sent off to boarding school with 'a copy of [Karl Barth's] Dogmatics in Outline among the cans of condensed milk and the new rugger boots in my tuckbox' (p.168). But the Cambridge of the mid-60's led him into left-wing politics of what he now sees as a naive and superficial kind:

In those heady days, the colleges were in ferment ... But our eyes turned constantly towards ideas and events taking place across the Channel or the Atlantic. (p.21)

He had come across Ruskin's Political Economy of Art in 1967 and written a tutorial essay criticising Ruskin's attachment to the Gothic, but could find no
interest on the Left in the ‘rich British tradition’ of social criticism ‘which Ruskin founded’ (p.22) – though he does describe Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society* of 1958 as influential, and as encouraging ‘my view that there was a “materialist” Ruskin, who could be detached from the swamp of his anachronistic “idealism” and preserved for the modern world’ (p.21). Rather than Ruskin, the young Left read Marshall McLuhan with excitement, and Walter Benjamin with respect. Then in London in the early 1970’s Mr. Fuller came under the influence of John Berger, particularly as presented in *Ways of Seeing*, with its attempt to demystify the work of art. Soon, however, Fuller came to react against what he calls ‘the relentlessly modern, technological and anti-spiritual emphases of *Ways of Seeing*’ (p.25) as blinkered and dangerous. In his reaction he turned back to Kenneth Clark’s *Civilization*, in which he found the belief – clearly now congenial to him – that:

> the arts were a means of continuing to affirm the life of the spirit in an increasingly ugly, fragmented and materialistic world. (p.26)

This led him back further to Ruskin, whose works he came to see as possessing a profound unity – like that of the Gothic itself – and constituting a ‘formidable indictment of twentieth century monopoly capitalism and its sad apology for a living human culture’ (p.27).

This gives his account of Ruskin its attractive vigour, and also explains why it is focussed as it is – on *Modern Painters*, that is to say, rather than the more ‘materialist’ *Stones of Venice*. The survey of Ruskin’s life in Chapter I concentrates mainly on the private aspects, but what is surprising, in view of the book’s ‘spiritual’ theme, is that it deals rather casually with both the ‘unconversion’ of 1858 and the ‘reconversion’ of the early 1870’s, of which we are told simply, ‘Perhaps he needed it’ (p.15). Nor are these events more fully considered elsewhere in the book. The main emphasis is the distinction, seen by Mr. Fuller as crucial, which Ruskin draws in *Modern Painters* Volume I between *theoria* and *aesthesis*. The latter, prefiguring aestheticism, is superficial and sensory; the former, in its depth and inclusiveness, awakens all Ruskin’s wonderful powers of reverence: Mr. Fuller paraphrases it as ‘the response to beauty of one’s whole moral being’ (p.45). Broadly speaking Mr. Fuller follows Ruskin in seeing the development of art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as having been a fall from *theoria* to *aesthesis*, a process in which art has become emptied of any spiritual content, and eventually turned into the crudities of a Julian Schnabel or Gilbert and George.

These are matters of central importance, and Mr. Fuller brings all his seriousness to bear on them. He sees Ruskin as having struggled heroically to create ‘a natural theology without God’ (P.234), and believes that some modern scientific thought is helping to make that possible today: he quotes Mandelbrot on fractals and E.O. Wilson’s *Biophilia*. Such thinking enables man to see himself as one with his world in a positive way, an attitude which finds expression too in the ‘Romantic’ art which Mr. Fuller admires and which, in his account, Modernism and Late Modernism have denied. Actually, Mr. Fuller argues in Chapter 15, the great Modernist painters were not committed to a materialist definition of reality; Renoir, Degas, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Rouault, Kandinsky, even the Cubists, were interested in the transcendental.
It was the art-historians – particularly, Mr. Fuller darkly states without particularising, ‘American historians of modernism’ – who misleadingly associated Modernism with scientific materialism. This materialism seems to have triumphed finally in Late Modernism, largely imported from America from the 1960’s onwards. Against this tradition Mr. Fuller sets a number of British artists who have shown a positive response to landscape: from Turner to Henry Moore in sculpture, and to Spencer, Nash, Lowry, Bomberg, Piper, Cecil Collins in painting. This tradition he sees carried on in the work of a number of Australian artists: Lloyd Rees, Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Fred Williams. Whatever the reader may feel about Mr. Fuller’s account of Modernism (which was surely never believed to be so unequivocally ‘progressive’ or materialist in its orientation as suggested here), I am grateful for his defense of the English Neo-Romantic tradition, which has been coming in for fuller recognition recently, and am glad to be informed about the Australian work. But I am not really convinced by the philosophical aspects of the argument. It does not seem to me that a key term of the discussion like ‘spiritual’ is looked at carefully enough. Mr. Fuller admits to being an atheist, and at one point refers to ‘the grand illusions of painting’ (p.144). But he does not fully address the implications of his own attitude or consider how exactly an atheist can employ the word ‘spiritual’. Instead he offers the obscure but interesting P.T. Forsyth in 1905 arguing that ‘noble’ art depends on a belief in a ‘Divine spirit in Nature’ (quoted p.145), or the puzzling possibility of ‘a natural theology without God.’ He seems unwilling to admit the implications of his own atheism, or to look to any humanist tradition to help to create the positive relationship between man and nature which he desires. So he emerges as a figure not unlike his own Walter Pater in the excellent chapter on Aestheticism, whose attitude is ‘secular, but ... tinged in every cadence with the fragrance of fading religion’(p.120).

Perhaps this is why Mr. Fuller seems to feel a particular exasperation with William Morris and those who have written on him from a confidently humanistic perspective. The chapter on Morris strikes me as the least satisfactory in the book, and the one in which the tone is most uncertain. The basis of Mr. Fuller’s criticism of Morris is his contention that ‘the aesthetics of Marx and Ruskin are irreconcilable’ (p.130), so that Morris’s attempt to reconcile them was based on an irresolvable contradiction. The contention is based on the view that Ruskin taught that ‘medieval man found freedom in the very “fetishistic” work whose final overthrow Marx so resolutely awaited’, and that Marx and Engels argued for the subjection of man’s will of the ‘natural order’ that Ruskin revered. I believe this contention to be based on a too narrow view of Marxism, though I do accept that in Communist regimes a crude idea of man’s ‘victory over nature’ has often led to a destructive disregard for the natural environment. (Evidence of this was documented by F.B. Singleton in his contribution to the Catalogue of the 1984 William Morris Today exhibition, which Mr. Fuller describes as ‘disgracefully biased’ (p.136). It is the formulation about ‘fetishistic’ work which is more debateable. Mr. Fuller’s argument does not do justice to the notion of alienation under the conditions of capitalist production, although he quotes Marx on the way in which the ‘sources and attributes’ would become ‘fully human’ with the removal of property-produced fetishisms (p.111).
However, it is on the account of Morris that I wish to focus. Mr. Fuller admits that Morris was greatly indebted, as he often declared, to Ruskin, but argues that he was ‘a less faithful disciple of Ruskin’s aesthetic ideas than he liked to pretend’ (p.132) – the word ‘pretend’ introducing an unnecessary suggestion of bad faith. Morris’s formulation of what he saw as Ruskin’s central idea was: ‘Art is man’s expression of his joy in labour’ (quoted p.132). Mr. Fuller believes that this misrepresents Ruskin, who was more aware of the necessary elements of ‘suffering in effort’ in all work, and less humanistic: ‘All noble art’ – in a quotation – ‘is the expression of man’s delight in God’s work; not his own.’ (quoted p.133) This is certainly a telling quotation in the context. But to use it in this polemical way is to attribute a greater consistency to Ruskin’s views than seems reasonable: much of the account of the Gothic in Stones of Venice reads as a hymn to the creative powers of man as a free worker. And even if we were to accept that Morris was not as Ruskinian as he believed, the question of the value of his position would remain unaffected, and it is here that many admirers of Morris will be at least unconvinced.

For Mr. Fuller now goes on to argue that Morris’s main reasons for becoming a Socialist were aesthetic (a word that has by this time acquired limiting implications). He then offers a succinct summary of News from Nowhere, emphasising, accurately enough, the absence of God and the presence of decoration. This leads him to question Nikolaus Pevsner’s 1936 account of Morris as a pioneer of modern design, citing in his support Gillian Naylor’s contribution to the 1984 Catalogue. Here most readers are likely to be persuaded: Pevsner’s early formulations strike us now as rigid if not doctrinaire. But what is demonstrated is the breadth of Morris’s achievement compared with the critical categories that have been applied to him; it is not much of an improvement for Mr. Fuller to label Morris’s design-aesthetics ‘reactionary’ (p.137). Certainly Morris can be set against the ‘productwise’ aesthetics of architects like Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos, who is quoted as saying ‘Ornament is wasted labour.’ (p.138) But it is hard to see how someone who had read the last part of News from Nowhere, or Morris’s lectures on the decorative arts, with any care could assert that ‘a denial of the spirituality of nature and of art lies at the core of Morris’s teaching’ (p.139): that teaching is based not on denial at all, but on a belief in our creative powers as human beings working in harmony with nature.

The source of the misunderstanding seems to lie in Mr. Fuller’s keenness to repudiate his own youthful Marxism; this leads him to overreact and exaggerate when discussing the politics of Morris and his critics. Robin Page Arnot comes in for particular abuse in an unnecessary footnote (p.244), and the whole history of Morris’s reputation is misrepresented. The 1930’s certainly did not revalue Morris single-mindedly into a ‘pure’ Marxist, nor was there ‘a spate of similarly minded volumes’ following E.P. Thompson’s 1955 biography. To put it like this is to denigrate Thompson’s achievement – and Mr. Fuller nowhere denies the accuracy of his work as an account of Morris’s development. Here another autobiographical passage tells us that for a while Mr. Fuller actually followed Thompson’s view of the value of Morris’s thinking as a critique of other forms of Marxism, but he then evidently went on to ask whether Morris had in any way improved on the thinking of Ruskin. Mr. Fuller denies that he did, arguing that Ruskin had a more realistic view of human possibilities and of the effect of technology, while Morris shared the
hubristic Marxist belief in the right of man to ruthlessly exploit the environment: again, one can only say that this is not the case, as Ellen in *News from Nowhere* shows. Not surprisingly, P.D. Anthony’s account of Ruskin is regarded as authoritative, and he is quoted as saying:

The achievements of Socialism in advanced industrial countries have gone a great way to achieve its political objectives in terms of birth, wealth and privilege, but the condition of the working man seems somehow unchanged.

The first half of this sentence may be extravagant in its claim, but it is with the second that the issue central to Morris arises. It may well be true that Socialism as so far practised has paid too little attention to the actual experience of work, but has capitalism done better? If not, what are we doing about it? Mr. Fuller gives no answer.

He concludes the chapter with the unsubstantiated and false assertion: ‘By the end of his life, after wasted years in the Socialist sects, Morris was distanced from the movement and disillusioned by it. He returned to the beauties and pleasures of anachronistic craftmanship’ (p.143). Yet the fine lecture ‘Communism’ was not given until 1893, the positively argued ‘How I Became a Socialist’ was published in 1894, and the funeral oration for Sergius Stepniak given in December 1895. In *Justice* on May Day 1896, the year of his death, Morris wrote:

Not all the discoveries of science, not all the tremendous organisation of the factory and the market will produce true wealth, so long as the end aim of it all is the production of profit for the privileged classes.

Morris may have been sometimes over-optimistic about the ability of humanity to create a just society (though it seems to me that he is usually very judicious about this); but it is surely unconstructive of Mr. Fuller to simply dismiss his vision as a ‘sentimental, aestheticised and impossible dream’ (p.143) without fully engaging himself with the deep-rooted problems of society that so preoccupied the mature Morris. In fact the responsiveness to nature expressed in the designs which Mr. Fuller freely praises may reasonably be seen as providing a basis for establishing an idea of the harmonious relationship between man and nature that is so pressing an issue for the world today. It is a pity that Mr. Fuller’s rejection of Marxism has led him away from seeing Morris’s ideas as a creative extension of those of Ruskin, for it seems to me that they both, together with many of the thinkers discussed in this book, should be seen as allies in the search for a humanistic philosophy to replace our ‘lost illusions’.

I hope the length of this review will have shown something of the range and vitality of Mr. Fuller’s thinking in this important book. It is good to know that we can follow the development of that thinking in the pages of the appropriately named journal he has courageously established to further his critique of our culture, *Modern Painters*. We can only hope that Mr. Fuller will manage to sustain the tone of Ruskin’s earlier writings, as in the best parts of this book, and not allow his anti-Marxism and anti-Modernism to lead to another *Fors Clavigera*.

*Peter Faulkner*

David Gerard’s essay explores the influence of Ruskin on Morris, and it is good to be reminded of how fruitful and long-lived this was, even though the paths of the two men ultimately diverged when Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1883. The chapter, ‘The Nature of Gothic’, in *The Stones of Venice,* in particular impressed and influenced Morris profoundly, particularly in its analysis of the kind of society and the kind of men created by industrialisation, and there can be little doubt that through Ruskin Morris first became fully aware that it was impossible to separate the quality of art from the quality of life for the majority. However I do not believe, as David Gerard seem to suggest, that the Morris of the mid 1870’s had learnt everything he knew from Ruskin or that Morris’s knowledge of the realities of class in British social life at this point had been gained through intuition. This does less than justice to Morris, who had learnt about the slums of Birmingham from his radical friends at Oxford, later admitting – in his autobiographical letter to Scheu in September 1883 – that through contact with them he ‘got into my head therefrom some socio-political ideas which would have developed probably but for the attractions of art and poetry’; in the Firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. he had had daily contact with, had worked alongside, working class men, even if they were relatively privileged in being skilled men rather than unskilled workers. Nevertheless this wide-ranging essay is often persuasive and always thought-provoking.

It is finely printed in 12-point Monotype Caslon on Sommerville Laid paper and is beautifully bound in Morris ‘Willow’ pattern paper.

*Christine Poulson*


William Morris and Modernism? But T.S. Eliot famously dismissed his woolly poeticisms in favour of the bright, hard precision of Andrew Marvell; Aldous Huxley got his career as modernist novelist under way by a vicious attack on Morrisian aesthetics put into the mouth of Mr. Scogan in *Crome Yellow,* and Virginia Woolf, in *Mrs Dalloway,* consigns Morris to the dreamy ethical idealism of Clarissa Dalloway’s long superseded youth.

Does Morris then fare better in visual, rather than literary, modernism? S.K. Tillyard thinks so, arguing that there is a powerful carry-over from the aesthetic doctrines and vocabulary of the Arts and Crafts Movement to the proselytising efforts of Roger Fry and his associates around the great Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in November 1910, which introduced the work of Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne to the English public and after which, Virginia
Woolf implied, 'human character changed'. Truth to materials and specificity of medium; purity of form, decoration, design, abstraction, expressive self-liberation; unwavering seriousness in one's approach to art, coupled with dreams, beyond it, of general social redemption – all these founding assumptions of Arts and Crafts were indeed, as Tillyard demonstrates in persuasive detail, carried over wholesale into Fry's early vindications of Post-Impressionism. Not until later – around the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912 – would the formalist elements in his appreciation of the new art win out over the initial fervid defence of its expressivity and emotionalism.

Given this convergence of Arts and Crafts and Post-Impressionism, Tillyard offers to explain not only the rapid general success of the latter, as it colonised a viewing public already predisposed towards it (and particularly women, on whose role in early English Modernism Tillyard is especially suggestive), but also the virulent opposition Fry's first exhibition met with in some quarters. For 'to the new movement's detractors Post-Impressionism summoned up not visions of the new life, but echoes of the potentially revolutionary threat of early socialism'. However, she doesn't provide much documentary evidence for this claim; and in his valuable collection of contemporary critical responses J.B. Bullen shows that it is anarchism rather than socialism that forms the point of political reference for the exhibition's detractors. What bearing does this discrepancy have on the general nature and politics of Modernism in England?

Tillyard refers on and off to 'Bloomsbury Post-Impressionism', a phrase which rather precisely marks the limits of her thesis about the carry-over from Arts and Crafts to Fry's 1910 Exhibition. For this particular strain of Continental modernism was imported not by socialists but by the radical liberal bourgeoisie, by a group devoted ultimately to the thesis of the emancipated, cultivated individual, not to the collective or communitarian values of the Left. The notion of the 'collective' in artistic Modernism then split noisily off and moved politically far to the Right; in late 1913 Wyndham Lewis and company detached themselves from the Omega Workshops, devoting themselves thereafter to an aggressively anti-humanist art which T.E. Hulme theorised as 'geometrical' and Ezra Pound as Vorticist. 'Immobility, concentration and solidity' (to borrow Tillyard's brief summary) were now the order of the day; abstract design or system now wholly crushed the individual expressive freedom with which, in Arts and Crafts theory, it had been integrated.

The modernisms Tillyard examines accordingly do not so much sustain the Arts and Crafts synthesis as split it asunder. These two impulses – self-expressive freedom and abstract design or collective system – were held together for Morris himself in the notion of the Gothic; for the Gothic cathedral articulated the individual craftsman's spontaneous joy in labour and the imperatives of tradition and community. We might accordingly expect the strands of modernism which themselves valorised the Gothic to best sustain the Arts and Crafts project in the colder climate of the early twentieth-century. Central among these would be Walter Gropius's Bauhaus: both Lyonel Feininger's wonderful woodcut of the 'Cathedral of Socialism' and Gropius's demands in its Manifesto of 1919 for a 'return to crafts ... a new guild of craftsmen without class-distinctions' remind us of how faithfully, in
its early Expressionist years, the Bauhaus sustained the Morrisian project. And if we look for a literary version of all this, we shall turn to a writer who, married as he was to a German woman, was in close touch with German Expressionist developments. For D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*, in which Lincoln Cathedral occupies a commanding symbolic role and in which just about every other character is in one way or another a craftsman, builder or architect, is exactly, one comes impatiently to feel, the prose fiction Morris should have written, rather than the Northern romances of his late phase. Raymond Williams, who several times emphasises in *Culture and Society* how ‘very close’ Lawrence is ‘to the socialism of a man like Morris’, perhaps also obscurely shared this judgement. At any rate, the sad irony of S.K. Tillyard’s otherwise excellent book is that her (and Fry’s) Francophilia prevents her seeing precisely those aspects of ‘Germanic’ modernism which could best have borne out her thesis about the transfer of Arts and Crafts theory across the turn of the century.

Tony Pinkney


This book was originally published in German in 1971 – although a summarizing final chapter surveys some late critical works – and it is very much along the limits which its title suggests, that of solid academic scholarship. The Symbolist Tradition in England is defined in narrow terms, excluding both Blake and Tennyson, and the book’s achievement is to cast light on the types of symbol used in some of the poetry of the later nineteenth century, particularly that of Baudelaire, the Rossettis, Olive Constance, John Davidson, Lord Alfred Douglas, ‘Michael Field’, Lionel Johnson, E. Leigh-Hamilton, Richard Le Gallienne, P.B. Marston, Morris, Arthur O’Shaughnessy, J. Payne, Edgar Allan Poe, William Bell Scott, Swinburne, J.A. Symonds, Arthur Symons, Francis Thompson, James Thomson, Oscar Wilde, Theodore Wratislaw and the early Yeats. As this list suggests, Dr. Hönnighausen is very thorough in his coverage of minor poets, and he makes abundantly clear the relatively restricted range of material used by these poets, whose main interest for us today is that they led up the towering achievement of Yeats. We are shown convincingly the developing Victorian concern with aspects of Symbolism, and then the types of symbol most often employed; the garden and the landscape; the *femme fatale* and the ideal beloved; the mystical and the occult; the snake, the sphinx, the dance and the rose. The book keeps strictly to its title area, and there is no attempt to relate the material discussed to that of other contemporary writers. This gives it something of the self-enclosed quality of much of the poetry discussed.

Students of Morris will be disappointed to find that only eight of his poems are referred to, all from *The Defence of Guenevere*, and of these only ‘Golden Wings’ is really discussed, with illuminating comments on its colour symbolism and its suggestive ‘litany of names’. Two of Burne-Jones’s figures of the seasons, ‘Spring’ and ‘Autumn’, are somewhat hazily reproduced with their accompanying quatrains, but there is no acknowledgement that these are by Morris. There seems no particular reason for the omission of the lyrical poems in *The Earthly Paradise*, which
exemplify many of the characteristics of other poems considered here. The only

critical remark on Morris's poetry cited is from John Drinkwater's 1912 volume; the

final chapter refers to Carole Silver's collection The Golden Chain and to Peter

Stansky's William Morris, but there is no reference to the main English biographies.

And fortunately Dr. Honnighausen's concluding comment on Henry James's

description of Jane Morris - 'Like Henry James we know Jane, the art figure, only as

Morris's and Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite projection' – has been outdated by Jan

Marsh's work: Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood appeared in 1985. Still, these criticisms

are the result of approaching this informative book from a very particular angle. In

general it does what it sets out to do soundly, and is attractively produced – with the

serious exception of the poor quality of the reproductions taken from coloured

originals: the black and white work of Beardsley here alone repays close attention.

Peter Faulkner

William Morris: Full Color-Patterns and Designs. Dover Publications and Constable

and Co. 41pp. in colour. 1989. £5.20.

This reasonably priced selection of Morris's work contains the illustrations from

Aymer Vallance's The Art of William Morris (1987). These consist of one cartoon,

two tile-patterns, eleven wallpaper designs, five chintzes, two printed velveteeens,

one velvet broché, three silks, five woven wool tapestries (two using silk), one

Kidderminster carpet, five Hammersmith carpets (one complete), two Arras

tapestries, and one fine binding. The Publisher's Note occupies half a page, and

oddly describes the original Firm as Morris, Marshall, Faulk & Company. It ends

with the statement that:

The wallpaper designs created by Morris for the firm are particularly famous and

remain in production, more than a century after their introduction.

Well, some of them do, in some forms! It seems a pity that a more useful

introduction was not provided, and that the titles of the plates are simply taken from

Vallance with no dates: the one chosen for the cover is simply called 'Wallpaper

designed for St. James's Palace' – and differs considerably in its colour effects from

the plate inside. The display face chosen is certainly not Morrisian.

Perhaps this is to niggle unreasonably over a picturebook? The back cover

suggests that:

Commercial artists and graphic designers will welcome this modestly priced

collection of copyright – free designs ...

Maybe. But they would be likely to learn more from a book which included further

information about the visual material which is – as always with Morris – a feast for

the eyes (the quality of the colour is reasonable). In particular I was left hankering

for the Hammersmith carpet here called 'Black Tree'.

Peter Faulkner