

Reviews

Vim Neetens, *Writing And Democracy: Literature, Politics and Culture in Transition*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, 176 pp., hbk £40, pbk £9.99

In a moment of historical upheaval like the present one, when Democracy (with a capital D as in dollar) is appropriated more ambiguously than ever into mainstream political rhetoric, it is useful to review a book seeking to examine how the historical growth of democratic aspirations has been reflected in literature. Wim Neetens, a Flemish cultural theorist whose thought has been more than slightly trained in the Academy of Terry Eagleton, argues that 'Questions of literacy/literature, culture and their relation to social and ideological constructions of democracy have become, once again, of pressing concern.' (p. 3) (Alas, the often abstruse theoretical formulations of Eagletonian polemic abound in this book.) Interesting attention is paid to Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* and George Gissing's *Demos: A Story of English Socialism*, although little is offered in terms of fresh analytical clarity to supersede P.J. Keating's classically comprehensive *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* which was published twenty years earlier.

Neetens devotes a chapter to socialist novels and this is useful in showing how their break with the forms of earlier Victorian fiction about the working class enhanced the democratic sentiments which pervaded their content. Neetens considers Shaw's *An Unsocial Socialist* and Tressell's *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*; sandwiched between the two of these are seven pages (138-145) devoted to *News From Nowhere*, which is a novel aimed to create, according to Neetens, 'an imaginary

but thinkable space in which a fantasy of a “true ideal of a full and reasonable life” is allowed freedom and play, while it remains predicated on a material transformation of society that has to be won through organisation and struggle.’ Neetens sees the novel as having an anti-reformist polemical intent: ‘the presentation of this “ideal” as ... unattainable under present circumstances.’ The account owes much to Thompson and the latter’s influence by Abensour, but, despite the claims of the opening chapter that new critical theories are making room for radical literary perspectives, this is not justified by the inclusion of anything particularly fresh in terms of analysis of what Morris was trying to say or how he said it. This is a pity, for there is surely scope for looking at Morris’s revolutionary approach to history and to utopia as being unprecedented in modern English literature precisely in the way that *News From Nowhere* exhibits the literary working out of a society shaped by a thoroughly democratic consciousness (in the widest sense of the adjective, whereby it is intimately linked to consciousness rather than constitutionalism) arising out of history’s first ever democratic revolution. In these times of bogus democratic triumphalism, the investigation of the depiction of genuine democratic triumph can only shed light.

Stephen Coleman

Edvige Schulte, *Scritti minore di letteratura e lingua inglese*. Gianini Editore, Quaderni della Facoltà di Scienze Politiche, Università di Napoli, 1989. 368 pp.

A Corrado, ed., *William Morris ‘News from Nowhere’ cent’ anni dopo*: A. Corrado, P. Faulkner, K. Kumar, E. Schulte. Guida Editore, Naples, 1992. 133 pp. 20,000 lire.

Professoressa Schulte continues to add to and embellish the substantial corpus of Italian translations and interpretations of Morris. As is often the case in the United States, the interest shown in Morris by Italian scholars is primarily in the fields of literature and of the crafts. The fact that even after the collapse of the Soviet Empire there remains in Italy a large working-class movement shaped or influenced by Lenin’s version of Marxism makes it surprising that there has been no translation from the French of Paul Meier’s *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris*. As in France such circles would clutch like drowning men at Morris’s conception of future society having to be constructed in two stages. Socialism (“incomplete Communism”) as the Bolsheviks claimed was to be the first, lower stage, and “pure Communism” the later, fully developed stage. Despite palpable differences between Morris and Lenin in this regard there was enough seemingly common ground for Morris to be presented by Meier as foreshadowing the notion of Communism being achieved in stages. It would be interesting to know whether the availability since 1980 of a translation of *A Dream of John Ball* and since 1984 of *News from Nowhere* has had any impact amongst those for whom the message would outweigh in importance the purely poetic texts.

In the collection of essays on aspects of English literature published in 1989, the one devoted to ‘The Shaping of the Aesthetic & Political Outlook of Wm. Morris’ is set beside illuminating studies of Pound, Milton, Kipling, Keats, Richardson, Defoe, Swift, Behan, Beckett and Joyce. As one would expect, Edvige Schulte is able to give a new perspective to the Italian dimension of most of these writers, not least in the case of Morris. Prof. Schulte may not have been impelled to explore the Morris oeuvre

from a commitment to his Socialist/Communist aspirations but, if for no other reason than professional dedication and competence, she ably weaves the many strands which go to make the integral Morris and in the process comes to give full recognition to his distinction between useful work and useless toil. That recognition extends to what is arguably Morris's most important contribution to Socialist thought, on the role and character of work in the new society. Perhaps it is because Edvige Schulte would seem to be more the interested onlooker than an involved Socialist that she sees in the subsequent foundation of the British Labour Party the realisation of Morris's aim of a united *Socialist Party*.

The most recent book with which Edvige Schulte is associated is in the form of a symposium to mark the centenary of *News from Nowhere*. Her fellow Italian contributor, Adriana Corrado, is joined on this occasion by our local colleagues, Peter Faulkner and Krishnan Kumar, who are so much more familiar to us in the English versions of their writings. In a sense this collection of essays performs a similar function to that edited by Coleman and O'Sullivan in 1990 but omits the same level of political identification with Morris's aims as was shown in the volume published by Green Books. Ms. Corrado is certainly able to provide valuable poetic insights when drawing on her intimate knowledge of *The Divine Comedy* as she charts the beauty, light and truth of Morris's allegorical journey to Utopia. In 1988 she did indeed write a study of the links between Christianity and the Utopian tradition.

Peter Faulkner's essay manages in less than forty pages to give the Italian reader a comprehensive picture of the man who wrote *Nowhere* and concludes that a hundred years later it still offers us an attainable vision rather than an impossible dream. Krishnan Kumar naturally draws from the enormous knowledge he has of the Utopian tradition and makes clear how Bellamy's dystopian *Looking Backward* shocked Morris into spinning his very different vision of how things might be.

Edmund S. Grant

Peter Faulkner, ed., *William Morris. Selected Poems*.
Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1992. 157 pp. £6.95.

At the conference held in Oxford to celebrate the centenary of *News from Nowhere* it quickly became evident that William Morris was a man for all talents. From that novel alone Morris may be perceived primarily as a political philosopher, a Marxist activist, a prophet of Greenness, a hopeless utopian, an early anarchosyndicalist, an arts and crafts visionary, a self-sufficiency advocate – depending on the reader's interpretative emphasis. Furthermore, as Peter Faulkner observes in his Introduction to this collection of poetry, Morris is most widely known today as a pattern designer. His influence is on our walls, draping our windows, even wrapping our Christmas presents. The name of Morris has become synonymous with a certain kind of good visual taste.

It is therefore, amidst this welter of identities, salutary to be reminded that in his own lifetime Morris had a considerable reputation as a poet. When Tennyson died in 1892, Faulkner records, Morris's claim on the Poet Laureateship was possibly overruled only on the grounds of his political views. Victoria may have approved of Morris's work for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and even, given

her distrust of Gladstonian policies, the suggestion that the Houses of Parliament might be more useful as a “storage place for manure”. She would not, however, have approved of a socialist Laureate.

There are general anthologies of Morris’s work that include a little of the poetry, but this volume is a distilled reminder of both the breadth and quality of the poems. Taken from May Morris’ collected edition of 1910–15, the selection here presents work from five of the six volumes of poetry Morris produced. Only the 1876 *Sigurd the Volsung* is entirely omitted, on the very reasonable basis that it is too long for this book, and unlikely to be comprehensible in a truncated form.

The presentation of the poems in chronological order enables the reader to follow Morris’ development clearly from the early energetic Pre-Raphaelite verse, through love and lyric poetry, and dramatic northern epic, to the late celebration of rest. The selection actually begins with ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, and a description of that lady’s fierce pride:

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
and concludes with the aphoristic couplet:

And for worst and best
Right good is rest.

Those lines end the poem ‘For the Bed at Kelmscott’, which literally appears on the great four-poster in the Cotswolds. The symmetry, moving from romantic young man to one who was tiring from living too many lives, is appropriate.

Insofar as Morris is known as a poet today it is perhaps in relation to the great narrative sagas of Icelandic or medieval English origins. Yet there is a subdued introspective strain among the poems of action. In ‘Iceland First Seen’, for example, which appeared in the final, 1891, volume *Poems by the Way*, Morris asks:

what came we forth to see that our hearts are so hot with desire?

There is no conclusive answer to that question. His whole life was a search for something that remained essentially indefinable. Ultimately the quest became its own justification, as though to stop seeking would be to cease living.

These are not bad times in which to be reminded of the lyric nature poetry: the twelve poems, for instance, that are each addressed to a month of the year in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70). ‘April’ begins:

O fair midspring, besung so oft and oft,
How can I praise thy loveliness enow?

In our post-T.S. Eliot age – “April is the cruellest month” – it is sometimes necessary to be reminded that for many centuries Chaucer voiced the common view:

And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour.

Morris, living until 1896, chronologically overlaps with the embryonic modernism of Henry James and Conrad, yet is closer in spirit to the Middle Ages.

The spirit he took from those times informs Morris’s Marxism, making it distinctly his own. That emerges in this selection in the ‘Chants for Socialists’. The paradox that was the multi-faceted Morris is partly illustrated by the end of ‘A Death Song’ appearing on the same page as ‘Pomona’. The former ends with the Shelleyan refrain:

No one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.

That proletarian defiance and prophecy of bloody revolution is juxtaposed with Pomona's exquisite promise of renewal:

I am the ancient Apple-Queen,

As once I was so am I now.

... I came of old,

From out the heart of Summer's joy.

In a period, like ours, when hope is necessary to provide the energy for transforming attitudes, Morris's poetry is a powerful counter to the spirit of despair that so easily leads to gloomy acceptance of doom. As Peter Faulkner illustrates in this excellently selected and well presented collection, the man who composed while he wove created a tapestry for our own times.

Brian Spittles