

The Gospel of Intensity: 'arry, William Morris & The Aesthetic Movement

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Harry Quilter (1851–1907), was a prominent art critic during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Though "Arry" was pilloried and lampooned unmercifully by the painter J. M. Whistler, he was, nevertheless, influential. The purpose of this article is to examine his 1880 essay 'The New Renaissance; or, The Gospel of Intensity'¹ in which he gives a profoundly unsympathetic view of the influence of William Morris on the contemporary public and places him firmly in the vanguard of the aesthetic movement in a way which is, at first sight, surprising. Quilter's article reminds us that dominant contemporary evaluations of an artist are not always universally held, and that the artist's influence on the contemporary public may not always be in line with his stated views or with our own assessment of the nature of his longer term importance.

William Morris is now widely acclaimed as a superb craftsman, as an innovative designer, as a successful businessman and as an accomplished writer and translator. Although he is not always perceived today as he might have wished, Morris is not a figure that it is fashionable or common to write down, save in the fields of his poetry and (by some) of his politics. Moreover, he was indisputably popular in his own time. By 1880, Morris was widely recognised as a successful poet, and as a fashionable designer, producer and purveyor in the field of the decorative arts. He had also received positive attention for his published work as a translator. Consequently it is all too easy to make assumptions and to notice only the often retrospective comments of friends and contemporaries who have adjusted their memories to meet an accepted later evaluation of their subject.

Having reached a high level of academic and popular recognition within our own time, Morris has been classified in terms of his antecedents, his followers and his opponents and placed in relation to the various artistic movements of his time. Thus Morris is commonly seen as developing under the influence of the first receding wave of Pre-Raphaelitism, as a follower of Ruskin, and thus as an exponent of 'truth to nature', and of moral values in art and in its production. He is thus seen as opposed to aestheticism and the notion of Art for Art's sake, as expressed characteristically by Walter Pater: 'For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake'.²

Such a view of William Morris can marshal behind it an impressive range of statements by Morris himself, of which the following is only one possible example out of many:

These arts, I have said, are part of a great system invented for the expression of a man's delight in beauty: all peoples and times have used them, they have been the joy of free nations, the solace of oppressed nations; religion has used and elevated them, has abused and degraded them; they are connected with all history, and are clever teachers of it, and, best of all, they are the sweetness of human labour, both to the handicraftsman, whose life is spent working in them, and to people in general who are influenced by the sight of them at every turn of the day's work: they make our toil happy, our rest fruitful.³

It is not the purpose of this article to challenge the necessary process of retrospective evaluation and categorisation. What is worth suggesting, however, is that such a view may not necessarily reflect the impact and perception of Morris by all his contemporaries and that significant questions can still be asked about the actual contemporary impact of Morris as an art worker rather than simply as an art writer.

History has not treated Harry Quilter in the way he would have probably wished. Although he wrote extensively as an art critic and exhibited his own paintings, it is as 'Arry', butt of the vindictive wit of James McNeill Whistler, that he is remembered – if at all – today. Quilter appears to have been one of those whose 'possession of a competence'⁴ allowed him the luxury of failing to decide what to do with his life. After an undistinguished career at Cambridge he read for the bar from 1872 until being called in 1878. He had already undertaken some studies of painting, however, and from 1876 he occupied himself as an art critic and journalist. By the time he wrote his 'The New Renaissance' Quilter had become, briefly, art critic of *The Times*⁵ and was also critic for *The Spectator*.⁶ 'The New Renaissance', however, appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in September 1880.

'The New Renaissance' has to be seen within the context of divisions within the artistic community created by the notorious Whistler v. Ruskin trial of 1878. The facts and outcome of the trial are worth briefly recalling here. John Ruskin, then at the height of his reputation as a critic, had ill-advisedly launched into a violent attack on Whistler and his presence as an exhibitor at the Grosvenor Gallery:

For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the Gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approached the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen and heard, much of cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.⁷

This was not the first time that Ruskin had attacked Whistler in print⁸ but on this occasion the artist responded by initiating proceedings for libel which resulted the following year in one of the most entertaining trials to take place in an English court. The proceedings ended in victory for Whistler though with derisory damages of one farthing.⁹

The trial and its outcome served to highlight and clarify divisions within the art world which were in turn to contribute to the grouping of various figures into movements which have persisted to the present day. The most important issue to

crystallise as a result of the Whistler-Ruskin affair was whether art was simply a source of pleasure or whether it was imbued with moral purpose, whether it should be an activity by and for an elite or a gift to the whole of a community, and whether it was essentially a matter of colour and form or should have a significant content. Whistler clearly placed art beyond social or moral imperatives: 'False again, the fabled link between the grandeur of Art and the glories and virtues of the State, for Art feeds not upon nations, and peoples may be wiped from the face of the earth, but Art is'.¹⁰ For Ruskin art was imbued with moral purpose and he summed up the division succinctly: 'You may separate these two groups of artists more distinctly in your mind as those who seek for the pleasures of art, in relations of its colours and lines, without caring to convey truth with it; and those who seek the truth first, and then go down from the truth to the pleasure of colour and line'.¹¹ This division between the 'aesthetic' movement and those in the tradition of Ruskin, led to a ranging of individuals in one camp or another. Whistler fell clearly into the first and has been conventionally grouped with figures including Walter Pater and Algernon Charles Swinburne under the 'aesthetic' label. Associated with Ruskin were Burne-Jones (who had reluctantly appeared as Ruskin's witness in the trial) and painters such as Holman Hunt linked with the Pre-Raphaelite tradition. As a long-time disciple of Ruskin, Morris had placed himself with Ruskin in attacking:

an art cultivated professedly by a few and for a few, who would consider it necessary – a duty if they could admit duties – to despise the common herd, to hold themselves aloof from all that the world has been struggling for from the first, to guard carefully every approach to their palace of art. It would be a pity to waste many words on the prospect of such a school as this, which does in a way, theoretically at least, exist at present, and has for its watchword a piece of slang that does not mean the harmless thing it seems to mean – art for art's sake.¹²

This identification has been largely accepted for practical purposes down to the present, and simply in terms of Morris's expressed attitudes it is difficult to contradict. The broader categorisation of artists into the aesthetic or Ruskinian/narrative traditions has also continued to develop over the last century of study.

By 1880, Quilter had already declared himself in sympathy with Ruskin in an article in the *Spectator*. He had also bought The White House, Whistler's residence in Tite Street, when the latter was forced to sell it following financial difficulties arising in part from the trial. Worse still, Quilter replaced Whistler's carefully designed interior with his own conventional decorative scheme. These actions were to contribute towards Quilter attracting Whistler's undying dislike and contempt, expressed prominently in contributions lampooning 'Arry' in *The World* over several years. The following excerpt, on the subject of 'Arry's redecorations at Tite Street, offers a flavour:

O Atlas! What of the 'Society for the Preservation of Beautiful Buildings'? (*sic*) Where is Ruskin? and what do Morris and Sir William Drake? For, behold! beside the Thames, the work of desecration continues, and the 'White House'

swarms with the mason of contract. The architectural *galbe* that was the joy of the few, and the bedazement of 'the Board', crumbles beneath the pick, as did the north side of St. Mark's, and history is wiped from the face of Chelsea. Shall no one interfere? Shall the interloper, even after his death prevail? Shall 'Arry, whom I have hewn down, still live among us by outrage of this kind, and impose his memory upon our pavement by the public penetration of his posthumous philistinism?¹³

The kind of associations in the public mind conjured up by the epithet "Arry" can perhaps be indicated by an 1881 article 'The English at the Seaside' in *Harper's Magazine*. The article bemoans the invasion of the resorts by the lower orders: 'The vulgar excursionist – the London 'Arry – can guffaw enough, and put plenty of vigour into his antics; he is as awkward, though not so amusing, as a young giraffe at play, and his mirth is not genuine.'¹⁴ Such a label was hardly likely to improve Quilter's reputation among the middle classes or to enhance his own appreciation of Whistler and those associated with him. At the time 'The New Renaissance' appeared in September 1880 however, Whistler's public attacks had not begun and as late as 25 December 1880 Quilter was able to review the exhibition of Whistler's Venice etchings in cool but broadly favourable terms.¹⁵ 'The New Renaissance' should not therefore be seen simply as part of a feud with Whistler though he is one of the targets of the article. The views expressed should be seen as the genuine conclusions of a high-profile critic.

Quilter begins with a large canvas. He sets out the proposition that change is characteristic of the age and that all settled beliefs are now challenged. Having touched on evolution and the conservation of energy, he sets out his central theme:

We are at present, . . . as soldiers in a hand to hand conflict, . . . striking perhaps a hard blow now and then . . . but getting no clue to the general issue, much less the purpose of our combat. The question asked so frequently now, 'Is life worth living?' must be left to future generations – the most we can hope to do being to make it more 'worth living' for them; and not the least efficient way of so doing will be to clear the path of the sham philosophies and sensational fashions which have sprung up thickly in the place of the ancient creeds.¹⁶

Quilter now turns to the arts. His target is 'modern pre-Raphaelitism'. A descendant of the original and 'healthy' movement this foe

is a source of corruption which cannot be too soon fully understood . . . And as might be expected, the evil is spreading from pictures and poems into private life; it has attacked with considerable success the decoration of our houses, and the dresses of our women . . . and there may now be seen at many a social gathering young men and women whose lack-lustre eyes, dishevelled hair, eccentricity of attire and general appearance of weary passion proclaim them to be members of the new school.¹⁷

This kind of rhetoric is unlikely to elicit outraged sympathy from late twentieth century readers. Furthermore, Quilter's use of the term 'pre-Raphaelitism' is

tendentious and will be returned to later. It is clear, however, that his 'young men and women' are to be understood as members of the aesthetic movement. By identifying this movement amongst contemporary art lovers 'Arry is pointing to something which was perceived as a phenomenon by those around him and which had achieved enough publicity to be a popular source of amusement and debate. George Du Maurier had been producing his famous cartoon series for *Punch* including 'Refinements of Modern Speech', in which an 'aesthetic young lady' asks her bemused conventional dinner companion 'Are you intense?'¹⁸ In the realm of comic opera Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* was to be given its first performance in April 1881 a few months after the appearance of Quilter's article. Characterised on the programme as 'An aesthetic Opera' and with 'aesthetic dresses' made from Liberty fabrics, the opera painted a satirical sketch of the aesthetic movement which is embodied in the person of its principal character, the poet Bunthorne:

A pallid and thin young man
A haggard and lank young man
A greenery yallery Grosvenor Gallery
Foot in the grave young man.¹⁹

That *Patience* played on pre-existing recognition of aestheticism is attested by the editor of *Harper's New Magazine* writing shortly after the opening:

When the Major exclaims 'But what has come over you all?' and Jane answers: 'Bunthorne; he has come over us. He has come among us, and he has idealised us', the audience enters at once into the sarcastic jest, and her tragic 'My eyes are opened and I despair droopingly; I am soulfully intense; I am limp; I cling!' produces the laughter of comprehension; of keen appreciation, impossible had not aestheticism, or its effects, reached the masses and distinctly impressed the ideas of that body known as 'the cultured class'.²⁰

Having established to his own satisfaction that the nation's youth are subject to a threat which cannot decently be ignored, Quilter's next step however is to distinguish early Pre-Raphaelitism from its latest excrescence. Originally, he claims, the movement had three adherents – Millais, Holman Hunt and Rossetti – 'and was a thoroughly healthy one': 'It was the protest of young enthusiastic artists who felt a pride in their profession, against being restricted to conventional subjects; and to the conventional manner of the English figure painters. They asserted their right to range at will over the whole field of human passion and natural beauty'.²¹ Millais is praised as the most worthy. His illustrations of Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* and *The Small House at Allington* are singled out for praise and the artist is characterised as 'Manly and powerful in the extreme . . . giving a portrait of English gentlemen and English ladies such as we might well be proud to think them'.²² On the three artists going their separate ways Millais is said to have become 'the same in method as the ordinary run of academic painters'.²³ Holman Hunt is described as having disappeared from the public view to paint religious pictures, while Rossetti, whom Quilter sees as an important

inspiration of the new movement, 'from causes which it would be impertinent to dwell upon, retired from public exhibitions altogether'.²⁴

The original brotherhood having dispersed, the stage was set for a sinister new development: 'a group of Oxford men, who in the lines of painting, poetry and criticism allied themselves to the dying cause and who, though they entirely forgot the idea with which it had been started, and perverted its main doctrines, succeeded in endowing it with new life'.²⁵ These Frankensteinian usurpers were none other than the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, the critic Walter Pater and the painter Edward Burne-Jones. According to Quilter they were contemporaries at Oxford. This is misleading; as Swinburne pointed out to William Rossetti he did not meet Morris and Burne-Jones until they returned to Oxford in 1857 to paint the Oxford Union murals under Rossetti's guidance, while Pater did not enter the University until October 1858, two years after Burne-Jones had left to pursue his artistic career in London.

Having identified his targets, Quilter wastes no time in giving an example of just how unhealthy these usurpers are:

One curious resemblance to Botticelli which belongs to Mr. Burne-Jones's work may indeed just be noticed in passing, which is the assimilation of the types of male and female; it is difficult to tell, in many instances, in either painter's work, the sex of the person represented. In what proportion the character of Mr. Jones's art was first determined by the influence of his master Rossetti; or by the poetry of his friend Mr. Swinburne, it would be excessively difficult to say.²⁶

It is reasonable to suppose that such veiled allusions to homosexuality would have been picked up at least by cognoscenti; though this article pre-dates the Wilde scandal, the painter Simeon Solomon, a close friend of Swinburne, had already publicly fallen from grace by reason of his homosexuality. In case anyone was left in the dark, however, Quilter adds a measure of re-enforcement concerning Swinburne: 'no one now denies the beauty of many of the poems; no one either – at least, no sensible person – denies the unhealthy tone of the book as a whole'.²⁷ So now we know.

The article goes on to quote an apposite line from the poet, 'Sick dreams and sad of a dull delight',²⁸ before launching into an attack on Burne-Jones's painting *Laus Veneris*. Millais is brought back to provide instructive contrast with his *The Huguenots* (*sic*), 'lightened as it is by the influence of truth and honour', rather than Burne-Jones's picture which 'enervates and depresses us' with its 'sad weary hopeless beauty'.²⁹ According to Quilter, however, all this might still have been relatively harmless had it not been for added power in the form of 'sympathetic criticism' – offered by Pater and Swinburne, and 'some link with practical life'. Enter William Morris, promoter of the 'Gospel of Intensity'.

To an age accustomed to categorising Walter Pater as 'aesthetic', his inclusion as a Pre-Raphaelite may be surprising. It is useful to remember however, that contemporary attitudes were rather more fluid, at least in the pre-Whistler v. Ruskin years. Pater had in fact been described as a Pre-Raphaelite in a satirical sketch by W. H. Mallock in 1877.³⁰ Though Mallock's description now reads as incongruous, Pater's own complex written style cannot have helped clarify his

position: 'To see the object as in itself it really is has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism, the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is'.³¹ More noteworthy is the identification of William Morris with the 'Intensity' characterised so memorably in Du Maurier's *Punch* cartoon.³² Morris's stated position was consistent and unequivocal and at times he expressed himself in terms which Quilter himself might almost have appreciated: 'Soon there will be nothing left except the lying dreams of history, the miserable wreckage of our museums and picture-galleries, and the carefully guarded interiors of our aesthetic drawing-rooms, unreal and foolish, fitting witnesses of the life of corruption that goes on there, so pinched and meagre and cowardly'.³³ This is certainly typical of Morris as an expounder of artistic and social theory. As such it helps inform us about Morris's views, but not about the actual impact of his work as a poet and art producer, in terms of who consumed his products and how they were received. That the aesthetic public may very well have been inclined to associate Morris in this way in terms of his artistic output and to use it within their own cultural framework is suggested by other writers, including J. A. Symonds writing a review of Rossetti's poetry in 1882:

In speaking of Mr. Rossetti, it is especially difficult to free the mind from prejudice, whether adverse or favourable. He is well known as the leader of that artistic movement which produced our so-called pre-Raphaelite painters and such poets as Mr. Swinburne and Mr. William Morris. The inspiration which in him and his eminent associates was original and sincerely felt, has since been simulated at second or third hand by imitators, who have attracted the curiosity of the fashionable world, furnishing material for good-natured satire to our comic journals, and figuring in their most salient humours on the comic stage.³⁴

Morris as a recruit to the 'Gospel of Intensity' is initially complimented: 'the genius of Mr. William Morris, himself a poet and an artist, gave its main attention to the invention and supply of good decorative designs in accordance with medieval theories', and later, 'The décoration of Mr. Morris being really beautiful in its way, and very much needed as a protest against various upholstery abominations to which we had too long tamely submitted . . .'.³⁵ Such praise is quickly qualified however; the link between Morris and the other guilty individuals is at first asserted as being by way of common membership of a clique, described in terms which imply an element of commercial and moral corruption:

As it is we know that Swinburne wrote criticism and poems, that one Rossetti wrote poems and painted pictures and the other wrote criticisms on them, and so influenced both arts; that Burne-Jones painted pictures with motives from Swinburne's poems, and was at the same time in partnership with William Morris in his decoration business; that Morris wrote poems and made designs; and that Mr. Pater educated the public generally in the appreciation of whatever archaic and out-of-the-way art he could lay his hands on.³⁶

A little further on Quilter drives his point home: 'The accusation which is rightly to be made against the clique is that their whole object was an unworthy one, that it inculcated a philosophy of life and morality out of which it was impossible that healthiness of thought or feeling should come, or with which it could co-exist, and sought to turn all the power of art and poetry not to the improvement of the race, but its injury'.³⁷ Whatever the value of such imperial sentiments, there are certain problems in asserting the existence of a clique containing the individuals previously named. Firstly, Morris and Pater do not seem to have had any significant personal relations, if indeed they knew each other at all. Secondly, as Fiona MacCarthy points out,³⁸ though Burne-Jones welcomed Swinburne as an intimate 'It is unlikely that Morris, when he met him, welcomed Swinburne so effusively into the inner circle. He was always to have reservations about Swinburne'.³⁹ A further difficulty is that by 1881 Morris and Rossetti had not been friends for a decade, while the partnership which linked Morris, Rossetti and Burne-Jones in Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. had been dissolved acrimoniously six years before in 1875 though Burne-Jones remained friends with both Rossetti and Morris. That Swinburne, Rossetti and Pater admired each other is true, as Swinburne put it in a letter to John Morley in 1873: 'I admire and enjoy Pater's work so heartily that I am somewhat shy of saying how much, ever since on telling him once at Oxford how highly Rossetti (D.G.) as well as myself estimated his first papers in the fortnightly, he replied to the effect that he considered them as owing inspiration entirely to the example of my own work in the same line'.⁴⁰ Even here, however, the strongest personal links were probably between Swinburne and Rossetti and if a third name were to be added it might as equally be that of Whistler to whom Quilter alludes later. Near neighbours at Cheyne Walk for long periods, Whistler and Rossetti shared the task of rescuing Swinburne from the consequences of some of his alcohol-related exploits.⁴¹ Even here, however, it should be remembered that Swinburne and Rossetti never met or corresponded after 1872. Nevertheless, while Quilter's suggestion of a clique may be suspect, there is evidence that he is drawing attention to an association in the public's mind between the above individuals and their assimilation as part of the movement. Returning to *Patience*, it should be noted that Bunthorne is described in the programme as 'a fleshly poet',⁴² a clear allusion to the public attack on Rossetti in Robert Buchanan's article 'The Fleshly School of Poetry'⁴³ published a decade before, in which Morris and Swinburne were publicly identified as fellow travellers with Rossetti. Bunthorne's fellow poet is called Archibald Grosvenor, thus affirming a link with the Grosvenor Gallery and its prominent exhibitors, notably Burne-Jones and Whistler; indeed, William Hamilton in his 1882 book *The Aesthetic Movement in England* describes Burne-Jones as 'the high priest' of the Grosvenor Gallery.⁴⁴

'Arry now turns to the moral effect of Morris's work itself: 'Morris's decoration began to be popular, and to overspread our houses, and even touch and alter the dresses of our women, and still no one seems to have suspected the healthiness or the advantages of the movement'.⁴⁵ Morris is not alone in his evil campaign against 'our women' and others:

From the recesses of Oriel College Mr. Pater took every now and then dives into medieval French or Italian history, emerging triumphantly with some firmly

clutched improper little story which he had rescued from the oblivion into which it had unfortunately fallen, or with the name of some forgotten painter, too long allowed to slumber in peaceful obscurity. Swinburne was no less active . . . and brought many a buried or misconceived genius before the glare of our modern footlights.⁴⁶

Worse is to come:

Morris's business, and his epics, both expanded, and at last, only yesterday as it seems, the Grosvenor Gallery opened, and gave to the movement its final fashionable influence. Imitators and admirers had by this time sprung up all round, especially among the women, and the first Grosvenor Exhibition witnessed the curious sight of the now greatest master of the new school (Burne-Jones) surrounded on all sides by the works of his followers, and as Mr. Ruskin said at the time in a famous number of *Fors Clavigera*, the effect of the master's work was both 'weakened by the repetition, and degraded by the fallacy of its echoes'.⁴⁷

Though he is not named, there is a clear allusion here to Whistler as a follower of Burne-Jones. Particularly intriguing is the suggestion that Morris was in some way to blame for the founding of the Grosvenor Gallery and for the rise to fame of Whistler. Again, in personal terms, one can query the plausibility of all this; after all it was Whistler in the 'Ten O'clock Lecture' some years later who attacked Morris and all he stood for:

A favourite faith, dear to those who teach, is that certain periods were especially artistic, and that nations, readily named, were notable lovers of Art . . . And so, for the flock, little hamlets grow near Hammersmith, and the steam horse is scorned. Useless! quite hopeless and false is the effort! . . . Listen! There never was an artistic period. There never was an Art-loving nation.⁴⁸

It should also be noted that Morris is not recorded as taking any part in the foundation or administration of the Grosvenor Gallery. In spite of reservations about Quilter's chain of causation however, he is, nevertheless, drawing attention to a widely shared perception of a movement embracing Morris as decorator and aesthete. Walter Hamilton, describing London's Bedford Park estate as a home of aestheticism, comments as follows:

In the internal decorations of a new house an incoming tenant has much liberty of selection; as a matter of fact, the majority of residents have chosen from the wall-papers and designs furnished by Mr. William Morris, whose establishment at Bloomsbury is extensive enough to supply new and varied patterns without any fear of sameness or monotony in passing from one house in the village to another.⁴⁹

Quilter has now worked himself up into a climax of indignation:

Cast your recollection back for thirty or forty years before this new light had broken upon us, and try to imagine what Turner, or De Wint or David Cox, or even old William Hunt, would have thought of our new theories. Fancy inviting the painter of the Hayfield and the Welsh Funeral to a modern aesthetic 'at home' or explaining 'the sweet secret of Leonardo' to Hunt while he painted Too Hot or the Listening Stable-boy! Fancy a young lady asking Turner if he was 'intense' . . . Surely all fine art has ties of blood-relationship, and we have not yet got so far as to deny that Turner, Cox, De Wint, and Hunt were true artists!⁵⁰

The end of art as we know it being near at hand, Quilter fleshes out his contrast of past with present and then lashes out at 'the mutual admiration societies' and 'intense young ladies' and warns that

If our women's dresses and drawing rooms continue to present a combination of dreary faded tints, dotted here and there with spots of bright colour; if china must still be hung upon the wall, and parasols stuck in the fireplace; if our houses continue to assume the appearance of a compromise between a Buddhist temple and a Bond Street curiosity-shop, if the cultivation of hysteric self-consciousness continues to be considered as a sign of artistic faculty, and the incomprehensibility of art-criticism to be a guarantee of its profundity; if we still continue to think that no art is worthy of examination which has been produced since the time of the 'Early Renaissance'; . . . why then, in heaven's name let us 'throw up the sponge' without further contention – let us become frankly and thoroughly 'Philistine' as were our fathers.⁵¹

After a final tilt at 'a sick indifference to the things of our own time, and a spurious devotion to whatever is foreign, eccentric, archaic, or grotesque',⁵² the tirade concludes, having conclusively despatched to outer darkness 'the worst gospel I have ever come in contact with'.⁵³

It is tempting to dismiss the Harry Quilters of history as amusing instances of outmoded beliefs or of intellection confusion – in this case as an example of unreflective imperialist sentiments. This is to deny such critics a role as interpreters of existing intellectual trends or movements, which can be valuable to later writers. Negative criticism can alert us to the fact that a figure such as Morris is rarely universally admired and that there would have been contemporary judgements, possibly quite broadly disseminated, which differed from the dominant view as to the value of their contribution. It is, for instance, salutary to be aware that Morris was viewed by at least some of his contemporaries as an agent of moral degeneracy. Such views should be evaluated as to their influence and incorporated in any overall assessment as appropriate. In turn such an augmented assessment can lead on to further questions such as those raised below.

Contemporary criticism, however apparently misconceived, can remind us of the difference between what historical figures state as their beliefs and the actual influence of their artistic production. It can also, as in this case, point up the importance of the distinction between an individual's stated views about art and society and their social practice and begin a discussion about the relative influence

of words and action. William Morris is an excellent example; writing as a socialist he preached the impossibility of art under capitalism, while as a producer of artistic goods for the market he was admired by his contemporaries and functioned as a highly successful businessman. Articles like Quilter's do at least remind us that in the early 1880s at least, it is probable that Morris the businessman was the more influential. The degree to which Morris's later socialist propaganda changed the situation deserves further investigation. Quilter's 'young men and women whose lack-lustre eyes, dishevelled hair, eccentricity of attire and general appearance of weary passion proclaim them to be members of the new school',⁵⁴ probably enjoyed Morris's art works without reference to his views on art and society and appropriated those works to their own cultural purposes. Parallel analogies could be drawn today. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine adequately the role of Morris's decorative materials within the cultural milieu of aestheticism. Questions about the significance imparted to them as cultural icons within that social set do deserve such examination, however.

Finally, as suggested earlier, whether confused or perceptive, contemporary critical assessments can challenge the tendency to 'read back' our own evaluations and categorisations and to demonstrate how the mediated influence of an artist or writer on his or her contemporaries may cut across the distinctions and valuations of later historians. Retrospective analysis is not the same exercise as the recording of contemporary opinions and responses.

NOTES

- 1 Harry Quilter, 'The New Renaissance; or, The Gospel of Intensity', *Macmillan's Magazine*, September 1880, XLII, (New York), pp. 391-400.
- 2 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, (London: Macmillan & Co. 1893), p. 253.
- 3 May Morris (ed.), *The Collected Works of William Morris*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1914), 22, p. 8.
- 4 Sir Sydney Lee (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, (London: Smith Elder & Co. 1912), 2nd Supplement Vol. II, pp. 147-148.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 147.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 147.
- 7 *Fors Clavigera*, (July 1877), quoted in J. M. Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, (London: Heineman 1953), p. 3.
- 8 John Ruskin, *Val D'Arno*, (London: George Allen 1890), p. 61.
- 9 William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure*, (London: Cardinal 1988), pp. 86-96.
- 10 *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
- 11 John Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, (London: George Allen 1891), pp. 72-73.
- 12 Quoted in *The Aesthetic Adventure*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
- 13 *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
- 14 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June-November 1881, p. 486.
- 15 *The Times*, 25 December 1880, p. 4.
- 16 'The New Renaissance; or, The Gospel of Intensity', *op. cit.*, p. 392.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp. 392-3.

- 18 *The Aesthetic Adventure*, op. cit., p. 59.
- 19 *Patience or Bunthorne's Bride*, first performed at the Opera Comique, London, on 23 April 1881.
- 20 *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, June–November 1881, p. 145.
- 21 'The New Renaissance; or, The Gospel of Intensity', op. cit., p. 394.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 394.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 394.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 394.
- 25 *ibid.*, p. 395.
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 395.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 395.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 396.
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