William Morris and Emma Lazarus

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The American poet, Emma Lazarus was a remarkable personality who by the time she first met William Morris in the summer of 1883 had already won wide acclaim with her writing. Although from a privileged background, Lazarus devoted herself to social justice and the downtrodden, ideals which she shared with Morris. From their first meeting, the two poets seem to have immediately empathized with each other and begun a warm friendship. One result of this association was an article on her visit to Merton Abbey in which Lazarus gives us one of the most detailed surviving accounts of Morris & Co.'s operations. The recent publication of Emma Lazarus's letters provides new information and insight into her relationship with Morris and his circle.

Emma Lazarus was born in New York City on 22 July 1849. Her father, Moses Lazarus, was a wealthy sugar refiner. Although raised as what we would today call Orthodox Jews, her parents sought assimilation and acceptance in Protestant circles and Emma 'had Christians for playmates and schoolmates and most of Emma's friends were Christians'. Emma's youth was one of luxury divided between New York and the family's mansion on the exclusive Bellevue Avenue in Newport, Rhode Island. The family moved easily in fashionable New York society.

Emma's first volume of poetry was published in 1866 when she was only 17. The second, *Admetus and Other Poems* published in 1874, won her wide praise and established her literary reputation. Turgenev among others was impressed by it. After *Admetus*, Lazarus began to produce a large body of poetry, translations and articles on cultural themes many of which were published in leading American periodicals including *Lippincott's Magazine* and the *Century*.

Her success as an author provided Lazarus with an entrée into American intellectual circles. She developed a close friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson, and her circle of acquaintances included Henry and William James, James Russell Lowell, William Wetmore Story, Henry George and Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter Rose Lathrop. She had a remarkably engaging personality and immediately made a strong impression. After meeting her for the first time, William James wrote to his wife that he was 'finding myself violently in love again, - "und zwar" with a lady I met at the Ward's last night and from whom I hope nevermore to be separated - a poetess, a magazinist and a Jewess, Miss Emma Lazarus, whose name you doubtless know as I did, without knowing any of her works. I am to see her again this afternoon'. James informed a friend after the same meeting, 'I found her [Lazarus] a wonderfully interesting woman. Je suis maintenant à la quête de ses ouevres.' Emma was at the center of the Manhattan intellectual circle surrounding Richard Watson Gilder and his wife Helena DeKay Gilder. Gilder was the author of numerous volumes of lyrical poetry and was the editor of the
Century, probably the most prestigious nineteenth century American periodical. Under his editorship, the Century both highlighted the best in American intellectual life and brought European culture to the American middle classes. Helena Gilder was a noted painter and illustrator. Both of the Gilders were active in progressive political circles and the women’s suffrage movement. The Gilders became Emma’s closest friends. Gilder was instrumental in forwarding Emma’s journalistic career, publishing articles by her on literature and the arts. In 1882, he chose her to write the Century’s Emerson memorial.

Despite her acceptance in Protestant social and intellectual circles, Emma was keenly conscious of her Jewish identity. Viewed from today, she seems very much a modern secular Jew, having little connection with Jewish religious practices but retaining a connection to Jewish culture. Her Christian friends were unable to completely understand this and one described her by saying ‘she lived, as much a Christian as a Jewess’, although there is no evidence that she ever had any interest in Christianity. She expressed her sentiments on these matters strongly. William James rather condescendingly described her as ‘brandish[ing] the Jewish flag, phylactery, tabernacle, golden calf, or whatever the standard of the Nation may be very patriotically’. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Emma wrote frequently on Jewish themes, attempting to make Jewish life comprehensible for a gentile readership. Richard Wilson Gilder published a number of these essays in the Century. In 1882, Emma dramatically proclaimed her identification as a Jew by naming her volume of poetry published in that year Songs of a Semite. Emma dedicated the book to George Eliot. It is natural that she would have felt an emotional attachment to the author of Daniel Deronda and the book obviously made a deep impact on her. Emma refers to, or quotes from, Daniel Deronda in many of her Jewish essays.

At the same time as she was writing about Jewish life, Emma was increasingly drawn to the plight of Jewish immigrants to America. Russian pogroms in the 1870s and 1880s forced thousands of Jewish refugees from Russia, Poland and the Baltics to come to America. After arriving, they lived in grueling poverty in slums in the Eastern cities. Deeply shocked by reports of the pogroms, Emma visited Eastern European immigrants on Ward’s Island off Manhattan which was used as a holding site for immigrants. She organized classes for them in English and in trades. Appalled by the brutality of the pogroms and the suffering of the immigrants, Emma became increasingly vocal in their defense. This led to her poem, the ‘New Colossus’, probably her most famous work, whose lines ‘Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free’ are engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty. In 1882, a Russian named Zenaide Ragozin wrote an article – ‘Russian Jews and Gentiles from a Russian Point of View’, Century (April 1882) – supporting the harsh treatment of the Jews in Russia. She claimed that Jews in Russia, whom she characterized as ‘loathsome parasites’, exploited the Christian peasants and thus deserved violence. Emma was outraged by the article and Gilder published her response, ‘Russian Christianity versus Modern Judaism’, in the Century in May 1882. Emma exposed the horrors of the pogroms including torture and tried to explain the intricacies of East European Jewish life. After the piece’s publication, Emma was increasingly seen as the defender of the East European Jews. Her concern with the problems of these immigrants after their
arrival eventually led her to believe that the answer to their plight was their settlement in Palestine. She became one of the founders of the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews which had as its goal the sponsorship of immigration of Russian Jews to Palestine. In 1883, she decided to travel to Europe to obtain support for the Society’s resettlement plans from prominent British and French Jews. She arranged to travel to Europe with her sister Annie Lazarus.

The Lazarus sisters arrived in England in May 1883. Armed with introductions from her American connections, Emma began a whirlwind of social engagements among British notables. She met a series of Liberal politicians including John Morley, James Bryce and John Bright; artists such as Leighton, Alma-Tadema, and Watts; and writers including Thomas Hardy and Robert Browning. One of her goals after arriving in London had been to meet Browning, and Henry James arranged this for her. Emma found that Browning ‘talked with the most wonderful eloquence & picturesqueness – a stream of wit, reminiscences & anecdotes – music, poetry & fun’. Browning invited her to his home where he impressed her by being ‘a great enthusiast of the Jews, & I think this may be the secret of his immense kindness to Annie and myself’. She described her day with Browning as ‘a memorable visit . . . he took out his wife’s precious little souvenirs and treasures, her Greek and Hebrew books with marginal notes and comments in pencil upon every page, his mss., letters & everything he thought would interest us’. Emma also pursued her work on colonization in Palestine. Unfortunately, the only letters from her time in Europe which survive are to Protestant friends so we have an unbalanced view of her travels. However, enough stray references survive in these letters to know that she made an equally impressive round of visits among prominent British Jews including the ‘Montefiores, Goldsmids, Rothschilds, Moscheles, [and] Montalbas’. Henry James wrote her, ‘you appear to have done more in three weeks than any lightfooted woman before’.

Out of all her early contacts in London, Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones seem to have quickly become her closest. Although initially she had been ‘prejudiced’ against Burne-Jones, she wrote soon after their meeting of

... our dear friend Burne-Jones – our visits to his house have been the most delightful thing we have done in London ... You would love him I am sure – he is like a medieval saint, so gentle, kind & earnest & so full of poetry and imagination, that he shines out of all the people I have seen, with a sort of glamour of his own. I have grown much interested in his work – the cartoons of the Sleeping Beauty & of the Perseus Myth in his studio are wonderful for beauty & suggestiveness.

Emma first dined at the Grange on 17 June and again on 25 June and 20 July. She developed a warm affection for Georgiana Burne-Jones which was obviously reciprocated. Georgiana wrote her ‘how very glad we have been to welcome you and your sister here ... Many people visit us who profess to care for Art, but not all leave the impression that their care really makes a part of their life – something in you made us feel your sincerity, and the effect of your ... visits has been comforting’. Burne-Jones arranged for Emma to see William Graham’s collection
of paintings and Emma brought her friend, the American artist Thomas Dewing, for a tour of Burne-Jones’s studio. Just before Emma left England, she gave Georgiana a copy of Songs of a Semite, and Georgiana, noticing the dedication, wrote her, ‘I did not know till I saw the dedication of your Poems how you felt towards George Eliot, or I should have loved to talk to you about her, for she was a very dear friend of mine’. At Emma’s request, the Burne-Joneses arranged a dinner on 25 June with Emma and Annie and William Morris as the only guests. Georgiana told Emma that she had arranged for Emma to meet Morris ‘in the quietest way’. Emma and Morris obviously immediately found common interests. Emma wrote after this meeting, ‘we were both taken off our feet by his tremendous force & genius, visible in every word, look & gesture’. At the end of the meal, Morris invited the Lazaruses to visit him at Kelmscott House.

Emma and Annie made their visit on 1 July: ‘Morris received us in a blue blouse, & looked, as usual, like a cross between an English sailor & a Scandinavian god’. In describing Kelmscott House, Emma wrote:

... you would go simply wild in that house – just on the edge of the river on a little avenue planted with magnificent oaks, & looking out in the rear on a garden such as you read about in the Earthly Paradise. And the house itself is so different from everything else you have ever seen or imagined – there is not the commonest article of household furniture that is not original in shape, color, & design. And yet all is perfectly simple & very beautiful from its exquisite taste and appropriateness.

On this first visit, Emma was particular impressed by Jane Morris: ‘Mrs. Morris is very beautiful & exactly like all the Rossetti pictures – she wore an aesthetic dress of dark dull red, with a garnet necklace & cross & looked like an old Italian portrait’. Morris provided the Lazaruses with a detailed itinerary of sites to visit in the English countryside, taking out maps and telling them ‘where [they] should find the best stained glass, & the best churches & castles etc. etc.’ Morris invited them to stay at Kelmscott Manor later in the summer. He also suggested their visiting the firm’s works at Merton Abbey.

The Lazaruses arranged to have their tour of the firm the following Friday, 6 July. Their tour included the dyeing sheds, looms, stained glass production and gardens. To Emma, the production processes were a revelation: ‘[S]keins of unbleached wool were dipped for our amusement; as they were brought dripping forth, they appeared a sea-green color, but after a few minutes exposure to the air, they settled into a fast dusky blue’. Emma was particularly impressed with the library Morris provided for his workers at Merton. ‘[T]he books were as richly bound as though intended for the poet’s private shelves, in consonance with his theory that the workingman must be helped and uplifted, not only by supplying his grosser wants, but by developing and feeding his sense of beauty.’ Soon after her visit, she sent Morris a book to be added to the library’s collection. She wrote after the trip to Merton to Helena Gilder:
Oh Helena, William Morris! I shall have a million things to tell you about him—such a day as we had with him down at Merton Abbey where his works are—He is a saint—and is the only man I have ever met who seems to be as good as Emerson—and I don't know that he is not better—for he is more of a republican & not an aristocrat as Emerson was.25

Morris had to cancel the invitation to Kelmscott but he told Emma that he hoped to see her in London, 'we shall all be very sorry if we miss you'.26 However, the Lazaruses left Britain for New York in November 1883 so that Emma could return to her work with the Eastern European immigrants. To her dismay, the Society for the Improvement and Colonization of East European Jews was forced to disband in 1884.

In January 1884 she began work on an article about her visit to Merton. She wrote to a friend, 'I have got Morris' consent to do it, & his promise to correct & authenticate the M.S. So I am in hopes it will have a certain value & it is such a delight to live over again those beautiful happy hours'.27 From this description of her arrangement with Morris, it appears that he agreed to be involved in the creation of the piece. Morris's letters during the writing of the article make it clear that much of the history of Merton with which Emma begins it was suggested by Morris. On 5 March 1884, Morris responded to a draft which Emma had sent him. He told her of the ruins of the Norman Abbey which had existed during the lifetime of some of his workers and the history of textile printing at Merton. All of this information was included in the article. Also, Emma must have initially written that Morris had once been fair-haired as he wrote 'Excuse my vanity in correcting you on a point of personal appearance: I have always been dark-haired as befits a specimen of one branch of the Cymry'.28

Emma's article has three parts, an outline of Merton's history with an introduction to Morris and the firm, a description of the firm's operations, and a description of Morris's political beliefs. She begins by describing the medieval history of Merton and its more recent industrial history. She is enthusiastic about the beauty of the location particularly Morris's garden. She notes that '[s]crupulous neatness and order reigned everywhere in the establishment... Nowhere was one conscious of the depressing sense of confinement that usually pervades a factory; there was plenty of air and light'.29

Emma sees Merton's operations as a 'noble and successful solution'30 to inhumane industrialism and is impressed when she learns that '[t]here is no branch of work performed in Mr. Morris' factory in which he himself is not skilled'. After observing Morris's interaction with his workers, Emma noted the 'admirable relationship... between employer and employed, a sort of frank comradeship, marked by mutual respect and good-will'.31 She believed that he had achieved his goal 'that the workman shall take pleasure in his work... that he shall be made to feel himself not the brainless "hand" but the intelligent cooperator, the friend of the man who directs his labor'.32

Emma's article also gives a sympathetic defense of Morris's socialism. It is unclear how committed Emma herself was to socialism. However, she obviously discussed it with Morris and led him to believe she would be interested in
the subject. In one of his letters, Morris keeps her up-to-date on his socialist activities: 'The “cause” is progressing here: we have now a flourishing branch of the Democratic Federation at Merton Abbey; so you see I live in hope of being able to cast my capitalist skin and become a harmless proletarian'.33 In her article, Emma quotes from his lecture, ‘The Lesser Arts’, and justifies his political outlook. She praises his ‘magnanimity’ and describes him as ‘filled and inspired and illumined . . . with his aims’.34 She ends by reprinting most of the text of a letter by Morris describing his views on profit-sharing with his workers.

Emma submitted the article to Gilder for inclusion in the Century, and he readily accepted it. Gilder commissioned William Stillman and his daughter Lisa to draw illustrations for the article. He had been a friend of Stillman for many years and was close to Marie Stillman and the entire family. Stillman prepared a drawing of Kelmscott Manor, and Lisa, a portrait of Morris. Although Lisa had limited experience, Gilder took a chance on her and authorized her to do the portrait. At its halfway point, Lisa described her progress and Morris’s sitting:

I did not write before because until today I was not sure whether Mr. Morris would sit or not. I went to ask him on Saturday and he was very sweet and dear and told me I might go on Tuesday (today) but he could not promise to sit still . . . [I] got on pretty well today. He said it was “not amiss” which his daughter says is praise from him and I am going Saturday again . . . He was very jolly all the time, wrote, and kept plunging his head into his hands quite regardless of me & suddenly remembering drew himself up e da capo. He told me a very funny story about himself, he was in a second class compartment & sitting with his feet straight before him, a gentleman opposite evidently disapproved of his posture & gave him a sly sidelong kick. Mr. Morris said he would have been quite ready to move had he been politely requested to, but merely looked at the gentleman and said ‘You must have bad manners’! at which the gent. collapsed. I thought it such a delicious snub.35

Gilder was pleased with Lisa’s drawing and published it with Emma’s article in July 1886.36

Emma made a second visit to Europe in May 1885 and stayed for over a year. While in London she met with Morris although we have no details about their interaction. On this trip she also had her first meeting with Marie Stillman whom she described as ‘most amiable and charming’ with a house filled with ‘delightful artistic work in every direction’.37 She travelled throughout 1886 in France and Italy. In January 1887, she became critically ill and returned to the United States where she died on 19 November 1887.

Although the period of their interaction was brief, Morris and Emma Lazarus had a genuine sympathy for each other and Morris clearly made a strong impression on her. Despite the differences in their background, they shared many common beliefs and values and each recognized that the other was an exceptional personality. The time Emma spent with Morris inspired her to write an article
which brought Morris’s design work, and even more significantly his socialism, to a broad American audience. This article continues to provide us with information about Morris & Co. which is unavailable from any other source.

NOTES

5 ibid., V, p. 228.
6 ‘Miss Lazarus’ Life and Literary Work’, op. cit., p. 293.
7 *The Correspondence of William James*, op. cit., V, p. 227.
9 *Emma Lazarus in Her World, Life and Letters*, op. cit., p. 110.
10 ibid., p. 107.
11 ibid., p. 213
12 ibid., p. 108.
13 ibid., p. 111.
14 Quoted in *Letters to Emma Lazarus in Columbia University Library*, op. cit., p. 63.
15 ibid., p. 63.
16 ibid., p. 62.
18 *Letters to Emma Lazarus in Columbia University Library*, op. cit., p. 63.
19 ibid., p. 62.
21 ibid., p. 111.
23 ibid., p. 390.
27 *Emma Lazarus in Her World, Life and Letters*, op. cit., p. 199.
30 ibid., p. 392.
31 ibid., p. 392.
32 ibid., p. 392.
35 Lisa Stillman to Richard Watson Gilder, 2 March 1885; Richard Watson Gilder Papers, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library.
36 Lisa Stillman’s drawing is now at the Butler Library, Columbia University.
37 Emma Lazarus in Her World, Life and Letters, op. cit., p. 149.