News from Somewhere: The Relevance of William Morris’s Thought in 1990

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Look you, as I sit at my work at home, which is at Hammersmith, close to the river, I often hear go past the window some of that ruffianism of which a good deal has been said in the papers of late, and has been said before at recurring periods. As I hear the yells and shrieks and all the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakespeare and Milton ... fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings. (XXII: 171)

Reading Morris’s 1881 lecture ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’ today, one is struck by its contemporaneity but even more by its honesty. Of course, plenty of other Victorian writers had pointed out the glaring inequalities in their society. Dickens, whose work Morris greatly admired, had been one of the first to fulminate against the corrupt system of living that he saw around him. He raged in Dombey and Son (1848) at the thoughtless manner in which magistrates or judges admonished “the unnatural outcasts of society” for their “brutal habits”, when it was actually that society itself which had made them amoral, immodest and ignorant:

Unnatural humanity! When we shall gather grapes from thorns, and figs from thistles; when fields of grain shall spring up from the offal in the bye-ways of our wicked cities, and roses bloom in the fat churchyards that they cherish; then we may look for natural humanity, and find it growing from such a seed.

However, there is a perceptible difference between the protests of the two men. Dickens does not overtly include himself in the criticism he metes out to the callously indifferent middle-classes. Morris, with customary diffidence, admits that class prejudice has left its mark on him. He leaves his audience to feel how much less able to remember their “good luck” they generally are when the yells and shrieks are heard outside the book-lined study.

It is this aspect of Morris’s thought which speaks to us still. As a young man, Morris was a rebel. He knew that he was “out of phase” with the times he was living in but refused to adjust to them. Instead of becoming a businessman or going into the Church, he set up in the fine-art decorating line. Instead of marrying a “suitable” middle-class young lady, he wedded a girl from one of the poorest and most insalubrious parts of Oxford. Yet he remained dissatisfied. The beautiful products of Morris and Company could only be manufactured at a price which no ordinary working man could possibly afford, and the life of a latter-day King Cophetua had its difficulties too. He was
haunted by the conviction that his own enjoyable lifestyle depended for its maintenance on the suppression of vast numbers of ordinary people in poverty and ignorance. Perhaps Morris obtained some relief by expressing his ideas on social inequality and its consequences in a prose romance set in a medieval world which he believed to be morally and aesthetically superior to his own. *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-87), which retells the tale of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, delights in the assumed parallel between the medieval peasant and the nineteenth-century worker, both of whom wish to shake off oppression and live life to the full. The later *News from Nowhere* envisions a better society which would be possible, if only people had the courage to believe in it.

In the 1880s, to Morris’s eyes, the exploitation of the poor by the rich was the same as it had ever been, except that the Victorian worker lacked the rebellious spirit of his medieval counterpart. How could he be helped? How could one spur into action, moreover, those prosperous, educated and well-intentioned people who felt as miserable and impotent in late Victorian society as Morris himself? Vague ideas of brotherhood were not enough:

“In times past, indeed, men were told to love their kind, to believe in the religion of humanity and so forth. But look you, just in the degree that a man had elevation of mind and refinement enough to be able to value this idea, was he repelled by the obvious aspect of the individuals composing the mass which he was to worship ...” (XVI: 132)

“Times past” would provide no permanent answer to contemporary problems, even if those problems had roots that went back into history, and so Morris created “times future” in *News from Nowhere* and put many of his ideas into the mouth of his ‘Sage of Bloomsbury’.

We are now only a few decades away from the time which Morris designated “An Epoch of Rest”. Many of us would not be quite at ease in Morris’s ideal society, which had ruthlessly jettisoned the concepts of money, parliamentary government and marriage. Certainly, some of the readers of this article might not readily appreciate living in a community with a radically anti-intellectual attitude to educational matters. (Early “bookishness” is not encouraged, according to “Nowhere’s” Dick.) In the end, though, the individual details of the way that life is lived in Morris’s utopia are far less important than the tale’s overriding message. In the memorable and magnificent conclusion to *News from Nowhere*, Guest, Morris’s *persona*, realizes that he is moving back to his own time when he comes face to face with one of the unfortunates born on the wrong side of the window:

It was a man who looked old, but whom I knew from habit, now half-forgotten, was really not much more than fifty. His face was rugged, and grimed rather than dirty; his eyes dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping. His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real good-will and courtesy, and much servility.

(XVI: 209-10)
Under the black gloom of this realization that he is again back in his own benighted society, Morris's narrator almost despairs, but not quite. Instead, he reminds us of the power of his vision of what may be.

How wrong it is to call Morris's writing escapist. On the contrary, he confronts and rises above the complacent assumptions of his time to show us that things do not have to be as they are. If he can envision a better way of living, then so can others, and if large numbers of people were to act to make their visions reality, then things would change. Surely this is a message as appropriate in 1990 as in 1890, and a vision with such substance that it cannot be said to come from nowhere?

NOTES

1 References to the Collected Works of William Morris, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-15) are given parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.