Reviews

Frederick Kirchhoff, William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self 1856-1872
ISBN 0 8214 0954 9

The subtitle is a sign of the times: a few years back it would have been simply 'The Construction of the Self'. Kirchhoff is a literary critic and his argument is that William Morris’s poetry from The Defence of Guenevere to Love is Enough represents the author’s struggle to create a personal identity in opposition to, or at least not dependent upon, the Romantic notion of the hero as questing, conquering knight and lover, to whom prowess in war and sex are essential aspects of self-definition – thus leading Morris away from individual power and glory towards the communality of socialism.

Actually this summary is somewhat firmer than anything in the book, which leads the reader on lengthy explications through the long and often confusing narrative-poems that only the dedicated will wish to follow. However, the baggy structures and slack verses of The Earthly Paradise are plausibly and sympathetically read as enactments of the uncertainties of the author, as his youthful ideals of masculine brotherhood and heterosexual desire are found to be wanting – or rather his discovery that a personal ideology based on such concepts leads to disappointment unless one happens to be a successful Romantic hero, such as (is implied but not stated) Rossetti seemed to short, squat, stubby-fingered Morris, whose high dreams of art, architecture, love and fellowship were reduced in the 1860s to the banalities of running a small business and seeing his marriage disintegrate.

The debt to E. P. Thompson’s reading of Morris’s response to his age is frequently acknowledged, and Kirchhoff touches tactfully on the biographical framework to Morris’s poetic productions, but the main virtue of his study is that it attends not to the life story but to the life in the stories – to what is being said in the texts of ‘Scenes from the Fall of Troy’ or ‘The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon’. The wandering narratives that unravel like knitting are full of loose ends and dropped stitches that make them seem incompetent; Kirchhoff sees this instead as creative ambivalence and questioning, the lack of certainty being the works’ essential meaning.

Though claiming to be grounded in “post-Freudian object-relations psychology” the book seems to me more of a work of textual criticism, and the reader is not intimidated by apparatus, though she may be bored by the paraphrasing. The overall approach is rewarding, though I cannot say that I am inspired to re-read the verse tales – surely one aim of good criticism? However, I am very happy (so long as I do not have to tackle it again) to learn that by ‘suspending closure’, Morris frees Love is Enough from conventional stereotypes, enabling it to reject both power and romantic love, although I am not entirely sure that artistic failure can be so easily redefined as post-modern success avant la lettre.

The book’s impossible price is presumably a result of the weak dollar.

Jan Marsh
For the wage slaves of the first generation after the English industrial revolution existence alternated between work and sleep. There was little time for leisure. The famous enquiries into factory and mine employment in the 1830s and 1840s reported working days of twelve to fifteen hours, six days a week. It was not until the mid-1880s that a sufficient number of workers had a sufficient amount of non-employment time for a leisure industry to develop. Even then, as late as 1895, H. W. Hobart, writing in the SDF's journal, *Justice*, was able to claim that out of 168 hours in a week the average worker spends fifty-six in bed, sixty in work and most of the rest travelling to work and eating. Nonetheless, the 1890s were different from the 1830s in terms not only of the amount of non-employment hours, but the emergence of the concept of leisure as a state of mind.

What would the workers do with this sense of being at leisure? The late nineteenth century had no shortage of moralists to offer counsel. Also there were the new leisure industrialists: those who sought to profit from the spare time and spare pennies of workers off the leash. Socialists did not ignore this contest for the way in which working-class leisure would be used; they knew that workers' free time could be wasted on futile pursuits or else dedicated to what they saw as a greater struggle for cultural self-improvement. Chris Waters' book is about the ways in which socialists entered into this contest. At times the author refers to this 'socialist' response to the new conditions without adequate discrimination: ought one really to lump together Morris and Hyndman, Fabians and Marxists, the ILP and the Socialist League without distinguishing them more clearly?

Waters cites the view of Robert Blatchford as being indicative of the socialists' fears for workers' absorption into the new mass leisure culture. Writing of the proletarian flocks who holidayed in Blackpool, he stated that "The crowd lack initiative and are not blessed with much imagination ... Ruled by the instinct of the herd they flock in dense masses upon excursion trains ..., packed like cattle, to the towns of their choice, where they sit for hours huddled like sheep in a pen and gaze blankly at the sea." (quoted p.37)

There were four main socialist responses to what, at worst, might be called the problem of leisure. Firstly, there was a socialist imitation of the old, middle-class moralists' idea of 'rational recreation'. Linked to this were philanthropic, and later 'municipal socialist' attempts to provide leisure activities which would edify as well as entertain. These first two responses were essentially authoritarian schemes to tell workers what was good for them: left-wing Matthew Arnoldism. A third response was to urge workers to develop their own, self-generated cultural pursuits, uncontaminated by the money-men of the leisure industry. A final response was to use the utopian form to persuade workers, through projections into a different future, that free time could be used in hitherto unconceived ways.

Morris rejected the elitism of middle-class reformers who sought to show workers how to be 'cultured'. Waters makes this point well (p.191) and goes on to quote Morris's distaste for cultural philanthropy: "Though public libraries and museums and picture exhibitions are good, ... if you are tempted to look upon them as substitutes for decent life in the workshop and the home ... they may become dangerous snares to well-meaning, middle-class philanthropists" (quoted from 'At a Picture Show' in
There is a superb quotation from Morris (p.82) criticising the People’s Palace which was established on the Mile End Road in the East End of London in 1887; it was financed by Edmund Currie, the son of a wealthy gin distiller, and was intended to allow local workers to practise enjoying themselves rationally. (My own father, who lived in the house next door to the place, often recalled how East End workers were urged to inhabit hovels and play in palaces).

Chapter Four, on ‘Music and the construction of socialist culture’, makes some very worthwhile points about an aspect of working-class history which is all too rarely examined. It was through songs that workers felt most able to draw upon the sources of their own experiential culture. Morris’s songs were very popular amongst workers’ choirs, and this is well documented by Waters. The other most important chapter is on ‘Utopia and the education of desire’. Waters offers a valuable insight into the function of utopian writing; it provides images and identities which can assist those who are stuck in the rut of the present to want to live differently. News from Nowhere (which, it should be remembered, was first serialised in order to make it appealing to the workers who read Commonweal) is discussed sympathetically by Waters; indeed, he regards it as ‘a vision of a new social order ... that is as appealing today as it was in the 1890s.’ (p.195) Waters quotes the Fabian, Graham Wallas: ‘The rest of us are merely inventing methods of getting what we desire. William Morris taught us what to desire.’

However, Waters is not quite happy with Morris’s treatment of leisure in News from Nowhere: “if we put aside Morris’s originality in his discussion of work, his analysis of leisure remains problematic.” (p.56) This is a strange dichotomy to suggest, for it is precisely within Morris’s highly revolutionary theory of work that the concept of leisure, as some kind of liberated period away from work, becomes redundant. Waters expresses the view that “Morris was ultimately bound by a discourse that was unable to offer any scenarios of pleasure that did not rely heavily on images of a bowdlerised Merrie England.” (p.57) It seems to the present writer that this assessment is harsh and wrong – what have the loving relationships and relaxed rowing of the story to do with “a bowdlerised Merrie England”? But even if the specific criticism is sustainable, the crucial point is that Morris presents in News from Nowhere a degree of social freedom (from employment, in particular) which allows people to do what they want with their time, and which disposes of the concepts of free and unfree time.

Chris Waters has written a well-researched book which is of much more than passing interest to readers of Morris. As he reminds us, Morris regarded socialism as not just an economic programme, but an “all-embracing theory of life”. What would he have thought of Disney World and Radio One?

Stephen Coleman
Dedicated to the distinguished American Morris scholar Joseph Dunlap, this is another good product of the anniversary year of *News from Nowhere*. Florence Boos and Carole Silver (to whose energy and dedication Morris studies in the United States owe so much) have brought together ten articles on the political aspect of Morris's writings in his Socialist period. Four concentrate, fittingly, on *News from Nowhere*, and the others deal with the lectures on art and society, Anarchism, *John Ball*, The Last Romances, 'Chants for Socialists' and *The Pilgrims of Hope*. I think it is reasonable to say that this is mostly work of consolidation and confirmation of attitudes, rather than springing any surprises, although both the essays on the poetry cover largely neglected ground. I found Norman Talbot's 'A Guest in the Future' particularly clear and well written among other work of good quality. He focuses on the figure of Guest in *News from Nowhere*, and suggests that by the end he has had a positive, stimulating influence on the people of Nowhere: he "leaves behind a better, tougher Nowhere. Human endeavour can improve even Utopia." (p.57) Talbot is also interesting if rather speculative on the influence of Dickens on the text – a link which is also well examined by Laura Donaldson in 'Boffin in Paradise', with a very good comparison of the views of the Thames of Dickens and Morris.

Two areas of contention seem to me to arise from these articles, concerning popular culture and Anarchism. Chris Waters’ discussion of the ‘Chants for Socialists’ raises the important question of where a middle-class writer stands in relation to popular culture. Ideally, we may suppose that Morris would have liked the workers themselves to have produced the songs for the Socialist movement’s early propaganda. But since that did not happen, he was quite happy to provide the ‘Chants’, avoiding, Waters argues, the sentimentality and abstraction of other writers. Such songs “were manufactured and imposed from above, but the best of them – particularly those written by Morris – could help inspire the struggle for the new society Socialists desired.” (p.144) Waters’ view is that the truly popular songs of the period, made by the workers for their own entertainment and inspiration, were precluded from a role in the Socialist movement because they were “expressions of local community experience, rooted in the workplaces and communities in which they were written” (p.144) rather than transcending local and national boundaries. As modern interest in popular culture develops, it will become more questionable whether there might not have been more positive potential for Socialism in the workers’ own culture than was recognised at the time. This is an area in which further research will be of great interest. Morris’s overall view, as we know from the lectures discussed here by Larry Lutchmansingh, was that capitalist industrialism had largely destroyed the culture of the working class. The work of Morris and Company could do nothing to change the situation of the mass of the workers, although it could point forward to a world in which delight in making could be recovered, so putting “the worker at the center of civilization once again.” (p.25) (Does ‘the worker’ sound exclusively masculine in this formulation? I hope not.)

The other issue that surfaces in a number of the articles, most explicitly in that by Lyman Sargent, is that of Morris’s relation to Anarchism. Sargent begins by admitting
that Morris was in conflict with the Anarchist members of the Socialist League and himself “vehemently rejected the connection”. (p.61) Sargent then distinguishes between various forms of Anarchism, and argues that Morris’s views had much in common with the ‘communist anarchism’ of Kropotkin. However, he admits that we need to know more about Morris’s relationship to Kropotkin, and it is because of the absence of such detail that the argument remains a matter of abstract definitions. Carole Silver also relates Morris to Kropotkin, this time in the context of the late romances and Morris’s negative view of realism. She describes Kropotkin as “Morris’s closest colleague among the theorists of ‘scientific socialism’ and the only one with whom he had more than minimal contact” (p.118) – somewhat downplaying the role of Belfort Bax – and goes on to show that Kropotkin was “actively antagonistic to the realist and naturalist literary movements of the time” and so a possible influence towards romance. It is to be hoped that the completion of Norman Kelvin’s monumental edition of the Collected Letters will throw further light on the relationship, which may not have been all one way: maybe Morris affected the form of Kropotkin’s Anarchism in a Communist direction? Michael Holzman, whose contribution illuminatingly relates John Ball to ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ as published over the same period in Commonweal, remarks in passing that “much of News from Nowhere was written as part of a debate within Socialism – presenting Morris’s arguments against anarchism” (p.99). It would be interesting to see the point developed.

However, a book is not interesting in proportion to its conclusiveness. There is plenty here to respond to and argue about, as I hope this review has suggested, and the publication contributes to the encouraging sense that Morris and his ideas are very much alive in 1991.

Peter Faulkner

Pamela Robertson, editor, Charles Rennie Mackintosh: The Architectural Papers

This book’s title is rather over-grand for these seven early lecture texts. The first was read a century ago in February 1891, when their author was twenty-two years old. They were meant to be heard and not seen, as here, in cold heartless print. Furthermore, they were delivered by Charles Rennie McIntosh. This spelling indicates how we should still hear the name in its later version.

It was a curious decision to set these lectures in print without correction. The surprise is the realisation that McIntosh was, at best, ‘dyslexic’. If their original form has intrinsic value, it would have been better to reproduce them – as in the book’s end-papers – in facsimile. At least, when we read them, we realise that we should also ‘hear’ them – with the sounds of Scots.

One advantage which we have, over the young man’s audiences, is that we are familiar with the mature architect’s work. A criticism, made in the introductory papers here, is that the young McIntosh would incorporate passages from his sources without due acknowledgment. Yet these lectures must have been accompanied by lantern slides (even Morris, on occasion, used slides) which would clearly have been
illustrations from the same publications as the corresponding descriptions. These, after all, were not academic events.

At the time McIntosh joined his future firm as a junior draughtsman, the senior partner, John Honeyman, attended the 1889 conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Art and Industry, in Edinburgh. During its five days, William Morris gave three lectures there and afterwards chaired a lecture by Walter Crane in Glasgow. There is no evidence of McIntosh's awareness of any of these events.

It was in the mid-90s that Charles Rennie adopted the spelling of Mackintosh. 1896 was the date of his successful submission in the design competition for Glasgow School of Art. (Five years later, his cannie employers accepted him in partnership – from which, however, he was to resign in 1913). Also in 1896 he and his future wife, her sister and another friend – 'The Four' – had been invited to exhibit their projects at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London. The theme of this Exhibition was 'Art and Life, and the Building and Decoration of Cities'. At its opening on the evening of October 3rd., Cobden-Sanderson announced the death, earlier in the day, of William Morris.

As part of the programme, Walter Crane gave a paper, 'Of the Decoration of Public Buildings'. It was he who introduced a recent arrival in Hammersmith, Hermann Muthesius, to this circle of artists and architects who were to be the sources for his study of the English house. No doubt this was also the occasion of his first encounter with the work of Mackintosh. In this book, Pamela Robertson refers to Muthesius as "his long-standing friend and supporter". This must have compensated for what Robert Macleod, in his essay on Mackintosh's 1903 paper, 'Seemliness', referred to as "the disapprobation of The Arts and Crafts disciples six years before".

Of three passing references to Morris in this book, only the one in David Walker's thorough-going paper (which highlights the value to Mackintosh of preparing his two lectures on architecture, 1892/3) has any substance rather than being ritualistic. James Macauley, in his contribution here, asks chauvinistically, 'Why was Mackintosh interested in Elizabethan architecture?' He then adds, 'A clever young architect of today would concentrate on contemporary work.' That does not sound so clever. Which contemporary work? The post-modern Thatcher 'ism' of pseudo-'Victorian Values', doll's house brickwork and TV's 'Play School' fenestration? On the other hand, Frank Arneil Walker, in the paper, 'Scottish Baronial Architecture', confounds an English reader with such a word as 'homologation' and makes no concession when he writes of "buildings set around the edge of the barmkin" (i.e. rampart). In a criticism of Mackintosh's "over-ripe prose" he writes, "Phrases polished with an effusive sincerity bordering on the unctuous leave a cloying sheen of sentimentality on those early paragraphs".

This reviewer's advice, on reading this book, would be to give primacy to Mackintosh: first read his script and afterwards the 'introductory' commentary.

John Hanna
Christopher Hampton, *The Ideology of the Text.*

In *Culture and Society* Raymond Williams describes William Morris’s method of social critique as “often no more than a kind of generalized swearing”. It seems to me that something of the same kind might be said of Christopher Hampton’s lively and in many ways impressive book. When he writes, for instance, of the “post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-modernist views upon the post-industrial New Times we are assumed to be living through”, you can almost hear his contempt for such ideas coming through raw and undiluted. And when the extraordinarily detailed and impressive work of such figures as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida is reduced to “blandishments and fashionable adjustments”, then this, I’m afraid, is indeed just abuse. It’s not that Hampton never does deign to argue against such views; there’s quite a lot of detailed argument at the start of this book, directed mostly against the later work of Roland Barthes, and it’s often trenchant and polemically effective. But again and again the tone of the volume implies that one doesn’t really need to argue; all this postmodernism is nonsense anyway, and no right-thinking socialist will have any truck with it. His chapter on ‘Unmasking the New Idealism’ briskly demolishes thirty years of complex theoretical work in a mere fourteen pages.

Christopher Hampton is much more at home in the middle chapters of this book, which are devoted to eloquent, subtle studies of Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold, Morris, Eliot, and the writing of the 1930s; and he writes well on Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson in the concluding section of his volume. I shan’t deal here with the literary studies, all of which vigorously historicise their authors, shrewdly demystifying the conservatives and liberals, energetically celebrating the radicals. But I have to confess – though it will, doubtless mark me down forever as a cultural degenerate in Hampton’s eyes – that these days I would much rather watch *Blade Runner* than read Blake, greatly prefer *Rambo* to Rimbaud, and find *Twin Peaks* considerably more gripping than *The Revolt of Islam.* Nor are these solely my weird cultural tastes; the great majority of my students share them too, and since my four year-old son rates *Teenage Mutant Turtles* a long way in advance of *Swallows and Amazons* and *The Chronicles of Narnia,* it looks as though he does also. But why should I (or we) need to be so defensive in my formulations? Let us rather turn these points round, and direct them back at Christopher Hampton who, though so energetically radical and forward-looking in his politics, is oddly conservative and nostalgic in his literary enthusiasms (but he has distinguished predecessors here, including Georg Lukács). Nor am I as confident as he is that “post-industrial New Times” are merely some kind of ideological mirage. My father, who has been a foreman in factories making industrial electrical equipment for most of his life, has found himself made repeatedly unemployed over the last ten years as Japanese competition and Thatcherite policy have wiped out the British manufacturing base; while my mother, working in the thriving finance-capital sector for Access, now finds herself working full-time for the first time in her life. If this isn’t post-industrialism, I don’t know what is.

I make these points in terms of lived experience rather than of theory, because one can disagree with many of the current formulations of postmodern theory (sometimes for the very reasons that Hampton suggests) and yet still feel convinced, in one’s blood
and one's bones, that *something has changed*. Christopher Hampton is right to remind us, on and off in *The Ideology of the Text*, that any such changes have only taken place in the most advanced capitalist societies (and they're more vivid to me from my years in Tokyo rather than Britain); but they are none the less real, and difficult to think through, for that. And these changes, which include the collapse of distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, the emergence of a ‘society of the spectacle’ or an ‘image culture’, the general ‘aestheticisation of everyday life’, the transformation of history into theme park and heritage industry, the ‘regressive modernisation’ (Stuart Hall’s term) of the New Right, have entailed fundamental shifts on the Left in the last ten or fifteen years. Discussing Raymond Williams, Hampton describes him as “a socialist with a clear objective grasp of the determining forces of the historical process”. This is almost breathtaking in its serene self-confidence when the very socialists who most claimed such a ‘clear objective grasp’ of historical forces, i.e. the Marxist-Leninists of the East-European Communist Parties, have just seen their regimes crumble to pieces in their hands; nor does the remark, as applied to Williams, much accord with the latter’s (in)famous sense of difficulty, complexity, qualification. The ‘postmodern’ Left of the 1980s is altogether less confident than Hampton’s brisk prose: if this has its negative aspects, in that diminishing of political imagination that can now see no further than the horizon of a Labour election victory, it also has its positive dimensions in opening out socialism to other radical forces such as ecology, feminism, anti-racism, nationalism. This is a postmodernism we should applaud, not deplore.

If I had space, I would seek to show that Raymond Williams is not the bulwark against postmodernism that Hampton takes him to be; certainly, recent arguments by Tony Bennett and Terry Eagleton ought at least to dent Hampton’s conviction that ‘cultural materialism’ is a straightforwardly Marxist theory. In my view, Williams in many ways is a postmodern thinker, allowing us to distinguish a productive concept of the postmodern from the cluster of ideologies that have also laid claim to that term. It is, at any rate, within the force-field of the postmodern that William Morris has acquired a new salience for us today: his ecological politics challenges classical Marxism’s uncritical preference for urban modernity, just as his emphases on desire, pleasure, utopia challenge its determinism and ascetic militancy. To be sure, we can’t simply adopt Morris’s work lock, stock and barrel in the postmodern epoch either. Fredric Jameson has recently argued that our utopianism may have to be ‘negative’ rather than positive, because any ‘full’ representation, such as Morris’s *Nowhere*, may be already captured in advance by the image culture of the multi-national corporations. Morris inspires a postmodernism which simultaneously reworks him, and this seems to me a more genuinely dialectical relationship between the literary heritage and the present than Hampton’s book generally allows.

Christopher Hampton’s final chapter rehearses E.P. Thompson’s violent polemics against the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser. Reading it, I kept recalling the ‘and’ which features in the titles of so many of Raymond Williams’s books, and its implicit demand that one think through, and then inhabit, the difficult ‘border country’ between any two opposed extremes. Postmodernism and socialism, then? Hampton’s lively and enjoyable book certainly gives us a clearer sense of one of the extremes, but the task of defining a productive no man’s land between them remains.

Tony Pinkney