

# Reviews

Jeffrey Skoblow, *Paradise Dislocated. Morris, Politics, Art*; Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 1993. 206 pp.

Ernie Trory, *Truth Against the World. The Life and Times of Thomas Hughes*; Hove, East Sussex, Crabtree Press, 1993, 277 pp. £8.50 pbk.

Jeffrey Skoblow's elegantly mannered *Paradise Dislocated* (he has a liking for sentences without verbs and cryptic quotations, as well as a ludic structuring with an opening Apology and a closing Envoi) is, he tells us, an attempt "simply, to place *The Earthly Paradise* in the context of twentieth-century dialectical thought, the somewhat subdominant tradition of late Marxism associated with the Frankfurt School, in particular Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer and Benjamin ..." and in that of "a tradition of nineteenth-century dialectical thought, namely romanticism, in the work of Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge especially." (p.xv). 'Merely' to do this is a large enterprise, especially as the book runs to fewer critical pages than one would expect: the whole of 'The Hill of Venus' is reproduced from the Kelmscott edition, occupying fifty seven facing pages. Nevertheless, Skoblow's succinct and allusive style enables him to make a stimulating case for reading the poem in an unexpected way, which links it directly to Morris's later politics. I must however add that I sometimes felt as I used to as a footballer, trying to keep up with the clever footwork of an elusive winger.

What Skoblow does is to take the characteristics of the poem which earlier critics have seen negatively, and ask us to look (or read) again: "It moves slowly, predictably, repetitiously, monotonously – but to speak of it in these terms is not to speak perjoratively. These qualities – monotony, repetition, poverty of vocabulary, equability of pace – are what make the *Paradise* a body. There are pleasures to be had in them." (p.2) This is based on the view that *The Earthly Paradise* asks to be read for the pleasures we experience on the way, in the reading itself, rather than for reaching a narrative conclusion. Drawing on a writer not known to me, Ron Silliman (author of *The New Sentence*, 1989), Skoblow claims that this kind of reading is "a form of resistance to the cultural hegemony of capitalism", the Administered World of Adorno's formulation in which desire is translated into ownership (p.2). Thus he can argue that Morris's "aesthetics of immersion", his commitment to physical details, is a political act, a rejection both of capitalism's desire to speed up reading as an act of consumption, and of romanticism's attempt to involve Transcendental Imagination that would take us out of experienced human reality into a higher realm. If in one sense the *Paradise* embodies "a great edifice to Death" (p.30) and the poet is aware of writing in an "empty day", this is because capitalism has emptied the world of meaning.

As I have suggested, Skoblow's writing is terse and assertive rather than explicatory, and unless one can locate oneself within his field of ideas the book can be very puzzling. But the contrasts he draws between the Administered World of capitalism and the Habundian World of Morris's imagination is at least worth trying to explore, however unfamiliar the terms may be to some readers. Skoblow is certainly drawn to paradox. The Envoi relates *The Earthly Paradise* to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*: "Pound and Morris, both encyclopedists of the wayward, their poems cultural summaries bearing the

message that the culture is no longer collective, the poems' own failures the very text of that message. Nobody reads *The Earthly Paradise*." (p.184) At this point I was not convinced. People, maybe, don't read it because there are plenty of more entertaining narratives around. Is capitalism really responsible for our desire to see to the end of what we are reading? Didn't Homer and Virgil satisfy that desire? (Though I'm aware that in such moments I may not be disagreeing so much as failing to understand Skoblow's arguments.) It would certainly seem that if anyone nowadays *does* read *The Earthly Paradise*, Skoblow's account of it will need to be considered alongside the more sober views of scholars like Florence Boos, at least by anyone who is prepared to make the effort to see the effects of thinking in the "late theoretical" Marxist tradition to which Skoblow evidently belongs. He doesn't always make it easy for us, but that is because the tradition of Adorno insists that over-simplification is a worse intellectual fault than difficulty.

By contrast, Ernie Trory's account of Thomas Hughes is a much more old-fashioned kind of book, and one is not surprised to find that it was originally planned in 1946. The aim is to set Hughes within the context of the social and political history of his times. This is done by alternating historical chapters, mainly based on such authorities as Marx and Engels, the Hammonds, Eric Hobsbawm and A.L. Morton (of later historians, not even E.P. Thompson is included) with chapters on Hughes's various and interesting activities as a Christian Socialist involved with the Working Men's College, the Trade Unions and the Co-operative Movement, the American Civil War, and a Utopian community in Tennessee (whose failure was very costly to Hughes). Trory argues that Hughes should be seen as more than the author of *Tom Brown's School Days*. There is a good case here, and the final suggestion that we should have an edition of a selection of Hughes's writings on social issues is one that I hope will be fulfilled. It would make an interesting comparison with Morris's lectures. Meanwhile, the *School Days* (now available in a World's Classic edition with the original illustrations by Arthur Hughes and Sydney Prior Hall) still remains enjoyable, as well as offering evidence of Hughes's peculiar Muscular Christian Radicalism.

Peter Faulkner

William Morris, *Rot und Grün: Reden zur Revolution von Kunst und Gesellschaft*, compiled and ed. by Manfred Pfister, transl. by students from the University of Passau. Passau: Andreas-Haller-Verlag, 1988. pp.160. DM 28.

After the initial contact with William Morris's works in the time before the First World War, his reception in Germany was mainly limited to his contribution in art. He was for the most part known as an important influence on the *Jugendstil* and a forerunner of the *Bauhaus* movement. With the exception of his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* little attention was paid to Morris the socialist and outspoken critic of industrial civilization.

In the late 1970s and early '80s, Karl Honnef in his *Dichterische Illusion und gesellschaftliche Wirklichkeit* (1978) and Reinhold Wandel in *Sozialkritik und regressive Ideale in den politisch engagierten Schriften von William Morris* (1981) drew new attention to Morris the socialist and political agitator. Hans Christian Kirsch's 1983 biography of Morris also demonstrated that Morris could be seen as a forefather of the Green Movement. Kirsch encouraged the German audience to discover Morris's vision of a better world as a source of inspiration in almost every

area of life. In the same year, Kirsch translated and edited four of Morris's essays in order to make Morris's ideas more readily available to a wider audience.

In East Germany, Morris was at first neglected but later on sanctified as a Marxist author. To make this canonization possible, he had to be described as a writer who outgrew utopian socialism and found his roots in "scientific socialism." In the ideological essay "Überwindung der Utopie: Versuch über William Morris" (1985), Georg Seehase managed to cleanse Morris of all idiosyncracies so that he would fit the limitations of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

In the most recent German publication on William Morris, *Rot und Grün*, which combines translated essays by Morris on art and society with an introduction by the editor Manfred Pfister, the diversity of Morris's political and artistic vision is clearly documented. This publication is the result of a seminar at the University of Passau which aimed at translating literary texts. It is thus a joint production of Professor Pfister and fifteen participating students. It is the first publication of a series called "KritBrit", which aims at making British writers who voice important criticism about society better known to the German reading public. Other writers in this series include Mary Wollstonecraft and Beatrice Webb.

*Rot und Grün* aims at giving an impression of Morris, the political thinker who envisions a society that redefines the relationship of work and art and seeks an ecologically healthy environment in which man can lead a meaningful and joyful life of fellowship. In line with the goal of the "KritBrit" series, the compilation seeks to introduce Morris to a wider readership which includes non-academics. Manfred Pfister's introduction thus aims at readability and refrains from annotations.

The compilation of Morris essays starts with a translation of Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" – a very wise decision by which the prospective German reader is introduced to the single most important influence on William Morris. Another helpful device is the short introduction that stands at the beginning of every Morris essay.

The translations keep very close to the original text but still manage to avoid the clumsiness that translations frequently have. The decision of the translators to cut redundant passages of the essays (e.g. p.18), on the assumption that repetition is caused by the "oral" origins of Morris's texts, is certainly legitimate. Cutting out the first two paragraphs of "The Lesser Arts", for instance, can easily be justified if one compares their contents with the rest of this first public lecture by Morris.

Biographical information and a short bibliography round off a publication which can be seen to represent a truly Morrisian spirit. *Rot und Grün* can certainly be recommended as an introduction to Morris for any reader of German who finds reading the original texts a little bit too difficult. In a time when a reunified Germany is still very much in need of a political vision for the future, it is certainly to be hoped that *Rot und Grün* will be followed by other German publications on Morris.

Jan Hollm

Barry C. Johnson, editor, *Olive and Stepniak. The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1893–1895*. Bartlett's Press, 1993.

Barry Johnson has continued the good work of his previous volume, which introduced the diary for 1890–1893 (reviewed here in Autumn 1990), with a second volume covering the following two years. In these years the young daughter of Dr. Richard Garnett, Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum and reviewer of Morris's

*Poems by the Way* in January 1892, kept a diary which brings alive for us now the intellectual and social life of a talented young woman of that class and time. Through her sister-in-law Constance Garnett (the well-known translator of Russian fiction, whose life by her grandson Richard appeared in 1991), Olive came to know the Russian exile community, and she was powerfully attracted to the Nihilist Stepniak, whose presence forms the emotional centre of the present book. It ends with his mysterious death, knocked down by a train on a level crossing near his home in Bedford Park on the 23rd December, 1895. The details of the unfortunate event are clearly discussed here, and the conclusion reached coincides with that of the jury: accidental death.

Of particular interest to the Morrisian reader will be the sense of the importance of the Russian exile community in advanced politics at the time. Stepniak's funeral is described in detail, as organised by the helpful John Burns. On December 28th, 1895 Stepniak's body was taken from Bedford Park to Waterloo, where a large crowd assembled, and was addressed by a number of speakers, including William Morris, who had travelled up with Burns, Spence Watson, Bernstein, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Keir Hardie and Eleanor Marx. The brief report in *The Times* of Morris's speech is given in full; as the editor modestly notes, it seems unlikely that it has previously been reprinted.

Certainly the reader is grateful to Barry Johnson for the editorial work that has given us entry into this world through this attractive and interesting book. We look forward to the third volume, which will be based on the letters home written by the courageous Olive from her time in Russia in 1896–7.

Peter Faulkner