J. W. Mackail as Literary Critic

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Readers of this journal will be aware of J. W. Mackail as the author of *The Life of William Morris* (1899), the first and still one of the very best biographies of Morris. There have, admittedly, been various later criticisms of Mackail’s treatment of his subject: he remains stubbornly silent about Morris’s marital difficulties, is unwilling to say much about the various family illnesses, is clearly unsympathetic to what he regards as Morris’s ‘dogmatic’ socialism, and arguably gives Edward Burne-Jones more centrality among Morris’s male friendships than he deserves. These sorts of reservation about Mackail’s approach exacerbated one Morris enthusiast, Robert Duncan Macleod, to the point where he compiled a pamphlet irately entitled *Morris without Mackail*. None the less, *The Life of William Morris* remains an impressive book – ‘a great ebullient portrait, certainly’, to borrow a phrase of W. B. Yeats. As son-in-law of Edward Burne-Jones, Mackail had privileged access to the letters, diaries and reminiscences of Morris’s inner circle, and he uses these to tell an inspiring story which lifts his book well out of the ruck of dutiful Victorian biographies.

Readers of *The Life of William Morris* will have noticed that Mackail gives detailed attention to Morris’s poetry across the course of his career – more attention than most twentieth-century biographers have accorded it. This fact serves to remind us that Mackail had strong literary interests of his own, that he is more than just a one-book author – even if the rest of his critical works have now fallen well below the threshold of contemporary academic visibility. He had a distinguished reputation in his day as both a literary critic of his own national literature and as a classical scholar. The American poet Wallace Stevens, for example, clearly appreciated his work on both the classical and the critical fronts: ‘not for nothing’, writes a recent Stevens biographer, ‘did he desire to have a photograph of Professor Mackail, whom he clearly admired’. In fact, Mackail was sufficiently established in both roles to be elected to the Oxford University Professorship of Poetry in 1906 for a five year term, and it is this Mackail – the prestigious literary critic whose thoughts on literature had been deeply shaped by his work on Morris for the biography – that I propose to examine in this essay.

John William Mackail was born on the Isle of Bute in 1859 and elected to the Warner exhibition at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1877. He took a first class degree in *literae humaniores* in 1881, scooped a whole raft of university prizes, and was, the *Dictionary of National Biography* confidently informs us, ‘without doubt the most brilliant undergraduate scholar of his time’. Mackail was elected to a Fellowship at Balliol in 1882, but did not for long pursue the glittering academic career that so clearly could have been his. In his Morris biography he speaks dismissively of ‘the little circle of occupations in which so many Oxford men
become so hopelessly shut up', and this Oxonian claustrophobia may have been a factor in his moving to the Education Department of the Privy Council (which later became the Board of Education) in 1884. Mackail married Margaret Burne-Jones in 1888, which moved him into the Morris circle and, on the professional front, he advanced to the post of assistant secretary in 1903, playing a notable part in establishing a system of secondary education after the Act of 1902.

Oxford may have been narrow, but he none the less returned to it in 1906 as Professor of Poetry, the twentieth-fourth occupant of this prestigious Chair, succeeding A. C. Bradley. His lectures there were published in three volumes: *The Springs of Helicon: A Study in the Progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton* (1909), *Lectures on Greek Poetry* (1910) and a more miscellaneous collection, *Lectures on Poetry* (1911). It is these literary-critical writings, rather than his considerable production as an amateur classical scholar, that I wish to examine here. They were supplemented in later years by *The Approach to Shakespeare* (1930), in which Mackail berates his Oxford precursor Bradley for discussing the characters from the plays as if they were real people, and by *Studies in English Poets* (1926) and *Studies in Humanism* (1938). Both of these miscellaneous collections contain stray Oxford lectures, and the former also features an impressive central sequence of essays on the poetry of the mid-eighteenth century.

Morris seems to inform some of Mackail's most deeply held convictions about poetry in the volumes of Oxford lectures. His claim in *Lectures on Poetry* that creativity is a ubiquitous and democratic faculty, rather than some elite possession, comes straight from Morris; for 'it was one of the most fertile doctrines of William Morris that the appreciation of art is natural; that normal human beings are potential artists'. So too perhaps, in some more oblique manner, does Morris stand behind Mackail's definition of poetry in both its formal and thematic aspects. For Mackail, 'the essence of poetry technically is that it is patterned language... If the technical art of poetry consists in making patterns out of language, the substantial and vital function of poetry will be analogous; it will be to make patterns out of life' (pp. 13, 19). And no sooner does he try to give some flesh to these schematic claims - 'pattern, in its technical use as applied to the arts, is distinct from composition generally. It is composition which has in it what is technically called a “repeat”. The artistic power of the pattern-designer is shown in the way he deals with the problem of his repeat' (p. 13) - than we surely find ourselves gravitating back to the account of Morris as designer of patterns for wall-hangings and chintzes in *The Life of William Morris* (I, p. 282).

In his Oxford volumes Mackail distinguishes himself as literary critic from the mere historian of poetry on the one hand, exhaustively amassing facts and information, and the 'philosophical investigator' on the other, subduing his literary materials to some grand abstract schema. None the less, he does have an overarching theoretical framework of his own, which he sums up in the notion of the 'progress of poetry'. To track this progress, in the spirit of Thomas Gray's 'Ode on the Progress of Poesy', is to trace a movement of cultural energy from Greece to Italy to England - a grand progression which has all sorts of minor eddies, external impacts and interruptions across the centuries. The task of
Mackail’s Oxford lectures will accordingly be to give both the big picture in broad brushstrokes, and to analyse some of the more localised sequences within that stately overall poetic procession from East to West.

His first volume, *The Springs of Helicon*, delimits its scope in its subtitle: ‘A Study in the Progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton’. The story he tells here, through lively studies of Chaucer, Spenser and Milton, turns out to be more in the spirit of Matthew Arnold than William Morris; for it is of the progressive overcoming of native insularity in favour of classical centrality. Under the influence of the early Italian Renaissance, Chaucer takes poetry beyond medieval alliterative verse into ‘a culture which was no longer self-contained and insular’, but there is something premature about this breakthrough: Chaucer ‘brought the Renaissance into England before the time ... The soil was not ready for the Italian influence to take root’. Two centuries later, Spenser has to make another such transformative effort, but, for all the undoubted fluency of his verse, there remains in him ‘as in so much English art – as in so much English work beyond the sphere of art...a trace left of insular grossness, a strain of something a little forced and exaggerated. He is hardly of the centre’ (p. 100). Mackail’s Arnoldianism (which is also often in evidence in his biography of Morris) comes right to the surface with that final phrase, and it is in his view left to Milton to complete the task of civilising English poetry: ‘he is of the centre, as none of his contemporaries are. He did for English poetry a work higher than theirs, overmastering and including theirs, a work that has to be done and done once only, and beyond which there is nothing more to do. They made our poetry civilised: he made it classic’ (p. 147).

One can hardly imagine William Morris having much truck with this conclusion; ‘Milton he always abused’, Mackail had noted in his *Life* (I, 219). And the new Oxford Professor certainly seems uneasily aware of Morris peering over his shoulder at points in *The Springs of Helicon*. The whole of the Chaucer analysis, in fact, is governed by a Harold Bloom-style ‘anxiety of influence’ in relation to Morris: ‘only a poet who possessed something of Chaucer’s own genius could speak adequately of Chaucer as a poet; and when William Morris, now thirty years ago, declined the invitation to be nominated for the Oxford Chair of Poetry, that chance was lost’ (*SH*, 3). Morris crops up briefly in the Spenser chapters too. Mackail’s discussion of the ‘terrible Elizabethan fluency’ of Spenser and his contemporaries leads him to meditate on ‘the tradition of endlessness in poems’ (pp. 87-88). Not surprisingly given the vast bulk of *The Earthly Paradise* his thoughts then stray across to Morris, ‘the most fluent and melodious of modern English poets’, who, however, ‘kept, by instinct or judgement, within the same limits [as Milton]’ rather than indulging himself as outrageously as Spenser in terms of length (p. 89). Since both Spenser and Morris see themselves as disciples of Chaucer, Mackail inclines to find more than just general parallels such as fluency and melodiousness between them, and notes that Spenser’s invocation to his poetic master in the *Faerie Queene* has ‘a singular likeness, in phrasing and rhythm as well as in substance, to those exquisite verses of William Morris which come as the *envoi* to the *Earthly Paradise*’ (p. 123).

In Mackail’s second volume as Oxford Professor, *Lectures on Greek Poetry*, he analyses the ‘progress of poetry’ among the ancient Greeks in four historical
stages. First, the ‘medieval’ or pre-Hellenic age as reflected subsequently in the Homeric epics; second, the age of the creation of Hellas, represented in literature by the lyrics of Sappho and Simonides; third, the age of Athens, of which he takes Sophocles as supreme representative; and lastly, the Alexandrian period, as embodied in the work of Theocritus and Apollonius. Since Morris’s Sigurd the Volsung is described in Mackail’s Life as ‘the most Homeric poem which has been written since Homer’ (I, p. 332), it is not surprising that Morris features notably in the Homer sections of Lectures on Greek Poetry. He plays an important role in Mackail’s examination of the ‘Homeric question’, the issue of whether The Iliad and The Odyssey are by the same author:

Internal evidence, Jebb thought, was conclusive to the workings of a different mind in The Iliad and The Odyssey. A different mind may however come to a poet with the lapse of years and with fresh experiences. Analogies are slippery. But if we turn to the most Homeric of English poets, we shall find a different mind in the Life and Death of Jason and the Story of Sigurd the Volsung.

Morris also proves useful in reactivating the force of Homeric epithets that might otherwise seem merely formulaic. Noting Homer’s fondness for ‘white-handed’ as a description of his women, Mackail quotes a stanza from ‘Mother and Son’ in Poems by the Way – ‘The wrist that is white as the curd’ and so on – and notes that Morris’s lines are ‘little more than an expansion of the single Homeric epithet . . . Under this fresh light the idle epithet has become a living and revealing word’ (pp. 74-75).

Repeatedly in his Homer chapters Mackail seems to be dragged back into the mental world of his Life of William Morris. Discussing editorial additions to the Iliad in classical times, he notes that ‘there is a vital difference, as all members of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings are aware, between adding and refraining from removing an addition’ (p. 20). A few pages later he argues that ‘The Iliad is the work of a whole nation. The nameless architect of Westminster Abbey, it has been finely said, was not this man or that man, but the people of South-Eastern England’ (p. 38); and the anonymous author of this remark is, of course, none other than Morris himself, in a paper on Westminster Abbey written for SPAB in March 1892 and cited at length in volume two of Mackail’s Life (II, p. 276). If The Odyssey, as Mackail suggests, ‘stands to The Iliad in somewhat the same relation as the Cathedral of Beauvais does to that of Chartres’ (LGP, p. 56), then clearly he has slipped back into the cultural milieu of Morris’s 1855 tour of Northern France. Similarly, when in his chapter on Virgil’s cultural context in Lectures on Poetry Mackail notes that Virgil was ‘one of a school or circle – so close were the relations among them that we may perhaps call them a brotherhood’, one can’t help feeling that the model of Burne-Jones and Morris’s Oxford Brotherhood is in his mind here (LP, p. 52).

Morris also features strongly in Mackail’s later sections on Alexandrian culture. He first offers a detailed analysis of the idylls and pastorals of Theocritus, offering some illuminating comparisons with Tennyson’s nineteenth-century adaptations of the genre of the idyll. Then he moves on to discuss Apollonius, whose Argonautica was a powerful influence on Virgil. If Morris provided a means for reactivating
the energies of Homer's verse earlier in the volume, he here provides a yardstick for measuring the limits of Apollonius; for,

... if we compare the *Argonautica* with the English treatment of the same story in *The Life and Death of Jason*, we see at once that where Apollonius fails is in lack of the true narrative gift - that exceedingly rare and exceedingly precious power - and in lack of architectural or constructive power. In that last quality, throughout his whole work, Morris is faultless (p. 248).

Similar praise is bestowed in *Lectures on Poetry*, where Morris is announced to be 'the greatest master of structure among modern poets' for his timely ending of *Sigurd the Volsung* (*LP*, p. 151).

'Few studies in poetry could be either more interesting or more instructive', Mackail informs us, 'than to lay these two poems [the *Argonautica* and *The Life and Death of Jason*] side by side and observe the differences of handling, alike in the main construction and the detailed evolution of the poem' (*LGP*, p. 266). A one-hour lecture doesn't give the Oxford Professor time to carry out this analytic task in any depth, but he does highlight 'one point of special interest: that is, the method in which the romantic epic brings itself into relation with the lyric'. Constrained as he is by the epic tradition, Apollonius incorporates only two songs by Orpheus. Morris, however, is less hamstrung by classical convention, and 'the lyrics in *Jason* - among the loveliest in English - are interposed in the narrative, and the difference further emphasised by a change of meter' (p. 267). A critical essay still remains to be written, then, following through the detailed comparison between Apollonius and Morris which Mackail only gestures fitfully towards here. Over his work as a whole he has a fondness for such tantalising gestures, and in *Studies of English Poets* in 1926 he proposes (but doesn't deliver) another extended comparative exercise in practical criticism. Take Tennyson's 'Hesperides', Morris's Song of the Hesperides in *The Life and Death of Jason*, and Milton's lines on the Hesperides in *Comus* and, Mackail argues, 'among them, the three treatments of the single motive give keys to the whole evolution of English poetry, fixed points of achievement from which bearings may be taken'.

At the end of Mackail's account of Alexandrian poetry, the underlying equation which has been implicitly governing it suddenly comes to the surface: Apollonius is to Theocritus as Morris is to Tennyson:

In the early sixties the great English idyllist had come to a pause in his production of poetry; the idyllic method was for the time exhausted. It was then that Morris, like Apollonius, but with a higher genius and freer movement, reinstated the long narrative poem, the romance or romantic epic, in the poetry of England. Like Apollonius, he hardly founded a school; for his genius was in this as in other matters unique and untransmissible ... the analogies are striking and suggestive (p. 271).

Thus it is that the 'progress of poetry' generates parallel rhythms of innovation across the centuries and across the different cultures.

Morris appears again in Mackail's third and more diverse Oxford volume, the
Lectures on Poetry of 1911. Given the very positive account of his translation of the Aeneid in The Life of William Morris – ‘he vindicated the claim of the romantic school to a joint-ownership with the classicists in the poem’ (I, p. 323) – it is perhaps surprising that Morris does not crop up in the two lectures on Virgil here. He emerges instead in the account of Arabian poetry, in which Mackail enterprisingly seeks to show that the ‘progress of poetry’ is not quite as straightforward – Greece to Italy to England – as Thomas Gray’s ‘Ode’ suggests. We must instead recognise, he argues, that ‘Western romance and chivalry derive from Arabian origins much as Western religion derives from Jewish origins’ (LP, p. 125). The ‘best single picture which we possess of romantic chivalry as the Arabs of the ninth and tenth centuries understood it’ is, he suggests, the Stealing of the Mare, a text he discusses (using W. S. Blunt’s translation) in some detail in his lecture on ‘Arabian Epic and Romantic Poetry’ (p. 130). The Arab text strikingly alternates prose and verse, at which point William Morris enters aptly on the scene; for,

in our own time, Morris, the great experimenter and rediscoverer, brought the form into use again. The House of the Wolfings, the earliest, and in the judgement of many the finest, of the romances of his later life, bears a remarkable analogy to The Stealing of the Mare in its use of the alternation of verse with prose; and that analogy is more striking because in both cases the romance may properly be described as a romantic epic: it has the epic concentration and nobility, the tone and colour of an epic age (pp. 130-31).

The great experimenter and rediscoverer makes a fleeting appearance in Mackail’s later lecture on ‘The Poetry of Oxford’ where, amidst such familiar Oxonian items as Matthew Arnold’s ‘The Scholar Gipsy’, Morris is represented by ‘a single phrase, leaping out at high imaginative tension, and extraordinary in the way in which it reveals and fixes an image’:

‘Hast thou seen Oxford, scholar?’
A vision of grey-roofed houses and a long winding street and the sound of many bells came over me at that word as I nodded ‘yes’ to him (pp. 215-16).

And with this moving image of Oxford from A Dream of John Ball it is time to take leave of the Professor of Poetry himself. I have tried to give a sense of the range of Mackail’s critical concerns in his three Oxford volumes and the profound role of William Morris in his critical thinking about poetry. But how, a century on, do we assess Mackail’s performance as 24th occupant of the Oxford Chair? Is he a critic we ought still to turn to, or can we safely assign everything except his Life of William Morris to a bygone critical era? Certainly we won’t find the trenchant close analysis of poetic language that we’ve become used to since New Criticism in the United States and William Empson in this country. But if Mackail can at times be infuriatingly impressionistic in his critical responses – ‘one feels as though in an electric storm, played about by a hundred lightnings’ (LGP, p. 153) – he also has an impressive command of both the Graeco-Roman and English literary traditions. Some of his lectures are doggedly scholarly, to be sure, but
many others energise their subjects, recreating the internal dynamism of the poetry while at the same time situating it illuminatingly in wider cultural frameworks. J. W. Mackail’s Oxford lectures may not be up to the high standard of Matthew Arnold’s or A. C. Bradley’s, may not in the end be enduring works of criticism, yet in their sustained attention to the poetry of many ages and many cultures they ultimately convey to us (as they surely did to their original Oxford audiences) what Mackail himself sees in his Lectures on Greek Poetry as the ‘ultimate and central message of Sophocles, his last word on life’: ‘look, and wonder, and think’ (p. 155).

NOTES

1 Robert Duncan Macleod, Morris Without Mackail: As Seen by his Contemporaries (Glasgow: W. & R. Holmes, 1954).