Book Reviews

*William Morris, I Pellegrini della Speranza*
Edvige Schulte, Liguori Editore, via Mezzacannone 19, Naples 1983
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*Il pensiero estetico e politico di William Morris*

Professor in the Faculty of political science of Naples University, Edvige Schulte is one of several Italian scholars who have done much to further the knowledge of Morris in Italy in recent years. She has a distinguished record in bringing English literature to the Italian reader, with works on English rhyme and on fiction from Aphra Behn to Laurence Sterne, as well as monographs on authors as varied as Kipling, Pound, and Beckett. She has produced the first translation of *The Pilgrims of Hope* into Italian in a faithful and readable version with a useful introduction and notes, and she has separately published a very interesting study of Morris’s aesthetic and political thought. She is to be congratulated on the production of the book and pamphlet now under review; and since they may not be easily available to all readers of the Journal, it may be of interest to give some account of her approach.

Among English 19th century writers interested in social renewal—Shelley, Byron, Arnold, Wilde, Shaw and Yeats, Morris was unique on account of his ‘profoundly religious concept of the dignity of man’ and of man’s right to liberty and happiness which can only be achieved through art. Morris is particularly important now that we seem again to acknowledge the special role of artists both as prophets and as embodiments of their age. The ’80s have seen a growing interest in the romantic aspects of the 19th century with exhibitions on Blake, Turner and the Sublime, and *The Pre-Raphaelites*, as well as a revived interest in Morris with ‘Bright Birds and Strange Blossoms’ at Birmingham, and the refurbished rooms at the V & A.

Morris’s image of historical progress is often one in which periods of barbarism alternate with civilisation. Schulte expands an earlier suggestion that he may have known of the ideas of Vico, as Yeats certainly did. Yeats saw the ‘gyre’, a spiral or cone, as a model for the life of man and the development of history, and the author finds a passage in ‘Arts and Crafts of Today’ where Morris represents progress as an ascending spiral. Thus some knowledge of Vico could be a reason for Morris’s choice of subject matter in his later narratives of historical events and myths notable for their ‘barbarous poetic energy’. Civilisation and barbarism succeed each other along a spiral path towards a future golden age in which the arts, the joy of life, and peace will reign.

Professor Schulte next turns to Morris’s travels in Italy and concludes that in his puritan way, he fought against the ‘tyranny’ which Italian beauty could have exercised over him by feeling nostalgia for his northern grey stones which of course did not prevent his making a powerful protest against the restoration of St. Mark’s.
She gives examples of the use he made of his experiences in his fiction and in designs and notes rightly that Morris and Italy has been insufficiently studied.

A concise account of some of the most important lectures on crafts is followed by a spirited argument to show that Morris’s brand of ‘practical socialism’ was a ‘faction of one’ quite different from that of any of his contemporaries and as Shaw pointed out, much more profound. That Engels found Morris ‘politically ineffectual’ does not surprise the author. Morris interpreted socialism in his own fashion, inspired by ‘the religious idea of the dignity of man and of art understood as an element of edification and of education of the spirit’.

He fused socialism with his own aesthetics, uniquely mixing art and the pleasure of life with politics. She quotes Art and Socialism—‘the beginnings of Social Revolution must be the foundations of the rebuilding of the Art of the People, that is to say, of the Pleasure of Life’. He fought against a future based on the satisfaction of material needs in a world where both beauty and love of nature had disappeared and, together with history and art, had become merely objects of curiosity, while poetry had given place to science.

The socialist movement, she argues, moved away from Morris’s idealism to found its political progress on the mass movement of trade unionism and parliamentary democracy. The masses whom he had spent so much time, energy and money in addressing, preferred the immediate benefits the mass movement gave them and turned away from Morris’s ideals of the simple life and the role of art as pleasure-giving: instead the age of consumerism began.

At the base of Morris’s thought there is always his artistic credo based on the relationship of art and society and his vision of history which made the past part of the present and of progress which moved upwards in a spiral. His political ideas Professor Schulte finds partly utopian, but his social ideas are more important than ever and profoundly relevant to our situation. His condemnation of work without pleasure, his affirmation of leisure for reflection, his high concept of the creative role of man and the value of human life, his insistence on greater social justice, his love for nature and his battle for the conservation of the environment which places him among the first ecologists of the modern era, all make Morris a prophet for our age.

The essay appears under the imprint of a University institute called after Suor Orsola Benincasa, the 16th century founder of the female order of Theatines. She may well be as neglected by the Institute called after her as the founders of the LSE are by that uncaring institution, but nevertheless we might recall that her tiny Order—even fewer in numbers than our Society—has played an important world wide educational role through the centuries and was in the first place dedicated to restoring the primitive austerity of apostolic life. Since Morris had no time for organised religion, it is easy to forget the numerous strands that link his thought on the crafts and society with mediaeval theologians. For Aquinas there was no distinction between arts and crafts. To work for pleasure is only a step from working for the glory of God. Professor Schulte reminds us, by implication, of some important sources for Morris’s thought.
While not everyone will agree with her study of Morris's politics and aesthetics, it is difficult to fault her translation of *The Pilgrims of Hope*. The translation with facing text includes sections by her assistants, Maria Lima and Vanda Polese, and is accompanied by an excellent introduction, concise biography, bibliography, comments, and notes. Professor Schulte maintains that by devoting *The Pilgrims of Hope* to the Paris Commune, Morris took a stance on contemporary social conflict which makes him the first 'committed poet'. She defends the poem from criticisms of its fragmented approach by pointing out the logical development of action, the coherence of individual character becoming more mature as a result of experience, the appropriateness of the language to what is being expressed and the unity of the metric form apart from its first two sections. She emphasises the modernity of its conversational qualities and points out that we are nowadays more used to the abrupt changes of tone which Morris employs to encompass his complex theme.

We can, perhaps as never before, appreciate his wonderful awareness of the woman's point of view. She makes a good case to show that Morris's passage on London Bridge was inspired by the same famous lines in Dante's Inferno that inspired T.S. Eliot's famous passage in *The Waste Land*. She then makes the exciting discovery that Eliot knew and used Morris's lines, as she shows, beyond reasonable doubt. It is sad to note that Eliot who was prepared to acknowledge his debt to Dante forgot, or at any rate failed to acknowledge his debt to Morris for reasons it would be charitable not to speculate on.

The translation is pedestrian but faithful, line for line, keeping the sense and to some extent the metre and reading reasonably fluidly. Occasionally the translators run on the rocks, as in section II, precisely when the lovers are crossing London Bridge and see the moon which has been white and pure over the countryside, now sullied and reddened as its sets by the 'Void of the night mist' which Morris damns as the 'breath of the city' behind the mass of ships' masts in the port of London. Morris complicated the image by saying not the moonlight but 'the mastwood was sundered/By the void of the night mist'. For the translators this becomes 'the setting moon veiled and red, there where the treetops emerge from the incorporeal fog of the evening', both misrepresenting the image and losing its subtleties. In another infelicity, 'Oft were my feet on the high way, often they wearied the grass' becomes 'how often have they trampled the grass'. But overall this is a fine piece of work and yet another landmark in the realisation of the universal significance of Morris.

*Hans Brill*

*John Ruskin’s Labour*
Price (hardback) £20.00

Ruskin is necessary reading for anybody who wants to understand, as distinct from simply admiring, William Morris. His contribution to ideas on art and social order was enormously influential, stretching from *Modern Painters* in 1843 to *Fors Clavigera* in 1872. Morris, who to the last called him, Master, died in 1896, active to the last breath. Ruskin said of Morris 'he is beaten gold'.
The Introduction to this book, which was briefly noted in our last Journal, tells us—‘The purpose of this book is to examine Ruskin’s social criticism but part of the argument to be developed is that this grows from and is inextricably related to his work on art and architecture.’ Indeed; and not only part: the whole of any serious argument on Ruskin must proceed from this; and it will be better grounded if we know that his passion for art was preceded by a passion for geology, that it was his boyhood training of hand and eye and vocabulary that gave him the marvellous instruments with which he swept into the field of art criticism in the 1840s, and won thousands of readers from top to bottom of a society about whose moral condition he was so deeply concerned.

The author makes very good use of quotation from Ruskin, who is very quotable indeed. I guess that, having once fancied himself an admirer of Morris, he is very recently come to Morris’s first master, and is as much delighted with the manner as with the substance of Ruskin’s eloquence—and rightly: many might shorten Ruskin’s argument; none could better its prose. Most of what is said of Ruskin’s ideas is well said, and just to him. But whoever else is referred to here, living or dead, what pervades this book is Ruskin’s relation to Morris and to Marx, who get the slenderest of real notice. Perhaps one should not complain: but this makes a ghost of argument.

The thesis may be set out thus: Ruskin is the great social critic of the nineteenth century in this country: he is also a great writer on art (of which the author fairly acknowledges an ignorance which seems to extend to literature) and a great writer of prose. His social criticism is not democratic: it is aristocratic and christian in temper and in the solutions it offers: it is not socialist. His fame, his acceptability in this century has been blotted out by that of Marx’s historical materialism and communism: to a less extent, and more recently, by that of William Morris, formerly reputed ‘a good designer whose political theory was, to put it at its kindest, unsound. Now, Morris is regarded as unique among British critics of capitalism.’ (Intro., p. 2.)

This last theme, with its suggestion that until Morris had been claimed by Marxists he could not be treated seriously, Anthony postpones to the end of his book. But it is worth examining for some interesting juggling.

Hardly anybody but Ruskin is quoted, and nobody at any length; and maybe in a short book we must accept this. It seems odd, though, that in a book so aggressively devoted to Ruskin vis-à-vis Morris and Marx, neither is ever quoted: no reference is given to any of their writings: nor do any of their works appear in a bibliography which includes no major work on either, is largely culled from socio-economic, politico-philosophical periodicals, descending as low as Alvin Gouldner, but not getting nearer, for example, to Raymond Williams’ thinking on Morris than 1961. Footnotes and bibliographical references hardly compensate, least of all when in a pathetic dash into the world of crafts, Welsh love-spoons are used to falsify Morris’s ideas, while morris dancing is given that illegitimate capital M which is vulgarly used to associate him with that activity.

We find ourselves outside a trial conducted in camera: allowed to read the prosecution case: not allowed to know the indictment: not allowed to hear witnesses. Let me offer a couple of instances of—scholarship?
On page 12 we are given a quotation from *Modern Painters* Volume I, Section IV, OF TRUTH OF EARTH, Chapter I: Of General Structure. This illustrates the complex rational structure of Ruskin’s work—remarkably mediaeval, a reminder of the depth of his reading. The actual quotation begins: ‘The laws of the organization of the earth are distinct from ...’ and Anthony goes on: ‘Ruskin’s subject is always the laws of organisation which, if understood, will clearly serve to discriminate between truth and falsehood. He began the study of those laws in painting. ... His first intention apart from a general resolve to write and make his way in the world, was, after Oxford, to write a pamphlet in response to attacks on Turner in *The Literary Gazette* and *The Athenaeum* 14 May 1842, but he found himself compelled to “amplify what was at first a letter to the editor of a Review into something very like a treatise on art”.* Anthony goes on to say that the work is largely concerned to establish the reputation of Turner. Turner had stood at the top of his profession for more than forty years, regardless of adverse criticism since the first decade of the century. His attachment to Turner’s reputation did a great deal to establish Ruskin’s own at a blow with *Modern Painters* in 1843.

The letter Ruskin refers to was written as far back as 1836, by an indignant seventeen year old, in answer to abusive criticism in *Blackwood’s Magazine* of Turner’s pictures in the Royal Academy of that year—Juliet and her Nurse; Mercury and Argus; Rome from the Aventine. At Turner’s wish, the letter had not been sent.

In the six years since, Ruskin had been a student at Oxford, had a serious breakdown, resumed his studies, won the Newdigate Prize for poetry, toured Europe with his parents, drawn landscape in Switzerland with J.D. Harding, and, home in 1842, settled down to write a book on Turner in the light of this practical study of what the artist himself had seen and painted. This book stretched to five volumes and was many years in completing, not least because Ruskin could not separate aesthetic and moral criticism: that he perceives their ultimate unity is one of his merits.

The second instance I shall take is of more consequence to the argument. Chapter nine is entitled The Legacy: here we come to discussion of where Morris stood in relation to Ruskin, where both stood in relation to Marx. The ground taken at this point is E.P. Thompson’s *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* whose powerful effect on Morris studies he clearly finds deplorable. After glancing at some figures of the early years of this century—Ashbee (but not Lethaby) Penty, Orage, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc (to whose ideas I suspect he is most strongly drawn) and G.D.H. Cole’s Guild Socialism, between pages 194 and 201, we come to the post-war revaluation of Morris, starting with Thompson—not noticing though that Robin Page Arnot’s little book of 1934 had actually begun the process. We are reminded of Thompson’s book and of its two editions, 1955 and 1977, which express his differing political stances of those two moments.

‘In the second Appendix to the first edition’, we are told, ‘Thompson reviews the arguments and evidence and concludes, counter to the opinion prevailing at that time, that Morris was a Marxist. He blames two early authorities on the life and

opinions of Morris for the mistaken view that he was a romantic, anti-marxist utopian. . . . Thompson finally cites Paul Meier as providing a conclusive examination which demonstrates that Morris's political writing draws upon and is consistent with a Marxist tradition.' There follows a passage purporting to summarise EPT's arguments and change of mind as between 1955 and 1976, which goes on: 'Paul Meier, who had in 1955 been cited as providing a conclusive examination to demonstrate that Morris's political writing drew upon and was consistent with the Marxist tradition, is, in 1976, described as having "only written out at large pieties and excisions in my own original treatment". What Thompson finally says about Meier's book is not quoted—that 'one can be assured that the book will put a final end to much rubbish' (Thompson, 2nd ed. 1977, p. 780). Alas, not all.

Now, there is indeed a second appendix to the 1955 edition of Thompson: as there is a first, a third, and a fourth. The first is the Manifesto of the Socialist League, written by Morris and annotated by him and Bax: the second, letters between J.L. Mahon and Engels: the third, five letters from Morris to Fred Henderson: the fourth, a discussion by Thompson of the value of Bruce Glasier's statements on William Morris and Marxism. No appendix has any reference to Paul Meier; for in 1955 Paul Meier's book, La Pensée utopique de William Morris, had not been written: even his excellent translation of News from Nowhere (as Nouvelles du nulle part) did not appear until 1961. The work to which Thompson refers—in another place—appeared in 1972—seventeen years after Thompson's first edition.

The discussion of Meier is, of course, an important part of the Postscript to Thompson's much revised second edition, where it is treated at some length because Thompson regards it as a work of authority in the field. But what are we to make of this more recent scholarship? or of arguments based upon it?

If Mr. Anthony will now read Marx; and some other serious authors contemporary with him—Mill, for instance, or Kingsley—who wrote more than Alton Locke—and then read Morris himself—he will perhaps be able to deal justly with Morris—and not least, with Ruskin himself, too great a man to be so ill-served.

Ray Watkinson
Companion of the Guild of St. George

A Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press

Our member Professor Peterson put us all greatly in his debt by bringing together all Morris's writings on the art of the book in his beautiful edition of The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book by William Morris, 1982 (reviewed in the Winter 1983–84 Journal), and has now quickly followed this up with his Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press in 'The Soho Bibliographies' series, which will prove equally indispensable for all future students of this major area of Morris's achievement. The scope of the work is set out in the Introduction: 'This bibliography describes the published works of the Kelmscott Press, books that were contemplated
but not actually printed, and advertising circulars and other ephemera; a final section supplies the texts of eight contracts and memoranda for Kelmscott books' (p. xvii); and again 'The bibliography is based upon, and is intended to supersede, Sydney Cockerell’s “An Annotated List of All the Books Printed at the Kelmscott Press in the Order in Which they Were Issued” ' (p. xli). The Introduction proceeds to give brief but valuable accounts of ‘Sources’, both primary and printed for the history of the Press; ‘Types’; ‘Paper and Vellum’; ‘Copytexts’, listing all the known texts from which the Kelmscott books were set up; ‘Inks’; ‘Illustrations’; ‘Ornaments’; ‘Cancels’; ‘Bindings’; ‘Presses’, and here the inclusion of the Society’s William Morris’s Printing Press, 1983, shows how up-to-date the listing is; ‘Staff’; ‘Publishers’; and ‘Finances’.

In addition to the factual material, Peterson includes interesting comments. For example, after noting that ‘scholars have generally concluded that the KP texts fall short of the more exacting modern editorial standards’ (p. xxvi), he continues ‘This is hardly surprising, since Morris and Ellis [his co-editor] were aiming at a readable text of broad literary appeal rather than literary accuracy. . . . Nevertheless, the care with which they printed literary documents, some of them previously unpublished, is remarkable; the Kelmscott Press was, among other things, a pioneering attempt at intelligent popularisation of literary works that in some instances were drawn from obscure sources.’

The bibliography proper gives a full bibliographic description of each book together with publication details, followed by ‘Notes’ on the printing history and whatever additional information is available about the volume. A good example of the value of this additional information is provided by A3 Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, The Love-Lyrics and Songs of Proteus, which throws more light on Scawen Blunt’s curious relationship with the Morrices, and incidentally provides a nice specimen of Morris's invective in his reference to a reviewer as ‘a cur by profession’. The ‘Related Materials’ section lists trial pages, presentation copies etc., based on information gathered from a form letter sent to the major British and American libraries and from book sale records. Peterson acknowledges that ‘of course, I am aware that this section can never be complete, particularly since much of the relevant material is probably in private collections’, but even so it will be a most welcome aid.

The volume is well produced, with many illustrations. Perhaps only bibliographers can properly appreciate the enormous amount of meticulous scholarship represented by a work such as this. Peterson’s reward is the satisfaction of having produced a major reference work, which may need up-dating from time-to-time, but which will not be superseded, and the immortality conferred by future catalogues with entries such as ‘Peterson A47’. The price will put the book beyond many individual purses, but no library with collections on the history of the printed book can afford to be without it.

Richard S. Smith