
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Art. III.—WILLIAM MORRIS.

ON October 3 last, William Morris, the poet, practical artist, and social idealist, passed away after a long illness. He was a man of many parts and curious gifts, and even his exaggerated ideas on popular art and his socialistic proclivities sprang from a generous nature and a mind above all things free from meanness and open to all noble impressions. His faults, indeed, as a social critic arose from a high-strung enthusiasm, and if he erred, it was from a mistaken sense of duty. Born of well-to-do, if not wealthy, people belonging to the commercial class, not unlike, in this respect, to his teacher, John Ruskin, he was educated at Forest School, Walthamstow, his native place. He proceeded thence to Marlborough College, and subsequently to Exeter College, Oxford. Among his friends and fellow-students, notably E. Burne-Jones and Rossetti, there were those who joined the Pre-Raphaelite movement and drew him into it by gentle force. From Ruskin he imbibed the ideas of the high vocation of work and handicraftsmanship, and following in the same lines he preached in his writings and lectures the "Gospel of handiwork," whilst at the same time he issued volumes of poems which adorn the libraries and drawing-room tables of many members of that middle class to which he belonged, and yet whose disrelish and unintelligent appreciation of the fine arts he so often jeered at. But Morris the poet is known in a still larger circle of admirers as "Morris the wall-paper maker" and artistic designer. He established in 1863, with others, a factory for the production of artistic glass tiles and wall-paper, for which, as the obituary notice of him in the *Times* says, his name has long been famous. There is something novel and striking in the fact that a practical and successful manufacturer may yet be a high-class poet, a fact which gives the lie to Mr. Morris's own theory, for that theory, expressed in not a few of his own prose writings, is that our commercial era is opposed to art, and that the artistic spirit is incompatible with the industrial tendencies of the day. He himself, describing himself in his principal poem, "The Earthly Paradise," as "the idle singer of an empty day," shows that a happy combination of practical and useful work, yielding profits and producing affluence with a poetical frame of mind and a sincere love of art, are by no means impossible.

An American writer describes the striking personal appearance of Morris as "the most picturesque in prosaic England," thus: "A stout, sturdy, stalwart man, with ruddy face, who looks frankly out upon the world with bright blue eyes. His grand,

massive head is covered with a shock of gray hair, tumbled about in wild disorder, while upper lip (which is short) and chin are covered with gray moustache and beard. He is always clad in the same fashion when I see him: a black slouch hat, black sack coat, and a most picturesque blue shirt with a collar to match. In winter-time he envelops himself in a thick dark Inverness cape. . . . Many years ago he sat accidentally upon his silk hat and crushed it; he has never worn one since. . . . His very aspect is a perpetual challenge to all that is smug, and respectable, and genteel."[1] The same writer also informs us that there is much of the passionate, unrestrained, beauty-loving child about Morris, and we are in a position to confirm the truth of these characteristics from other sources nearer home. It should be mentioned, too, that in his active business life and in his relations with his subordinates and workers on his own establishment he certainly carried out with consistency the principles laid down in his own writings; in fact, there was a thoroughness and completeness about his character and conduct, and a happy union of good sense with high artistic sensitiveness, adding beauty to strength, which constantly reminds one of the wise saying of his master, Ruskin, that "all human work depends for its beauty on the happy life of the workman," or, as Morris himself remarks somewhere, "The pleasurable exercise of our energies is at once the source of all art and the cause of all happiness: that is to say, the end of life."

At times Mr. Morris, like most people of an ardent temperament, gave vent to extreme opinions on subjects where he felt strongly, as when, in his lectures on "Hopes and Fears for Art," he avers that "the leaders of modern thought do for the most part sincerely and single-mindedly hate and despise the arts." So far from this being a fact, the contrary is true, for all thinking people in the present day are most anxious to promote the cultivation of the arts and bring artistic enjoyment near to the people's hearts and homes. The formation of Ruskin Societies, the establishment of people's palaces and the opening of picture-galleries in the East of London, are a few instances to illustrate the strength and reality of this movement. But Mr. Morris is quite right in saying that in the rank and file of labour the progress of enjoyment of beauty has not yet reached the point at which "real art is the expression by man of his pleasure in labour." The artisan and the factory worker have not yet attained to the pride and joy

[1] "William Morris, Poet, Artist, Socialist: a selection from his writings, together with a sketch of the man," edited by Francis Walter Lee, New York; being No. 5 of the "Social Science Library," and containing some excellent extracts from the works of W. Morris, pp. 4, 5.

in their work which was so characteristic of their class in the Middle Ages, so that all work done then was really "a joy to the maker and the user."

How far did Mr. Morris exemplify this in his own art of poetry and those artistic designs, that is, in the productions of his pen, and in his industrial establishment? In other words, how far does he practise what he preaches?

Among his best-known poems—the "Defence of Guenevere" (1858), his "Life and Death of Jason," in seventeen books (1867), his "Earthly Paradise," consisting of twenty-four romances (1868-70), his translations of the "Æneid" and the "Odyssey," and others of later date—the "Earthly Paradise" is perhaps the most characteristic and the best known of all his poems. They for the most part draw their inspiration from ancient Greek or old Norse stories, and all display refinement of conception and performance; they are free from all affectation and unreality. They bear some resemblance to Tennyson's "Idylls," but differ from them in the absence of that spirituality and religious tone and depth of thought which are peculiar to Tennysonian poetry. We should say, by way of distinguishing the two in their tone and tenor, that Tennyson is a reflective poet and a revealer of some of the mysteries of being, whereas Morris is fond of reverie and dreaming. We are permitted to look upon a placid lake in which many things are reflected in both, but in the former there is a deeper depth. We will only quote two stanzas of the poem on October in the "Earthly Paradise" to illustrate our meaning:

> Come down, O love; may not our hands still meet,
> Since still we live to-day, forgetting June,
> Forgetting May, deeming October sweet—
> Oh, hearken, hearken! through the afternoon
> The gray tower sings a strange old tinkling tune!
> Sweet, sweet and sad, the toiling year's last breath,
> Too satiate of life to strive with death.
>
> And we, too—will it not be soft and kind,
> That rest from life, from patience and from pain;
> That rest from bliss we know not when we find;
> That rest from Love which ne'er the end can gain?
> Hark, how the tune swells that erewhile did wane!
> Look up, Love—ah, cling close and never move!
> How can I have enough of life and love?

The lines produce restfulness, a gentle ripple of emotion: they are soothing, calming, subduing, but they do not move the spirit with any force. They produce languor and quiet, melancholy acquiescence rather than aspiration or inspiring thought and feeling. In all his poems the mediæval and romantic quietism predominates. It has a charm of its own,

but it is imitative of an age gone by, rather than interpreting poetically the life of modern days; in short, it lacks actuality. Everything moves in an unreal world of dreams of the past or of the future.

This is equally true, if not more so, of the prose stories, such as "The Dream of John Ball" and "The Roots of the Mountains," the style of the latter of which has been stigmatized by a critic as "Wardour Street English," because of its slavish imitation of the old English modes of speech and expression. In the former Mr. Morris tries to present us with the condition of the English peasant in the time of the great revolt, to a great extent the work of "the poor priests of Wiklif," who, like John Ball, were, if not the prime promoters, at least the religious inspirers of the movement. On comparing it with a similar theme as treated poetically by Sir Henry Taylor, the contrast is the same as that between the poetry of Morris and that of the late Laureate; they are as different as day-dreams are from days spent in vigorous action. In short, Mr. Morris is desultory, and in this respect unlike his master, Chaucer, though it has been said of his poetry that he is in some respects "the greatest master of narrative verse since Chaucer's day"; and this desultoriness, or slow meandering of the stream of poetic effusion, the "sweet sadness," is probably owing to the fact that he is something of a fatalist, in spite of his vigour and spontaneity of character as a man. Even as the "Laureate of Socialism" Morris is not as forceful as we should have expected when he pours forth verse to give expression to his social aspirations, though there was no lack of verve and vigour in his agitatorial career. His joyousness of life and restlessness, which never allowed him to be without some occupation—even in conversation, we are told, he used to rush about the room, and could not sit still for ten minutes—vented itself in other ways. One of these was the enthusiasm he threw into his work as a decorative artist. How his work as such began in the establishment of the firm of which he became the responsible manager we are told in the interesting account of it by Rossetti, quoted by Theodore Watts-Dunton, in the notice on W. Morris, contained in the *Athenæum* for October 10, where he says:

> One evening a lot of us were together, and we got talking about the way in which artists did all kinds of things in olden times—designed every kind of decoration, and most kinds of furniture, and someone suggested—as a joke more than anything else—that we should each put down five pounds and form a company. "Fivers" were blossoms of a rare growth among us in those days, and I won't swear that the table bristled with "fivers." Anyhow, the firm was formed, but, of course, there was no deed or anything of that kind. In fact, it was a mere playing at business,

and Morris was elected manager, not because we ever dreamed he would turn out a man of business, but because he was the only one among us who had both time and money to spare. We had no idea whatever of commercial success, but it succeeded almost in our own despite.

The work turned out by this firm has now a world-wide reputation, and its head not only produced excellent work, but has also succeeded as the inaugurator of the "great revival in decorative art" during the latter part of our century, and the promoter of those "art and crafts exhibitions" which helped so much in advancing it. From this it would appear that to carry on business in the ordinary methods of commerce is not quite irreconcilable with following a pure taste in art, as Morris imagined, and that commercial success and art progress are not incompatible with each other. At all events, the success of Mr. Morris is proof positive that even in our own degenerate days the attempt to build up art from handicraft is not an undertaking necessarily doomed to failure. The very fact that he was so pre-eminently successful is a proof, in short, that "our present politico-commercial civilization" is not "absolutely hostile to art."

But Mr. Morris and his friends would say that the whole people as a people, the many, the masses, are devoid of art instinct, and that the production and enjoyment of artistic work are still confined to the few, and that the pleasure of work and the happiness of the workman in producing or possessing things of beauty, which are a joy for ever, are the exception rather than the rule. But is not the encouragement given to technical education, teaching of drawing in primary schools, as well as music, and the foundation of schools of art in all towns, nowadays a step towards this? Is it not laying what Mr. Morris in his lecture on "Art and Socialism," delivered at Leicester twelve years ago, demands, "the foundations of the rebuilding of the art of the people"?

This brings us to the last stage of our estimate of Mr. Morris's aim and work—*i.e.*, his efforts as a social innovator. Here it has to be remarked that his socialistic ideas and efforts were closely connected with art. His is not the political or economical standpoint, but that of the poet, the dreamer, and the artist; and it is probably owing to this fact that he left one after another of the representative socialistic bodies in this country because, though at one in the general aims of his associates in the crusade against the present social system, their arguments and their methods were not his—their aims are mainly materialistic, his of a more æsthetic nature. He wants greater equality, because, as he says somewhere, "inequality of condition . . . has now become incompatible with the existence of a healthy art"—*i.e.*, "art made by the people

for the people." The remedy he suggests is a curious one. In his lecture already referred to he puts it clearly: "How can we of the middle-classes," he inquires, "the capitalists, and our hangers-on, help them? By renouncing our class, and on all occasions when antagonism rises up between the classes casting in our lot with the victims—with those who are condemned at the best to lack of education, refinement, leisure, pleasure, and renown; and at the worst to a life lower than that of the most brutal savages—in order that the system of competitive commerce may endure."

This he has done to some extent in his own person and with the aid of his own fortune. But if the same spirit did actually animate all classes, high and low alike, no reconstruction of society would be required, for where the predominating principle is not selfishness, but self-surrender, there all live in peace and prosperity, with ample time and leisure to create and enjoy what is lovely.

In the same way, though taking his place as an agitator, as a matter of loyalty to those with whom he worked for a time, not from predilection and a sense of fitness for the post, he all along was a dreamer of dreams, beautiful and fancy-woven, of a future society of brotherhood and fellowship, rather than the actual promoter of a set scheme for remodelling our own social system. Therefore his "Chants for Socialists" are much inferior to his other poetry, because they are agitatorial, and written for a purpose rather; whilst his "News from Nowhere," as a picture of Utopia, strikes the present writer as one of the least picturesque, the least captivating, and the least convincing among all the Utopias from T. More's times to our own, because in such a production the non-political and impractical mind of Morris was set to an uncongenial task. He possessed the fervour, but not the force required for the systematic plan and execution of such political romances. A romance writer he was—none better; but he had neither the political instinct nor the economic knowledge required for such works. Thus, *e.g.*, when he touches on idleness, the chief danger in a socialistic state, when the incentive of individual effort is taken away, since the community provides for all, he simply speaks of it in his Utopia as a disease like the measles, which passes away in time. He prescribes no measures for its removal. "Everything seems like a joke when we have a pleasant spell of work on, and good fellows merry about us," says one of the heroes in "Nowhere." The writers of other Utopias make a great deal too much of governmental organization of labour. Morris is a peaceful anarchist. In his "Nowhere" land "we have no longer anything which you, a native of another planet, would call

a government"; and, again, "we are very well off as to politics, because we have none." And why? Because none are needed. Everybody does of his own accord all that can be expected of him as a matter of course; everybody lives by rule, and is a law unto himself, and there is no compulsion or legal restriction required. But, again, we say, here speaks a dreamer of beautiful dreams. If the members of society, one and all, were what he represents them to be, certainly social revolution and social architecture on a new plan would not be required, society would build itself up in love and justice. In other words, if Christian principles were the law pervading all hearts and minds, society would be perfect.

As we have said before, Mr. Morris, in his own dealings with his workpeople and those under his employ, did what he could under the limitations which modern factory work imposes on the best employers to render this dream a reality. He introduced the eight-hours working-day, and the wages paid in the Merton factory were the highest known in the trade. As far as possible, the method of the mediæval gilds in educating apprentices was adopted, and his American admirer tells us that he saw a beautiful piece of work from this factory, which had been done by an average boy taken from the village, and trained in the works on this method.

We have said enough to show something of the work attempted and accomplished by a man of rare ability and noble character, gifted with poetic genius of a high order, and throughout his career guided by high aims and aspirations. Even when they err and are misled by exaggerated views, and lured away by impossible ideals into inconsiderate speech and action, propounding of impossible schemes of social life, such men render a great service to humanity. Their earnestness inspires others, their new ideas send a bracing current through sluggish minds, their unselfish, though often impractical, efforts are, in a corrected form, improved upon by others more judicious, though no less earnest, ever eager to promote the common good and to reform existing abuses. William Morris the poet will continue to delight many readers long after his death; William Morris the designer and printer will be looked back upon as the inaugurator of new and more delicate workmanship in domestic art; and William Morris the social visionary will be regarded with kindly toleration, if not with marked approval, by the students of social problems and critics of social Utopias.

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