

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE GRAND ARTISTIC NARRATIVE OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

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Abstract: Embedded in what might be regarded as one of the most intricate social and cultural webbing of modern times, the Victorian artist, caught in between the formalism and love for traditionalism of Neo-Classicism, yet mesmerised by the ebullient taste of Romanticism for creativity and innovation, was constantly (re)defining his search and perspective regarding the conceptualisation of the outer world. At times of most dramatic changes, of evanescent frontiers and amalgamated exploratory horizons, the portrait of the artist was deeply imbued by a robust taste for Neo-Medievalism and the Gothic, further distilled in refined tones of exotic and mysterious Oriental enchantment. This paper looks at the equally complex patterns of William Morris's works as designer and the social and cultural milieu that accommodated both the artist and a whole new world in quest for its own identity and history.

Keywords: Pre-Raphaelites, arts-and crafts, artistic endeavour, nature, idyllic past

*Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the sinner of an empty day.*

William Morris

Attempting to (re)capture the grandeur of an age that overflowed the matrix of its own time in frameworks of contrastive analysis accounts for the paragon under whose auspices we intend to accommodate the image of Victorianism at the very heart of a 'world-creating' melting-pot. Would it be too hazardous to name it a second Renaissance? Far from either claiming one from the other, or explaining one's corpus through its predecessor's, there are moments when the cartographers of the two epochs meet and their lines cross, and reconsidering the past heritage may be one such glorious moment. If Renaissance men looked up to the classical world of Greek Roman scholarship and values, Victorian thinkers approached the past with the hope of discovering a "remedy for the chaos and anarchy of the present. John Ruskin's *Gothicism* was an example to be followed by contemporary artists. The return to the models of ancient literature offered, according to Matthew Arnold, a possibility of revival and a source of inspiration for Victorian literature" (Galea, p. 13).

Looking at the past in an attempt to seize the challenging and constantly shifting perspectives of the present has always been a recurrent exercise of retrospection, a plunge into the magmatic innards of history, symbolically summoned to instil life into the disarticulated present. Victorians took a great interest in the Middle Ages, with Alfred, Lord Tennyson, John Ruskin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris evoking it as an idealised, almost ethereal, “*world of dream*” (Galea, p. 14). “*The medieval cult, in all its forms, witnesses to the strain of living and thinking in a society where facts, theories and principles must have seemed to many people like an unintelligible whirl of atoms*” (Pollard, qtd. in Galea, p. 14). No wonder that utopian thinking outlines imaginative contours of time, rather than space, projecting it all against an idealised background – nothing but an escape from the dreary and ugly contemporary society. The same undying ethos of discovering new worlds wrote a common history both for the Renaissance age, as well as for the Victorian epoch; just as the Victorians were excited by the geographic exploration of virgin, undulating horizons, the Renaissance witnessed, with insatiable curiosity, the opening of broader perspectives and pristine realms.

One such destiny, whose passionate journey spelled the story of an inquisitive, restless spirit, was that of William Morris, a man with an almost infinite nostalgia for the past and its legends that was “*the chief urge of his busy life from the boyhood when he rode through Epping Forest in a toy suit of armour to the maturity when he recounted A Dream of John Ball*” (Pollard, p. 452). Resembling the double-faced god Janus, looking more into the past than scrutinising the future, William Morris captures the idealised story of a yesterday he unrelentingly collides against the gloomy vision of his days. Published in book form in 1888, this fantasy in prose tells the story of the 14th-century English priest renowned for his wholehearted, adamant commitment to a classless society, a utopian desire for an egalitarian world of ethical values and moral principles. The double temporal angle from which the story is told builds itself with one of Morris' contemporaries who dreams of being a scholar in Kent during the Peasant's Revolt, and who meditates on the problem of the future in a conversation he has with the John Ball; in a symbolic exercise of regression, the projections onto the future seem equally unrealistic and utopian as they used to be centuries ago.

Dreaming and journeying back in time, embracing the primeval beauty of nature seen as God's utmost perfection, so generously offered to mortals translate the quest and longing for serenity, balance and undisturbed harmony. There is no such geography, nor can the maps of the world record it, as everything seems to be *News from Nowhere*, the title of his famous utopia, published in 1891, a book in which the author pleads for the non-alienation of man from his environment, thus articulating a pastoral attitude towards life and the world we live in. So appalled was Morris about the transformations the Industrial Revolution brought about and the scars it left on the face of the world, that his main concern was with a beautiful arts-and-crafts society. Similar to the Renaissance ideal of *homo universalis*, accomplished, knowledgeable and intellectually insatiable, William Morris recommends himself as a complex artist and personality; not only was he a poet, writer, reformer, but also a designer, painter, printer, bookbinder and craftsman. It is the narrative of William Morris' crusade against the ugliness of his time and his undying commitment to beauty in all its stances that wrote history, whence beauty read symmetry, passion, absolute exquisiteness. As Ruskin's ablest disciple, he believed that the “*diligent study of nature*”, quoting from one of the lectures he gave in 1874, was of vital importance to any artist as nature embodied God's paramount design and he shared his friend's intimate belief that a “*vital style in building was inseparably related to the environment that produced it*” (Buckley, p. 141).

It was as if in the breathtaking geometry of God's works was to be once again recaptured by the mathematical golden ratio, so intimately connected with Fibonacci's spiral of rhythmic patterns that are present in the world of plants, as in the branching of trees, the flowering of a Jerusalem artichoke or the arrangement of a pine's cone. David Ramsay Hay, the founder of the *Aesthetic Society* at Edinburgh, in the year of the Great Exhibition, 1851, was convinced that the “*great harmonic law of nature which parades and governs the universe*”, recommended to the artist the Pythagorean system of numbers or musical ratios as the fundamental rule for all design intended to image forth the all-beautiful cosmic harmony' ” (Buckley, p. 144).

The grandeur of the perspective his mind envisaged, looking for perfection either in history or in nature, lies with the revival of the past as source of inspiration for those 'thirsty minds' that are summoned to restore the beauty of the world to its proper, rightful place. It is here where etymology comes to tell an interesting story which brings together people and ages, craftsmanship and passion for perfection, journey and discovery. The word behind all that is *journeyman*, a skilled worker, no longer an apprentice, not yet a master, but a “journeying” member of a guild community seen both as a working-bee from the “beehive” of artists and craftsmen, as well as a discovery-bound individual, on constant search for beauty and perfection. As journeymen were free to go and work for different masters, proving the outstanding skills of their craft, their journey, read and interpreted in terms of exploration and discovery, may be seen as an allegorical exercise of quest for accomplishment. Undoubtedly a master of his crafts, William Morris was a journeying spirit who not only revered the past, but was totally fascinated by the idyllic Medieval depictions of rural life which appeared in the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, abundant in detail, vivid colouring, complex and intricate compositions.

So deep was his admiration for the Medieval spirit that he commissioned his friend, the architect Philip Webb, to build a house for his wife and he that would have to be “*very medieval in spirit*”. The same dual perspective we have previously anticipated when referring to the double-faced god Janus tells the story of the *Red House*, the dwelling the newly weds lodged from 1860, which, although an example of modern architecture, displayed exclusively Gothic inspired interior decorations and furnishings. In love with his wife and the idea of building a home of his own, Morris did more than decorating a house; he left a manifesto of his artistic credo, bitterly disappointed as he was by the tawdry industrial manufacture, by the clichéd philosophy of mass production supported by the Industrial Revolution. “*His Red House of 1859 [...] represented not only the first modern attempt to shape a commodious home entirely from native building materials, but also the first effort to plan both exterior and interior as a single unit*” (Buckley, p. 141).

Victorians were much in love with their homes, within the walls of which their life wrote the intimate story of a most whirly century and Morris, “*more than any other decorator, [...] helped clear the Victorian home of the ugly, the ornate, and the inorganic; for more clearly than all, he provided a standard of intelligent selection and a will to carry into practice the first principles of his creed: 'Have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful'* ” (Buckley, p. 142).

The quest for beauty and elegant designs made Morris found a company together with some of his with friends from the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Charles Faulkner, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, P. P. Marshall, and his best companion, Philip Webb, in 1861 “*to create and sell medieval-inspired, handcrafted items for the home*” (Mackail, p. 197) that included furniture, printed textiles, wall-papers, carvings, stained-glass

and metal-work. Everything *Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.* created was intimately imbued with the Pre-Raphaelite credo of breathing emotion and truthfulness to nature, even if it meant imagining phantasmal lands of sensuous, luminous outlines. Interestingly enough, though seeking to find shelter in allegorical projections of the mind, no member of the Brotherhood 'tore' himself completely from the social fabric of his time. Nor did Morris, who, despite the fact of being an ardent advocate of an equal, classless society, and though it displayed what Mackail refers to as "innate Socialism", crafted only exquisite, luxurious items that would only supply a niche market. Far more powerful than his commitment to political ideas was his passion for art and its infinite richness, and everything was finally subdued to the artistic expression *per se*. "*The importance of decoration for its own sake and the belief in the relevance of arts to all parts of life that the Pre-Raphaelites emphasized had a special influence upon Morris' career. With his experience of architecture and painting and his hobbies of woodcarving and embroidery Morris was equipped to become a designer*" (Galea, p. 234).

Morris' gift and craftsmanship supplemented that of Owen Jones and Augustus Pugin in metamorphosing the public taste of his time, accounting for him being one of the leaders of the *Arts and Crafts Movement*, as well as founders of *The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* "*against the deterioration caused by the restorers*" (Galea, p. 234). Hence, beyond political concepts and ideologies, lies the supreme truth of beauty and art, the only truth any artist believes in and wholeheartedly commits to; nevertheless, William Morris was one artist who did not blur the line between the two completely, and even if, paradoxically enough, he dimmed his political views in favour of art supremacy, in his mind it was "*not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics and religion*" (Buckley, p. 177).

The narrative the title of the paper anticipated overlaps the wide spectrum of an age that travels the history of the world with the outbursting, fresh energy of new beginnings with an intricate webbing of design, written or drawn. Morris' entire work and life are a richly adorned tapestry of words or drawings, each summoning and recording the lost beauty of time immemorial. For William Morris, this meant the Medieval period, which he visited with the curious, yet awed spirit of the artist, who, pencil, brush or quill in hand captured the tapestry of an idyllic past. His literary productions display the same meticulousness in capturing details and shadowing contours and telling stories about the fascination for far-away places and moments in time. The Icelandic sagas he discovered and was so fond of, his preference for mythological tales and heroes speak of his propensity to dream and evoke "*imaginary lands or remote worlds in space and time, enveloped in a mysterious atmosphere, populated by hazy characters seized with feelings of joy and vague fears*" (Galea, p. 233).

Just as he believed that freedom comes with the power to explore the unique, creative resources of an artist's mind and spirit, and transpose them into authentic gems of creation, the resourcefulness of an age comes with its power to play with the matrix of time. In spite of his plastic perspective upon time, that made him embrace the *neige d'antan* over the rather gloomy horizons of the present, William Morris was a man of his age, as Victorians recommend themselves as visionaries, drive-and-ideas actors, whose talent and mind left the enduring prints of an overwhelmingly undeniable, enriching heritage. As if inspired by his characters, William Morris shaped our understanding of history, arts and culture in an almost infinite flow of colours and motifs, aware of the brevity of life whose beauty, ephemeral as it is, one must seize and immortalize.

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