The Symbolism of William Morris

by Ralph Berry

The initial impression that the work of William Morris makes is one of overwhelming variety. He is that great rarity, a man expressing himself in literature and the visual arts with equal fluency and eloquence; and the range within each major field is astonishing. Poetry (including a short play), fiction, lecture and tract; painting, drawing, architecture, the designing of stained-glass windows, textiles, wall-paper, books—the variety seems endless. But I wish here to emphasise the unity, and not the variety, of Morris' oeuvre. I suggest that his work exhibits from the beginning certain preoccupations, or is orientated towards certain symbolic poles. These symbols retain their magnetism for Morris throughout his career: and his work, therefore, seems to me a sustained exploration of these symbols, rather than a purely chronological process in which interests are dropped and others taken up. I shall, I hope, demonstrate this by considering the main contours of his work, from his earliest to his latest productions.

The Defence of Guenevere (1858) is the first major production of his life. As may now be seen clearly the volume did not find an attentive or understanding public. Even today, it is somewhat undervalued. Yet it seems to me the key to Morris' life-work. I would characterise the volume as Morris' Paradise Lost, for Paradise is the central inspiration of the collection and failure the situation of some two-thirds of the poems. Formally, the poems explore the world of Malory and Froissart. Essentially, they project situations of defeat and loss. The title poem states the motto-theme, for in it Guenevere, confronted with the choice between—in her words—heaven and hell, chooses hell:

(NB—The footnotes for this article are grouped at the end of it.)
Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you quite alone and very weak;
Yea, laid a dying while very mightily
The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
Of river through your broad lands running well:
Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:

'One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell
Of your own strength and mightiness, here, see!'
Yea, yea, my lord, and you to ope your eyes,
At foot of your familiar bed to see

A great God's angel standing, with such dyes,
Not known on earth, on his great wings, and hands,
Held out two ways, light from the inner skies
Showing him well, and making his commands
Seem to be God's commands, moreover, too,
Holding within his hands the cloths on wands;

And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;
No man could tell the better of the two.

After a shivering half-hour you said:
'God help! heaven's colour, the blue;' and he said, 'hell.'
Perhaps you then would roll upon your bed,

And cry to all good men that loved you well,
'Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known;'  2

The word 'dyes' has its own resonance in Morris' later career.
The inner, perhaps autobiographic meaning of this passage is
lost to us; but I emphasise the primary importance of Guenevere's
situation, as she recalls the past, lost happiness of her time with
Launcelot. Other poems offer variations on this theme. 'King
Arthur's Tomb' is Launcelot's panel in the diptych, the mirror
of Guenevere's lament. 'Old Love' makes Constantinople (and
its fall to the Turks) a figure for the loss of youth and love.
'Riding Together' and 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire' incor-
porates the same vision. Even the title of 'The Eve of Crecy'
makes its point. Yet Morris is not simply an elegist. He is aware
that the vision of Paradise is fully congruent with the symbol
of the Quest: and his 'Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery' is an
account of the most ardent visionary in Arthur’s company. It ends:

everywhere

The knights come foil’d from the great quest, in vain;
In vain they struggle for the vision fair.

The Sangreal, then, becomes another figure for the paradise that is lost and is one day to be regained.

There is a static and dynamic element in these poems. The dynamic is best seen in ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’, with its philosophy of living and fighting for beauty:

For, as I think, they found it such delight
To see fair Helen going through their town:
Yea, any little common thing she did
(As stooping to pick a flower) seem’d so strange,
So new in its great beauty, that they said:
‘Here we will keep her living in this town,
Till all burns up together.’

... Now

Why should I not do this thing that I think;
For even when I come to count the gains,
I have them my side: men will talk, you know,
(We talk of Hector, dead so long ago)
When I am dead, of how this Peter clung
to what he thought the right; of how he died,
Perchance, at last, doing some desperate deed
Few men would care do now, and this is gain
To me, as ease and money is to you.
Moreover, too, I like the straining game
Of striving well to hold up things that fall;
So one becomes great.

The activist philosophy of fighting for one’s ideal is, plainly, directly relevant to Morris’ subsequent career. The static complement to this is most tellingly represented in the opening of ‘Golden Wings’:

Midways of a walled garden,
In the happy poplar land,
Did an ancient castle stand,
With an old knight for a warden.

Many scarlet bricks there were
In its walls, and old grey stone;
Over which red apples shone
At the right time of the year.

On the bricks the green moss grew,
Yellow lichen on the stone,
Over which red apples shone;
Little war that castle knew.

Here is a word-painting of Morris’ prelapsarian paradise, the paradise that ends in:

The draggled swans most eagerly eat
The green weeds trailing in the moat;
Inside the rotting leaky boat
You see a slain man’s stiffen’d feet.

It expresses classically the motif of *The Defence of Guenevere*.

If *The Defence of Guenevere* is *Paradise Lost*, then *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70) is evidently an explicit intimation of a kind of paradise. It is however a surrogate rather than an attained reality. The introductory lyric suggests this:

Folk say, a wizard to a northern king
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the spring,
And through another saw the summer glow,
And through a third the fruitful vines a-row,
While still, unheard, but in its wonted way,
Piped the drear wind of that December day.

So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the beating of the steely sea,
Where tossed about the hearts of men must be:
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,
Not the poor singer of an empty day.

And the framework of the poem makes it clear, for the wanderers do not find the Earthly Paradise and are told that their quest is hopeless:

Such, sirs, are ye, our living chronicle,
And scarce can we be grieved at what befell
Your lives in that too hopeless quest of yours,
Since it shall bring us wealth of happy hours,
Whiles that we live, and to our sons’ delight,
And their sons’ sons.
As Graham Hough remarks, ‘The only Earthly Paradise there is the paradise of the tale-teller, the realm of art.’ The enduring realities are those of the struggle, the Quest—this is sufficiently symbolised by the Wanderers’ ship, ‘our keel, the Fighting Man’—and the vision itself:

But we... Have gathered hope to find across the sea
A land where we shall gain felicity
Past tongue of man to tell of:

And the vision itself seems more distant. Critics have complained of the diffuseness, and lack of urgency of The Earthly Paradise. The whole appears to be a poeticized tapestry, a series of friezes which do indeed depict vivid and memorable episodes but whose purpose is ultimately that of tapestry—to render more gracious and congenial the habitation in which one finds oneself. Perhaps Morris’ own verdict on this work is the best one. He came to prefer News from Nowhere as having ‘more real ideal’. The realisation of man’s aspirations was to be in the future, not in some misty land of romance in the past. ‘The best thing about it’, he is reported to have said of The Earthly Paradise, ‘is its name.’

Consider now the habitations that Morris did design. The central point is obvious: the house and its appurtenances were, for Morris, the embodiment of paradise as attainable upon this earth. Of the various houses he lived in, two matter above all others. One was Red House. He built it, and lived in it for the five years that his chief biographer regarded as the happiest and most fruitful of his life. As evidence of his general intentions we can take the drawing-room, which Morris openly proclaimed he would make the most beautiful room in England. Morris designed not merely the building, but—as we would say—the total environment.

Only in a few isolated cases—such as Persian carpets, and blue china or delft for vessels of household use—was there anything then to be bought ready-made that Morris could be content with in his own house. Not a chair, or table, or bed; not a cloth or paper hanging for the walls; nor tiles to line the fireplaces or passages; nor a curtain or a candlestick; nor a jug to hold wine or a glass to drink it out of, but had to be reinvented, one might almost say, to escape the flat ugliness of the current article.
Necessity compelled Morris to leave Red House in 1865 (he never returned to it) but it remained a striking achievement. It is given to few even today to design and see constructed their own material version of paradise, down to the curtains and tiles. Especially important was the garden, the token of man living in harmony with nature. In 1882 he wrote of the society he hoped for:

civilized man will no longer seem (as he does now) to be the enemy of nature, to shame and befoul her, and turn her rest and order and beauty into feverish ragged squalor: the house shall be like a natural growth of the meadow, and the city a necessary fulfilment of the valley. 7

The garden of Red House was planned with such care that scarcely any of the trees in the orchard needed to be felled: ‘apples fell in at the windows as they stood open on hot au­

The other house was at Kelmscott. Curiously, Morris never owned this most famous of his dwellings; he rented it from 1871 until his death. He did not even do much to the house, save replace the decayed floor-boards with the paving and wood blocks. Nevertheless, the house was uniquely Morris’. It incorporated the past, with which man must always come to terms, in ideal form; the flat, upper-Thames countryside around it was much to Morris’ taste; he loved the house, furnished it with his own creations, and described it memorably in his ultimate vision, News from Nowhere:

My companion gave a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment; nor did I wonder, for the garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious superabundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty. The blackbirds were singing their loudest, the doves were cooing on the roofridge, the rooks in the high elm-trees were garrulous among the young leaves, and the swifts wheeled whining about the gables. And the house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer . . . ‘Yes, friend, this is what I came out for to see. This many-gabled old house built by the simple countryfolks of the long-past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, is lovely still . . . and I do not wonder at our friends tending it carefully and making much of it. It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days . . . ’ (Chapter XXXI)
‘Happy’, ‘happiness’: these are, with ‘paradise’, prime words in Morris’ vocabulary, and Kelmscott is above all a house in which to be happy.

What of the interior of this, and other houses? Morris’ ideas here fit, though not without a little difficulty, into the framework I have discussed. His famous injunction, ‘Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful’ is the essential motto here, and needs no special comment: but his concept of ‘useful’ could be primitive. So sympathetic a commentator as Raymond Watkinson finds his views of furniture ‘rudely functional’—that is, it should in the first place withstand the strains he placed on it without breaking.

Furniture... although it must be strong, was stuff to move around. Its forms were dictated by human proportion, by the need to sit, to lay out food for a meal, books for reading or papers and colours for designing and by the need to keep some things safely in a cupboard or a cabinet. But as to form and proportion, the fundamentals of design, these he seems to have seen no need at all to meddle with.

But we can, I think, regard Morris’ views of furniture design as a lacuna in interest, rather than an aberration. His main preoccupations in this field were with textile and wall-paper design. These are crucial, and relate directly to Morris’ notions of the Earthly Paradise in actuality. His designs normally incorporate a floral or foliage motif. They are, broadly speaking, inventive, well-wrought, and pleasing. Yet they have been trenchantly criticized:

... the classic method of Morris’s art is patterning, and his classic production is wallpaper, wallpaper. As is often glibly said, the human eye delights in pattern; but pattern is not an adequate substitute for composition. Furthermore, pattern is only pleasing when kept within bounds. The bounds need to be those of the picture-frame, not those of a whole room. Just as rooms need windows, they need pictures; but no picture could properly exist in a room draped in Morris paper. The whole concept of wallpaper is an insult to the human eye’s ability to distinguish one thing from another. So too is Morris’ poetry, so very like wallpaper in that there is no reason for it ever to stop, and so too is the third major aspect of Morris’s boringness, the fact that his productions, though not entirely (for nothing is) meaningless and unemotional, all tend in that direction.
Unfair though this is—there is much more variation to Morris’ patterning than Hilton concedes here—the charge is important, and must be faced. Hilton is right, I think, to detect the essential analogy between Morris’ wall-paper and much of his poetry. Both become mental environments, whose ultimate objective is the relaxation and regeneration of the individual. They are decorative—a term that has no pejorative implications for Morris. But his patterns are scarcely ‘meaningless’, as Hilton would have it. Morris himself, in ‘Some Hints on Pattern Designing’, was at some pains to rebut this same point. ‘You may be sure that any decoration is futile, and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation, when it does not remind you of something beyond itself.’ This is not to be regarded as a recipe for mere naturalism, though. ‘Ornamental pattern work, to be raised above the contempt of reasonable men, must possess three qualities: beauty, imagination, and order.’ And of the second quality, Morris states:

... every work of man which has beauty in it must have some meaning also; that the presence of any beauty in a piece of handicraft implies that the mind of the man who made it was more or less excited at the time, was lifted somewhat above the commonplace; that he had something to communicate to his fellows which they did not know or feel before ...

Clearly, Morris understands by ‘decorative’ something more than pleasing abstract patterning. What is the essence of his treatment, and whence does it spring? It is technically, says Morris, the conventionalizing of nature. Beautiful and natural forms ‘will remind him not only of the part of nature which, to his mind at least, they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part.’ Morris’ designs all originate from some piece of nature: usually a plant or flower, occasionally a bird. His patterns are founded upon a precise and appreciative observation of natural forms.

The point is worth elaborating. The objectively real, the concrete is invariably the foundation of Morris’ creations. Just as he loved to bring out the inherent qualities of the material that he was employing—wood, stone, vegetable dyes, stained glass—so the visual imagery of his patterns (and indeed, of his poetry) embodies the surfaces of realities. His eye is a
camera obscura that records his environment. For this, ample evidence is available from the journals and letters. Morris had what poets often lack, a close eye for natural detail. There is an important corollary of this quality (it is not a necessary consequence): Morris was little interested in metaphor. His poetry is singularly lacking in metaphor, and indeed the essential quality of metaphor—suggestion by association—seems to have little place in Morris’ mental structure. This emerges very clearly in his pattern designs. It is natural to look closely for the emblematic significances of (say) the Blackthorn, Pomegranate, or Vine wall-papers, or the Dove and Rose fabric. One thinks, for example, of the use Shakespeare makes of the floral emblems in The Winter’s Tale (IV, iv). In fact, this approach is alien to Morris. So far as I can judge, there is no emblematic significance whatever to his designs, always granted their natural origin and the impressions which he wishes directly to stimulate. The point can be made convincingly by reference to his book ornament designs. It is obvious that books, which differ very greatly in content, have a claim to distinct and separate ornamental design, that is, that designs should reflect the book’s subject matter. Quite the contrary happens. There is technical variety in Morris’ book designs, but they seem unrelated to context. For instance, News from Nowhere (1892) has the same leafy-foliage border as Godefroye of Boleyne (1893) and other books. Typically, the Morris illuminated letter is white on black with foliage infilling. (As used in The Earthly Paradise of 1896.) A prolonged study of Morris’ designs has convinced me that he deployed them without reference to any precise emblematic significance.

But this is not to say that his devices do not contain a collective, symbolic significance. They do, and Morris’ own words on decoration, discussed above, point us in the right direction. Ray Watkinson’s perceptive commentary on Morris’ wall-paper takes us on:

Although for him repose is an essential quality which the designer should pursue, this does not mean that designs should be blank and static; rather that they should give up something of the relaxed pleasure of a garden. A wallpaper should be able to turn a room into a bower, a refuge, without insisting on its presence in the room with us.
We need to fasten on a single word to identify the symbol: 'bower'. That is it, exactly. A wall-paper of flowers and foliage becomes a sector of a garden, a bower, a refuge. The prevailing imagery is subsumed in a controlling symbol. The room itself becomes part of the Earthly Paradise.

* * *

The extension of the paradise theme into Morris' political thought is a natural movement. Much political thinking is in any event oriented towards visions of paradise. Characteristically, the conservative will find his ideal embodied in the past, the radical in a future state. Morris—never one to fit neatly into other people's categories—has, oddly, affinities with both streams. As a dedicated worker for the Socialist movement and convinced follower of Marx, he would naturally have repudiated any conservative leanings. Still, his gaze remained till the end of his life curiously fixed upon the past, as well as the future; and his Utopia is explicitly likened to the Middle Ages (News from Nowhere, Chapter XVIII). The essence of his Socialism was that the movement should provide a reconstructed society. And the prime justification of the new order was that it should make men happy. Happiness was not mere hedonism; it should result from a positive affirmation of life and in the pleasure which comes from the full exercise of man's faculties and creative powers.

I am bound to suppose that the realization of Socialism will tend to make men happy. What is it then that makes people happy? Free and full life and the consciousness of life. Or, if you will, the pleasurable exercise of our energies, and the enjoyment of the rest which that exercise or expenditure of energy makes necessary to us. I think that is happiness for all, and covers all difference of capacity and temperament from the most energetic to the laziest.14

And again:

civilisation . . . tends to reduce man to a machine without a will; to deprive him gradually of all the functions of an animal and the pleasure of fulfilling them, except the most elementary ones. The scientific ideal of the future of man would appear to be an intellectual paunch, nourished by circumstances over which he has no control, and without the faculty of communicating the results of his intelligence to his brother paunches . . . I demand a free and unfettered
animal life for man.\textsuperscript{14}

He looked in his new society for work to provide the principal happiness. Allied to this is his principle of fellowship. Again and again in his writings, he makes us aware of the importance he attached to this; he felt man to be one, not only with his fellow-men living at the time, but also with those who will come after. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in \textit{A Dream of John Ball} (1886):

\begin{quote}
`Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell; fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth it is for fellowship’s sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man’s life upon the earth shall wane.'\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
`Forsooth, I knew once more that he who doeth well in fellowship, and because of fellowship, shall not fail though he seems to fail today, but days hereafter shall he and his work yet be alive, and men be holpen by them to strive again and yet again; and yet indeed that was little, since forsooth, to strive was my pleasure and my life.'\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

\textit{News from Nowhere} makes clear the same idea and certainly contains at least a suggestion that it replaces conventional religion:

\begin{quote}
and now we do, both in word and deed, believe in the continuous life of the world of men, and, as it were, add every day of that common life to the little stock of days which our own mere individual experience wins for us and consequently we are happy . . .
\end{quote}

(Chapter XVIII)

Thus, Morris’ Socialist convictions led him to see the movement as the only possible vehicle for the future society of his dreams. This is not the place to analyse them at length,\textsuperscript{17} and indeed they contain some persistent contradictions. He did not, for instance, come to terms with the difficulties of translating revolutionary theory into practice. (His scenario for a revolution, in \textit{News from Nowhere}, happens to be fairly unconvincing.) He did not fully grasp that the Socialist movement, in the foreseeable future, might have no direct or radical answer to the ugliness of the industrial landscape, and the human problems of mass production. But it is clear that his Socialism was of a piece with his entire thought, and ‘address to the world’. He envisioned a society of comradeship, beauty,
and fulfilled creativity; and he looked to the Socialist movement to bring it into being.

That vision is made concrete in his romance, *News from Nowhere*. It is an Utopian idyll, a glimpse of England in the aftermath of a successful revolution. It moves from an evident reality (an anecdote of a Socialist meeting) to a dream, and back again. Mackail describes the book, slightly tenden­tiously, as a ‘pastoral’, and remarks that it ‘is of such beauty as may readily win indulgence for its artificiality’.

It is possible that what advertises itself as a Utopian romance should not be challenged on the score of probability; but I do not think so. There is no sense in discussing Utopias unless one asks how far they are possible, and one cannot write an effective moral fable by faking the physical conditions.

It is certainly true that the picture Morris draws is uncon­vincing, if beguiling. A society shorn of social frictions, silent on age and death, delegating unpleasant work to machines (and who produces and maintains them?): an absence of interna­tional problems: an absence even, it appears, of winter: one cannot take this too seriously. We have, for instance, no idea how the ‘Bordeaux’ that the party drinks at one point comes to be acquired from the accommodating French. And yet, in its odd way, the book convinces, for it has great charm. Morris has abandoned none of his convictions in writing it, and makes one of his characters say: ‘“What is the object of Revolution? Surely to make people happy. Revolution having brought its foredoomed change about, how can you prevent the counter-revolution from setting in except by making people happy?”’ (Chapter XV)

(Chapter XV) And his vision of a decentralised, post-industrial England, harking back to the Middle Ages, does have a dogged, internal consistency that is independent of the contradictions that any intelligent reader can easily discern in the fantasy. The truth is, as Hough rightly stresses, that ‘the book derives its strength from another source—it has the reality of a myth’.

The sense of myth is strong throughout: Ellen, for instance, takes on the dimensions of a Flora, a Perdita. Not social anal-
ysis, but the timeless vision of the Golden Age: this is what energizes, and validates, *News from Nowhere*.

The imagery and thought of William Morris form a unified whole. His vision focuses constantly upon a Paradise Lost, and Regained. His imagination swings from the landscapes of Iceland to that of the Thames; from the smoke-begrimed industrial devastation of the present to the post-Revolutionary society of the future; from the psychic pain and loss of *The Defence of Guenevere* to the easy, harmonious human relationships of *News from Nowhere*. The entire output of his firm constitutes, quite simply, the appurtenances of the Earthly Paradise. In this light the designs of his tapestries, curtains, windows, wall-papers, and books should be understood. And his Socialism is a programme for Paradise, the continuation of Sir Peter Harpdon’s philosophy of the struggle:

Moreover, too, I like the straining game
Of striving well to hold up things that fall;
So one becomes great.

All the same, the only Paradise attainable on this earth must be a habitable location. And so in the end one comes to Kelmscott Manor, which is the house the travellers come to in *News from Nowhere* and which is still available to us as the concrete image of his vision. There we can contemplate his fusion of action and thought, symbol and reality. The valance over his bed brings poetry to the service of furnishings, and it is perhaps no bad way to terminate a review of his symbolism.

The wind’s on the wold
And the night is a-cold,
And Thames runs chill
Twixt mead and hill,
But kind and dear
Is the old house here,
And my heart is warm
Midst winter’s harm.
Rest, then, and rest,
And think of the best
Twixt summer and spring
When all the birds sing
In the town of the tree,
And ye lie in me
But scarce dare move
Lest earth and its love
Should fade away
Ere the full of the day.

I am old and have seen
Many things that have been,
Both grief and peace,
And wane and increase.
No tale I tell
Of ill or well,
But this I say,
Night treadeth on day,
And for worst and best
Right good is rest.

FOOTNOTES


2 Quotations of Morris’ poetry are taken from the Kelmscott Press edition of 1892.


4 Recollections of William Sharp in the Atlantic Monthly (December 1896).


6 ibid., p. 147.


8 Mackail, op. cit., I, p. 148.

9 Raymond Watkinson, William Morris as Designer (Studio Vista, 1968), p. 43.

10 Timothy Hilton, The Pre-Raphaelites (Thames & Hudson, 1970), p. 172. See also the two highly independent and well-informed articles on Morris that Peter Floud published in The Listener, 7 and 14 October 1954. In them he exposes tellingly certain inconsistencies in Morris’ theory and practice, and some weaknesses in the conventional view of his achievement.
This and the subsequent passages are quoted in Watkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 43 *et seq.*

Looking for the origins of ornamental art, Morris found 'their teacher is not far to seek: whatever lived or grew around them . . . all these [natural objects] had been fashioned fair and lovely . . . how could they choose but take up the links of the chain and work as nature worked about them: . . . ’ ('Of the Origins of Ornamental Art', in Le Mire, *op. cit. cit.*, pp. 138–9).


ibid., p. 233.


ibid., p. 112.