William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites

Maria Cândida Zamith Silva | FLUP – CETAPS (Portugal)

> *I refuse to make myself really unhappy for anything*
> *short of the loss of friends one can't do without.*

> William Morris

To bring William Morris to your minds today as a living personality I will, paradoxically, recall Robert Blatchford's statement in his obituary, in the *Clarion*, October 1896:

> I cannot help thinking that it does not matter what goes into the *Clarion* this week, because William Morris is dead. […] It is true that much of his work still lives, and will live. But we have lost him, and, great as was his work, he himself was greater … he was better than his best […] In all England there lives no braver, kinder, honester, cleverer, heartier man than William Morris. He is dead, and we cannot help feeling for a while that nothing else matters. (qtd. in Naylor, 202)

In *Some Reminiscences,* his Pre-Raphaelite partner William Michael Rossetti describes him as "about the most remarkable man all round […]. He was artist, poet, romancist, antiquary, linguist, translator, lecturer, craftsman, printer, trader, socialist; and besides, as a man to meet and talk to, a most singular personality" (143).

These opinions are both impressive and accurate, and they give us a rather clear picture of the man. Unquestionably, however, there is even more to it; and the above excerpts may lead us to try and investigate what there is worth recalling beyond the man's achievements. William Morris was, as a human being, an indefatigable worker, a trustworthy friend, and, mainly, a mixture of D.

Quixote and Lancelot, always in quest for his ideal world. As a utopian writer and thinker, the society he imagined is one of the most optimistic and happy ones: his *News from Nowhere* is known all over the world and it keeps its power to entertain and teach us a few important lessons about happiness and conviviality. The honesty of his writings and the passion of his involvement in every new project he embraced, his changes of opinion, his in-and-out participation in the socialist movement, are notorious and remarkable. Also remarkable is his discovery, research and translation of the Nordic magic Sagas and the traditions of Iceland, his capacity to pursue one dream after another with unflinching enthusiasm, his conviction that Art, Beauty and Happiness should be for everyone. In later years he would explain his position: "I want to be happy, [...] and I find it difficult to believe that that is not the universal desire: so that, whatever tends towards that end I cherish with all my best endeavour" (*Collected Works, Vol. XXIII*, 81). All this is true, immense, and humanly and socially important.

Nevertheless, conditioned by subject restrictions I will not be dealing today with the bulk of these overwhelming topics. My concern is centred around and derives from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in 1848 by a group of very young and revolutionary English painters, influenced by John Ruskin and his writings.

This movement was started by John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Holman Hunt (respectively nineteen, twenty and twenty one years old) as a protest against the conventional Victorian art represented by the Royal Academy and the imitators of Raphael. They wanted to institute a new way of art, "with the aim of returning to 'Nature', while rejecting what they saw as the moribund academic tradition stemming from Raphael and Renaissance classicism" (Bird, 120). In a way, they were the English counterpart to the French Impressionist movement, with the particularity that their innovative and

revolutionary project was anchored to the past, to the values and techniques of Fra Angelico and other Pre-Raphael painters. They wanted to transplant those medieval values and techniques to their time, adapted to guarantee a brighter and happier vision of Nature, and more Beauty for all. This aim was in unison with the ideas displayed in John Ruskin's writings, particularly the chapter "The Nature of Gothic" in the 2nd volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). Therefore, no wonder that Ruskin gave the group his public approval and came to be considered by some as their spokesman (*apud* Vogt, 131). This important position and support of such a renowned figure in the artistic and literary milieu helped to change the initially very hostile and critical public view of the Brotherhood into a more positive approach.

William Morris was introduced into this community by his school mate Edward Burne-Jones. They had come to Oxford with the intention of taking holy orders, but they both were more strongly attracted by the ideas and style of life of that selected group of artists who rebelled against the conventions to bring something new to the arts. After sharing lodgings in London for some months they joined the Brotherhood, and this was an opening trend to the whole of Morris's subsequent life, orienting him in the pursuit of his dreams to find innovative, purer, and equalitarian ways to spread happiness for all the strata of society.

Before becoming one of the Pre-Raphaelites Morris had found the time to get interested in architecture and to start a life-long friendship with Philip Webb, who would later design the famous Red House for him. With the Pre-Raphaelites, Morris acquired that craving for liberty of thought and artistic creation for all, which became the distinctive features of his character throughout his life. He quitted architecture for painting, and it was as a member of the Brotherhood and under the tutoring of Dante Gabriel Rossetti that he produced the most remarkable of his (rather few) paintings, "Queen Guenevere" (also known as "La

Belle Iseult", on display at Tate Gallery, London) in the year 1858, the same year when he published his poem "The Defense of Guenevere". In the company of those irreverent artists he was often the target for friendly jokes and sketches, particularly concerning his stout figure and abundant curly hair, and also his never appeased appetite, as can be seen in many of Burne-Jones's drawings, as, for instance, "Morris eating" or "Morris reading his poems to Burne-Jones".

He himself accepted and even joined the joyful teasing group, same as he didn't mind accepting the nickname *Topsy* which Burne-Jones had chosen for him due to his restlessness, clumsy and brusque movements and gruff voice, and which was generally used in the group.

Besides the painters and other artists, Morris became acquainted with the painters' models, and among them he met the beautiful eighteen-year-old Jane Burden; he soon fell in love with her and they were married in 1859. They had their honeymoon on the Continent, where they visited with particular interest the beautiful Gothic cathedrals which instilled in Morris the devotion for the times and mores of the Middle Ages, when each artisan could be proud of his creation and see it as a finished and personal work of art. He loathed the massive mechanisation that sprang from the Industrial Revolution because he believed, as he said much later in a lecture, that "the Aim of Art is to increase the happiness of men, by giving them beauty and interest of incident to amuse their leisure, and prevent them wearying even of rest, and by giving them hope and bodily pleasure in their work; […] genuine art is an unmixed blessing to the race of man" (*Collected Works, Vol. XXIII*, 54).

William and Jane (Janey) had two daughters: Jenny (Jane Alice), who came to suffer from epilepsy, and May (Mary), who would accompany her father's activities and later become the publisher of his Collected Works in twenty-four volumes. They lived for some time in the Kent beautiful Red House which Philip Webb designed and Morris decorated helped by Rossetti, Burne-Jones and

Swinburne. According to Rossetti, the Red House was "more a poem than a house but admirable to live in too" (qtd. in Naylor, 14). In reality, this Red House may be considered as the first manifestation of what would later be known as the Arts and Crafts style.

Among the all-masculine community of the Pre-Raphaelites, women were merely beautiful accessories to the men artists, although some of them also practised tapestry work, or even painting or other artistic activity. The most exquisite and beautiful of all was Elizabeth (or Lizzy) Siddal (the Ophelia in the famous painting by Millais), who learnt and practised to be a reasonable painter herself. Rossetti entertained a long *liaison* with her; in 1860 they were finally married but two years later she died of consumption. The widower's grief was so great that he buried all his poems (many inspired by her) in her coffin; however, in 1869 he was repentant of his action, and he succeeded in obtaining permission to have the corpse exhumed, thus recovering the poems.

These years were not fortunate to Morris's sentimental life either. Without Lizzy, and after a brief *affair* with another model, Fanny Cornforth, Rossetti saw Jane again as a lovable woman, at the same time when she herself was getting tired of her husband's continuous involvement in one after another absorbing project. Meanwhile, Morris had become ill with rheumatic fever and he was forced to reduce the intensity of his life; and so, much as he regretted it, he had to give up his beloved Red House. In 1865 he established the family residence in London, in the top floor above his Bloomsbury workshop of Queen Square. Jane had resumed her occupation as painters' model and she hadn't forgotten her liberty of thought and behaviour. Some of Rossetti's best pictures, such as "Mariana"[1], "Pandora"[2], or "Bruna Brunelleschi"[3] have her as a model, and their intimacy gave rise to gossip and caricatures in *Punch*. However, Morris seemed to accept everything to keep Janey happy. This became even more crucial when he decided to take over the lease, with the widowed Rossetti, of "a little place

deep down in the country, where my wife and children are to spend some months every year"[4] – a country home close to the River Thames, on the Oxfordshire/Gloucestershire borders. When Morris went in his tour to Iceland with Charles Faulkner and his Icelander friend and at one time teacher Eiríkr Magnússen, Rosseti stayed on with Jane and the children. Openly unmoved, Morris discreetly confesses to a friend that he has been "backwards and forwards to Kelmscott". He affirms that "nor indeed does it spoil my enjoyment of life always, as I have often told you: to have real friends and some sort of aim in life is so much, that I ought still to think myself lucky", but nevertheless he cannot help mentioning the "selfish business"

> that Rossetti has set himself down at Kelmcott as if he never meant to go away; and not only that keeps me away from the harbour of refuge (because it really is a farce our meeting when we can help it) but also he has all sorts of ways so unsympathetic with the sweet simple old place, that I feel his presence there is a kind of slur on it.[5]

This shows how he cherished Kelmscott Manor and also how the relationship Janey/Rossetti distressed him. But his natural kindness and goodwill prevail when he exclaims a few lines below "O how I long to keep the world from narrowing in on me, and to look at things bigly and kindly!" At last, when the situation became untenable Morris finally broke up with Dante Gabriel and the latter left Kelmscott Manor. After that the family went to the Continent, in a long visit to Italy.

In 1861 Morris had created the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. where he was the managing partner, counting with the contributions of leading Pre-Raphaelite artists, particularly Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Their works became widely known and appreciated, and they got important commissions for churches and public buildings, of which one

can find good examples in, for instance, the stained glasses of St. Michael's church in Forden, Wales (1873), or the tapestry *Adoration of the Magi* of the Exeter College (1890). Notwithstanding the commercial success, however, the firm was dissolved in 1874, probably when the situation at home became untenable, but more openly perhaps because Morris wanted to be the sole owner and decision maker. Morris's firm was superseded the following year by a new one, Morris & Co. Some of the old partners took it very badly that they should be abruptly "dismissed", and a long lasting estrangement installed itself among the several families involved, as it can be detected from a photograph showing the Burne-Jones and Morris families together in that year 1874.[6] Although some kind of relationship was in time renewed, the old camaraderie of the first years of the Brotherhood was never brought to life again.

During these troubled years, driven by the adverse circumstances together with the wish to abandon painting to dedicate his efforts and money to promote the so-called minor arts, Morris had taken the decision to quit the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Some of the artists followed him in his new projects and, although no association was officially established, they came to constitute a second version of the revolutionary group. Morris had become more and more interested in the ways of medieval arts and crafts, wanting to bring beauty to the houses, furniture and objects of everyday life. He was at the core of the Arts & Crafts Movement, having been the main creator of its characteristic style of simplicity and beauty, although the actual name itself was only coined in 1887 by T. J. Cobden Sanderson. The movement soon acquired international scope, with repercussions all over Europe and also in North America and other continents. Morris had been persistently learning and practising every one of the crafts he wanted to develop and make accessible to the public, although – understandably – he never succeeded to make them reach and benefit the lower classes he wanted to promote. Naturally, each article being unique and a true work of art, it

could not be accessible to lower budgets within the prevailing capitalist system of the new society. Frustrated in his equalitarian efforts, Morris turned his energies to his poetry and to the different decorative arts in which he now excelled.

A period of great intellectual activity followed his personal crisis. From the late 1860s to the end of the next decade Morris published intensely in poetry: *The Life and Death of Jason*, *The Earthly Paradise*, *A Book of Verse*, *Love is Enough*, and *Sigurd the Volsung*; in addition to the translations of Horace's *Odes* and Virgil's *Eneida,* besides some Icelandic sagas. In 1868 Morris describes himself in *The Earthly Paradise* as

> Dreamer of dreams, born out of my time,
> ………….
> Telling a tale not too important
> To those who in the sleepy region stay,
> Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

And in "September" he makes one of the rare confessions of his sorrow:

> Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
> Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
> And hope no more for things to come again […]

In 1878 Morris rented a new house, *The Retreat*, in Hammersmith, which he baptised as Kelmscott House. From its windows one could follow the traditional Oxford/Cambridge race, a particularity which Morris appreciated. And he made at least two boat journeys from there to his country manor. In 1881 he moved his workshops to Merton Abbey, in Surrey, where he disposed of suitable facilities to dye and print his textiles, design and make tapestries, rugs and carpets, or any other kind of household materials. By that time he wrote to his

wife describing the suitability of the site, emphasising its location: "Wardle and Webb are gone today to have a look at those premises at Merton […] There are decided advantages about the […] place; first, it would scarcely take me longer to get there from Hammersmith than it now does to Queen Square […]" (qtd in Naylor, 143).

Until his death in 1896 Morris never ceased to write and publish poems, cultural or political intervention articles, translations of classical texts or Icelandic Sagas. He also sponsored the publication of several journals, from *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) to the socialist *Commonweal* (1885). He received an invitation to teach poetry in Oxford (1877), and an assignment as Poet Laureate (after the death of Tennyson in 1892), both of which he declined. In the meantime he helped found the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* (1876), he was made "Honorary Fellow of Exeter College", Oxford, he was a delegate of the *Socialist League* at the "Congrès de la Deuxième Internationale" in Paris (1889), he was elected "Master of the Art Workers' Guild" (1892), and he founded the "Kelmscott Press" where his poetic works were published, together with those of some eminent poets such as John Keats, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He so cherished his Kelmscott Manor that his two subsequent sites were named after it. Along the years, the activity of his workshop had also increased considerably, whilst Morris busied himself studying and practising new crafts, creating designs (which would become famous) for wallpapers, fabrics, tapestries, carpets, embroideries, iron works, books, tiles, stained glass, pieces of furniture, or any kind of decorative or useful objects for the house.

Since the early 1880s Morris's concern for the working classes took a more political trend and he tried to establish an official movement which might have a say in Government on their behalf. But none of the existing alternatives quite satisfied him, not even the Socialist League, the initial ideals of which were being

twisted to suit personal or party interests. He also quitted the Socialist Party for the same reason. The problem was that, as V. Dupont states, "son propre idéal humanitaire dépasse l'économie. Il est à la recherche du bonheur, non pas de la surabondance des biens matériels" [his own humanitarian ideal goes beyond the economic. He looks for happiness, not for over-abundant material assets] (Préface, 52). He remained, however, a fighter for equality of rights against all the odds until his death and he did not spare his efforts and involvement together with his money. As Naylor says: "There was no sudden conversion, and no violent transition between Morris the Romantic and Morris the Revolutionary; he was consistent in all his thinking, in his theory as well as his practice, always relating his ideals and interpretation of the past to his hopes and fears for the future" (17). He fought for his ideals with his pen, his voice and his money: with his pen he wrote *News from Nowhere* and a great number of articles in different periodicals to reach a vast array of readers; with his voice he was a clever and persuasive preacher in parks and at street corners, or while marching at the head of crowds, same as lecturing in conference rooms; on 13th November 1887 (the *Bloody Sunday*) Morris marched with the protesters and he was taken to jail with most of them; with his money he helped financing social or political projects which he thought useful, including the Arts & Crafts movement or the Independent Labour Party. At the same time, he never forgot his passion of hope for the art "that will make our streets as beautiful as the woods" (May Morris, *Collected Works, Vol. XVI*, xvj) or the optimism as expressed in the last words of his lecture "Make the Best of It": "Have you not heard how it has gone with many a cause before now? First few men heed it; next most men condemn it; lastly all men accept it; and the cause is won" (*Idem*).

Morris's final great manifestation of the Beautiful, the Kelmscott Press, which "was also his final, perhaps his only, self-indulgence" (in Naylor, 18), published some 50 fine press editions of classical and contemporary works. The

last and most magnificent of all was *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted*, with illustrations by Burne-Jones. Morris himself contributed with the designs for the full-page woodcut title, plus the borders for the pictures, six large initial words and all the ornamental initial letters, large or small. This *Kelmscott Chaucer*, as it came to be known, is a major piece of art and the last one supplied by William Morris's efforts in his Middle Ages style.

If one attempts to trace any kind of predecessors to William Morris, such a task will end up with a nearly complete failure. Besides the medieval artistic references of all kinds, one may consider, as possible inspiration for the floral designs, old representations from the times of Greece and Crete, designs carved or painted on the remnants of walls of temples or palaces; also the 'indiennes', the exotic fabrics brought from the Far East by the East Indian Companies after the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama opened the maritime way to the western trade; connected to these, the Alsacian textile manufacturers who produced beautiful copies of the fashionable fabrics up to the late nineteenth century, some of which still survive – it should be remembered that there was an old French tradition of textile printing workshops (the names of Christophe-Philippe Overkampf, Jean-Baptiste Huet or the Haussmann brothers of Rouen come to mind);[7] and further, nearer at hand, the famous British symbol, the five-petal Tudor rose. However, William Morris had always the knack of making something new and his very own out of the artistic manifestations he admired in the past, because he was a born creator of art, never an imitator. Indeed he was, unquestionably, the initiator of a multifarious artistic movement which aimed at bringing more beauty to everybody's daily surroundings, with such success that it came to spread all over the world.

His predecessors are hard to find, but he does not lack successors. Indeed, the fame of William Morris's designs soon reached most of the European and North American countries, and, after his death, many disciples and followers

were keeping his memory and heritage alive. A great number of high middle class houses were for decades embellished with wallpapers donning Morris's floral designs.

During Morris's own lifetime and shortly after his death, a number of very 'avant-garde' modernist movements adopted similar or adapted floral designs, nature inspired gardens, medieval like furniture, architectural choices, and so on. Some copies of original Morris's designs are still being produced to this date in relatively large quantities by modern mechanized means, adapted to wall papers, bedspreads, wall-hangings, or cushions, and can be purchased through www.william/morris.co.uk. Among them, for instance, is the Jane's Daisy bedspread, based in a wall-hanging dated from the early 1860s, designed for the Red House and possibly embroidered by Morris himself, his wife Jane and her sister.

In the literary field, W. B. Yeats, whose career "serves well as a bridge between early and late periods of collectivism and modernism" (Tratner, 135) was so keen on Morris's ideals and poetry that in his early years he tried to imitate his ways. In "I See Phantoms", for instance, he shows himself "unwilling to give up his cherished optimism, […] the hope of the happiness of William Morris" (*Idem*, 152). Yeats himself said in *Bookman*, in 1896: "In the literal sense of the word, and in the only high sense, he was a prophet; and it was his vision of that perfect life, which the world is always trying […] to bring forth, that awakened every activity of his laborious life" (qtd. in Naylor, 202). Charles Dickens expressed openly his appreciation for the man and his ideas. And in the late 1880s George Bernard Shaw was a regular speaker at the meetings of the Socialist Democratic Federation in the Coach House (Kelmscott House).

Morris's influence on J. R. R. Tolkien was still stronger and more durable. As it can be inferred from his letters, one of the greatest influences on his writings was "the Arts & Crafts polymath William Morris". He wished to imitate his prose

and poetry romances. From him he took hints for names of features in, for instance, *The Lord of the Rings*, and he dealt with Icelandic subjects and legends which Morris made accessible and popular. One good example is *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, a verse retelling of the Norse Völsung cycle, published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien in 2009 (Harper Collins).[8]

In *The Letters of Henry James* (1920), one can read: "Morris himself is extremely pleasant and quite different from his wife. He impressed me most agreeably. He is short, burly, corpulent, very careless and unfinished in his dress […] He has a very loud voice and a nervous, restless manner and a perfectly unaffected and business-like address. His talk indeed is wonderfully to the point and remarkable for clear, good sense . . . He's an extraordinary example, in short, of a delicate sensitive genius and taste, saved by a perfectly healthy body and temper" (qtd. in Naylor, 204).

Whilst in literature the "echoes" of Morris were individual since, as commented by someone shortly after his death: "It was a curious thing that here was a great artist and no school" (qtd. in *Collected Works Vol. XVI*, xxviij), the influence of his ideas in architecture was even more visible and general. A remarkable example can be noted in Catalonia, where a group of architects including Gaudi, Vilaseca, Domènech and Fontseré gave life to a project of revitalization of the industrial arts. Among these innovators, Luís Domènech I Montaner (1849-1923) is perhaps the one with a wider field of artistic interests stemming from Morris's examples. Besides being a remarkably innovative architect he was also a renowned industrial designer, whose tile panels, stained glass windows and exquisite pieces of furniture (mostly applied in churches and official buildings) owe much to the works of William Morris. Following the example of Morris, Domènech proposed to study the very composition of materials and develop specific designs that would integrate the traditional crafts, materials and techniques whose recovery was the basis of his entire repertoire

of ornamentation. With the exception of the Arts & Crafts Association, the *Castell dels Tres Dragons* (Domènech's workshop) was the first collective endeavour to bring craftsmen, artists and architects together in a shared project (*apud* Figueras, 205).

Further to the Catalonia example, it is imperative to mention the Deutscher Werkbund, a German association of artists, architects, designers, and industrialists, founded in 1907 in Munich at the instigation of Hermann Muthesius, who also wrote an exhaustive survey of the practical lessons of the English Arts & Crafts movement. The action and endeavours of the Werkbund were intensified in 1919 by the Staatliches Bauhaus, a school founded in Weimar by the architect Walter Gropius with the idea of creating a 'total' work of art in which all arts would eventually be brought together. The Bauhaus moved to Dessau in 1925, to Berlin in 1932, and it was closed in 1933 under pressure of the Nazi regime. The Bauhaus style became one of the most influential currents in Modernist architecture and modern design, and it had a profound influence upon subsequent developments in art, architecture, graphic, industrial and interior design, and typography.

In this context, the Portuguese works at Caldas da Rainha, the *Fábrica de Faianças das Caldas da Rainha,* should not be forgotten, since its original and colourful creations in glazed earthenware show unquestionable, rather avowed, debt to the work of William Morris and to the Arts & Crafts Association.

I believe that these examples illustrate the vast and persistent expansion of the ideas and message of William Morris, "one of the most versatile, energetic and original men of his time, a force that impinged decisively on the world of practice" (Leavis, qtd. in Naylor, 205). In short, a man for all seasons and for all kinds of people, a man with whom we can learn a lot, particularly the art of being happy.

[1] Oil painting, 1868-70, City of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collection.

[2] Chalk drawing (a study for Pandora), 1869, Bridgeman Art Library, London.

[3] Bodycolour, 1878, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

[4] Letter to unknown recipient, Aug.-Sept. 1871.

[5] Letter to Aglaia Coronio, 27 Nov. 1872.

[6] Photograph by Frederic Hollyer (in *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their World*, p. 194 – *Courtesy of the Board of Trustees of the V & A*).

[7] Further information can be obtained in the introductions to *18th Century Textile Printing*, *19th Century French Flowers*, and *Roses*, respectively by J. Jacqué, Susan Meller and Susan Meller. Joost Elffers Books. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991(edition 2005 Könemann, Tandem Verlag GmbH).

[8] In Wilkipedia, consulted 10 November 2012.

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