

D. G. Rossetti and William Morris

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D. G. Rossetti

Last year's publications on Dante Rossetti and William Morris were fewer than usual, but nonetheless in aggregate, these offer new insights and approaches. For Rossetti, Fergus McGhee's "Rossetti's Giorgione and the Victorian 'Cult of Vagueness'" (*Cambridge Quarterly* 50, no. 3 [2021]: 279–295) identifies an important aspect of Rossetti's aesthetic as expressed in his essay "Hand and Soul": a commitment to what he called "definite vagueness," a precise impression of unknowability. After noting the importance of this concept to several of Rossetti's contemporaries, including Edgar Allan Poe, McGhee illuminates ways in which Rossetti's sonnet "A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione; in the Louvre" is specifically designed to evoke a mood of haziness, mutability, and indefinability that he associated with the Renaissance Venetian concept of *vaghezza*. McGhee notes that Rossetti's paintings for pictures are, in fact, characterized by a *lack* of correspondence between the painting and its accompanying poem, so much so that for his early poems-cum-pictures, he originally wrote out prose descriptions. McGhee demonstrates that Rossetti's revisions were carefully designed to increase this sense of elusiveness, and he differs with earlier critics who place the poem within an ekphrastic tradition. Instead, Rossetti's sonnet, through its several changes in tone and speaker, creates a sense of shifting intimacy and distance, relying "for the complexity of its effect upon a continuous tussle between inner and outer perspectives," avoiding the grandiose or unearthly transcendent effect sought by many others in favor of something "fragile, tangible, near at hand" (p. 289).

In "Rossetti Reconsidered: Dante's *Vita Nuova* and Its Paths to Canonization in Victorian Literary Culture" (*Le tre corone* 8 [2021]: 1–164), Frederica Coluzzi places Rossetti's well-known 1861 translation of his *The Early Italian Poets* within the context of the other creative and critical Dantean translations and reappropriations that flourished between the 1840s and 1880s. She notes the distinctive features of Rossetti's edition, whose more than two hundred poems had been carefully collated from British Museum materials including chronicles, anthologies, and imperfect poetic texts representing varied styles, periods, and dialects. Rossetti had scrupulously sought the opinions of

his literary friends and contacts, including Tennyson, Ruskin, William Allingham, Charles Eliot Norton, and Elizabeth Gaskell, and his careful arrangements sought to replicate the melodies of the originals, as well as providing the first overview of the development of early Italian poetry and its influence on Dante. He had not been alone, however, for in 1860, the American Charles Eliot Norton had issued a *New Life of Dante Alighieri* that included his own translation of the *Vita Nuova* with extensive commentaries, and shortly after the publication of Rossetti's volume, Theodore Martin issued another version of *The Vita Nuova of Dante* (1862) in a less expensive annotated edition. Reviewers appreciated the fact that Rossetti's anthology provided an original history of the formation of an Italian national literature, but sales were modest. Rossetti then issued a new edition in 1874 under the title *Dante and His Circle*, rearranging its contents to emphasize its importance for the study of this increasingly popular poet. The material in Coluzzi's valuable account of the distinctive features of Rossetti's work and his relationship to predecessors and competitors might well have been included in her *Dante Beyond Influence*, reviewed shortly, since to fully understand the topic, one would need to read both works. A further topic might also merit attention: the extent to which Rossetti recast the original texts of his non-Dantean translations. He had prepared translations of Blake's poems for *The Life of William Blake* (2 vols., 1863) as a favor to Anne Gilchrist, who was then editing her late husband Alexander's work for publication, and although Rossetti's versions are arguably distinctive creative works in their own right, they differ significantly from the versions prepared by more recent Blake editors.

Frederica Coluzzi's *Dante Beyond Influence: Rethinking Reception in Victorian Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2021) approaches the issue of translation and reception more broadly. She concentrates on the years 1865–1921 as manifesting a “hermeneutical turn,” in contrast to earlier, more romantic and generalizing approaches. In contrast to her aforementioned article on Dante Rossetti's translations, Coluzzi emphasizes the contributions of William Michael Rossetti and his sisters, notably providing a corrective to the relative oblivion into which Maria Rossetti's 1871 *The Shadow of Dante: Being an Essay towards Studying Himself, His World, and His Pilgrimage* has fallen. An accepted member of her father's circle of *dantisti* who had assisted Charles Lyell in his revision of an edition of Dante's poems, Maria was in fact the freest of the Rossetti siblings from her father's influence, eschewing his esoteric readings of the figure of Beatrice and keeping her distance “from his allegorical fanaticism that interpreted the *Commedia* as a reflection of . . . Gabriele's own historical and contextual reality” (p. 103). As the first analytical,

reflective, and detailed scholarly commentary for a wider Victorian audience, *The Shadow of Dante* was a critical and popular success; it garnered ten editions, was featured in Mudie's Circulating Library, and received praiseful reviews in the *Athenaeum*, the *Nation*, the *Academy*, and the *Saturday Review*, as well as from American reviewers such as James Russell Lowell, who remarked in the *North American Review* that Maria's work was "by far the best commentary that has appeared in English, and the best that has been done in England" (p. 114).

Bircan Nizamoglu's "The Dynamics of Progress and Regress in Rossetti's 'Eden Bower': Lilith as a Degenerative Force?" (*Anglo Saxonica* 19, no. 1 [2021]: 1–12) applies Victorian debates about evolution and female sexuality to Rossetti's poem ventriloquizing the snake who, according to legend, had served as Adam's first wife before her expulsion from Eden. Nizamoglu draws parallels between Victorian scientific fears of human degeneration, contemporary beliefs that women's position in the evolutionary sequence is closer than men's to nature and thus "bestiality," and the poem's portrayal of a seductively revengeful temptress who accomplishes through deceit the fall of humankind. Herbert Spencer had asserted that women's weaker intelligence caused them to seek to please men, disguise their latent hostilities, and exert persuasion to obtain their desires; Rossetti's Lilith exhibits these traits as she convinces the primal Snake to lend her his shape through a grotesque intertwining of serpent and human. Nizamoglu notes that, as contemporary scientists discerned both evolution and devolution within nature, Lilith and her victims both evolve and regress: though Eve represents an evolution beyond Lilith, the latter regresses to serpentine form; Lilith can only bear snakes as progeny, whereas Eve bears sons, a seeming evolution, yet one of these sons regresses to become the first murderer. Rossetti's conception of history is thus cyclical, as successive cycles of evolution and degeneration determine human fate, and Nizamoglu finds Rossetti's most original contribution to be his harmonization of the biblical story, discredited by many intellectuals of the time, with evolutionary theory and Victorian fears of racial degeneration. He does not speculate on the reasons Rossetti considered the story of Lilith's revenge as "a splendid subject" (p. 2), but the projection of sexuality onto a repellently grotesque (yet tempting) female agent would seem to invite psychoanalytic interpretation.

William Morris

Owen Holland's *Literature and Revolution: British Responses to the Paris Commune of 1871* (London: Routledge, 2021) offers the first extended study of the enormous shadow cast by the Commune across the literature of the British Isles. Though most writers observed this brief revolutionary seizure of power

with varying degrees of anxiety or distaste, the Pre-Raphaelites and their circle, including Ford Madox Brown, Dante Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, and William Morris, manifested various forms of favorable response. Holland explores the representations of the Communard cause in a range of popular novels, including those by Edward Bulwer Lytton, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Margaret Oliphant, George Gissing, Henry James, H. G. Wells, and Eliza Lynn Linton (the most favorable). The sole chapter on poetry, “The Uses of Tragedy: Alfred Austin’s *The Human Tragedy* and William Morris’s *The Pilgrims of Hope*,” contrasts Austin’s retrospective 1889 epic with Morris’s sympathetic account of English Communards serialized in the Socialist League newspaper, *Commonweal*. For Austin, the fall of the Communards confirmed that efforts to alter social circumstances for the better would inevitably fail and, indeed, that the Commune had “brought with it a war of classes bitterer even than that of nations, and has already exacted its tribute of anguish, in the merciless struggles of the Paris Commune” (p. 121). Austin’s characters suffer from private tragedies of “repressed love and missed opportunity,” however, rather than on account of political commitments.

By contrast, Morris’s *The Pilgrims of Hope* attempts the more difficult task of framing a tale of personal loss within the larger question, “How may the ideals of the Communards survive the violent fall of the Commune itself?” Holland notes that *Pilgrims* played an important role “in securing the Commune’s symbolic status in Britain” (p. 132). As confirmation, he reviews other contemporary socialist poems on the Commune by Walter Crane, Pakenham Beatty, Charles Markham, Reginald Beckett, and Fred Henderson, which blend commemoration with faith that this defeat has been the first stage in a dialectical struggle leading to a more triumphant future. Holland notes a frequent tension in prose retrospectives of the Commune between memorialization and critique, as tributes to the heroism of socialist martyrs brush against desires to consider alternate paths or embark on entirely new efforts. Socialist poems emphasized the more hopeful aspects of revolutionary precedent; accordingly, the final scene of *Pilgrims* presents a saddened former Communard who lives to bring the socialist message of hope to his native Britain: “And I cling to the love of the past and the love of the day to be, / And the present, it is but the building of the man to be strong in me” (chapter 13).

Elizabeth Carolyn Miller’s *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2021) places Morris’s *News from Nowhere* within a tradition of late nineteenth-century speculative fiction that contemplates the ongoing destruction of nature. In her chapter “Worldbuilding Meets Terraforming: Energy, Extraction, and Speculative

Fiction," Miller examines fictions that are set in extractive spaces or that examine a post-extractive society, noting that by removing features of the primary world, such texts are able to dramatize broader transformations in energy and energy change (p. 142). The resultant "anti-extractivism" reflects disquiet that "the circuits of capitalism have become . . . beholden to stocks of finite underground material" (p. 150). *News from Nowhere*, for example, emphasizes the extent to which the citizens of Nowhere have eliminated the pervasive smoke of coal pollution in favor of a land devoted to love of "the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells" (p. 169).

Predicated on the recognition that capitalism is inherently wasteful—Morris had remarked in "Art under Plutocracy," "I tell you the very essence of competitive commerce is waste" (1883)—Nowhere is arranged as "a garden wherein nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt" (chapter 10). Miller notes that Morris's initial position as the heir of shares of Devonshire Great Consuls (sold in 1877 as he began his activist career) had enabled him to understand the destruction inherent in mining and thus prepared him to write a post-extractive-energy utopia, with its "prescient attention to the damaging environmental effects of extractivism across his body of work" (p. 174). She concludes, strikingly, that "Nowhere has reached, at once, the end of nature and the end of history." The collapse of the capitalist economy and the "split-level world it created" has been dissolved, and Morris's utopia, through its disentanglement from dependence on Earth's subterranean levels, achieves an "aesthetic realization of post-extractivism" (p. 177).

In "Morris's Dramatic Scenes" (*Essays in Criticism* 71, no. 4 [2021]: 414–430), Kei Nijibayashi identifies the dramatic elements present in *The Defence of Guenevere* and *The Earthly Paradise*, which she notes have received minimal critical attention. Observing that "the reality Morris tried to represent is not that of a Pre-Raphaelite static accuracy but of the inner dynamism of the characters" (p. 416), she examines many instances in which a character's emotions are reflected in bodily poses; in addition to the more famous examples in the opening passage of *The Defence*, Nijibayashi identifies several more throughout the volume and in such *Earthly Paradise* tales as "The Lady of the Land" and "The Story of Rhodope." Many of these are vignettes of women, whose emotions are revealed through the motions of their hands and feet: for example, in "The Lovers of Gudrun," after Gudrun comes to the recognition that both Kiartan and Bodli wish to marry her, she sleeps with "one arm deep buried in her hair, one spread / Abroad, across the 'broideries of the bed, / A smile upon her lips, and yet a tear" (p. 425), a pose indicating both foreknowledge and ambivalence. Nijibayashi cautions against overgeneralized contrasts

between the styles of *The Defence* and *The Earthly Paradise*, however: “there is an element of narrative in the former, and of dramatic mode in the latter” (p. 425), and she documents the pervasive presence of a narrative voice in the *Defence* monologues as well as the succession of dramatic visual portraits in *The Earthly Paradise*. One might suggest that her claims could be carried even further to adduce numerous dramatic vignettes and instances of scene-building in these volumes, as well as in Morris’s dramatic fragments including “Scenes from the Fall of Troy,” his socialist skits including *The Tables Turned*, and other narrative poems such as *The Life and Death of Jason* and *Sigurd the Volsung*.

In “Morris and the Homeric Epic: Translating *The Odyssey* into Socialist Praxis” (*Journal of William Morris Studies* 24, no. 3 [2021]: 3–21), Michelle Weinroth provides what may be the first discussion of why Morris, during his busy socialist activities of 1886–1887, chose to translate this particular classical epic. A first answer is that his style of translation in seven-beat lines (“Tell me, O Muse, of the Shady, the man who wandered afar”) was intended to counteract the imperial implications of earlier, more hegemonic renditions. Morris followed the German philologist F. A. Wolf in finding the Homeric epics to be derived from folk or popular literature, so that through his unorthodox prosody and diction, he “repudiated the mellifluous tongue with which the English ruling elite sang its own praises” (p. 6). In addition, Weinroth ponders the personal significance that Odysseus’s journey may have had for Morris as he grappled with the factionalism within the socialist movement and the apathy of contemporary workers, so that “[t]he Homeric epic may be read as an aesthetic correlative of Morris’s tale of recurring setback and unflinching moral strength” (p. 7). Though Odysseus’s fortitude would have provided inspiration for Morris’s own struggles, the hero’s domineering manner and occasional cruelties would have illustrated “the equivocal merits of masculine political authority” and militarism (p. 8).

Although it is hard to know what lessons Morris may have drawn from specific Homeric scenes, Weinroth’s surmises form an appreciative commentary on the difficulties Morris faced in actual life and suggest the bracing effect that his reengagement with the heroic past may have provided here (and in other translations of the period). Weinroth further posits that Morris’s translation of *The Odyssey* helped develop attitudes carried into his later prose works: “*The Odyssey* would carry in its narrative the emboldening appeals of socialist rhetoric, the tropes of fortitude, survival and *longing for home*; but for Morris, it was the prose romance that would radicalize the politics of socialist speech” (p. 18).

In 2021, the *Journal of William Morris Studies* devoted a special double issue to commemorating the achievements and influence of the Kelmscott Press

during the past 130 years. Among many valuable articles, in “‘To see things as he saw them’: Alternate Realities in Burne-Jones’s Illustrations for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*” (*JWMS* 24, nos. 1–2 [2021]: 106–129), Sarah Hardy identifies the principles that underlie Burne-Jones’s eighty-seven illustrations for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. Hardy notes that Burne-Jones was highly selective, leaving eighteen tales unillustrated in favor of concentrating on “works which express alternate realities—dreams, stories within stories and allegorical quests—to create dynamic visual portals to other worlds” (p. 106). The essay’s reproduction of fifteen Burne-Jones drawings enables readers to follow her exposition of the artist’s mental processes as he refined his images, for example, in adjusting a subject previously painted on a large canvas to the much smaller page in order to startle readers with a sense of motion and dramatic detail, as in “Dorigen’s Longing for the Return of her Husband” from “The Franklin’s Tale.” Eschewing the representation of specific historical types, Burne-Jones’s figures are “timelessly classical” (p. 109) and androgynous, as their frames and embedded symbols express “the enormity of time” (p. 11) and experiment with the “depiction of time and space to create alternate dimensions which blur the lines between the living world of the reader and the fictional reality beyond the page” (p. 116). The labor-intensive process for creating the woodblocks required close collaboration between three persons—the original designer, a craftsman who traced the initial design on the woodblock, and finally, an engraver—to produce the striking lines of the completed image. In some instances, also, the juxtaposition of two images in a double illustration enabled Burne-Jones to expand the narrative over time, as in the facing-page designs for “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” in which the witch of the first image is transformed into the beautiful woman of the second. Similarly, for “The Prioress’s Tale,” the first illustration presents the child’s imminent martyrdom, followed by a startling reversal on the succeeding page in which the redemptive image of Mary hovers above the resurrected child. Hardy also identifies musical elements in several designs, as in the intertwined dancers in Burne-Jones’s illustration for “The Romaunt of the Rose,” wherein the moving figures exist in their own timeless reality. Hardy concludes that rather than “simply creating his own version of medievalism or drawing Chaucer in the image of himself, as other critics suggest, Burne-Jones created new worlds where he could share Chaucer’s visions and ‘see things as he saw them,’ thereby creating an alternate reality which exists quite beyond that of Chaucer, the readers or his own” (pp. 125, 127).

In the same issue, in “Fundamental Sympathy: The Gothic, the Fin-de-Siècle Printing Revival and the Digital” (*JWMS* 24, nos. 1–2 [2021]: 7–23),

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra argues that the principles of Ruskin's Gothic—faith in the necessary interrelations of work and the aesthetic—are manifested in the Kelmscott Press and subsequent fine press printing practices as well as in contemporary digital designs. Noting that the book itself was a radical form of new media in its day, requiring a balance of ornamentation and architecture and the “cooperative development of work, activity, and craft in an ongoing design process,” she finds that Morris was also “prototyping the iterative, experimental, cooperative practices used by many digital humanists today” (p. 10). Kooistra further offers a detailed account of the design and production practices at the Kelmscott, Doves, Eragny, Vale, and Evergreen Presses, noting that even as these preserved the arts of wood engraving, typesetting, and hand printing, their mediations were also transformed by new, more mechanical late nineteenth-century technologies: “Making a Kelmscott type required layers and layers of mediation and remediation, a mixture of mechanical and manual technologies, and many hands and things working cooperatively” (p. 14). Morris's emphasis on ornament rather than typography anticipates modern digital designs, as he insisted that “the ornament, whatever it is, whether picture or pattern-work, should form part of the page, should be part of the whole scheme of the book” (p. 17). Kooistra observes that modern coding produces a “digital Gothic” and that, like digital Gothic, “wood-engraving and ornament are generative technologies, both code-dependent and capable of endless variations” (p. 20). Finally, through the harmony of their elements, “for Morris, the design of ornament had moral weight and carried transformative power,” so that for both printing and digital forms, “the resources that matter most are time, craft, and relationships, not technologies” (p. 21).

To honor the Kelmscott Press anniversary, the Flagstone Press at the University of Oxford issued a handsomely illustrated book, *For What in All the World Is So Good as to Fear Nothing?*, with four newly discovered Morris letters, facsimiles of the letters, striking illustrations by the artist Richard Wilson, and introductions by Wilson and myself, prepared in collaboration with the typographer Richard Lawrence. This tribute to Morris's collaborative spirit recovers Morris's appeals to Kenneth Macaulay, a young arts entrepreneur whom Morris may have hoped would join him in advocating for a new social order. Morris offers insight into his own motivations as he suggests, “by renouncing his class and acting for the abolition of classes [a manufacturer] may & probably will be of great use: only, I say, he must be prepared for any consequence and shake off all prejudices . . . which to my mind will make a man of him, for what in all the world is so good as to fear nothing” (Letter to Macaulay, 17 March 1884).

In “William Morris: An Annotated Bibliography 2016–2017,” David and Sheila Latham provide the nineteenth installment of their biannual annotated compilations of critical and scholarly contributions on Morris and his circle. This two-year period saw 119 publications, with the greatest number devoted to literature (p. 29), the decorative arts (p. 28), and more general items (p. 27). Politics lagged a bit behind, with seventeen entries, and book design weighed in with seven. The Lathams’ invaluable bibliographies can be consulted online through the US William Morris Society website, but at some point, readers would benefit from an aggregated and indexed compilation; with twenty installments covering forty years, the next version might offer a propitious gathering point.

The William Morris Archive has added several introductions during 2021—for *Poems by the Way* by David Latham, *Beowulf* by Yuri Cowan, and *Sigurd the Volsung* by Peter Wright. An inspiring conclusion to Morris studies of the year is provided by the artist David Mabb’s “News from *SOMEWHERE*” (*JWMS* 24, nos. 1–2 [2021]: 88–94), a twenty-foot painting and collage created from altered versions of Morris’s text that glow in front of a black night-sky background. The work is made from altered pages of a facsimile of the Kelmscott Press edition of *News from Nowhere* that have been overpainted in black, leaving only ornamented initials visible as these spell out “somewhere,” creating an effect like stars leaping forth against the night sky. Mabb notes that the exhibit is designed, like its source text, as “a utopian space which rejects late nineteenth-century industrial capitalist society in all its exploitation and ugliness” (p. 88), and he interprets his painting’s (and Morris’s) message of deferred hope: “it is out of fragments and facsimiles, which can be appropriated from the past and repurposed for the future, that a new somewhere might be made possible, even if there appears nowhere but the night sky for a somewhere at present” (p. 89).