John Ruskin and the Ethical Foundations of Morris & Company, 1861–96

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ABSTRACT. In Unto this Last, John Ruskin argued that Britain's industrial society was morally degenerate and pernicious in that it drove the labouring class into cultural and material poverty. The thinking of the Political Economists, which supported the new liberal industrial order, was correspondingly flawed, because it lacked any credible moral element. Ruskin's writings are in essence an appeal to the business leader to behave in a socially responsible, paternalistic fashion according to his own moral prescriptions. In this way, he believed that British society might be regenerated. This article examines the ways in which William Morris sought to give practical expression to these ideas. There is no perfect correspondence between the business notions of John Ruskin and the practice of William Morris. Yet it is evident that Morris stuck to many of his mentor's ideas with remarkable tenacity; and the operation of the Morris business, especially those aspects relating to design, craftsmanship, work organisation, working conditions, scale and the market, owed much to Ruskin.

I. Introduction

During the course of the 1850s, John Ruskin's investigations into art and architecture gradually led him towards social criticism and political economy. The first stirrings occur in The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849). In 'The Lamp of Life', Ruskin began to evolve a new understanding of the nature of men's work, and what it meant for society. Like Carlyle before him, Ruskin was insistent that it was through work that man fulfilled himself. For Ruskin, however, it had to be creative labour, which drew upon the workman's intellectual and moral strengths as well as his physical powers. Such ideas were further developed in The Stones of Venice (3 volumes, 1851–53), where they are drawn together in the famous chapter entitled 'The Nature of Gothic'. Here Ruskin set out his belief that the architecture and art of a particular society express the values of its entire culture. According to Ruskin, architecture and its attendant arts should be judged according to the amount of freedom of expression allowed to the individual workman. He contrasted the arts and crafts of the Middle Ages and the relationships they engendered favourably with the industrial society of the nineteenth century, which seemed to him to place more restrictions on the workman than any preceding age had done. Modern society was thus indicted for having alienated and dehumanised workers, forcing them to perform monotonous and soul-destroying tasks. This led Ruskin into a critique of contemporary society, industrialisation and economic thought which culminated in the publication of four essays in August–November 1860 in the Cornhill Magazine, then under the editorship of Thackeray. In these essays, published in book form in 1862 as Unto this Last: Four Essays on the Principles of Political Economy, Ruskin argued that Britain's industrial society was morally degenerate and pernicious in that it drove the labouring class into cultural and material poverty. The thinking of the Political

Economists, which supported the new liberal industrial order, he saw as correspondingly flawed, particularly because it lacked any credible moral element. Delivered in the sermonising tone so characteristic of Ruskin, these essays are highly coloured by the injection of a series of moral pronouncements which give them a strong ethical tone, at the expense of strictly consistent reasoning. And, whilst much of *Unto this Last* is devoted to destroying the claims of the 'science' of Political Economy, Ruskin goes on to offer a number of points of guidance for the business community. Though he fully accepts the need for a hierarchical society, governed by an educated elite, he encourages merchants and manufacturers to adopt a value system aimed at social harmony rather than individual profit. His writings are in essence an appeal to business leaders to behave in a socially responsible, paternalistic fashion according to his own moral prescriptions. In this way, British society might be regenerated.

These arguments were greeted by a storm of protest, and they alienated many of those members of the commercial and professional classes who had responded so positively to his readings of famous works of art and architecture in *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*. The result was that Ruskin's readership contracted sharply in the middle decades of the century. Many of the thousand copies of *Unto this Last* which were printed in 1862 remained unsold ten years later, and the controversy also affected sales of his other works. In retrospect, however, *Unto this Last* stands as 'the great central work of Ruskin's middle years', and gradually, it became a major success. By the early twentieth century, 100,000 copies had been sold, and there were also several pirated editions which had commanded a ready sale in America.

William Morris, writing in 1892, could assert that it was the ethical and political side of Ruskin's work, rather than the artistic, which would prove the most durable:

'It is just this part of his work, fairly begun in the 'Nature of Gothic' and brought to its culmination in that great book 'Unto this Last', which has the most enduring and beneficent effect on his contemporaries, and will have through them on succeeding generations.'

For the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour; that it is possible for a man to rejoice in his work . . . that unless man's work once again becomes a pleasure to him, the token of which change will be that beauty is once again a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive labour, all but the worthless must toil in pain.'

There is no doubt that Ruskin was the principal — though by no means the only — influence upon Morris's formative years, and throughout his life Morris 'retained towards him the attitude of a scholar to a great teacher and master, not only in matters of art, but throughout the whole sphere of human life'. From Ruskin, Morris took two fundamental principles: his belief in the importance of the decorative arts, and his views on work and business morality. Morris's responsiveness to these ideas was relatively unusual in the late 1850s and early 1860s, though it became less so as Ruskin's work began to touch a widening cross-section of late Victorian society. What made Morris unique, however, was the immense effort he made during his lifetime to give their ideas practical expression — and indeed to extend them in important ways. In this essay, we examine ways in which Morris sought to give practical expression to these ideas. The vehicle for this practical expression was the Morris firm — established in 1861 as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. (MMF & Co.), and reconstituted as Morris & Co., under his sole ownership, in 1875.

II. The Morris enterprise

First of all, Morris's reading of Ruskin was a major factor determining his choice of career and consequently the formation of the Morris firm. At the very time, in the late 1850s, when Morris met Ruskin and was studying his major works, he was tormented by the need to find a satisfying and fulfilling career. Having given up the Church and architecture, he was struggling to become a