"WILLIAM MORRIS"[1] (Translation of a brief presentation of Morris's work by Portuguese philosopher Agostinho da Silva)

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William Morris's father, taking advantage of the industrial progress in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, invested his money in mining companies, while at the same time working as a stockbroker in London. In this way he amassed a fortune which allowed him to provide his family with every comfort, while simultaneously maintaining the rules of a strict upbringing, in stark contrast to the environment of entrepreneurship and commerce in which they lived. As soon as he could, he took his family to the countryside and William, who was born on the 24 March, 1834, spent his childhood in Woodford Hall, a large house, surrounded by parks and gardens. Close by there was a wood with a small stream where William and his siblings would follow the paths which wound between the trees, mounted on a pony, or would become more adventurous and go deep into the dense undergrowth. At times they would stop to fish and lose track of time in the rustling branches, waiting for the faintest twitch of the floats or watching the fish pass by - a fleeting black-green shadow or a silvery flash in the clear water of the stream. On other occasions they would head for the quietest, most remote place they could find and tell stories of knights who had wandered dense woodland, just as they did, to vanquish wizards and tyrannous kings or free damsels in distress, who, imprisoned in castles, wept for their distant loves from behind locked doors.

[1] William Morris, Author's edition, 1994 (without illustrations).

William, whose frailty stopped him taking much of an active part in the games of other boys of his age learnt to read early, and at the age of four started reading the works of Walter Scott, fascinated by the palace parties, the adventurous expeditions, the tournaments where justice was decided and the valiant resistance of the Saxons against foreign control. The Middle Ages took over his spirit and little by little appeared to him to be the best era humanity had experienced, just as it had to the Romantics: tales of peace-loving people, who worked in the fields or in small city workshops, ruled over by powerful lords, brave and just, who spent their lives fighting for good, besotted by their lady loves whose melancholic beauty inspired sweet ballads, or judging the occasional lawsuit brought forward by one of their subjects. In the cities, the construction of cathedrals involved everyone and each of the craftsmen involved put their heart and soul into the task with which they had been entrusted. Throughout the land was heard a wave of prayer and glory; the dream was becoming a reality and the atmosphere was right for the most noble feelings to be expressed and established. When given a suit of armour, it seemed as if he truly lived in the era he preferred to all others and he would ride his pony between the trees, brandishing his long sword, helmet shining in the pale twilight of the wood. The dragons hid, no castle raised its standard and wizards, if they existed, hid in a cowardly fashion when the boy champion appeared .The books of Marryat and *Arabian Nights,* which amongst others he read later, may have strengthened his love of adventure and kindled his desire to lead a life different from that of others, but they couldn't diminish his love of things mediaeval. Instead, they encouraged him to return to the pages of Scott where his favourite heroes evoked times past with the magic of a single word.

When he was about nine years old he started primary school. Even though he dedicated time to his studies, he still had free time to read and walk; it appeared more important to him to let his imagination wander than to patiently

memorise the rules of arithmetic and grammar his teachers demanded of him. Also, his family had no wish for him to rush his studies. On the one hand they excused him due to his delicate health, which was improving much with his walks in the woods, and on the other hand his father's fortune meant economic necessity wasn't such a serious consideration as it was for others. He continued his studies until 1847, the year in which his father died. As it was felt necessary to keep a close eye on the boy, he was sent to Marlborough College, a boarding school which was going through a period of reorganisation, but whose headmaster had little concern for pedagogical matters. There was scant discipline, and at the same time a lack of a necessary structure; each boy dedicated himself to the sport he considered most convenient, and those like William, who preferred to spend hours in the corner of the classroom reading a story were similarly free to do so. Pupils could study, sleep or play in class or outside, depending on their aptitudes or whims. For William no system could have been better. His love of reading developed and the games, as they were optional, were reasonably attractive to him, although he still preferred quiet spots where he could read and meditate.

Due to his love of the Middle Ages he studied architecture and archaeology, either consulting all the books he could find on the subject in the college library or obtaining material from elsewhere. When he could, he wandered round the surrounding area, lingering in the ruins of mediaeval buildings. He still loved nature although his interest was now almost exclusively artistic. He read *Herbario de Gerald* (Gerald's Herbarium) untiringly, admiring the forms of herbs and flowers, drawing their most unusual forms while at the same time continuing his interest in mediaeval times and showing a growing sense of beauty. He had a great attraction for church ceremonies and it seemed that, in a time of trains and factories, the clergy was the only profession where some aspects of mediaeval times could be relived. At least he could experience the

beauty of the cathedrals and create a life of dreams, as he had done in previous days in Woodford Hall and perhaps, as so often happened in the future, this way of seeing things came to shape his thoughts. When he left school he prepared to enter Oxford University, gaining the skill necessary to take religious orders. He had a Greek and Latin teacher and quickly learned to read the classics which interested him most in the original version. A world unfolded before him, no less beautiful than the other, although it stimulated more his intelligence than his imagination. Above all it was a good school of experience, and through his contact with the classics, William Morris gained knowledge of style which combined both elegance and strength. Mediaeval thought, or rather the mediaeval dream was a genre which did not allow for the imprecise, the vague, and the lack of discipline of the written or spoken word of the Romantics. Through the tranquil formulation of ideas and the critical serenity with which he chose and ordered them, his ideas gained in clarity and strength.

In June 1852 he passed his entry exam but it was only in January of the following year that he was admitted due to a lack of lodgings at the university .He formed a friendship with Burne-Jones who had also come to take religious orders and immediately they formed a lifelong friendship due to their shared artistic interests. It was exclusively their friendship that protected them from the dryness, the strict regime and the inferiority of Oxford. Either the masters withdrew into a world of academia without any signs of life, with the students preferring sports to the library or lessons, or they came up against antiquated ideas or a brutality that could barely be disguised as chivalry. The two found themselves isolated, which although it denied them the help they hoped to find, in compensation gave them a freedom which would be more useful than total absorption in a university environment. They spoke of art, history, archaeology and trips they would one day make to the sacred lands of the Middle Ages. They took long walks round the outskirts of the city and with the arrival of new

students, some of whom were personal friends of Burke-Jones, they were able to organise a small group which maintained a spirit of intellect, initiative, contemplation and a desire for achievements. Morris was the most enthusiastic of all and never showed fatigue or a lack of enthusiasm: all obstacles fell in the face of the brave knights and the world would be what they had imagined, albeit it in a very vague manner, if they could only remain firm in battle. What was needed was to instil beauty into life, which seems to be ever more utilitarian. They had to rekindle the idea of an ideal existence in the heart of every man in which a deep-rooted interest would free thousands of English factory workers from grinding hours of toil; like a vision of paradise, the memory of cathedrals, built with love, liberty and a relish for the task, where each of the workers could leave his mark, rose alongside the machine rooms of the huge factories. Was it possible to turn back the clock? Of course, and soon exuberant Morris energetically organised ideas and urged the group to take upon itself the reform of the working conditions of English factory workers. The others hesitated, uncertain of the path to take, and more attracted by literature than action, they finally convinced Morris that perhaps the best course of action was to establish a magazine which would enable them to set forth their ideas and create an environment which could result in practical action. The nine hundred pounds Morris received annually from 1855 onwards allowed the project to move forward and *The Cambridge and Oxford Magazine,* which sold few copies of the 12 editions published, involved the collaboration of students from both universities. Here Morris published some of his best poetry, which he composed with ease, as if it were a task of little importance. He found his themes principally in the Middle Ages and his poetry, although lacking historical accuracy, was some of the most beautiful in English literature, for the novelty of its images, the rhythm of its language and its understanding of a world of suggestion and imagined music.

Holidays spent on the Continent in France and Belgium put William Morris in direct contact with some of the great cathedrals and the sites where much of the action described in history books and novels had taken place. These entrapped him ever more in the mediaeval world, although it was also true that they led him to an awareness of the evils of the modern world which could emprison his spirit and hinder the pursuit of his artistic dreams. However it also seemed to him that it was possible to work in both worlds at the same time and under the influence of the same inspiration. His belief was that if the principles which had made the Middle Ages great were applied to modern life, it would rid men of the mental and moral oppression in which most of them lived. The economic basis of human organisation was still very confusing to him, and he could not establish a connection between industry, art and his aspirations for a fulfilling life for all.

On his return to England he consulted his sketch books in which he had drawn details of cathedrals or the notebooks where he recorded his impressions of the great masters he had admired in museums. Nature still interested him and there were numerous sketches of landscapes, but principally a fixation with details of plants and animals, more in the decorative sense rather than an attempt to capture them for their intrinsic interest. He felt that instead of entering the clergy he should dedicate himself to art, but it was also true that art didn't satisfy him completely. It appeared to him that art was to a certain extent distant from man and he wanted to help mankind find its way to real humanity and contribute to its betterment, not keep his distance like the great majority of intellectuals and artists of his time. He felt in art the danger that it might diminish his drive towards human solidarity, the danger that it might lead him to view the world as a spectator, not as the transforming agent he hoped to be. He attempted to create a life-long student association which would have the character of a religious order but without the imposition of belief, the purpose of

which was for members to share a desire for perfection , to be true to themselves, and to bring to others the knowledge, suggestions, doctrines or works that would best help them progress. However, it was difficult to find collaborators, especially as the projects were so vague and he himself had yet to decide on an occupation. In the end, in a decision more for others than himself, he abandoned the idea of entering the church and started work in Street's studio as an apprentice architect while at the same time experimenting with mediaeval illumination, wooden sculpture and clay modelling. His best friend, Burne-Jones, who by this time was completely dominated by Rossetti's influence, which would soon also have its effect on Morris, decided to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to painting.

In October 1856 they travelled to London and the two friends rented a flat in Bloomsbury. They needed to furnish it but it seemed an affront that artists should buy the same furniture as was on sale to the English bourgeoisie, so they designed their own and decorated it with paintings in which Morris revealed he was a diligently good disciple, but in which Burne-Jones showed himself capable of originality, albeit still under the influence of Rossetti's artificial, literary preoccupations. Morris so enjoyed the experience that he abandoned architecture, and dedicated himself to painting. One year later Rossetti was awarded a contract to supply frescos for a room in Oxford and Morris was part of the group of painters responsible for the work. The themes were taken from a tale of knights but none of the artists, enthused as they were by the occasion and mediaeval visions, thought of acquiring the necessary techniques and soon the frescos faded, although the loss of the work was little mourned, except for the pieces by Rossetti and Burne-Jones.

Although interested in painting, Morris still had plenty of energy for other ventures. He wrote verse and prose, almost always based on mediaeval themes, and in 1858 he published a volume of his poetry- the *Defense of Guenevere* – to

which critics paid no attention and which sold very badly. However, the best poems highlighted all of Morris's qualities such as his capacity to recreate an atmosphere of the past, the subtle delicacy of his rhythmic structures and the emotion of the poet when confronted by the scenes of compassion or cruelty which had most impressed him. The Middle Ages, while appearing as a paradise to artists, was also presented as a time of violence and cruelty, where the shadow of death was a constant companion. To Morris however, it still appeared to be more worthwhile than the era that fate had determined he should live in – one of submission, sorrow and an absolute domination of material necessities. It is also possible that part of Morris's pessimism resulted less from his comparison of the Middle Ages with the nineteenth century than with the results of his work as a painter. His enthusiasm was diminishing considerably and his critical spirit, always sharp, left him in no doubt as to the value of his paintings. The more effort he made, the more his paintings looked like insipid copies, without the faintest spark of inspiration. Giving up and finding a job where painting was a useful extra, or at least one where he could use what he had learned about drawing and colours seemed to be the best course of action. He was aware that none of his existing projects suited. He was the type of person who had to create his own sphere of activity but knew how difficult that was and how uncertain the results could be. However his energy was sufficient for much more complex tasks and realising he had chosen the wrong path, renounced his career as a painter.

His marriage to Jane Burden in April 1859 helped him find himself. Jane was a stunning beauty, tall and majestic. There was perfection in the lines of her face, a purity and a serenity which she imposed on all around her and which brought the discipline and security Morris needed to escape the, at times corroding influence of his friends, and to concentrate on himself, perfecting what was best in his spirit so as to leave his mark on the world. He started by choosing a piece of land in Upton, Kent and hired Webb, a pupil of Street, to build a small

house surrounded by a walled garden, which could simultaneously act as a centre of activity and a monastic retreat. The decoration was entrusted to Burne-Jones and while work was being carried out on the house, the idea of a small business dedicated to the manufacture of everything which could contribute to elevate the artistic level of English homes was born. Workshops were built in the countryside with the workers' houses nearby, and little by little, starting with furniture, every type of decoration was produced.

The project immediately received the enthusiastic applause of friends and a small business was formed involving about eight partners, with Morris supplying almost all the capital. Talent, imagination and fervent hard work were in plentiful supply although capital and administrative know-how were less than was necessary for the success of the company. Morris's determination however knew no bounds. Work started almost immediately and the crises, which soon appeared, were confronted with courage and good humour. The most serious of these were the illness of Burne-Jones and the ruin of Morris. The former deprived the firm of its only real full time artist for a considerable period; the latter placed Morris in financial difficulties and affected the security of the project. However, he never considered giving up the fight and launched himself into work with double the energy. He bravely sold his house at Upton and bought another close to London from where he directed the firm's activities, and in the 1862 exhibition, the now Morris, Marshall Faulkner & Company presented works in stained glass, decorated furniture and embroidery which called the attention of the critics and started to influence other designers. Shortly after, orders started to arrive from churches and private houses and profits meant new workshops were opened. These produced cotton and wallpaper printed with Morris's own designs, which were almost always inspired on the world of plants and animals, and which, of all the products the firm sold, were the cheapest and most popular. For these reasons, they were most influential in changing tastes,

while at the same time bringing a little art to the homes of the less wealthy, which Morris so wished for.

A commission to decorate a room in South Kensington in 1867 made the firm's reputation and, under the administration of Tangier, it also gained financial security. Morris was then free to dedicate himself totally to technical work while at the same time writing and publishing *The Earthly Paradise ,* with stories from Greek, Nordic and medieval sources. In stark contrast to the optimistic activity and the confidence the success of the factory gave him, his poems were dominated by the idea of a tragic destiny and all were concerned with death, which had previously been evident in *Defense of Guenevere* and *The Life and Death of Jason*, which he wrote between books. Both compositions were perhaps overtly long and lacked inspiration and rhythm but the short interspersed lyrical poems were amongst his most beautiful works. However, neither his poetry not the work of the firm were enough to occupy him and in 1868, excited by the sagas and epic songs of the Scandinavians, he started to learn Icelandic and three years later, made his first trip to Iceland. The island impressed him for its harsh, sombre tragic landscape, perfectly adapted to the scenes of the dramas of love and death narrated in the sagas and which appealed to one of the facets of his spirit.

Upon his return to England he worked on illumination and carried out one of his most perfect works, the illustration of the Rubá'yat by the Persian poet Ornar Khayam, from Fitzgerald's translation. But the calm wasn't to last: the firm's prosperity caused infighting which years of struggle had not, and only at the end of difficult negotiations did William Morris buy out the other partners, thereby becoming the sole owner of the factory. He immediately researched new areas and learned of new techniques in the art of dyeing, experimenting with vegetable dyes, which were superior in their artistic effect and aniline duration. He then started weaving and sent for a weaver and loom of the latest design

from France with the idea of making tapestries. In the meantime orders increased and Morris became a recognised authority by museums, which frequently called upon him for evaluations or to pronounce on the authenticity of pieces. Churches which needed to replace stained glass windows always came to the firm and after having overseen work in St James's palace, no one hesitated in entrusting the decoration of the most important houses to him. He was less appreciated as a writer, in spite of his translations of the Sagas, the Aeneid, *Love is Enough*, the *Freeing of Pharamond* and above all *Sigurd the Volsung* which he published in 1876.Morris considered *Sigurd* his masterpiece, but most readers shrank away from the richness and splendour of the work which seemed, and at times was, too artificial and heavy.

Although the firm's activity and his literary production brought him into contact with the public, in both cases with the knowledge that he was a person of influence and capable of moulding mentalities, it was only through the restoration of ancient monuments that Morris had occasion to fully intervene in the public life of his country. Due to a sudden love of ancient monuments, a love full of romanticism but lacking a sense of reality, the authorities, supported by numerous private individuals, had taken it upon themselves to restore ancient buildings considered of artistic or historic value and in the name of restoration had committed the worst acts of vandalism. At times a monument had been modified, to supposedly reintegrate it with primitive purity, when this purity was no more than a theoretical concept. At other times parts of buildings were invented so they appeared whole, which naturally was unsuccessful, and worse still, on other occasions, the real historical monument, the ruins, were demolished and substituted with a totally modern building, the only value of which was as a staged set. The idea of a society to defend monuments against artistic notions and the government was suggested and Morris, who would become the secretary, immediately started work. He protested against

restoration work which went any further than halting the ravages of time. In the meantime he dedicated all his energy and capacity for work to the company as he had done previously, without giving a moment's consideration to the fact that the campaign would cause the firm considerable financial loss, as it limited sales of stained glass. Gradually the idea sank in, opposition to harmful aesthetic interventions became ever greater and much of England's rich artistic heritage was saved.

However, for Morris the victory brought no respite. It was simply the first and least important of a vast crusade upon which he embarked with the zeal and courage of his medieval role models. He gained a taste for public action, conferences, protest meetings, commissions and societies and it seemed to him that this was the best way to educate, to make man reach a higher level of culture and life. His ideal was to re-establish the love for life which seemed to have existed in the Middle Ages, where everyone gave of their best within their possibilities, and where social circumstances, whether political, economic or cultural, which were after all merely artificial barriers, failed to stop personal development. It was obvious he would have to fight on two levels, focusing his attention on the one hand on everyday life including political life, while on the other hand focusing on the perhaps more important problem of elevating man's spirit. He was an educator who, to become complete, found it necessary to take an interest in politics. This he did not through a particular liking for the subject, but because his work at the firm and his experience with the men and their resignation in the face of the inevitable limitations gave him a sense of what was possible. England and the world, in his view expected something important from his work and he did it with enthusiasm and forceful resolution while at the same time perfecting the weaving processes for the production of upholstery in the factory and preparing to set up workshops outside the city in a spot where the

workers could appreciate the beauty and experience more hygienic living conditions.

His battle started with the question of the Orient which came about due to the barbarities committed by the Turks and which divided opinion in England , creating two groups which fought bitterly. One protested against the attitude of Turkey and demanded international sanctions. The others, with the memory of the Crimean war still fresh, supported the Turks, blamed all the incidents on manoeuvrings by the Russians and demanded military action against the Moscow-based Empire. Morris, on a humanitarian impulse, and because war against the Russians seemed absurd, took up the cause against the Turks and became treasurer of the association he founded in '76. He wrote pamphlets, gave speeches, wrote a song which naturally wasn't one of his best poetic works thus avoiding, or believing that a declaration of war against Russia had been avoided. In the meantime he was fully aware of the economic questions surrounding war and understood that his any action taken would need to be more complex that his rather superficial ideas. His own ideas on art and pacifism would have no future without a solution to the economic problems which England and other countries would face. The means of production, in a broad sense, would have to be organised in such a way as to attend exclusively to the interests of humanity, to create the possibility of a job done with interest in place of the absurd, crushing tasks which were normal and which could be nothing else, given the economic system which was in place. Contrary to what many thought, he didn't see the machine as an enemy of man but as his best aid. Put simply, freedom depended on how it was used; he believed it should be developed, not solely to the benefit of its owners, but also to reduce the number of hours necessary for the production of all essential goods, employing those with free time in the manufacture of artistic objects, in which the worker could leave the mark of his individuality and develop physically and spiritually. He

suggested working within existing laws and only felt it would be necessary to draw up others if for some reason opposing groups broke those laws which gave Morris and his friends a possible way forward. During some years Morris dedicated himself more to socio-political work than to the company, and contrary to expectations, encountered his greatest obstacles not from his adversaries but from those who should have supported him. Due to the ignorance of most people and the lack of a sense of practicality in almost all leaders, his efforts were in vain. Morris believed it was necessary to start again, firstly educating the population so they could understand certain ideas and avoid becoming easy prey to ignorant or ruthless politicians.

Practicing what he preached, which rarely happened with others who expressed the same views, Morris was a good friend to his workers. He constantly worried about their material and moral well being, always searching for new technical processes which could give more beauty to the products and lighten their workload, always improving the workplace so the atmosphere helped to develop the spirit. Neither the aged nor infirm, not even the incompetent were harshly sidelined as in other factories. Morris believed above all that whatever symbolised production or beauty had a right to exist. Human concerns were of secondary consideration and contrary to popular belief, but in line with what Morris had always claimed, the result was neither financially unsound nor did it reduce the quality of the products. Having survived a period of financial difficulties, the firm affirmed its position and considered expansion. A small printing press with characters, principally adaptations of classic and gothic typefaces designed by Morris himself, was set up in Kelmscott Manor. He established the basic rules of book aesthetics, unknown to almost all typographers, and although it is true to say that he didn't obtain concrete results in this area, he continued to influence industrial progress. His pages were almost always too thick and the decoration rarely matched the text or the chosen

typeface. What was important however was to show how a book should be an artistic whole and how the form of the typeface, the colour and quality of the paper, the width of the margins, the colour of ink, and the distribution of space were of major importance. In the last years of his life, typography was his great passion although he never forgot his other passions: he still produced wallpaper, textiles, furniture, stained glass, tapestries (some of great artistic value) at the same rate and always and with improved quality and taste. He also wrote and although his writing may not have had the same flair or perfection of form, he did write more realistically about life with all its problems, setting aside the affection which to a certain extent had spoiled some of his earlier works. In his last pieces of work he emphasised his faith in the future, in humanity free of encumbrances, morally and intellectually progressive, able to assert a fullness of spirit and conceiving of man in the present as a rough outline of what he could become in the future. On this day, which he spoke of enthusiastically in *The Pilgrims of Hope, A Dream of Johon Ball*, and *News from Nowhere*, beauty would not only be for the few but, given some inner spark, all would be able to rise to the levels which in the contemporary world were only attained by the privileged, even though they weren't always the most deserving. In a generalisation of his first visions of the Middle Age he believed that soon art would be a creation by the people for the people, a means of universal communion and not just another barrier causing separation and battles, as it had been in his time. The hope of a brighter future never left him during his prolonged, painful illness which finally overcame his work-weary body. He tried to keep the factory working at full speed and on the eve of his death held the first copy of an edition of Chaucer in which he had invested all his efforts. After considerable suffering which he bore with fortitude, he died in Hammersmith on the 3rd of October, 1896.

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