

SCATTERED LEAVES:
MORRIS'S MEN IN AMERICA AND THE POLEMICAL
MAGAZINE¹

John F. Roche

Where is your William Morris?" Horace Traubel asked in *The Artsman* of January 1904. A better question might have been, "Which is your William Morris?" No one was more beloved by the American arts and crafts community than was Morris – with the possible exception of Traubel's friend, Walt Whitman – and the Englishman would frequently appear in their publications, in the two decades following his death, not only as an inspirational figure, but as a practitioner with lessons to teach in technique and organization. Yet whereas Whitman personified multivalently the fully "liberated" person – no matter whether shaded in terms literary, artistic, intellectual, political, or sexual – Morris had not only a poem, but a program, and so was more problematical to invoke. Instead of merely a "free-thinker," Morris was also a "socialist." No problem: the latter was for the Americans just another fashionable term like "single-taxer" and "Nationalist." So for a number of years the contradictions between the Pre-Raphaelite of the 1850s and 1860s and the Marxist of the 1880s and 1890s did not matter. Nor did possible distinctions between Morris's roles as craftsman; poet, storyteller, utopian writer, and political organizer. Such things did not matter to these wanderers to whom "a mass of sea-weed brown" was sure sign of the earthly paradise. The prevailing attitude was summed up in a phrase Oscar Lovell Triggs overheard, then reported, in *To-Morrow* (March 1905: 19): "Morris is in the air."

On a more pragmatic level, Morris's experiments in self-publishing encouraged the creation of small presses in America that published books, pamphlets, and magazines to spread the gospel of liberated work. Enthusiasts printed and/or edited a number of these publications, many of them hand-sewn and embellished, which invoked Morris for enterprises that tended to wander further and further from Morris's original beliefs. The discourse community that arose on both sides of the Atlantic was sustained by small magazines combining literary-offerings and crafts features with coverage of radical issues and quasi-radical "free-thinking." So great a range of discussion problematizes the distinction between arts-and-crafts magazines and other radical magazines like Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* or Edward Bellamy's *The Nationalist*, which sometimes shared contributors.² All can comfortably be designated *polemical* magazines. But focus