Part V. The Tale of the Quest's Ending

it is of Birdalone. But Sir Aymeris laid his hand on his shoulder and said in an angry whisper: Thou shalt be put downstairs, priest, if thou hold not thy peace.

LEONARD drew aback scowling, and went out of the door, & so slowly down the stair, and withdrew him into the cover of the door of the first chamber down from the tower-top, with the mind to waylay Sir Aymeris as he came down; and meanwhile he cursed him for a fool and a dull-wit, and himself yet more, as was but right, for a fool and a licorous traitor.

BUT he had not tarried there more than a score of minutes, ere he heard a great shout from those up above: They are come! they are come! And next thereafter came all the men clattering down the stair past him, scarce refraining them from shoving each his neighbour on to the next one; Leonard followed on them, and presently arose great shouting and tumult through all the house, & all folk, men & women, hurried flock-meal toward the water-gate, & with them went Leonard perforce; and sick of heart he was, calling to mind the first coming thither of Birdalone.

BUT now when they came to the water-gate, there verily was the Sending Boat just coming to hand; and in the stern stood the three knights together, all clad in their armour, and before them sat three lovely ladies, clad one in gold, one in green, and one in black: and lo, there was the Quest come home.

Chapter II. Now ask they of Birdalone, and Sir Leonard speaks.

NOW THE prow touched the stones of the stair, & folk were busy to lay hold of it that the wayfarers might land, but Sir Baudoin cried out in a great voice: Let none be so hardy as to touch this ferry, either now or hereafter; for there is peril therein. And therewith he took Aurea by the hand, & led her out of the boat and up the stair, & she all joyous & wondering; and thereafter came Hugh and his darling, and last of all Arthur & Atra, and she alone of the three women looked downcast, & her eyes wandered about the throng that was before them there, as though she sought something, yet feared to see it.

Frontispiece. William Morris, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, Hammersmith, Kelmscott Press, 1897. Courtesy of the University of Florida, Rare Book Collection.

The Quest for Verbal/Visual Cosmos in William Morris' Calligraphy and Typography

PAOLA SPINOZZI

> *The picture-book is not, perhaps, absolutely necessary to man's life, but it gives us such endless pleasure and is so intimately connected with the other absolutely necessary art of imaginative literature that it must remain one of the very worthiest things towards the production of which reasonable man should strive.*
>
> William Morris, *The Ideal Book*, 1893

> *In a journey through a book it is pleasant to reach the oasis of a picture or an ornament, to sit awhile under the palms, to let our thoughts unburned stray, to drink of other intellectual waters, and to see the ideas we have been pursuing, perchance, reflected in them. Thus we end as we begin, with images.*
>
> Walter Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New*, 1896

Polymorphous Art

THE idea that the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic objects can produce radical changes in society stands out as a fundamental tenet of William Morris' conceptions about art, as they were theorised and practiced between the 1860s and the 1890s. Comprehending why the establishment of a new, equalitarian society requires an integrated view of aesthetics and ethics, and why the quest for interart osmosis is worth pursuing, entails assessing the significance he attached to the notion of primeval unity of the arts, to organic art, and to double talent.

While exploring how different expressive codes interact simultaneously on the same page, Morris strove to create polymorphous artworks which convey a sense of harmonious wholeness. He conceived of calligraphy and typography as forms of art in which verbal and visual components generate organic cohesion. The illuminated manuscripts he produced between 1856 and 1890 merge calligraphy and ornamentation, iconicity and pictorialism, and solicit acts of reading/viewing that encompass both the meaning and the appearance of words; more importantly, they raise issues of how to create an artwork that can be perceived as a cosmos. His theories of book design are

also founded on the idea that the ideal printed text should reveal the beauty and vitality of organic art as well as disclose correspondences between form and content. The fifty-three volumes published by the Kelmscott Press between 1891 and 1898 testify to his quest for verbal/visual harmony and order.

In numerous lectures and essays Morris maintained that medieval illuminated manuscripts and early printed books, while bearing witness to the expression of originality and spontaneity, achieve interart osmosis and activate multiple modes of comprehension. Pages are microcosms which elicit responses not only for the subject matter they explore, but also for the aesthetic value they possess. His belief that reading and seeing are inter-related activities requires further consideration, because it affected his evaluation of the impact produced by the polymorphous nature of his art. Indeed, Morris' calligraphic and printed pages engage viewers/readers in acts of perception that are as stimulating as demanding.

For Morris the relationships between art and society in the Middle Ages offered outstanding instances of work which involves manual skills and creativity, and testifies to double talent. The re-evaluation of handicrafts, which constitutes a major topic of 'The Lesser Arts' (1877), 'Early England' (1886), 'Ancient Society, Medieval Society' (1886), written with Belfort Bax,[1] 'Feudal England' (1887), 'Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century' (1887), 'The Revival of Handicraft' (1888), 'The Arts and Crafts of To-day' (1889), 'The Development of Modern Society' (1890), and 'Medieval Society: Early Period, The Rough Side of the Middle Ages', written with Belfort Bax and published in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1893), provide historical evidence that medieval artists expressed not only fantasy, power of invention and originality, but also their sense of belonging to a community. By claiming that the creation and enjoyment of beautiful artefacts are not exceptional faculties, but pertain to all human beings and develop in a favourable environment, Morris wanted to demonstrate that artistic creativity is inextricably connected with social cohesion. The idea that art and work are entwined substantiates a utopian social model founded on high praise of medieval Arts and Crafts, which marked the apogee of pristine, spontaneous representation of beauty and testified to fellowship among artists-artisans.

The belief that medieval guilds of artisans had fulfilled a fruitful interaction between mental elaboration and manual work was aimed at deconstructing the Renaissance hierarchical notion according to which

original aesthetic theory and practice is the exclusive realm of architects, painters, and sculptors, while the ultimate end of craftsmen is the making of material objects. By praising the individual creativity of the artist-artisan, Morris erases the divide between the cognitive capacity and inventiveness attributed to the *artes liberals*, and the basic, merely technical skills associated with the *artes mechanicae*.

Morris firmly believed that the development of the applied arts is deeply connected with the national and cultural identity of Great Britain. While feudalism, introduced during the Roman and Norman invasions, had a strong impact on the process of formation of North European countries, the guilds bore witness to an autochthonous history, characterised by the constitution of proto-socialist communities in the Middle Ages:

> the spirit of association [...] had never died out of the peoples of Europe, and [...] in Northern Europe at least had been kept alive by the gilds which in turn it developed; the strong organization that feudalism could not crush. [...] the history of the gilds is practically the history of the people in the Middle Ages. [2]

> [...] the history of the guilds is the true history of the Middle Ages. [3]

In *News from Nowhere* (1890), Morris' utopian romance, ancient traditions and skills mark a continuity between the present and the past epoch, of which they are the most remarkable legacy. Replaced by industrial work during the nineteenth century, they became almost extinct, but were kept alive by generations of artisans during the transitional stage which followed the end of capitalism, and have reached great advancement in the post-revolutionary era:

> [...] not only was it impossible to find a carpenter or a smith in a village or small country town, but [...] people in such places had even forgotten how to bake bread [...]. On the other hand, the old men amongst the labourers managed to teach the younger ones gradually a little artisanship, such as the use of the saw and the plane, the work of the smithy, and so forth [...]. [4]

The ideological core of Morris' medievalism was the belief that artistic expression in the Middle Ages originated from authenticity of inspiration, while artificiality, caused either by dry conventionalism or mechanical production, was leaving deep scars in Victorian art and architecture. Timothy H. Evans acutely observes that it was not the attitude of the

antiquarian which induced Morris to acquire a deep knowledge of medieval history, crafts, architecture, and literary genres, but a desire to assess their legacy in his age. [5] Interpretation and re-adaptation of an idealised past are fundamental for envisaging the future; revolution will succeed only if it is supported by the transmission of cultural history, which includes not only values, but also practices. The chapter entitled 'How the Change Came' focuses on the long process of education which precedes the advent of communist society. Craftsmanship is regarded as a key activity, not only because it enhances the expression of creativity, but also because it encloses the cultural past of England.

Art in Nowhere has finally become popular, and the opposition between artistic qualities and practical utility has finally been erased, because objects can function as useful tools and possess aesthetically significant shapes. They represent the cycles of nature and human life in ritual and symbolic forms, hark back to legends and folklore, and possess a mythopoietic power appealing to all. Moreover, embroidery and woodcarving, tools and objects for the house are unique, handmade pieces which express personal inventiveness and enhance life quality, instead of being sold for profit. Art is communitarian, because aesthetic creation and enjoyment can be shared by all, but it is also individual, since it allows for the development of one's own creative aptitude.

The vitality of popular art in post-capitalist England is constantly opposed to the degradation of the arts in the nineteenth century. However, the 'grumblers' raise objections which may well be pronounced by the detractors of Marxist thought: in a society where competition has been abolished, can creativity thrive? How will the arts change in a society where class conflicts have been overcome and suffering has diminished substantially? Elitist parameters which have marked the development of western art will be no longer valid. How will the aesthetic quality of popular, communitarian art be assessed?

In 'The Aims of Art' (1886) Morris provides the most lucid account of his endeavour to grasp the origin and nature of human creativity. His conceptualisation of the moods of energy and idleness utilizes autobiographical data and transposes them to a universal plane in order to identify how, and why, human beings make art:

> When the mood of energy is upon me, I must be doing something, or I become mopish and unhappy; when the mood of idleness is on me, I find it hard indeed if I cannot rest and let my mind

> wander over the various pictures, pleasant or terrible, which my own experience or my communing with the thoughts of other men, dead or alive, have fashioned in it; and if circumstances will not allow me to cultivate this mood of idleness, I find I must at the best pass through a period of pain till I can manage to stimulate my mood of energy to take its place [...]. And if I have no means wherewith to rouse up that mood of energy to do its duty in making me happy, and I have to toil while the idle mood is upon me, then I am unhappy indeed, and almost wish myself dead [...]. Well, I believe that all men's lives are compounded of these two moods in various proportions, and that this explains why they have always, with more or less of toil, cherished and practised art. [6]

Energy cannot be wasted, but spent in intense activity, while idleness fosters remembrance, vision, and meditation. Thus, the fulfilment of the artist-worker's daily activities involves fatigue as well as pleasure. Far from being characterised by indolence and inertia, rest is a form of re-creative inactivity which Morris deems necessary for the contemplation and enjoyment of the fulfilled artistic act. The most frightful curse is restlessness, which he defines as the feeling of frustration for not having been able to bring the creative act to completion. [7] However, if the analysis of the dialectical relationship between labour and rest sounds convincing when applied to Morris, it proves problematic when it is generalised: indeed, the artist-artisan whom he depicts as an ordinary man is a genius, a creator of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Morris envisions a classless society where art is for all, but the endowments on which he relies can only belong to exceptional individuals. While he stressed that society should grant equal opportunities for all to acquire technical skills and choose a creative work, he neglected diversity. In his communitarian society all people are stimulated to express inventiveness and originality: whether creative talent can be regarded as a common feature, or rather as the gift of extraordinary individuals, such as Morris himself, is still an intriguing question.

'The Story of the Unknown Church', written by Morris at the age of twenty and published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856), recounts the life of a medieval artist-artisan who chooses to live in a religious community where he finds spiritual relief and the energy to express his artistic talent:

> [...] I raised a marble canopy that reached quite up to the top of the arch, and I painted it too as fair as I could, and carved it

> all about with many flowers and histories, and in them I carved the faces of those I had known on earth (for I was not as one on earth now, but seemed quite away out of the world). And as I carved, sometimes the monks and other people too would come and gaze […]. So my life passed, and I lived in that Abbey for twenty years […] till one morning, quite early, when they came into the church for matins, they found me lying dead, with my chisel in my hand, underneath the last lily of the tomb. [8]

The sculptor who spends his life creating art in a religious community testifies to Morris' appropriation of Romantic conceptions about the artist's unique personality. His very first ideas about the relationships between art and society denoted the attempt to reconcile the individual and public dimension of the artist-artisan by imagining a secluded place which, however, does not exclude human interaction. Dedication to the arts should be pursued in semi-isolation: the precept Morris sustained in his youth underwent a substantial transformation during the years of political commitment. In the socialist utopia he envisaged in the 1880s art is a popular, communitarian activity; however, individual talent can still be cultivated. The belief that personal inclinations should be regarded as a powerful source of inspiration and the awareness that the anthropological complexity of human nature makes desires so different were the two major polarities on which he elaborated his thought about the individual creation and social circulation of aesthetic objects.

In the essays dedicated to the ideal book and to printing, Morris adopts a diachronic perspective in order to explain why medieval art marked superb achievements in artistic styles and techniques. The very definition of Gothic deserves close attention: in the lecture on 'The Early Illustration of Printed Books' (1895) he not only retraces the origins and development of organic art, but also defines it as a universal aesthetic category:

> Properly speaking, all arts […] belonged to the definitely Gothic school. […] probably some of those present had a vague idea of what that meant, some thinking it referred to churches and Gregorian chants. […]
>
> First of all this art […] was […] "Organic Art"; the principle of growth in it being not merely accidental or individual, but connected by a long line of tradition, of practice and craftsmanship. […] they had – first of all in the days of the old classical civilisation before the time of Pericles – this organic

> art in a very vigorous and complete condition […]. It went on progressing along these lines of organic growth in the early days of Greek art, and approached something near perfection about the time of Pericles. […] the society of that period was not equal […] to turning about and finding some new field in which to run the old material. […] this art crystallised and entered into the second condition of the ancient classical art epidemic period, during which, although there appeared to be a certain amount of vitality, there was no growth, no advance. [9]

Morris searches for the beginning of organic art in western culture and locates its first apogee and decline in the Greece of Pericles. Historicization is necessary for expounding a fundamental concept: because artists have continued to practice organic art throughout the centuries, its value can be assessed by retrieving its primeval expressions and successive ramifications.

> Another change came in Europe losing her civilisation almost entirely, and in the integration of Europe a new art sprang up. […] And so they tried to realise a new art, and in that art there lay […] the seeds of […] Gothic art. […] meaning, to the people who first used the word and knew anything about the Goths, a savage and perhaps rather ferocious art. […] an art partly made up of the old classical art and ideas from the surrounding countries, and considerably under the influence of the eastern nations – the Persians notably – and their peculiar ideas of Beauty. […] This new art, after having taken ideas from the East, was presently to take ideas also from much ruder people – the people of the North and West […].
>
> After this union of the East with the old classical world and then with the North and Celtic, the next stage was what they might call the art of quite an early mediæval period, which they dated to the end of the Norman Conquest. [10]

A wide historical and geographical map which comprises settlements and expansions enables Morris to demonstrate that the origins and permanence of Gothic art are marked by confluences and hybridisations between eastern and western peoples. The significance he attributes to cross-fertilizations calls for a closer enquiry into his reception of John Ruskin's *The Nature of Gothic* (1851-53). While tracing cultural itineraries which span the continents from South East to North West, Ruskin aims to demonstrate that architectures and, more challengingly, the civilizations they represent

testify to an ontological, thus ineradicable, contrast between Gothic and Byzantine. While his emphasis is on cultural diversity, and the clashes it has engendered, Morris' concern is for the retrieval of imbrications. Identifying the legacy of the Gothic involves searching for coalescence; such conviction will enforce his idea that envisioning a future socialist society presupposes confrontation as well as synergy.

During the 1880s Morris realized that the notion of dialectical process, derived from scientific socialism, could strengthen his organicist views about transformations of human institutions. [11] In contrast with positivist ideology, he believed that the history of civilization is characterised by stages of progress or regression generated by the intervention of human beings, and that in contemporary society, ruled by capitalism, people must acquire class consciousness if they want to produce radical changes and build up a social system founded on socialist principles. As E. P. Thompson has observed, dialectical process thrives on a romantic tension towards a future which guards the legacy of the past. The emphasis on the spiral, expressed by Morris in *The Manifesto of the Socialist League* (1885), reveals the coexistence of two strands of thought:

> every distinctive stage of progress, involves a backward as well as a forward movement; the new development returns to a point which represents the older principle elevated to a higher plane [...]. The progress of all life must be not on the straight line, but on the spiral.[12]

The concept of spiral reveals an oscillation between historicism and medievalism, between a dialectical view of the future and a nostalgic revival of the past. For Morris the social body hosts seeds of change which can grow and give birth to new forms of work organization and acculturation. The late romantic idea that the Victorian age, though corrupted, can still be healed, merges with the Marxist belief that revolution will defeat capitalism, and an epoch of equalitarianism will begin. However, Morris' vision of the future cannot be uncoupled from an idealisation of the Middle Ages which thrives on the conviction that the guilds of arts and crafts testify to the development of communitarianism and to the unbridled expression of artistic creativity. Morris' views about western culture from antiquity to the Middle Ages are marked by a duality, which involves a rigorous diachronic study of cultural ramifications and hybridisations, but also an idealization of the past, constantly evoked in icons of beauty and ethos.

Morris' theory about the arts as organisms nurtured by individual

creativity and social cohesion is based on the principle of unity and multiplicity. When he employs the term Early Norman, he specifies that it is referred to architecture as well as to other arts. The terminological issue induces him to expound an important concept about the symbiosis of the arts, to be regarded as the finest accomplishment of Gothic artists. Gothic is not only figurative art, because 'all arts were intertwined one with another — there was in fact only one art, with various manifestations.' [13] [...] When Rome and Constantinople, the Celts and other peoples from Northern Europe came into contact, the arts received an immense impetus and for four hundred years, from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, produced organic works characterised by the dual pursuit of elegance and originality.

The stylistic models elaborated from the first half of the Trecento to the second half of the Quattrocento marked the final development and gradual decline of Gothic art, and the end of the Middle Ages. The illuminated manuscript was gradually replaced by the book, which bore witness to the permanence of organic art through faithfulness to two fundamental principles: the epic element, made manifest in the narration of a story which revolves around an accident, and the ornamental element, which expresses both beauty and fitness, propriety and decorum.

The ancient legacy of the Gothic has been spoilt by the Victorians, whose penchant for imitation and restoration Morris firmly objects to, because it disregards authenticity and values artificiality, taints pureness and fosters reproducibility. His hope for future generations is that scientism might lose its pervasive power, and the arts will be cultivated for the aesthetic and spiritual benefice they offer:

> The intelligence of the present day tended towards the cultivation of the sciences and not art. A day would doubtlessly come when people would get tired of letting their intelligence rest on the scientific side of things, and almost invariably would turn their attention to art. [...] they would eventually get through the ages of science and get a sort of transition age between science and art, and then the latter would have a tolerably good time of it.[14]

Unable to envisage a future society in which sciences and arts interact, Morris foresees a deeper and deeper bifurcation in their respective evolutions. A renaissance of the arts will only be possible when the predominance of science and technology ends, because in the age of machine the primary aim is to enhance material progress rather than to cultivate artistic expression. His frame of mind can be comprehended by pointing out that for him the

opposition between humanistic and scientific knowledge arises from the ideological necessity to emphasise the social function of art. He firmly rejects an idea of progress restricted to the advancement of material conditions and attained through the construction and use of mechanical devices, which he associates with the exploitation of the working class. Instead, the development of the arts involves the expression of manual skills and creativity, and acquires profound ethical value, because it enhances human dignity.

Precisely because Morris is convinced that human regeneration in socialist utopia can be brought about by means of education, practice and enjoyment of the arts, he praises experimentation with different media. The belief that the artist can express the unity of art through the multiplicity of its manifestations can be regarded as his contribution to the mutual illumination of the arts. Different codes can be employed to show that various forms of creativity create synergies and enhance artistic value, while the specificity of each art can still be distinguished. The conviction that writing, painting, decoration, and illustration should interact and empower each other sustained his socio-aesthetic theory, according to which, in order to prevent leisure from being spoilt by alienating industrial work, society must enable all individuals to choose a job which involves multiple forms of creativity. He thus conceives of art as both conceptual and practical, mental and manual, and rejects the hierarchical distinction between designer and maker.

Morris gradually came to believe that artists cannot work in seclusion, because only the sense of belonging to a community enables them to create art and make it enjoyable. However, it is not easy to understand how, while striving to make art for the people, he could envisage modes of interaction between an artist endowed with multiple talent, whose ancestor could have been Leonardo da Vinci, and a common person. His belief that each human being possesses the ability to acquire technical skills and use them to create an original artwork is founded on the certainty that the ontological potentialities of mankind are huge. While reading Morris' lectures and essays, one wonders whether the expression of creativity through different media can be defined as 'normal', rather than 'exceptional'. Morris' project of revitalising the romantic concept of artistic creativity as a utopian faculty does not provide substantial responses to crucial issues such as inventiveness in everyday work, the aesthetic quality of popular art, and the genius. He succeeded in proving that art could leave elitist circles and circulate, be enjoyed, and practised, regardless of social status. Certainly, however, his most utopian thought was that extraordinary talent does belong to all.

Along Pathways of Visual Handwriting

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the art of writing beautifully was taught at school. While learning to write, children also apprehended 'the aesthetics of a written graphic line that easily flowed between text and image.' [15] By means of exercises that combined calligraphy and drawing, they became aware that graphic marks could produce not only letters and words, but also decoration and ornament.

Morris began to experiment with calligraphy between 1853 and 1856. As an undergraduate at Exeter College he spent whole days studying the illuminated manuscripts kept at the Bodleian Library and reading medieval and Victorian romances. However, his interest in calligraphy and decoration went far beyond the desire to revive two of the crafts which had reached their highest splendour in the Middle Ages. When he realised that he was not equally talented as a painter and poet, he reacted to his sense of inadequacy by developing forms of inter-medial creativity. His search for modes of visual expression other than painting will affect his aesthetic conceptions, which will be shaped by the necessity to overcome the hierarchy between pure and applied arts, and by the determination to demonstrate that, in an artwork constituted by various forms, each contributes to cohesion, but also maintains its specificity and aesthetic autonomy. The poem 'Guendolen' (1856) and the manuscript *A Book of Verse* (1870) bear witness to his utopian views about the possibility of studying ancient techniques in order to create decorative calligraphy in the Victorian age.

Juvenile Calligraphic Experiments

'Guendolen'

'Twixt the sunlight and the shade
Float up memories of my maid
God remember
Guendolen.

Gold or gems she did not wear
But her yellow rippled hair
Like a veil, hid
Guendolen.

'Twixt the sunlight and the shade
My rough hands so strangely made

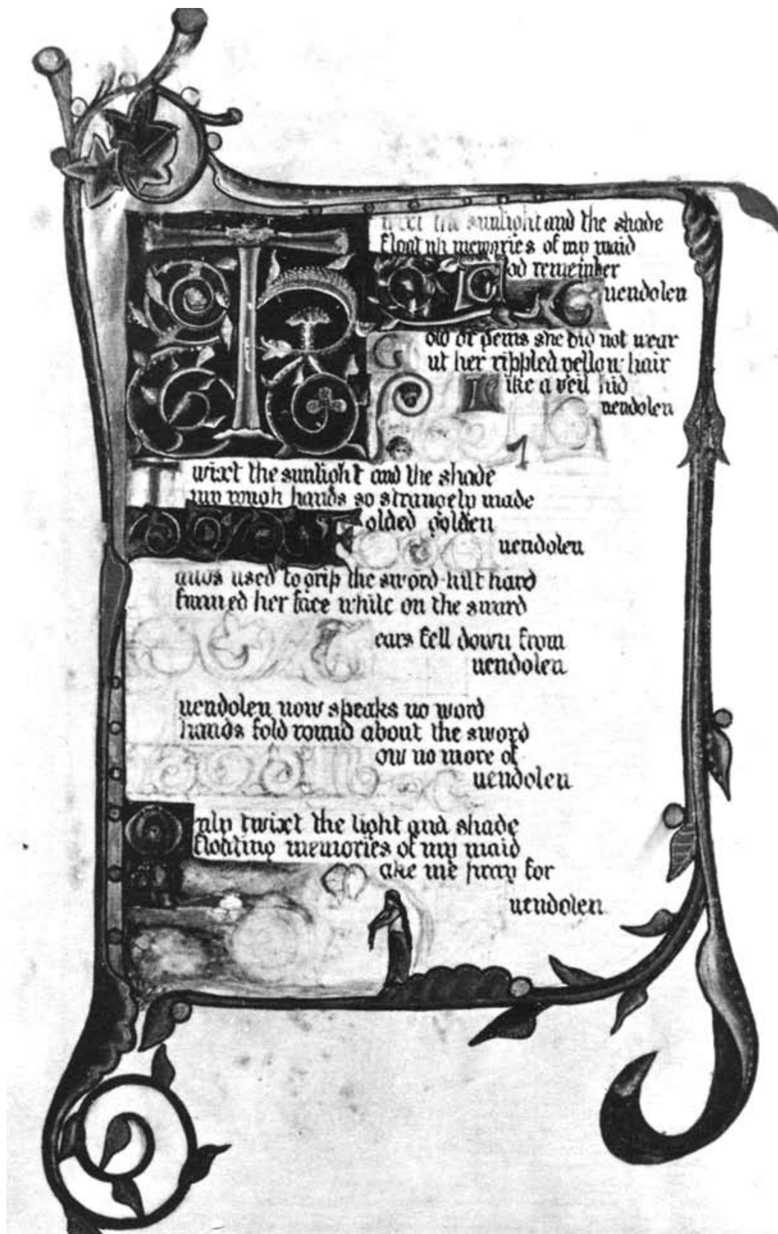


Figure 1. William Morris, 'Guendolen', vellum leaf, 1856, present location unknown, Sotheby's Catalogue, Alan G. Thomas Sale, 1993, lot 244. Courtesy of Sotheby's International.

Folded Golden
Guendolen.

Hands used to grip the sword hit hard
Framed her face, while on the sward
Tears fell down from
Guendolen.

Guendolen now speaks no word
Hands fold round about the sword
Now no more of
Guendolen.

Only 'twixt the light and shade
Floating memories of my maid
Make me pray for
Guendolen.

Morris' first experiments with illuminated calligraphy, dating to 1856, produced 'Guendolen' [Figure 1]. The short poem was published for the first time in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) with the title 'Hands', then expanded and republished in *The Defence of Guenever and Other Poems* (1858) with the title 'Rapunzel'. 'Guendolen' is fundamental for comprehending how Morris' aesthetics is founded on the reception of medieval culture and experimentation with calligraphic and decorative techniques.

The medieval motif of tragic love was particularly appealing to the young poet, but his penchant for uncanny atmospheres is already recognisable in the depiction of a protagonist haunted by unpredictable drives. Poetic language and illuminated letters pursue symbiosis by reverberating luminosity: 'sunlight' (line 1), 'gold' (line 2), 'yellow' (line 3), 'sunlight' (line 9), 'golden' (line 11); and 'light' (line 21) match the brightness of decorative elements. However, decoration which grows abundantly between the lines intrudes upon calligraphy: the arabesques traced by initials, vegetal motifs and human figures prevail over words. Even though strong sound effects are created by the massive use of dental and sibilant consonants, the overabundance of decorative components generates a visual appeal stronger than the power of cadence, alliteration and repetition.

It would be reductive to characterise the pictorial signs disseminated all over the manuscript as ornamental, because they predominate over words. Nor can they be considered as illustrations that shed light on the verbal code,

because their heterogeneity shuns the recognition of precise correspondences between images and words. Initials, in particular, reveal a dual nature: seen as ramifications of the phytomorphic lines, they are pictorial; but they are also verbal, if read as letters of the Gothic alphabet, on which the intelligibility of the poem depend.

The richness of particulars which characterizes the left hand side of the page and the emptiness of the right hand side unbalances the space of representation. Verses, arabesques, capital letters, vegetal motifs and human figures coexist in a bizarre verbal-visual work. Although Morris was a young artist who needed to refine his skills, exploration of interart modes proves that from the very beginning he aimed to achieve osmosis, which could encompass multiple processes of signification, and produce a simultaneity of sensorial and intellectual stimuli.

A Gift of Poetry and Pictures

Between February and August 1870 Morris wrote *A Book of Verse*, a collection of poems in calligraphic forms, which he gave as a birthday present to Georgiana Burne-Jones. The title establishes an intertextual connection with the poem *Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam, translated into English by Edward Fitzgerald. The first stanza, which refers to a shift in the speaker's perception of the world, is charged with symbolic value:

> Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough
> A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
> Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
> and Wilderness is Paradise now. [16]

The passage from dejection to a physically and spiritually gratifying condition alludes to the feeling of sympathy for Georgiana Burne-Jones. Their mutual confidence soothed the sense of loneliness Morris experienced during the 1870s, when he and his wife Jane Burden grew gradually estranged from each other.

The *colophon* [Figure 2] signed by Morris contains important details about the contributions by the four artists who collaborated to the manuscript:

As to those who have had a hand in
making this book, Edward Burne Jones
painted the picture on page 1: the other
pictures were all painted by Charles F
Murray, but the minstrel figures on
the title-page, and the figures of Spring
Summer and Autumn on page 40, he did
from my drawings.
As to the pattern-work, George Wardle
drew in all the ornament on the first ten
pages, and I coloured it; he also did
all the coloured letters both big and
little; the rest of the ornament I did,
together with all the writing.
Also I made all the verses; but two
poems, the Ballad of Christine, and the
Son's Sorrow I translated out of Icelandic.

William Morris
26 Queen Sq: Bloomsbury London
August 26th 1870.

Figure 2. William Morris, *A Book of Verse*, 1870, colophon (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

As to those who have had a hand in making this book, Edward Burne Jones painted the picture on page 1: the other pictures were all painted by Charles F Murray, but the minstrel figures on the title page, and the figures of Spring Summer and Autumn on page 40, he did from my drawings.

As to the pattern-work, George Wardle drew in all the ornament on the first ten pages, and I coloured it; he also did all the coloured letters both big and little; the rest of the ornament I did, together with all the writing.

Also I made all the verses; but two poems, the Ballad of Christine, and The Son's Sorrow I translated out of Icelandic.

William Morris
26 Queen Sq. Bloomsbury, London
August 26th 1870 [17]

Edward Burne-Jones', Charles Murray's and George Wardle's contributions balance Morris' unequal talent in visual and verbal art. He took care of poetry, calligraphy, and colouring, and produced most of the decorative elements and some drawings, but did not paint: Burne-Jones offered the miniature at the beginning of the first poem, Fairfax Murray contributed the portrait of Morris on the front-page and other pictures.

His desire to create an effect of fullness, which he associates to wholeness, leads him to stretch the definition and function of calligraphic page. The very term front-page [Figure 3] sounds inadequate: if the small oval portrait of Morris and the bibliographical references prove that it is the initial page, the presence of a luxuriant foliage transforms it into a hybrid which bears

Figure 3. William Morris, *A Book of Verse*, 1870, front-page by William Morris and Charles Fairfax Murray (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

resemblance to a miniature wallpaper or a tapestry. In the first ten pages, ornamented by Wardle and coloured in soft hues by Morris, branches, flowers and leaves mark the horizontal and lateral portions of the page, and do not interfere with calligraphy. In the following forty-one pages, brightly coloured and ornamented by Morris, vegetation and flowers bloom on the right hand side and branches stretch to the left hand side. The balanced coexistence of verbal and visual elements in the first pages is postponed to a strong emphasis on ornamentation, which becomes the most prominent feature.

'The Lapse of the Year'

Spring am I, too soft of heart,
Much to speak ere I depart
Ask the summer tide to prove
The abundance of my love 4

Summer looked for long am I
Much shall change or ere I die
Prithee take it not amiss
Though I weary thee with bliss! 8

Laden Autumn here I stand,
Weak of heart and worn of hand
Speak the words that set me free
Nought but rest seems good to me. 12

Ah, shall Winter mend your case?
Set your teeth the wind to face,
Beat the snow down, tread the frost,
All is gained when all is lost. 16

'The Lapse of the Year', the twentieth poem featuring in *A Book of Verse*, is presented in one page [Figure 4]. Each stanza is marked by a centripetal force which emphasises the distinctive features of Summer, Spring, Autumn and Winter, speaking in the first person, and a centrifugal force which produces intersections. Spring, 'too soft of heart' (line 1), brings along delicate feelings which must grow stronger. Summer is the season of desire, in which the enjoyment of pleasure reaches its climax and extenuation: 'I weary thee with bliss' (line 8). Autumn, 'weak of heart and worn of hand' (line 10), asks for rest from the burden of life, and awaits rejuvenation. Winter is the season of toil, in which human endurance is heavily tested. Iconicity in the two central verses, 'set your teeth the wind to face,/ Beat the snow down, tread the frost', represents the condition of hardship and fatigue: the heavy sound

40

THE LAPSE OF THE YEAR

SPRING am I, too soft of heart
Much to speak ere I depart:
Ask the summer-tide to prove
The abundance of my love.

SUMMER looked for long am I
Much shall change or ere I die
Prithee take it not amiss
Though I weary thee with bliss!

Laden AUTUMN here I stand,
Weak of heart and worn of hand;
Speak the word that sets me free,
Nought but rest seems good to me.

Ah, shall WINTER mend your case?
Set your teeth the wind to face,
Beat the snow down, tread the frost,
All is gained when all is lost.

Figure 4. William Morris, 'The Lapse of the Year', from *A Book of Verse*, 1870, p. 40 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

of the dental consonants 't' and 'd' conveys an idea of stuttering strides and resilience at the same time.

While focusing on a specific period of the year and condition of life, every nucleus contains an agent of mutation: 'ere I depart' (line 2) in Spring; 'much shall change' (line 2) in Summer; 'the word that sets me free' (line 3) in Autumn; 'All is gained when all is lost' (line 4) in Winter. The last verse encloses Morris' hymn to palingenesis: loss is overcome by rebirth. The pictures of the four seasons are separated by different frames, but also juxtaposed. Reminiscent of classical iconography, Spring is associated with germination, Summer with ripeness, Autumn with decline and Winter with stasis. Even though their settings are distinct, they are linked by chromatic correspondences. The green in the tunic of Spring grows everywhere in Summer; the golden, radiant globe hold by Summer reappears in the warm intensity of the tunic worn by Autumn and in the piles of hay in the background. Dressed in a cold shade of indigo and surrounded by colourless nature, Winter is gazing at the fire, chromatically related to the other seasons. White spreading around Winter comprises all the colours of the spectre, and establishes a correspondence with the last verse which, while invoking nothing, conjures up all possibilities.

The construction of the poem, in which the movement propagating from the first to the fourth stanza symbolises life progressing through the seasons, finds subtle associations in the chromatic markers, which erase the apparent self-enclosure of each picture by establishing relationships among the four figures.

'Praise of Venus'

Before our lady came on earth
Little there was of joy or mirth
About the borders of the sea
The sea-folk wandered wearily, 4

About the wintry river-side
The weary fishers would abide
Alone within the weaving room
The girls would sit before the loom 8

And sing no song and play no play
Alone from dawn to hot mid-day
From mid-day into evening
The men afield would work, nor sing, 12

Mid weary thoughts of man and God
Before thy feet the wet ways trod
Unkissed the merchant bore his care
Unkissed the knights went out to war, 16

Unkissed the mariner came home,
Unkissed the minstrel men must roam
Or the stream the maids would stare
Nor know why they were shapen fair 20

Their yellow locks, their bosoms white
Their limbs well wrought for all delight,
Seemed fruitless things that waited death,
As hopeless as the flowers beneath 24

The weariness of unkissed feet
Therefore O Venus well may we
Praise the green ridges of the sea
Oer which upon a happy day 28

Thou cams't to take our shame away:
Well may we praise the curdling foam
Amidst the which thy feet did bloom,
Flowers of the Gods; the yellow sand 32

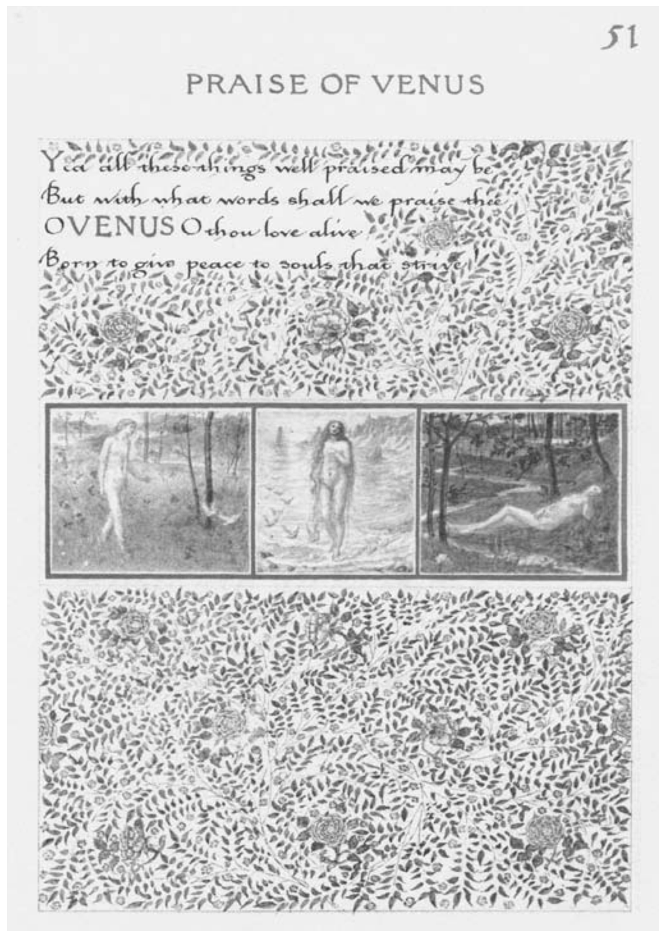
They kissed betwixt the sea and land
The bee-beset ripe seeded grass
Through which thy fine limbs first did pass;
The purple-dusted butterfly 36

First blown against thy quivering thigh;
The first red rose that touched thy side
And overblown and fainted died;
The flickering of the orange shade 40

Where first in sleep thy limbs were laid;
The happy day's sweet life and death
Whose air first caught thy balmy breath: --
Yea all these things well praised may be 44

But with what words shall we praise thee
O Venus O thou love alive
Born to give peace to souls that strive!

In the last page of *A Book of Verse* [Figure 5], which contains the four final verses of 'Praise of Venus', vegetal motifs become prominent. While in 'The Lapse of the Year' they are marginal and lightened by soft colours, here they cover the whole surface. Three pictures in central position focus on naked Venus, whose whiteness illuminates fields, sea and woods, symbolizing sensual pleasure. With a few, vivid traits Fairfax Murray represents a meadow with poppies, small butterflies and two white birds, a beach at sunrise, and a river that flows between roses and fruit trees. The vividness of nature enhances the glowing corporeality of the goddess, portrayed in the act of offering her femininity.

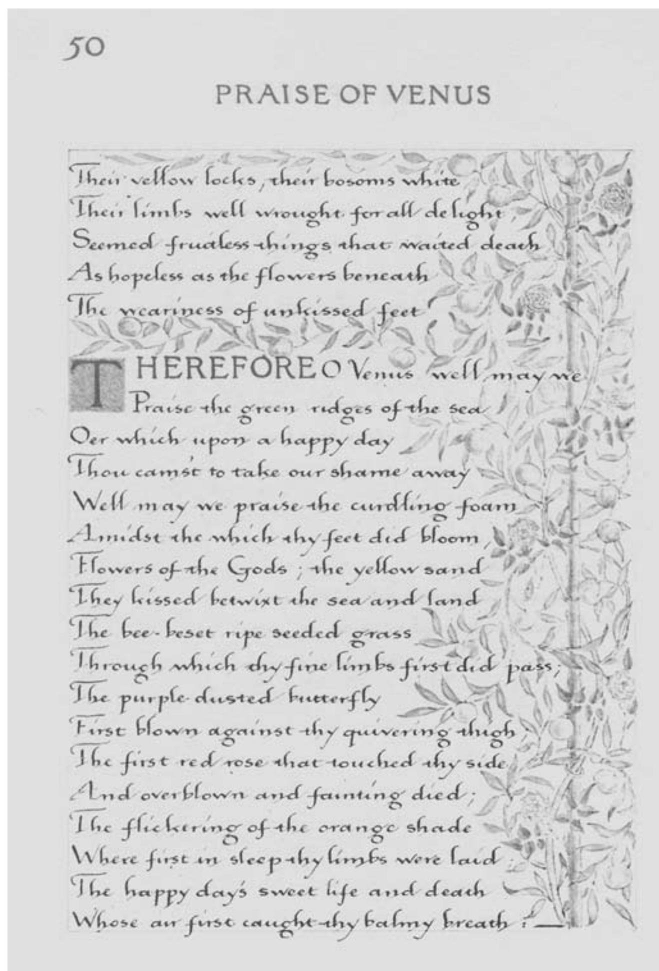

51

PRAISE OF VENUS

Yea all these things well praised may be
But with what words shall we praise thee
O VENUS O thou love alive
Born to give peace to souls that strive

Figure 5. William Morris, 'Praise of Venus', from *A Book of Verse*, 1870, p. 51 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

The very end of the poem (lines 44-47), placed at the top of the last page of *A Book of Verse*, contains a question about the poet's faculties, and admits to the inability of language to celebrate Beauty and Love fully. 'All these things', magnified by the touch of Venus, are minutely described in the previous page [Figure 6], in verses pervaded by pictorialism (lines 26-43): 'the ridges of the sea' (line 27), 'the curdling foam' (line 30), 'the yellow sand' (line 32) appear in the second picture; 'The bee-beset ripe seeded grass' (line 34), 'The purple-dusted butterfly' (line 36) in the first; 'The first red rose'



50

PRAISE OF VENUS

Their yellow locks, their bosoms white
Their limbs well wrought for all delight,
Seemed fruitless things that waited death
As hopeless as the flowers beneath
The weariness of unkissed feet

THEREFORE O Venus well may we
Praise the green ridges of the sea
O'er which upon a happy day
Thou camst to take our shame away
Well may we praise the curdling foam
Amidst the which thy feet did bloom,
Flowers of the Gods; the yellow sand
They kissed betwixt the sea and land
The bee-beset ripe seeded grass
Through which thy fine limbs first did pass;
The purple-dusted butterfly
First blown against thy quivering thigh
The first red rose that touched thy side
And overblown and fainting died;
The flickering of the orange shade
Where first in sleep thy limbs were laid
The happy day's sweet life and death
Whose air first caught thy balmy breath:—

Figure 6. William Morris, 'Praise of Venus', from *A Book of Verse*, 1870, p. 50 (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

(line 38) and 'The flickering of the orange shade' (line 40) in the third. Venus' body is portrayed through contact with natural elements: 'thy feet' (line 31) in the sea foam, 'thy fine limbs' (line 35) on the grass, 'thy quivering thigh' (line 37) touched by a butterfly, 'thy side' (line 38) caressed by a rose, 'thy limbs' (line 41) under an orange-tree, 'thy balmy breath' (line 43) in the air.

While the poem portrays the body in parts, the three pictures by Fairfax Murray represent it in its fullness. Evoked by the poet and made visible by the painter, Venus' body encloses an ancient meta-artistic question: is the verbal code less ductile than the pictorial one? Morris' response to *ut pictura poësis* seems to be an acknowledgement of the superiority of images. However, the preceding verses show that the verbal sign possesses a mythopoieic quality which enables the poet to conjure up the thing by overcoming its absence. The pictures envision a triple Venus, in the poem she multiplies everywhere. Through a kaleidoscope of images that evoke her apparition in various natural landscapes, rendered with pictorial vividness, Morris celebrates the capacity of the word to 'create' the thing.

The dual act of reading and seeing the pages of *A Book of Verse* is challenging, because it involves exposure to a high density of signs, which Morris perceived as deeply interrelated. The value he attributes to inter-artisticity derives from the belief that osmosis illuminates the original unity of the arts, but also reveals the intrinsic value of each art form. Furthermore, for Morris calligraphy activates a dual process which develops simultaneously from what words mean and how they appear; it is a form of figurative writing thriving on a delicate balance between referentiality, expressed by meaning, and self-reflexivity, made manifest through the aesthetic component of the signifier. However, Morris failed to recognize that, instead of creating a harmonious unity, the abundance of illuminated letters, miniatures and decorations may easily cause a short circuit. The iconic component of calligraphic writing, the intense pictorialism of poetic content, the visual beguiling of pictures, and the luxuriance of ornamental motifs generate a complex proliferation of signs, which expose the reader/observer to the danger of a hermeneutic impasse. The profusion of verbal and visual components, which for Morris should interact and create correspondences, affects the production of meaning and empowers the lure of words, images and decorations per se, outside — or beyond — their meaning.

Ideals in Books

In 1891 Morris founded the Kelmscott Press in order to re-introduce printing processes, tools, and materials utilized by fifteenth-century printers. He used a hand-press, handmade, unbleached paper, black ink produced by a German firm and binding materials manufactured by Henry Band in Middlesex. He chose elaborate type-faces, increased their size, diminished the space between the lines, prepared woodblocks, and introduced numerous decorative elements at the margins of the page. [18]

The establishment of the press posed problematic questions for Morris because printing machines constantly reminded him of the extinct art of the manuscript book in the Middle Ages. The conflict between 'natural' and 'artificial' working tools involves not only aesthetical issues, but also ideological concerns. The desk and the press testify to two opposite modes of working with the verbal code: simplicity is the great privilege of the scribe, which the printer has lost. [19] The introduction of mechanical procedures would have been acceptable, if it had not caused the decline of handwriting. Because he wanted to re-evaluate the beauty of the written page, he attempted to create types which possess a high calligraphic quality, even though he realized that materials such as paper and ink were only partially known, and tools such as the calligrapher's pen could but be different.

What prompted Morris to launch his enterprise was the hope that, by fulfilling specific aesthetic parameters, the books he published could enhance the pleasure of reading. The layout of the page, characterised by fonts and ornaments with a strong impact, was aimed at enhancing visual appeal. However, such richness can intrude upon, and even jeopardize, the act of reading, transformed into a complex act of perception. The frontispiece [Figure 7] of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted* (1890) and page 45 [Figure 8], dedicated to *The Romaunt of the Rose*, might support the argument that type-faces, borders, and decorative illustration reveal the same *horror vacui* that drove the Victorians to gather, or amass, objects in their living rooms. Certainly, the art of printing has not evolved along the line Morris hoped for. In fact, as William S. Peterson has observed, Morris' theories were utilized for the realization of the book of the twentieth century, characterised by mechanical production and careful design. Even though he was forced to realise that industrial processes could not be brought to a halt through the revival of medieval crafts, he made clear that the disfiguring effects of industrialisation on architecture could be healed and the uniqueness of artistic creation could be guarded by creating aesthetic objects which contributed to the advancement of civilization.

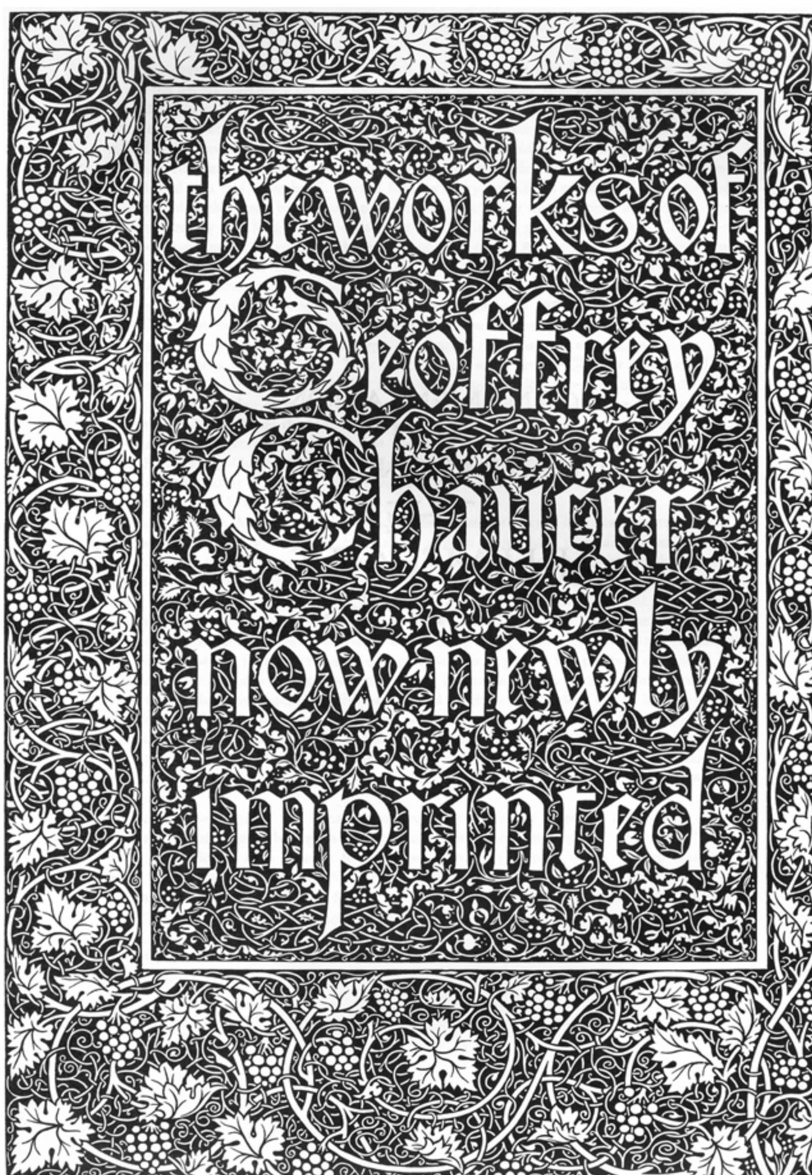


Figure 7. William Morris, frontispiece of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted*, Hammersmith, Kelmscott Press, 1890, from William Morris, *Ornamentation & Illustrations from* The Kelmscott Chaucer, with an Introduction by Fridolf Johnson, New York, Dover, 1973.

For if I with his arowe mete,
It wol me greven sore, ywis!
But I, that nothing wiste of this,
Wente up and doun ful many a wey,
And he me folwed faste alwey;
But nowher wolde I reste me,
Til I hadde al the yerde in be.
THE gardin was, by mesuring,
Right even and squar in compassing;
It was as long as it was large.
Of fruyt had every tree his charge,
But it were any hidous tree The Trees
Of which ther were two or three.
Ther were, and that wot I ful wel,
Of pomgarnettes a ful gret del;
That is a fruyt ful wel to lyke,
Namely to folk whan they ben syke.
And trees ther were, greet foisoun,
That baren notes in hir sesoun,
Such as men notemigges calle,
That swote of savour been withalle.
And alemandres greet plentee,
Figes, and many a date-tree
Ther weren, if men hadde nede,
Through the gardin in length and brede.
Ther was eek wexing many a spyce,
As clow-gelofre, and licoryce,
Gingere, and greyn de paradys,
Canelle, and setewale of prys,
And many a spyce delitable,
To eten whan men ryse fro table.
And many hoomly trees ther were,
That peches, coynes, and apples bere,
Medlers, ploumes, peres, chesteynes,
Cheryse, of whiche many on fayn is,
Notes, aleys, and bolas,
That for to seen it was solas;
With many high lorer and pyn
Was renged clene al that gardyn;
With cipres, and with oliveres,
Of which that nigh no plente here is.
Ther were elmes grete and stronge,
Maples, asshe, ook, asp, planes longe,
Fyn ew, popler, and lindes faire,
And othere trees ful many a payre.
WHAT sholde I telle you more of it?
Ther were so many trees yit,
That I sholde al encombred be
Er I had rekened every tree.
THESE trees were set, that I devyse,
Oon from another, in assyse,
Five fadome or sixe, I trowe so,
But they were hye and grete also:
And for to kepe out wel the sonne,
The croppes were so thikke yronne,
And every braunch in other knet,

Figure 8. William Morris, *The Romaunt of the Rose*, in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted*, Hammersmith, Kelmscott Press, 1890, page 45, from William Morris, *Ornamentation & Illustrations from* The Kelmscott Chaucer, with an Introduction by Fridolf Johnson, New York, Dover, 1973.

Ruskin wrote *The Nature of Gothic*, but did not want to reconstruct Gothic cathedrals in the Victorian age; Morris knew it was impossible to reproduce medieval books: nevertheless, they both strove to reintroduce the artistic and social values they believed had been uphold in the Middle Ages. The blending of architecture and nature — Venetian palaces and the lagoon, stones and water — is portrayed by Ruskin as an iconic representation of historicity, in which Gothic stands out in a vision of creative freedom and moral strength. For Morris the production of books reminiscent of the rise of printing transforms everyday objects into repositories of cultural memory. Like Ruskin, he believed that contemplation of the past could exert a healing power, but also thought that books could be designed to display their effect as objects of beauty and historical reminders of a pre-industrial social context.

The concept of art as construction, or re-construction, of a cosmos involves a synergy between the work of man and the work of nature. Morris wants to neutralize human alienation caused by industrial work by celebrating the medieval illustrated book as an emblem of order and harmony. As Peterson aptly observes:

> One cannot understand the moral intensity of Morris' typographical writings without realizing that he does not merely wish to improve the printing of books: in fact [...] he wants to alter the course of Western history. [...] It is possible [...] to concentrate entirely upon Morris' sensitive analysis of the medieval illustrated book and his wonderful perceptive advice about typographical design. But we will hear only half of what he is telling us if we ever forget that lending order to the printed page is, for Morris, ultimately one way of lending meaning to human existence. [20]

However, maintaining that Morris' utopian project was purely founded on the pursuit of beauty and ethos would be misleading. His experiments with the frontispiece, borders, type and size of fonts are intricately connected with his entrepreneurial role [21] and, inevitably, with commercialisation: since the *objets d'art* created by his publishing house demanded a considerable amount of specialised work, he was compelled to sell them at expensive prices. The achievement of high ethical and aesthetical standards remained indelibly linked to the assessment of economic value.

Morris' conceptions of the printing process reverberated across the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Kelmscott Press transformed books into artistic objects which activate reading as well as seeing, thus arousing

both interest and pleasure. The quest for interart osmosis and the focus on the aesthetics of reading innately appealed to numerous publishing enterprises of the 1890s, from *The Yellow Book* to private presses such as the Doves and Eragny and Vale Presses, which applied the tenets of aestheticism to typography.

The issue of autonomy deserves particular attention, requiring a dual perspective, which encompasses the nature of the artefact, and the interaction between artist and society. For Morris the understanding and visual enjoyment of the text do not compete with, but rather enforce, each other: paradoxically, he seemed to believe that autonomy and interrelatedness were not mutually exclusive. He thus failed to realise that multiple signification impinges on cohesion and can disperse signs and meanings. Autonomy also acquires a social value, because detachment from or involvement with politics depends on a choice which artists cannot shun. Indeed, cultural renewal is founded on their capacity to develop a dialogue between ethics and aesthetics. The abolishment of industrial labour and its replacement by forms of artisanship which produce aesthetic pleasure are fundamental stages in the utopian process aimed at transforming a capitalist society into an equalitarian one. As Norman Kelvin lucidly argues, the impact of Morris' views was very much connected with his notion of autonomy:

> [...] the mere fact that the decorative work of Morris and Company, and the Kelmscott Press, inspired wide, and continuously spreading imitation, speaks in a most literal way of a social impact; of the making of autonomous art into a social process. In this all-important respect Morris' achievement parallels the achievement of Wilde, Beardsley, and Beerbohm, their redefining of the expectations of the public in both the verbal and the visual arts. The autonomous art has left its trace in the art of the hundred years since [...] in a way that leads in turn to incalculable but certain social consequences, for good or bad, as indeed it did in early twentieth-century political life, in aestheticized politics of the state. [22]

While elaborating on Morris's views about the ideal book, Walter Crane and Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson enhanced the synergy between the Arts and Crafts movement and Aestheticism. *Flora's Feast. A Fairy's Festival of Flowers in full colour* (1889) and *Queen Summer: Or, the Tourney of the Lily and the Rose* (1891), testify to the evolution of Crane's aesthetics from Pre-Raphaelite medievalism to Art Nouveau and proto-Surrealism. In *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (1896) he retraces the

origin and evolution of illustration from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century by examining manuscripts and books from numerous European countries. Morris' idea that history makes itself manifest in artistic forms, and acquires figurative value on pages and canvases, in sculpture and architecture, enables Crane to argue that art history strongly interacts with historiography and anthropology. Not only does artistic expression possess aesthetic qualities, but it conveys cultural memory, thus deepening historical knowledge:

> Here and there the continuity of chapters is broken, a passage is obscure; there are breaks and fragments – heroic torsos and limbs instead of whole figures. But more and more, by patient research labour, and comparison, the voids are being filled up, until some day perhaps there will be no chasm of conjecture in which to plunge, but the volume of art and human history will be as clear as pen and pencil can make it, and only left for a present to continue, and a future to carry to a completion which is yet never complete. [23]

Books and newspapers bear witness to the evolution of ancient forms of graphic representation exemplified by prehistoric engraving, hieroglyphs, and pictography. Originally letters established iconic relationships with signifieds; while developing more and more complex connections with ideas, they have metamorphosed into abstract and arbitrary signs. Because the iconicity of the alphabet has been dimmed, even concealed, by the proliferation of meanings, the introduction of illustrative and decorative components provides precious hermeneutic clues.

The foundation of the Doves Press in 1900 allowed Cobden-Sanderson and Emery Walker to further test the feasibility of Morris' theories about book design, and to offer their own standpoints toward the pleasure of reading. *The Ideal Book or Book Beautiful. A Tract on Calligraphy Printing and Illustration and on the Book Beautiful as a Whole* (1900) by Cobden-Sanderson offers a fundamental contribution to the fin-de-siècle passage from mimetic to symbolic art, when the quest for the mutual illumination of the arts and the plea for diversity began to compete with each other. The preponderance of typographic components, decoration, and illustration causes the subordination of writing. Furthermore, the predominance of signifiers over signifieds impairs the production of meaning:

> But in the passage from the image created in the mind by abstract symbolism to the image expressed on the page by verisimilitude,

> the book itself underwent a change and became in the process, not a vehicle for the conveyance of an image, but itself the image […]. […] when the illuminator, passing from the decoration of significant or initial letters, took to the making of pictures in this fashion within the folds of them, he was pressing his art too far. He was in danger […] of subordinating his Text to himself, of sacrificing the thing signified to the mode of its signification […]. [24]

Cobden-Sanderson's lucid rendition of interart strife raises issues that cannot be circumscribed to the fin-de-siècle, but are still relevant after more than a century. When numerous arts coexist, they will not cooperate, because each of them will attempt to affirm itself. While striving to demonstrate that representation reaches its highest power when it expresses correspondences between verbal and visual signifieds, Morris eventually perceived that literature and painting primarily express themselves. The most significant question raised by Morris is whether the mutual illumination of the arts does not highlight, above all, the self-reflexive nature of each art.

Morris' concern about multiple expressive codes reveals that he strove to challenge the constraints of referentiality established in the Victorian age. He offered evidence that the more the signifier discloses beauty, the more it raises interest *per se*, thus diverting the attention of the reader/viewer from the signified. Aesthetes will celebrate the pervasive glow of artistic objects, will advocate that life can be enjoyed only by creating and experiencing all possible art forms. As Oscar Wilde declares, the arts must find mutual nourishment in order to offer their devotees immunity from the squalor of life: 'The conception of making a prose poem out of paint is excellent. Much of the best modern literature springs from the same aim. In a very ugly and sensible age, the arts borrow, not from life, but from each other.' [25] Wilde wrote that art inspired art also because Morris had been searching for polymorphous modes of expression. His concern about the aims and scope of representation resonates at the end of the nineteenth century, heralding issues that Modernism and avant-garde will thoroughly explore. His works of [inter]art reveal that polarities between referential and self-referential art will gradually be replaced by rarefaction of meaning and enhancement of self-reflexive, meta-artistic components. The quest for the symbiosis of the arts ends with the awareness that, while illuminating each other, they illuminate, and question, themselves. [26]

Polymorphous art is a definition which attempts to enclose the

innovations introduced and the shortcomings experienced by Morris, but also aims to revise restrictive views on Pre-Raphaelitism. Wylie Sypher's belief, expressed in 1960, that 'Pre-Raphaelite poetry began by being narrative or illustrative and ended by being frankly and consciously ornamental' [27] is hardly tenable. The focus on ornamentation as a mere addendum to verbal art sounds misleading, because it disregards the Pre-Raphaelites' attempt to overcome the subservience of an art form to another and to activate interart dynamics in order to enquire into the autonomy and interdependence of the arts. Meta-artistic questions testify to the evolution of Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry, and self-reflexivity must be regarded as a major achievement. Morris' calligraphy and typography offer a complex corpus for investigation. While experimenting with them, he perceived that the coexistence of the verbal and visual code, and the roles assignable to word or image, engender hermeneutic mobility. Because his calligraphic and typographic works elude identification of what is central and what is marginal [28] — the *parergon*, in Derrida's terms, the critical interest they arouse drives them beyond the domain of Victorianists.

Recent scholarship has found new arguments to maintain that the peculiar ethical/aesthetical nexus of Morris' views on art is a major motive of interest. [29] As Andrea Gatti has explained, the pages of the Kelmscott volumes arouse admiration for the ideal of 'bellezza diffusa', diffuse beauty, which they attain. What has been appreciated for more than a century is not their design, but their rich decoration, the beauty of the plates, the choice of materials, and the moral and social ideals which support Morris' theory of publishing as an art. [30] He strenuously endeavoured to prove that taste cannot be considered as a faculty which distinguishes social classes, but as a quality shared by all. Opportunities, not talent, differentiate human beings.

While his strong emphasis on a social idea of art has certainly been noted, the relevance of his meta-critical discourse has been largely neglected. Morris created diverse objects of art. He began his experimentation with polymorphism because he wanted to overcome the hierarchical boundary between pure and applied art, still deeply rooted in his age. However, his enquiry into the specificity of expressive codes and polysemous art cannot be easily adjusted within the Victorian frame of mind. Questions about un-representability and clear signification, non-referentiality and transparency are still at the core of critical debates about representation. Morris' quest for the cosmos, within and among the arts, thrives on trans-codification and, more importantly, on its constant re-codifiability, and constant re-interpretability.

1 Belfort Bax (1854-1926) became an active member of the Social Democratic Federation in 1882, but left it to found, together with Morris, the Socialist League. They co-authored the *Manifesto*, which was read at the first General Conference on the 5th of July 1885. Bax's opposition to anarchism led him to rejoin the SDF, which he supported in influential theoretical essays.

2 William Morris, 'Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century' (1887), in *William Morris on History*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1996), p. 98.

3 William Morris, 'The Development of Modern Society' (1890), in *Morris on History*, p. 119.

4 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by Krishan Kumar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 184-185.

5 Timothy H. Evans, 'Folklore as Utopia: English Medievalists and the Ideology of Revivalism', *Western Folklore*, 47:4 (Oct. 1988), pp. 245-268.

6 William Morris, 'The Aims of Art' (1886), in *William Morris. Stories in Prose. Stories in Verse. Shorter Poems. Lectures and Essays.* ed. by G. D. H. Cole (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1949), pp. 588-589.

7 See Ruth Kinna, 'William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61:3 (July 2000), pp. 493-512; Vita Fortunati and Paola Spinozzi, 'Dialectics between Labour and Rest in Morris' Utopia: *News from Nowhere* (1890)', *Utopias. Cadernos de Literatura Comparada*, 6/7 (Dezembro 2003), ed. by Fátima Vieira and Jorge Miguel Bastos da Silva (Porto: Granito Editores e Livreiros, 2003), pp. 119-137.

8 William Morris, 'The Story of the Unknown Church', *William Morris Stories in Prose Stories in Verse Shorter Poems Lectures and Essays*, p. 282.

9 William Morris, 'The Early Illustration of Printed Books', *The Ideal Book. Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book by William Morris*, ed. by William S. Peterson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 15-16.

10 'The Early Illustration of Printed Books', pp. 16-18.

11 See Nicholas Salmon, 'Introduction', *William Morris on History*, p. 4.

12 William Morris, 'Note C' to *The Manifesto of the Socialist League*, July 5th, 1885, E. P. Thompson, *William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York, Pantheon Books: 1976, rev. edn.), p. 783.

13 'The Early Illustration of Printed Books', p. 18.

14 Ibid., p. 23.

15 Gerard Curtis, 'Shared Lines. Pen and Pencil as Trace', *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. by C. T. Christ and John O. Jordan

(Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: The University of California Press, 1995) p. 30: 'Examples of nineteenth-century children's penmanship books show how calligraphic flourishes could be used to devise pictures and drawings of animals'.

16 Omar Khayyam, *Rubaiyat*, trans. by Edward Fitzgerald (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), p. 25.

17 William Morris, *A Book of Verse*. A facsimile of the manuscript written in 1870 by William Morris, Introduction by Roy Strong and J. I. Whalley (Ilkley: The Scolar Press, 1981). The *colophon* appears in the very last, unnumbered page of *A Book of Verse*.

18 J. R. Dunlap, 'Morris and the Book Arts before the Kelmscott Press', *Victorian Poetry*, 13:3 & 4 (Autumn-Winter 1975), pp. 141-157, and A. R. Life, 'Illustration and Morris' "Ideal Book"', *Victorian Poetry*, 13:3 & 4 (Autumn-Winter 1975), pp. 131-140; *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, ed. by Paul Needham (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library – London: Oxford University Press, 1976); 'The Founding of the Kelmscott Press' and 'The Work of the Kelmscott Press', http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/web/morris/, accessed 8 July 2008.

19 J. W. Mackail, Chapter XIX. 'Passive Socialism: Foundation of the Kelmscott Press: 1890-1891', *The Life of William Morris* (Longmans, Green and Co.: London, 1899), II, pp. 256-257.

20 William S. Peterson, 'Introduction by the Editor', in *The Ideal Book*, pp. xi-xxxix, in particular p. xxiii.

21 See Charles Harvey and Jon Press, *William Morris. Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

22 Norman Kelvin, 'Morris, the 1890s, and the Problematic Autonomy of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 34: 3 (1996), pp. 425-432 (430-431).

23 Walter Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (London: Bell & Sons, 1896), p. 14.

24 T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, *The Ideal Book or Book Beautiful. A Tract on Calligraphy Printing and Illustration and on the Book Beautiful as a Whole* (n.p.: Doves Press, 1900), p. 6.

25 Oscar Wilde, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison — a Study in Green', in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), p. 22.

26 See Paola Spinozzi, 'As Yet Untitled. A Sonnet by Walter Crane for a Painting by G. F. Watts: Ekphrasis as Nomination', *Textus*, XII, 1 (1999), special issue devoted to *Literature and the Arts*, ed. by Stephen Bann and Vita Fortunati, pp. 114-134.

27 Wylie Sypher, *Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature* (New York: Knopf, 1960, then New York: Random House, 1980), pp. 198-199.

28 See Lothar Hönnighausen, *Präraphaeliten und Fin de Siècle: Symbolistische Tendenzen in der Englischen Spätromantik* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1971);

English translation by Gisela Hönnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study in Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 257.

29 See Elizabeth Helsinger, 'William Morris before Kelmscott: Poetry and Design in the 1860s', *The Victorian Illustrated Book*, ed. by Richard Maxwell (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), pp. 209-238; Andrea Gatti, 'L'ideale della bellezza diffusa. L'estetica tipografica di William Morris', *Lettere in libertà. Dalle iniziali miniate ai graffiti, alfabeti, segni, immagini*, ed. by Roberta Cristofori and Grazia Maria De Rubeis (Parma: Museo Bodoniano, 2006), pp. 173-190.

30 'L'ideale della bellezza diffusa', p. 190.