

Article

WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE “MORAL QUALITIES” OF ORNAMENT

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Abstract

Aesthetic transformation, for William Morris, leads to broader social and political transformation. The arts of design, in particular, ought properly to be in the forefront of social change. A brilliant designer in his own right, Morris spent much of the period 1877-1886 formulating principles (he called them “moral qualities”) whereby design might be practiced so that it advances the greater social good. In this essay, I discuss those principles as Morris enunciated them in two of his most neglected essays, “Making The Best of It” and “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing,” both originally written for and addressed to audiences of artisans and artworkers. When freed from the constraints that would enslave his mind and practice, Morris argues, the designer might create work that both promotes and incarnates the principle of radical transformation, whereby life might be made palatable for those living and working in intolerable conditions.

Ornament shapes, straightens, and stabilizes the bare and arid field on which it is inscribed. Not only does it exist in and of itself, but it also shapes its own environment

– Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*

For much of the past century, ever since the Viennese architect Adolf Loos pronounced ornament to be a crime, a disease, and “a phenomenon either of backwardness or degeneration” (Loos 1910, 290-91), the propensity of Victorians to decorate the surfaces of the things they held dearest – civic and religious buildings, private homes, books, manuscripts, and commodities both luxurious and necessary – has been a matter for suspicion and misunderstanding. Along with other new thinkers on art and architecture, Clive Bell and Le Corbusier being perhaps the most obvious, Loos brought in a chaste and narrowly functionalist visual modernism that defined itself against the Victorians’ propensity for excess and decoration. The outrageously ornamented surfaces of London’s St. Pancras Hotel or the Albert Memorial stood (and to some extent, still stand) as the symbols of a misbegotten “Victorian” era, in which matters

of form, depth, structure, and significance were sacrificed to an almost childlike delight in the ornamentation of pure surface.

The modernists' disparagement of ornament and decoration has had a momentous effect upon understanding of the life and work of William Morris; for although Morris himself frequently railed against what he called "sham" ornament, or a widespread "love of luxury and show" (Morris 1877, 23), he dedicated much of his life and career not to ornament's eradication but rather to its practical improvement and a finer articulation of the principles on which it should be conducted. Many of the lectures published in his *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882), along with such uncollected lectures as "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing" (1881), "The Lesser Arts of Life" (1882), and "The Origins of Ornamental Art" (1886), stand as vital testaments to his determination to correct strains in Victorian ornament that he perceived (with a moral vehemence that matched Loos's) to be corrupt, decadent, and inhumane. As importantly, his practical works in design – most famously, the furnishings, papers, and fabrics produced and marketed by Morris & Co. – stand as exemplifications of the new decorative spirit he envisaged and briefly ushered into being. For William Morris, decorative art was indeed "a serious thing," as he put it in the title of one of his lectures (Morris 1882).

Although Morris's pursuit of a finer decorative ideal was quickly simplified in the interests of the broader movement it inspired (the so-called Arts and Crafts Movement), it was far from a narrowly "artistic" matter, of concern purely to those employed in the manufacturing and graphical fields or to the lucky few able and willing to pay the often heavy costs associated with such fine decorative work.¹ Design was of moral and political importance, Morris argued, both its production and its consumption intimately if not always clearly related to broader matters of civic and political justice. Following the lead of John Ruskin in "The Nature of Gothic" and *Unto This Last*, Morris understood that the spirit in which art was produced and consumed went to the heart of the society it both expressed and helped to make up. Ornamental art in particular had become the servant of an uneasy alliance, all the more powerful after the Great Exhibition of 1851, between manufacturers, central government, and a newly mandated network of urban design schools in Britain's chief manufacturing cities. The dominant impulses driving Victorian ornament were both expressions and building blocks of an industrial capitalism that reduced the designer to a machine and the user to a de-sensitized consumer, motivated by considerations of cheapness and luxury rather than ones of practical or moral fitness.

¹ Working in a capitalist economy that he despised, Morris knew that these costs placed his work beyond the reach of those whose lives were most in need of change, and he always lamented what he termed "ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich." As well as the rich and well-to-do, the first consumers of Morris's practical works of design included wealthy institutions such as the Church, Exeter College, and the South Kensington Museum; while the oft-imitated books of the Kelmscott Press quickly became collectors' objects, much to Morris's own disgust.

By contrast, from the late 1860s onwards Morris practiced and theorized design along more radical and original lines. When lecturing on design, he frequently spoke directly to artisans and art-labourers – to members of the Trades’ Guild of Learning, for example, or to the Birmingham Society of Artists (long among England’s most revolutionary artistic institutions) – expressing the discontent of those whose creative abilities had been shackled to and by the capitalist system. In “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing,” he says that he can “never address [...] the subject of art without speaking, as briefly, but also as plainly as I can, on the degradation of labour” (Morris 1881, 202). “The division of labour,” he writes in “Making The Best of It,” “which has played so great a part in furthering competitive commerce, till it has become a machine with powers both reproductive and destructive, which few dare to resist, [...] has pressed especially hard on that part of the field of human culture in which I was born to labour.” The field of artistic practice, “whose harvest should be the chief part of human joy, hope, and consolation,” says Morris, “has been [...] dealt hardly with by the division of labour, once the servant, and now the master of competitive commerce, itself once the servant, and now the master of civilization.” As a result, “contented craftsmen” had begun turning quietly into “discontented agitators,” their minds “not at rest, even when [talking] over workshop receipts and maxims.” Although his subject seems narrow on the surface, when speaking on what he variously-called “the lesser arts,” “popular art,” “the arts of the people,” “pattern-designing,” or simply “ornamental art,” Morris consciously expressed “a lurking hope to stir up both others and myself to discontent with and rebellion against things as they are” (Morris 1879, 82).

But Morris’s radicalism did not consist merely in his expressions of discontent about the system that would turn artists into “slaves” and “machines,” or his increasingly and explicitly political efforts to overthrow such a system. As Michelle Weinroth has recently written, “Morris’s subversiveness resides as much *within* his creative patterns as it does externally” (Weinroth 2015a, 244). His radicalism consisted partly in his practices as a designer, and in his articulation of the principles governing those practices. For Morris, decorative work was “futile, and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation, when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol” (Morris 1881, 179). Good decorative work possessed what on more than one occasion Morris called innately “moral qualities” (Morris 1881, 179; Morris 1879, 106). And regardless of how the practice of such decorative work would liberate its producers from the shackles of capital, its production expressed or symbolized principles that went to the heart of the broader political world in which it could be made uneasily to exist.

Those principles are articulated in two of Morris’s most neglected lectures, “Making The Best of It” (1879 or earlier) and “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing” (1881). Both lectures were originally written for and addressed to audiences of artisans and art-workers. But as with virtually all of his lectures, Morris’s intentions for them could not

have been more ambitious. Although both lectures are ostensibly practical efforts to suggest changes in the ways in which design might be practiced (as the modestly-titled “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing” clearly acknowledges), Morris in fact had far broader ends in mind. “Making The Best of It” begins by lamenting the aforementioned division of labour and by expressing Morris’s hopes that his remarks might stir others to discontent and rebellion. Interestingly, however, the lecture takes what appears to be an accommodationist turn when Morris acknowledges that “even rebels desire to live, and sometimes crave for rest and peace” and begins to consider how the discontented might “make the best of it” (Morris 1879, 82-83). The mass of houses in Britain, built without hope of beauty or care, are alienating structures, he says, “injurious to civilization, [and] so unjust to those that are to follow us” (Morris 1879, 85). But even “ignoble” dwelling-places might be transformed so as to make them not merely liveable but the very embodiments of hope, growth, and a broadly environmental consciousness. The question Morris addresses here is clearly one still pressing today, when urban alienation and environmental depredation are arguably more severe than in Morris’s day. But far from agitating for top-down change and a revolutionary overthrow of the existing social order, Morris advocates change through more low-key and purely aesthetic means – through transformation, by a radically new decorative spirit, of the “house” in which both the consciously discontented and the unconsciously “heedless” must live. He wants to “shake people out of” their passivity, to “make them think about their homes, to take the trouble to turn them into dwellings fit for people free in mind and body” (Morris 1879, 86).

On the surface, Morris’s concept of change here appears narrow and limited. But in a telling phrase, he hopes that “much might come” in the wake of ostensibly domestic transformation or what we would today call *interior design*. “My hope,” he elaborates, “is that those who begin to consider carefully how to make the best of the chambers in which they eat and sleep and study, and hold converse with their friends, will breed in their minds a wholesome and fruitful discontent with the sordidness that even when they have done their best will surround their island of comfort, and that as they try to appease this discontent they will find that there is no way out of it but by insisting that all men’s work shall be fit for free men and not for machines” (Morris 1879, 86). Aesthetic transformation leads to broader social and political transformations. The interior designer – who is to some extent also the consumer of his own designs – is in the forefront of social change.

Much of the first half of “Making The Best of It” consists of practical hints for how this transformation might be effected. Tellingly, Morris begins with the need for gardens, which to him are symbolic spaces embodying freedom and a cessation of life’s struggle, as well as an obvious natural beauty. “Don’t be swindled out of [any] wonder of beauty” (Morris 1879, 89), he exhorts urban dwellers who, if they presently have gardens at all, stock them with the profitable genetic mutations forced on them by hothouses and fashionable florists. In great towns, “gardens, both private and public, are positive

necessities,” he insists, “if the citizens are to live reasonable and healthy lives in body and mind” (Morris 1879, 91). This is not to say that gardeners should be the slavish servants or imitators of nature. Rather the garden should in some respects be an extension of the urban environment to which it is simultaneously an adjunct: “both orderly and rich” as well as “well fenced from the outside world,” it “should look like a thing never to be seen except near a house. It should in fact look like a part of the house” (Morris 1879, 91). And it follows that “no private pleasure-garden should be very big,” just as “a public garden should be divided and made to look like so many flower-closes in a meadow, or a wood, or amidst the pavement” (Morris 1879, 91).

Morris next proceeds through a series of practical tips for how the exterior of the house might be painted and the interior better decorated. External fittings, especially window sashes and frames, should be white or whitish; windows should not be so big as to “let in a flood of light in a haphazard and ill-considered way” (Morris 1879, 92); floors should not be obscured by massive, artificial carpets and should be constructed from natural materials or mosaics made from tile, marble, and wood; walls should be divided or broken up horizontally, once at most, by a dado or frieze, or better still not at all; and Morris has a great deal to say about the best colours and shades whereby the room might be decorated. He is especially interested in how colour is to be employed in pattern-designing for wallpapers and furnishing fabrics. At the most basic level, some “relief” to the pattern is necessary, some “breaking the ground by putting on it a pattern of the same colour, but of a lighter or darker shade” (Morris 1879, 102). Excellent pattern-designing for domestic interiors involves “a clear but soft relief of the form, in colours each beautiful in itself, and harmonious with the other on ground whose colour is also beautiful, though unobtrusive” (Morris 1879, 103). The principle is one that drives Morris’s own wallpaper designs, which, as Weinroth (2015a, 258) has written, frequently “draw the viewer’s eye back to recessed and overlooked areas of the wallpaper” through the incorporation of “subdominant motifs,” such as “lateral extensions of the foliage,” that forestall the “forward-moving energy” of the paper’s dominant motifs.

The real core of “Making The Best of It” comes roughly two-thirds of the way through, when Morris addresses himself to the “moral qualities” of pattern-designing, which he says are “finally reducible to two – order and meaning” (Morris 1879, 106). It is here that the larger political aspirations behind Morris’s pursuit of pattern-designing are apparent. “Without order,” he writes, the designer’s work cannot even exist, while “without meaning, it were better not to exist” (Morris 1879, 106). By “order,” Morris partly means the constraints and limitations imposed by the material with which the designer must work. “All material offers certain difficulties to be overcome,” he writes, but far from being shackles upon the designer’s imagination, such constraints represent possibilities or “facilities to be made the most of” (Morris 1879, 107), and “it is a mere sign of incompetence in either a school or an individual to refuse to accept such limitations, or even not to accept them joyfully or turn them to special account, much as

if a poet should complain of having to write in measure and rhyme” (Morris 1879, 106). The artist who would be free of formal and material constraints is like the architect who would be liberated from the properties of bricks, concrete, or the law of gravity. “Every material [...] imposes certain limitations within which the craftsman must work,” Morris explains elsewhere, but far from being “hindrances to beauty,” these limitations are “incitements to its attainment.” Delight in skill lies at the root of all art, and material constraints represent “the wall of order against vagueness, and the door of order for imagination” (Morris 1881, 181). But while Morris advocates a rigorous and self-conscious materialism in art, it is clear too that, for Morris, the designer’s relation to his material is fraught with political symbolism: “Up to a certain point, you must be the master of your material, but you must never be so much the master of your material as to turn it surly, so to say. You must not make it your slave, or presently you will be a slave also” (Morris 1879, 107-8). Certainly designers should “master” their material to make it “express a meaning” and “serve” beauty, “but if you go beyond that merely to make people stare at your dexterity in dealing with a difficult thing, you have forgotten art along with the rights of your material” (Morris 1879, 108). Mastery, slavery, rights. Design-work is a microcosm of the co-operativeness and mutual respect without which no work of any value or meaning might be done in a stratified society.

The moral quality of “order” derives also from the form of the pattern that the designer creates. One of the chief reasons why Morris insists upon designs that incorporate “a recurring pattern [...] constructed on a geometrical basis” is that such designs express a latent political symbolism: “every line should have its due growth, and be traceable to its beginning” (Morris 1879, 109). Moreover “no stem should be so far from its parent stock as to look weak or wavering. Mutual support and unceasing progress distinguish real and natural order from its mockery, pedantic tyranny” (Morris 1879, 110). As Weinroth has written (2015a, 250), design conducted along these lines is the “graphic index of an egalitarian social philosophy,” an affirmation of non-hierarchical social arrangements “in which no central figure dominates the ground” and, even within Morris’s beloved landscapes of flora and fauna “no one shape or representation, prevails.” Equally the relation of stem to “parent stock” in the formation of floriated design patterns is a symbol of the “support” and “unceasing progress” without which life itself is impossible. Secondary forms, represented florally in Morris’s wallpapers as new growths or offshoots (buds, blossoms, fully-formed flowers, fruits, and so forth), both depend upon and surpass the “parent” forms from which they derive. According to Weinroth (2015a, 255), “resisting static repetition, Morris’s wallpaper patterns compel the viewer’s layered perspective [...] to confront hitherto unnoticed content, the sudden appearance of the ‘wondrously’ new.” Weinroth is correct that, like the metrics of Morris’s poetry, the patterns of Morris’s wallpaper designs are a form of “graphic choreography,” generating a “rhythm” that “brings the whirring perspectives of frenzied life to a halt, energizing the perceptual senses to crave more time, to linger with the unexpected, and to break down

perceptions” (Weinroth 2015a, 251). But Morris’s pattern designs also emphasize the dynamics of forward-moving growth and change, built not on rupture and division but on “natural” and modest increments whereby the new both replicates and revises the old. As Morris himself puts it (Morris 1881, 199), “rational growth is necessary to all patterns, or at least the hint of such growth.” All pattern-making involves repetition and recurring figures, but “the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily from another.” Moreover such growth should be “strong and crisp,” never “thready or flabby,” and even where a line of pattern ends “it should look as if it had plenty of capacity for more growth if so it would.” Far from evolving from “fixed postulates,” says the French theorist and aesthete Henri Focillon, “ornament creates various new geometries even at the heart of geometry itself” (Focillon 1934, 94). It renews life through the ceaseless dialectic of repetition and variation.

This emphasis upon forward-moving growth and change effectively constitutes the second moral quality of design. To be sure, when he writes that “the second moral quality of design [is] meaning” and that “no pattern should be without some sort of meaning” (Morris 1879, 110-111), Morris describes this attribute in abstract and non-specific ways, perhaps deliberately highlighting the hermeneutic problem (“meaning”) involved in the decipherment and valuation of any decorative design. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Morris means vital growth and change, which for him have “a body and a visible existence” only when “invention and imagination [submit] to the bonds of order.” Far from displaying a reckless disregard for formal relationships among the elements of design, the work of the fertile imagination will “grow on and on, one thing leading to another, as it fares with a beautiful tree” (Morris 1879, 110). This is not to say that the designer must show a slavish devotion to those decorative forms that come down to us traditionally as a result of customs, milieux, or local and national traditions.² The designer will become merely the slave of tradition, says Morris, if the older forms he inherits are “servilely copied, without change, the token of life.” All art is a “compact of effort, of failure and of hope,” Morris writes, and “we cannot but think that somewhere perfection lies ahead, as we look anxiously for the better thing that is to come from the good” (Morris 1879, 111). Art without “hope of change” is not art at all, for it will weary its most steadfast admirers while failing to inspire future creators of art.

A hope of change also lies at the heart of “Some Hints on Pattern-Designing,” first delivered two years after “Making The Best of It,” which makes some subtle refinements to the earlier lecture. Design satisfies a physical necessity, Morris begins by saying. People have always craved what to some of them doubtless seems an absurd superfluity in life. The urge to beautify one’s clothing, living-environment, or even the very surfaces of one’s body for the sake of beauty and richness alone is an almost universal need, perceptible in

² This was the dominant idea of the so-called “South Kensington” system, enshrined in Owen Jones’s *Grammar of Ornament* (1856).

cultures otherwise widely different. The best art, Morris goes on to say more contentiously, consists of “the pictured representation of men’s imaginings,” of stories that “tell of men’s aspirations for more than material life can give them, their struggles for the future welfare of their race, their unselfish love, their unrequired service.” Yet pictorial and narrative art, while “stirring to men’s passions and aspirations,” hardly represents a basis for a theory of design. Its very greatness makes it “a thing to be handled carefully” (Morris 1881, 176). Its capacity to arouse emotion and desire eventually “wearies us body and soul,” for we cannot be moved every hour of the day by “tragic emotions.” It is “not so good to have the best art for ever under our eyes” (Morris 1881, 177), concludes Morris, like a weary PhD student, “though it is abundantly good that we should be able to get at it from time to time.”

A more promising basis for design lies in a “lesser” art, one that is “suggestive rather than imitative.” More fully integrated than the best art into the rhythms of our daily life, “lesser” art “surround[s] our common workaday or restful times,” Morris says, while constantly reminding us “of the outward face of the earth [...] or of man passing his days between work and rest.” Moreover it “sets our minds and memories at work easily creating” the things of which it reminds us (Morris 1881, 177). Certainly it might not dispense with representation entirely. But what representation it possesses will not be scientific and will be imbued with soul “by the efforts of men forced by the limits of order and the necessities of art” (Morris 1881, 178). Its vitality will derive in part from its inbuilt consciousness and exploitation of its own material constraints. In the jargon of the Victorians, imitation or representation will be “conventionalized” and made subject to those conditions exerted both by the material and the purpose that the work must serve. While it imposes obvious limits on any direct imitation of nature, this “working in materials” – which is “the *raison d’être* of all pattern-work” adds Morris, in an important aside – is precisely what “drives it still more decidedly to appeal to the imagination” (Morris 1881, 182). Pattern-work may incorporate “certain beautiful and natural forms,” drawn from the world around us, but to a reasonable and imaginative person, they “will remind him not only of the part of nature which, to his mind at least, they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part” (Morris 1881, 181). We must be a “law to ourselves,” Morris writes when speaking of pottery and tile-designs, creating decorative artworks that “will at once surprise and please people, which will take hold of their eyes as something new, and force them to look at it” (Morris 1881, 198). A look of “satisfying mystery [...] is an essential in all patterned goods,” he writes (Morris 1881, 191).

Once again, the core idea here is that art should express and sustain hope for change, and for this reason decoration is “futile [...] when it does not remind you of something beyond itself.” Nonetheless Morris is careful to circumscribe limits so that the imagination does not descend into meaningless extravagance. As well as being beautiful, the decorative ideal embodied in a given design should be “possible for us to get.” Far from inspiring discontent and being a source of discouragement, it should instil hope and

should "not drive us either into unrest or into callousness." There should be nothing meretricious or self-consciously technical about the design: it should be rooted in a skill which is easily attainable and "which can be done by a great many people without too much difficulty and with pleasure" (Morris 1881, 179). And finally while it has the strong "impress of human imagination" upon it, there should appear nothing whimsical, excessive, or overly fanciful about it. Whatever skill it embodies should be "workmanlike" and "considerate," allowing neither the brain nor the hand to be "over-taxed." The designer won't spare his labour when necessary, but by the same token he won't waste it or make his work display any "commercial trickery sustained by laborious botching" (Morris 1881, 179).

Before I consider these elucidations of the moral properties of decoration in a broader light, a word is in order on the spirit in which Morris advances his ideas. In both of the lectures I have been discussing, Morris is conscious that he is speaking to audiences of artisans and workers, and he is correspondingly careful not to appear over-dogmatic. "Will you look upon me as a craftsman who shares certain impulses with many others?" he asks his audience in "Making The Best of It": "so looking on me, you may afford perhaps to be more indulgent to me if I seem to dogmatize over much" (Morris 1879, 81-82). Similarly in "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing," delivered at the Working Men's College, Morris is conscious of the danger of over-taxing the patience of his audience: before enumerating the moral qualities of art, he begs leave for "one last word on them before we deal with the material or technical part" (Morris 1881, 179); and he also asks leave to "say a little on the subject of the relief of patterns" before passing to the less theoretical question of "the use to which these forms of pattern may be put" (Morris 1881, 186). The importance of Morris's sympathy with his audiences' practical concerns can hardly be overstated, for Morris's discussion of ornament's moral properties goes hand and hand with a series of practical discussions of the applications to which his ideas might be put. Just as large parts of "Making The Best of It" constitute a detailed visual tour of the house that is to be decorated, large parts of "Some Hints on Pattern Designing" consist in a survey of the "chief crafts in which surface patterns (and chiefly recurring ones) are used," so as to note "some of the limitations which necessity and reason impose," while simultaneously showing "how those limitations may be made helps, and not hindrances" (Morris 1881, 189-190). Morris duly surveys the arts of wallpaper and fabric manufacture, carpet- and tapestry-design and weaving, embroidery, and pottery in order to show how his ideas might be applied. In wallpaper-making, colours should be "modest" and bounded by a "definite outline," while the "construction" of the pattern should be masked, so as "to prevent people from counting the repeats" (Morris 1881, 190-191). Brighter dyes might be used in cloths for furnishing, since the latter generally fall into folds or turns round furniture, and here designers need not be anxious about masking the pattern's structure. Carpet-designs should be "quite flat" and should give "no more at least than the merest hint of one plane behind another," while

“every little bit of surface must have its own individual beauty of material and colour” (Morris 1881, 195). And so on. These practical elements of Morris’s design lectures are perhaps the least appealing to intellectuals, but it is easy to see how they inspired Morris’s first audiences. Along with Morris’s own practical efforts in design, they did much to bring about the foundation of Arts and Crafts guilds such as the Century Guild, the Art Workers Guild, and the Guild of Handicraft.

How radical are Morris’s assertions and demonstrations of the moral qualities of design? In one sense, the question begs for an act of historical imagination of the kind that Morris was forever asking his own first audiences and readers to make. In our own time, industrial and interior design has been wholly commodified to a point at which it is virtually invisible or a mere “given” (although it is nonetheless a critical backdrop against which we live out our lives).³ If we want to address Morris’s radicalism, we need to recall a time when capitalists, liberals, and socialists alike attached the highest ideals to design, many of them believing that the imperatives of automation and the market could be successfully resisted through design. It is important to recall too that Morris himself expressed suspicion about the very concept of radicalism: a capitalist will call an artist a “radical of radicals,” he writes, because in his insistence upon being treated as a workman, not an operative, the artist will be “mere grit and friction in the wheels of the money-grinding machine.” Such a man “will stop the machine perhaps,” Morris, goes on to say, “but it is only through him that you can have art, i.e., civilization unmaimed” (Morris 1879, 116). It is typical of Morris to insist on no separation between political principle, or effect, and artistic practice. The artist’s radicalism consists finally in his adherence and fidelity to his art.

For Morris the term *radicalism* was a tool of the ruling class (a “radical of radicals” means “a troublesome fellow,” he writes [Morris 1879, 116]; “what are you going to get by remaining mere radicals?,” he pointedly asks the self-professed “radical” wing of the Liberal party [Morris 1884, 47]; and even in disparaging the term, Morris uses it in its modern and widely-accepted adjectival sense of “advocating thorough or far-reaching political or social reform” or “characterized by independence of or departure from what is usual or traditional: progressive, unorthodox or traditional.”⁴ But as Weinroth (2015b, 18) has written, the term *radical* is “polysemic and highly contested” and there exists another, less well known definition that presses urgently on how we might value Morris’s

³ “Good design is unobtrusive,” says the contemporary designer Dieter Rams, one of the most acclaimed and influential designers living today: “products fulfilling a purpose are like tools. They are neither decorative objects nor works of art. Their design should therefore be both neutral and restrained” (“SFMOMA Presents Less and More: The Design Ethos of Dieter Rams,” <https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/sfmoma-presents-less-and-more-the-design-ethos-of/>).

⁴ “Radical,” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Towards the end of his life, Morris scorned his own “brief period of political radicalism” as a mere “transitional” period, in which he had seen his ideal clearly enough but had had no hope that it might be realized (Morris 1894). My thanks to Paul Leduc Browne for this reference.

theories about design. The first adjectival definition of *radical* listed in OED is “of or relating to a root or roots”; and OED also lists a subsidiary definition meaning “fundamental to or inherent in the natural processes of life, vital” (as in the medieval concept of *radical humours* or the *radical moistures* of an organic body). Although Morris cannot have intended it, both these definitions apply aptly to Morris’s arguments about the moral properties of ornament. Like the fluids, gases, and minerals that make life possible, art is (or ought to be) the bedrock on which we live out our lives. Far from being a matter superfluous to larger debates about justice and politics, our immediate living environment is at once a symbolic expression of the values we hold dear and a repository of “affect” from which we (perhaps unconsciously) draw hope, disappointment, or encouragement as we “pass our days between work and rest.” Interior design, after all, is not simply seen but *felt*. Whether misbegotten or inspired along Morris’s own lines, design is fundamental to the processes of life. It is surely no accident that, at a time when designers such as Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser, associated with the South Kensington School, favoured the geometrical abstractions of Moorish ornament, or the “conventionalizing” of form to a point at which its basis in any imitation or representation of nature was impossible to discern, Morris emphasized pattern-making rooted in (though by no means enslaved to) the forms and colours of the natural world, which for him embody the principles of life and growth. As Caroline Arscott has convincingly shown, the depth of his designs “is not just deployed for the purpose of naturalistic expression but... is crucial for the activation of... meanings associated with the grand struggles of human existence” (Arscott 2008, 51). In the simplest and most literal sense, Morris is *radical* because his decorations foreground the growth of roots, buds, and the rising of sap – what Arscott calls “a unity of living substance” (Arscott 2008, 97) – thereby reminding us constantly of what it means to live. “To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself” (Marx 1843, 251).⁵

Nonetheless, Morris’s decorative designs and theories do not allow us to accept them wholly on their own terms, as static representations of some pastoral, pre-industrial ideal. Rather Morris insists repeatedly that design exists in dialectical tension with life as it is presently constituted. He urges his fellow-Victorians to develop an art that is *decorative*, one which saturates the quotidian world of daily life, not in order that it might “content us” but rather “to make us long for more,” while recognizing that this longing in turn “drives us into trying to spread art and the longing for art.” The practice of decorative art, in other words, is a rebellion that gives “hope of victory.” By propagating decorative art, Morris hopes that “a great many men will have enough of art to see how little they have, and how much they might better their lives if every man had his due share of art.” Is this “too extravagant a hope?” Morris rhetorically asks, in the final paragraph of “Making The Best of It” (Morris 1879, 118). Without a doubt, it is a radical hope.

⁵ My thanks to Paul Leduc Browne for this reference.

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