Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND WILLIAM MORRIS

Elizabeth K. Helsinger

Yale University Press
New Haven & London
CHAPTER THREE

Lyric Color and The Defence of Guenevere

In his first published poems, William Morris shared Rossetti’s interest in perceptual intensity studied from the visual arts—particularly, for Morris, Pre-Raphaelite paintings and the medieval arts that their materials and techniques recalled. But unlike Rossetti, to whom he was particularly close in the years when these poems were being composed, Morris focused on color, a uniquely difficult medium for a poet, in his poetic explorations of the psychology of perception. In this and the following chapter, I want to attend to the surprisingly understudied role of color as a powerful resource for representing and achieving poetic intensity, first in Morris’s early poems and then (in chapter 4) in the romantic and later nineteenth-century critical and poetic writing to which Morris’s poems importantly contribute.

Intensity is a quality strongly associated in poetic criticism with lyric poetry, although it may be—at least in Western traditions—the particular legacy of romantic poetics. Much of the popular understanding of a specifically “lyric” poem centers on a short, first-person poem, in which language and syntax, sound and imagery strive to convey an extreme excitement or tension (literally a stretching or straining under force or pressure) from the mind and feelings of the lyric speaker to those of an auditor or reader. We think of Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow” of strong emotion: powerful feelings impelled to expressive release from inner tension. (This understanding forgets his qualifying insistence on the importance of recollection in tranquility, where thought, governed by habits of association and reflection, modifies the influxes and expressive overflows of feeling.)2 Perhaps more tellingly, we may remember Keats’s assertion that “the excellence of every Art is its intensity.”3 Arthur Hallam, Tennyson’s friend and early defender, distinguished between Wordsworth’s emphasis on subsequent reflection and Keats’s praise of intensity, embracing the latter as closer to the “truth” of poetry: poets of “sensational,” like Keats, Shelley, and the early Tennyson, recalled for Hallam heights
not reached since the days of Shakespeare and Milton, when “intense thoughts... did not fail to awaken a proportionate intensity in the natures of numberless auditors.” True poets (and Hallam here equates “true” with “lyric”) are those whose “whole being [is] absorbed in the energy of sense.” To write from or about that condition of absorption, as Wordsworth, Keats, and Hallam all understood, meant attending closely to sensations.

Sensations of color posed a particular challenge. From Keats to Baudelaire, Morris, and Rossetti, the “energy of sense” found in sensations of color seemed to promise the aesthetic intensity they sought. According to nineteenth-century commentators like Hazlitt, Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater, color is a mode of lyric intensity, of an “energy of sense” that forms its own special province of the imagination. Thinking through color becomes a trope for the reform of the senses through the arts, and of the arts through the senses raised to a higher power. These are the terms of what might be called a romantic exaltation of color, which nineteenth-century critics found in such innovative romantic-era users of color in paint and in language, as Bonington, Turner, Delacroix, Keats, and (less directly) Scott and Byron. Romantic uses of color to achieve lyric intensity were, however, renewed and transformed under the changed circumstances of mid- and late century perceptions of the challenges of modernity, particularly in the work of poets and critics closest to the visual arts in both England and France. For Ruskin, Baudelaire, and Pater, as in the fiction of Gautier, Huysmans, and Wilde, color is a sign of the intensity that marks lyric art as distinctively modern, as something found in the poetry not only of Keats but of Morris or Arthur Rimbaud, and in the paintings of artists from Delacroix and Turner to the English Pre-Raphaelites and Gustave Moreau. Color is at once romantic and modern (the two terms are in fact often used interchangeably); its prominence marks “the most recent, the most current expression of beauty,” Baudelaire wrote in 1846. “He who says romanticism, says modern art,—that is, intimacy, spirituality, color, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by all the means contained within the arts.”

This is not the view of the nineteenth-century or late romantic modernity with which we are most familiar. Why should color be an aspect of a lyric intensity of expression for these influential writers on art and literature? One might argue that, in late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century arts (including some poetry), at least equally important are the uses of color to create decorative patterns—a conjunction that might be thought to defeat expressive or lyric intensity. Yet, as I want to suggest through one example here, lyric intensity in later nineteenth-century arts is often achieved precisely through the use of patterns or combinations of colors for expressive and conceptual ends. There are many different local histories of painting, poetry, and the decorative arts (and of science, philosophy, and the politics of art) in Germany, France, and England, which a fuller treatment of this subject would need to engage (some of which I discuss in the next chapter). But one can say broadly that color in the later nineteenth century remains an especially charged topic, where thinking takes place across the boundaries of media, disciplines, and nations. Color’s long associations with intense sensory experience, rather than intellectualized form, and its accordingly subordinated status within Renaissance and neoclassical aesthetics, suggest one reason why both romantic and modern painters and poets embrace color to challenge existing ideas of the beautiful. Yet there is much more to the story.

My subject is England and the Pre-Raphaelites, and I shall put the question of color’s special role for them by focusing not on paintings but on a book of poetry. Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere* (1858) was the earliest published book of Pre-Raphaelite poetry and in many ways remains the best poetic counterpart to the fresh and inventive spirit of Pre-Raphaelite painting in its initial stages. Morris’s poems pursue the psychology of perception—which had already interested the painters—as a subject of pictorial and poetic representation. Color plays an unexpectedly large role in both the early visual work and Morris’s volume. It is central to the effects of strange intensity achieved in Morris’s brief, mostly dramatic lyrics. Morris’s representations of subjective time and space in these poems expand Rossetti’s poetic acts of attention to painting, reinterpreting his explorations of sensuous presence and imaginative projection.

Defining just what roles color plays in this volume by Morris, as I shall try to do here, may provide a way of thinking more broadly about what was happening, in England and elsewhere, when poets and painters alike took up the visual, poetic, and philosophical possibilities of color as part of their ambition to invent arts for a modern age. In what follows I examine two aspects of Morris’s use of color in constructing a poetic idiom: first, color’s expressive possibilities, where *shifts* in color both stimulate and represent the tortuous movements of emotion and memory under perceptual stimulation, translating and extending a practice of Pre-Raphaelite painting; and second, what one might call color’s conceptual possibilities, where *patterns* of color, some referring to a now archaic code (heraldry), suggest the possibility of an analogous method of encoding and ordering conceptual content (particularly that of spatial and temporal relationships) while aggressively redefining a modern relationship to the distant past. It is the combination of these two uses of color, observable in Rossetti’s contemporary paintings and developed in Morris’s poems, that generates, I shall argue, lyric intensity for these poets and painters of the later nineteenth century.

Color is exceptionally hard to work with, particularly when its effects must be translated through language. Like Lady Beauty herself (in Rossetti’s figure, later adopted by Yeats), color could shake voice and hand while perpetually eluding the pursuing poet. Among the difficulties that color poses for poetry
or any verbal art, three are especially troubling. First, language is notoriously limited in its resources for naming and representing colors: color names don't come close to covering the spectrum of perceptible color shades, tones, and intensities—in fact, most languages are surprisingly impoverished in color terms. Second, there is no consistency, in either ordinary language usage or technical or commercial practice, in the naming of hues and tones. Third, color perception varies significantly from individual to individual. Thus the same words may call up quite different mental experiences in different people. Given the paucity of color words, the wide differences in color perception, and variations in pigments and dyes under the same name (not to mention the great differences in reflectivity that different surfaces or vehicles, different batches of dye or pigment, and changing conditions of light and atmosphere can make), how is it possible to use color in a verbal art effectively—or to control the meanings of color in language at all? While color language has often been used by poets despite its lack of precision, the kinds of effects that I shall be analyzing in Morris's poetry are made possible by his focus not on specific colors but on moments when color is made perceptible through difference. Other critics have pondered the possible symbolic meanings of particular colors in Morris's early poems.\(^{13}\) I am struck rather by the importance of color relationships. Morris—like the romantic tradition he inherits and complicates—is most interested in the perceptual effects of change and juxtaposition: the transition from relatively neutral tones to concentrations of intense color combinations, or the use of one color contrasted with or relieved against another in the construction of patterns. In Morris's poems it matters less that two readers have the same sensory image of "scarlet" or "gold" (or that these designate with precision particular colors in the "real" world) than that they understand them to be vivid presences. Exploring relations among colors, temporally or spatially, lets Morris use color words to sound syncopations in the rhythm of a temporally unfolding lyric and to create (or reinforce) internal patterns of form and meaning. Neither the rhythms of shifting colors nor the patterns of differentially related colors depend for their effects on evoking particular colors with precision or uniformly for all readers. Morris's translation of effects of color into poetry implies something like a Saussurian understanding of language.

These are not the only possibilities for using color in poetry. Color words may also carry complex associative resonances that are not limited to color: that is, of a particular material, of its source or common uses, of its material feel and manner of employment, to name a few. Moreover, as language, color terms have their own sound and look and feel—in the ear, on the page, and in the mouth. These too can be manipulated by a poet as part of the intended effects of color in a verbal art, and we find them at work in Morris's lyrics. They help create the perceptions of difference and similarity that Morris uses in his poems. But we should note one aspect of the relationship between language—heard, seen, or felt—and color that Morris does not invoke: the claim that letters of the alphabet or phonemes already have strong, synesthetically rich color associations that a poet might deploy, painting, as it were, with letters. Late nineteenth-century French poets were particularly intrigued with this possibility, explored most famously in Rimbaud's sonnet "Voyelles":

\[
\text{A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles, Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes . . . . }^{14}\ (1-3) \\
\text{[A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels, One day I will tell of your hidden births . . . ]}
\]

Rimbaud's expanded genealogy of each vowel, in the stanzas that follow, draws heavily on an associative complex of texture, sound, and even smell to create lyric histories, as it were, out of what begins as an unpromising and possibly idiosyncratic list. Yet even Rimbaud's initial list unfolds as a set of differential relationships. Noir (black) is followed by blanc (white), and rouge (red) by its complement, vert (green). With blue, which Rimbaud places at the end of the sequence (and, in the final stanza of the poem, invokes as its culmination: "O, suprême Clairon / . . . / Oméga," 12, 14), the potential patterning is both internal (blue's near relationship to green, of which it is one of the components) and, as the final stanza suggests, the summoning, integrating, and illuminating force (at once sound, space, and light) that drives the whole sequence, the equivalent of ether or light itself:

\[
\text{O, suprême Clairon plein de strideurs étranges, Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges:} \\
\text{—O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux! (12–14)}
\]

\[
\text{[O, supreme trumpet, full of strange dissonances, Silences traversed by Worlds and Angels:} \\
\text{—Omega, the violet ray of His Eyes! ]}
\]

Vowels may have their colors, at least for some people, but to turn a list of them into poetry, Rimbaud must construct and exploit relationships among them. In this respect, Morris's early poetry, with its acute attention to sensations of color apprehended as temporal or spatial pattern, has much to teach us.

I

Morris's practical and scholarly engagements with manuscript illumination, stained glass, embroidery, and other forms of interior decoration, already intense at the time he wrote the poems of The Defence of Guenevere, shape and
following the example of early Flemish (rather than Italian) painters in oil, they achieved a concentrated presentation of minutely observed particularities of texture and color in the depiction of clothing and household objects or of the densely foliared foregrounds that constituted the greater part of their non-figural settings. Like their Northern Renaissance examples, the Pre-Raphaelites effectively created flat patterns in color out of arrangements of persons and objects presented without the focusing effects of chiaroscuro, the “principal lights” and “principal shadows” dear to academic instruction. (The same Flemish pictures often portrayed prominently the oriental carpets that were to be especially instructive to Morris when he came to study flat patterns of color for his own textile designs.)

John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites’ early advocate, publicly applauded the painters’ painstaking study of flowers and leaves and rocks in their natural settings, finding their practices consistent with his insistence, in *Modern Painters*, on the primary value of direct observation. He had already recognized, in his 1848 review of Eastlake’s *Materials for a History of Oil Painting*, the value of returning to early Renaissance methods, methods, and attitudes. These emphases, as first brought to public attention through Ruskin’s critical intervention, are at the center of the usual art historical story of Pre-Raphaelitism’s impact. But as the best critics have always noted, Pre-Raphaelite paintings also reveal an interest in conveying a more modern sense of psychological intensity, indeed of fraught situations, primarily in interpersonal relationships inflected by social and sexual tensions. Here they used strained gestures, contorted bodies, and, though this has been less explored by critics, heightened and unusual colors and color combinations deployed for expressive purposes—all of which appeared to contemporary critics, including at times Ruskin, as harsh, even ugly.

Morris’s use of color in his early literary compositions can be linked to what one might call the expressionistic aspects of early 1850s Pre-Raphaelite art: the exaggeration and distortion of both color and form (particularly the human figure) for expressive purposes that proved so unsettling to contemporary viewers. Morris as poet learned from the paintings that he had seen, particularly oils by Millais, Hunt, and Brown and watercolors by Rossetti. Consider, for example, the strained postures and gestures of Lorenzo in Millais’s *Lorenzo and Isabella*, or Claudio in Hunt’s *Claudio and Isabella* (plate 5), fidgeting the chair that pulls his right leg up awkwardly beside him, while Isabella, in a similarly strained pose, pushes gently against his chest and leans slightly backward; or those of Mary and Christ in Millais’s *Christ in the House of His Parents* (plate 6). These strained poses find their counterparts in the gestures of Jehane and Robert in Morris’s poem “The Haystack in the Floods” (“he tried once more to touch her lips; she reach’d out, sore/And vain desire so tortured them,” 132–35); of Guenevere in “The Defence of Guenevere” (“She throw her wet hair backward from her brow,/Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek . . . like one lame/She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head/Still lifted up,” 2–3, 7–9); and of Guenevere and Launcelot at their tense meeting over the tomb of King Arthur in “King Arthur’s Tomb.” In these poems an awkward or impossible situation is registered for us in moments of sudden focus on a lamed or twisted or awkward body, its “passionate twisting” (“The Defence of Guenevere,” 57) brought viscerally to our attention by close focus on a moment when the character tries to register the state of his or her body. (For example, see Guenevere’s “hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,/As though she had had there a shameful blow,/And feeling it shameful to feel ought but shame/All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,/She must a little touch it,” 3–7; or Jehane, as “She laid her hand upon her brow,/Then gazed upon the palm, as though/She thought her forehead bled,” 76–78.) In both poems and paintings, the reader or viewer is made almost painfully aware of bodies through awkward or strained extensions or twists in moments of emotional discomfort and tension.

Critics viewed the poses and gestures in the paintings as puzzling or offensive departures from expectations that art would be beautiful, violating the decorum for representing religious figures or even familiar Shakespearean characters. Yet these efforts are not, despite accusations, the consequence of naivety—certainly not in the case of the already prodigiously accomplished Millais—but rather of attempts to make the representations emotionally expressive through the physical discomfort of the spectator. The torques to which the painters subject the bodies of their figures may recall what appeared to nineteenth-century viewers as the grotesqueness of the figures in, for example, the Lasinio engravings of the murals in the Campo Santo at Pisa (their grotesqueness was noted from Keats through Ruskin). In Pre-Raphaelite hands, however, such grotesqueness seems to be deliberately sought to express the fraught psychological tension between figures, reflecting a distinctly contemporary nineteenth-century sensibility—one closer to Browning than to Shakespeare. It is part of what makes these paintings successful as critique rather than reflection: the painters focus on the dis-ease of domestic relations.

The startling modernity of their models—their recognizable resemblance to contemporary figures marked with the signs of (working) class—forces viewers to register consciously the pictures’ reflections on the wounds of labor (*Christ in the House of His Parents*), or the fraught relations between men and women introduced by the selfishness of desires for self-preservation and self-gratification (*Claudio and Isabella*), or the arrogant cruelty of greed (*Lorenzo and Isabella*), or the physical fear and confusion that sexual initiation could
illuminate the particular patterns of color, the associations he builds around color images, and the uses to which he puts it in his poetry. I won’t discuss these influences in detail here, but I do want to suggest that attention to them will begin to pose the issue of color in his poetry differently. Morris’s understanding of color relationships was from the beginning inflected by his engagement with the materiality of color—pigments, dyes, and their different behavior when applied to various materials. These are the concerns of someone just starting to paint under Rossetti’s instruction in 1857–58, but they are even more, in Morris’s case, the fruit of his study of stained glass and his first efforts at manuscript illumination and embroidery. The gothic churches he visited in England and northern France and the illuminated manuscripts he studied in the British Museum (such as a fifteenth-century copy of Jean Froissart’s *Chronicles*, with its depiction of the painted and embroidered hangings decorating interior spaces, the source of designs for several of Morris’s first patterned textiles) yielded just such striking combinations and unexpected transitions, as we can see both in his prose accounts and in the visual artwork he produced under their influence. The grey darkened stone or the columns of black gothic script on vellum pages enhanced the revelatory impact of concentrated combinations of deep and glowing reds and blues and touches of green, relieved with yellow or gold, encountered in both stained glass and the enamel-like brilliance of manuscript illuminations. As Morris passed quickly from observing to making in each of these areas, he acquired an unusually varied practical understanding of the physical characteristics of applied color that enabled the production of particular color relationships.

In the summer of 1857, for example, Morris—who had by then spent a year apprenticed in the gothic-revival architectural firm of G. E. Street—contributed the decorative borders on the Oxford Union walls that were painted by the enthusiastic group of young artists led by Rossetti. Strong reds and golds, blues and greens predominated in the figure scenes and in Morris’s borders and ceilings. Similar combinations are characteristic of the painted decoration Morris used in churches in Gloucestershire, Scarborough, and Cambridge during the early years of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company—the Firm—and can be found also on the polished black or dark green surfaces of the furniture Morris and his friends designed and painted for the rooms he shared with Burne-Jones in Red Lion Square from 1856–58 and for Red House, designed jointly with Philip Webb, to which Morris and his new wife, Jane Burden, moved in 1860. Coventry Patmore, who saw the frescoed walls and painted ceilings of the Debating Hall in the new Oxford Union building late in 1857 while they were still fresh, described the color as “sweet, bright, and pure as a cloud in the sunrise,” and “so brilliant as to make the walls look like the margin of an illuminated manuscript.” Similar dark reds, golds, blues, and greens mark the outline-stitched, simplified natural motifs embroidered on indigo-dyed serges in the curtains Morris somewhat crudely embroidered for Red Lion Square, or the more sophisticated needlework on undyed linen, executed by Jane and Bessie Burden, that Morris designed for the Red House bedroom. Morris’s and Burne-Jones’s early work in stained glass is particularly illustrative of the effects of strong, glowing color, sparingly contrasted with more neutral backgrounds, that Morris seems to have sought in his design work. The panel now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the St. George windows in the Victoria and Albert Museum both use deep, gem-like colors in a palette dominated by a ruby red and a deep blue-green (interspersed with touches of gold, flesh color, and paler greens) to realize single figures and figural groups designed by Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, and Burne-Jones.

These early decorating projects recall the pre-Reformation church and domestic interiors depicted in illuminated manuscripts, which Morris and his friends explored on their continental journeys in the 1850s in the gothic churches of Normandy. When furniture was simple and minimal, decorative and household objects were few, and interior spaces were often large and drafty, comfort and color came from a liberal use of patterned textiles—woven or embroidered wall, bed, table or altar hangings, cushions, and, of course, the dress of the inhabitants. Together with painted decoration on the high roofs or a few large pieces of furniture—a cupboard, a settle—these textiles relieved large expanses of otherwise plain wood and stone surfaces. In these relatively large, uncluttered spaces, patterned color stands out against the neutral tones of wood, stone, or undyed wool and linen to acquire a richness and celebratory brilliance that Morris and his friends found startlingly and excitingly different from both the grey striped churches and the too-colorful, crowded rooms of contemporary English interiors.

No less important for the formation of Morris’s heightened sensitivity to pattern and relationship in color was his exposure to Pre-Raphaelite art. To review briefly a familiar history, according to William Holman Hunt’s later reconstruction, he and John Everett Millais—at least in the early period of experimentation (from about 1849 to 1854 or 1855)—in their pursuit of visual “truth” set aside the accepted rules and practices of contemporary academic instruction and spurned the palettes of their teachers. They made particular use of practices and pigments recovered from early Renaissance painting handbooks, translated and discussed by Charles Eastlake, Mary Merrifield, and others, publicized further by the paint dealer George Field, and taken up by a few painters in England (such as William Mulready) to craft a practice of painting in bright colors applied in small, unblended touches over a white or wet white ground, eschewing darkening varnishes. Moreover,
produce (Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Ecce Ancilla Domini, plate 4). Indeed, it is worth noting that the Pre-Raphaelite reading of the Lorenzo and Isabella story comes not from Boccaccio but from Keats: the return to early Renaissance Italy is in the service of interpreting a specifically romantic, that is to say modern, art.

The painters’ striking use of color works similarly to the use of exaggerated poses. Where bodily distortion is perceived against an implicit understanding of what would constitute “normal” body shapes and poses, so too color draws attention to itself as dissonant or disturbing when contrasted with ordinary painterly practice (contemporary or historical) or through the particular combinations of colors that the painters employed. In either case, Pre-Raphaelites use the shock or surprise of vivid and harsh color to increase the emotional or psychological tension that strains the poses of their subjects, producing visceral effects on the viewer. This is most startling in Millais’s Christ in the House of His Parents. Against the shades of pale brown of the carpenter’s workshop, the bright coppery red hair of both Mary and Christ underlines Millais’s efforts to convey the scene with a realism verging on harshness. (The strong colors of the clothing worn by these laborers—a rich green and orange shawl on one, a red shirt and pink undershirt on another, likewise stand out against the relatively neutral ground of the workshop: there is nothing subtle or refined about these people or their clothing.)

But color equally contributes to his portrayal of strained desire in Mariana: Millais’s Mariana adopts not the grey monotony of Tennyson’s best-known lyric of this title (again, the painting’s source is less Shakespeare than a modern poet of romance) but rather the Provencal or Italian setting of Tennyson’s less successful poem “Mariana in the South”—primarily, it would seem, for the possibilities for color the latter offered. These are realized particularly in the juxtaposition of the bright royal-blue velvet of the dress that clings to Mariana’s stretching body, set in vivid contrast with the orangish red, velvet-covered stool from which she has risen. The stained-glass windows, the gold-leaf-on-green wallpaper, and, of course, the dull gold and flame of the dimly lit shrine in the background, as well as the bright yellow-brown of the floorboards in sunlight, help to assert through the strength of color the intensity of the sensual longing and frustration that creates the picture’s emotional impact. (This association of the “South” with color—like Byron’s of the “East” or Scott’s of a still-feudal Highland Scotland—exploits the figurative association of color with otherness of various sorts that was another frequent trope in earlier romantic art and poetry: striking color in dress or decor or skin is variously used to connote Catholicism, the South (Africa), the Asian or Middle-Eastern East, highland Scotland, Ireland, or the gothic-feudal middle ages to white, Protestant, middle-class nineteenth-century England.

The figurative uses to which color is put are somewhat different in content but consonant in their exotizing intent across the Channel in France.) Millais’s richness of color and exploitation of complementary or near-complementary opposition nonetheless stays within the tolerable range for viewers looking for “beauty” or pleasure in pictures like Mariana or Ophelia, as do the rounded, English features and forms and the fair skin of his female figures. But color nonetheless foregrounds emotional tone and suggests psychological disturbance (see also Millais’s Bridesmaid).

Hunt’s reds and oranges, especially when combined with his bright pinkish reds or purples and greens (probably making use of Field’s pigments approximating bright early Renaissance colors or of newly discovered chemical pigments), have a shudder, deliberately harsh edge. While insisting on accuracy in transcription, he uses colors and color combinations that jar in pictures that mean to make the viewer recognize something disturbingly wrong in the scene portrayed. It is not just the red cheeks of the eponymous young man in The Hireling Shepherd to which critics objected as signs of unwonted coarseness, but also the pinkish purple bandanna around his neck, relieved against the blue-green of his tunic and the orange-brown of his shirt, and the white of the companion’s shirt and the red of her dress, which draw attention to their dailiness as out of place, and a violation of pastoral duty. Messages in Hunt’s pictures tend to have this didactic character, reinforced with much anecdotal and typological symbolism—but color first sets the jarring tone. In Claudio and Isabella the riot of strong colors that mark his dress (green shoes, purple tights, red tunic with orange fur—and the bright pinkish red ribbon on his lute), contrasted with the subdued blue-green-grey of his sister’s nun’s garb, signal Claudio’s (and Antonio’s) destructive dedication to pleasure, Claudio’s self-absorbed panic at the prospect of his own death, and particularly his sexual aggressivity.

Brown too uses a disturbingly bright pinkish red in his Last of England, where it is an obtrusive, incongruous element in the scene of grim departure. Like the child hidden in the woman’s shawl, it is a suggestion of the suppressed feelings—determination but also deep resentment—that lie behind the decision to emigrate. In Brown’s later Pretty Baa-Lambs the ribbon appears again, there emphasized by the purplish pink glow it contributes to the reflected sunlight on the mother’s face in a picture that, for all its focus on the “scientific” registering of color in sunlight and shadow, shares the stubborn, defiant refusal to be “pretty”—thrusting a harsh reality in the face of the viewer, which marks so many of Brown’s pictures with his blend of personal and social bitterness. Brown produced more pictures with features, including color, that viewers found uneasily and gratefully than any member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. While the emotional pain of Last of England is not
difficult to discover, in other pictures—such as Pretty Baa-Lambs, which depicts a familiar post-Raphaelite and religious Madonna image—the effect is rather a refusal of sentimentality. In the latter work, Brown avoids the conventionally pretty or pleasing in his depiction of the face and features of mother or child, which are underlined by the harsh effects of bright sunlight on English flesh. The indigo blue sky and brilliant green grass contribute to the insisting, assertive character of this painting.

Ruskin's advocacy of color was surely an important stimulus to the Pre-Raphaelites and to Morris, and Ruskin's refusal to join the general critical condemnation of Pre-Raphaelite "harsh" color was an important part of the public support he lent them. Their use of color, however, differs from the brightness he praised in medieval and early Renaissance work in important ways. Ruskin associated the brilliance of medieval color with medieval faith, and therefore the absence of an overpowering anticipation of mortality. He did not emphasize social disturbance or mental and emotional disorientation through color, though his prose may sometimes reflect this. Ruskin justified color as purity, sanctification, redemption—which he saw as symbolically confirmed in the Old Testament, where scarlet marks the scapegoat as a type of Christ taking on the sins of the world, or the rainbow appears as the sign of the covenant, the promise of God to preserve his chosen people. Color is the sign of the redeeming act of divine love or mercy, the promised future salvation. (The same symbolism informs Hunt's painting of The Scapegoat, as Ruskin pointed out in his public defense of that picture, though in Hunt's painting the colors of desert and salty sea are full of harsh purples and orange-browns.) This explains the importance of literal purity for the colorist in Ruskin's view: the painter should use colors at maximum brilliance or saturation (where they are furthest from grey) and gradate them with white, not tone them down with black—they should tend toward light, not darkness. Ruskin's writing on color thus goes out of its way to attempt to sever the connection between color and sensuality and to skirt the issue of color's links with emotions, or rather restrict the range of those emotions, even while his prose testifies to his great sensitivity not only to the delights of gradated color but to the power of color to disturb and profoundly disconcert. In Pre-Raphaelite practice, color often speaks less of serene faith than of social and sexual tensions and disturbed emotions in the scenes it depicts.

Morris developed Pre-Raphaelite explorations of color's power to disturb in The Defence of Guenevere poems. Color in these poems is both vivid and expressive of psychological tensions, particularly in the way it often marks and gives involuntary access to troubling moments in a character's life. The situation in poetry differs because color is not continuously present in the poet's characterization of his subjects' consciousness or in a reader's or listener's experience of a poem: its entrances can in themselves create moments of surprise, pleasurable or jarring, serving as a sign of intensifying sensory experience for both characters and readers, and altering the rhythm of a poem. The moments in which color appears in Morris's early lyrics repeatedly serve as hinges, fixing a striking image to some powerful emotion and triggering the abrupt transition to a different state of consciousness. The appearance of color will signal (and, we understand, sometimes cause) the slide into memory or dream or vision. Color appears as perceptual or lived experience: sensation with the power to evoke strong emotion and memory. Bright splashes of color bring home the felt vividness, one might say the substantiality, of the apparently subjective world of feeling, memory, dream, or vision.

For that reason, the inability to attach feeling to vivid color is itself significant in several poems, marking a character's unnatural distancing from his or her own emotional responses. Thus we get strange moments of dissociation surrounding a fixed memory of vivid color in "Rapunzel." Guendolen from her tower witnesses a fatal fight between two knights far below:

And while they fought I scarce could look at all,
My head swam so; after, a moaning low
Drew my eyes down; I saw against the wall
One knight lean dead, bleeding from head and breast,
Yet seem'd it like a line of poppies red
In the golden twilight. (166–171)

And a little later, returning to the same image, yet still unable or unwilling to take in what has happened, Guendolen continues:

Perhaps my eyes were dazzled with the light
That blazed in the west, yet surely on that day
Some crimson thing had changed the grass from bright
Pure green I love so. (182–85)

Here color is strangely divorced from the bodies that bear it and thus from other sensations or emotions that would normally be roused. Color becomes, in other words, for a moment the only reality: the bleeding knight can be seen only as "some crimson thing," "like a line of poppies red" staining the pure green of the grass in the golden twilight. Guendolen experiences something like that "innocence of vision" that Ruskin recommended to the painter, where the eye sees only patches of color and is unable to resolve them into
known things. But in Morris's poem such divorce of sensation from emotion is the sign of an unnatural suspension, a suppression of knowledge and feeling. The poem is full of such suspensions and suppressions—the prince who watches Guendolen for a year, unable to act, as well as Guendolen herself, the witch's prisoner, condemned to know the world only from the height of her tower. And while unnatural, such suspensions of time and purposive activity, and such disordering of the normal connections between sensation, perception, feeling, and action, are also magical and strangely beguiling.

In this poem, like Millais, Hunt, Brown, and Rossetti, Morris draws on the alienating effects proposed by a long Western history of writing about color—alienation of the self from what were understood to be ordinary, adult habits of perception and rational deduction. Color thus becomes a way to thrust the rational, stable self into another order of perception where the laws of physics or indeed practical experience of navigating spatiotemporality appear not to apply. Color experienced in all its intensity potentially overwhelms and produces a form of ecstasy, ex-stasis, or derangement. Perception in which color dominates is thus the province of visionaries, madmen (Turner), or the enchanted, and also of children and the un- or under-civilized—savages and the uneducated lower classes. It represents an "innocence" of the eye that is also ignorance, as if one suddenly unlearned the shape and place of everything and started over again, without the knowledge or perhaps even the power of recognition or conceptualization. Pre-Raphaelite focus on color—achieved through its unwanted brilliance, heightened through striking, sometimes harsh combinations, together with the subordinate role of chiaroscuro—hence signaled heightened sensory perception at the expense of intellectual control: Claudio, Mariana, Hunt's dallying shepherd and shepherdess (or the kept woman of The Awakening Conscience), the distraught Ophelia, a working-class Christ and his parents, the bewitched Guendolen and her prince. Such lyric color, in poetry or the visual arts, demands those acts of perceptual attention that constitute a nonrational form of cognition.

Color in Morris's poems has the power to disorient the individual who is the psychological focus, but it is also, for the reader, the sign that such disturbance or disorientation has taken place, producing an abrupt and unannounced switch in time or place or level of consciousness. So, in "The Gilliflower of Gold," for example, a knight boasting of his success on the field of tournament recounts how, nonetheless, at one moment he almost failed:

But I felt weaker than a maid,
And my brain, dizzied and afraid,
Within my helm a fierce tune play'd,
Hah! hah! la belle jaune girofée. (37-40)

The tune is the refrain line of every stanza (we have already heard it nine times at this point), but here it triggers a memory that gives the knight renewed strength:

Until I thought of your dear head,
Bow'd to the gilliflower bed.
The yellow flowers stain'd with red;

Hah! hah! la belle jaune girofée. (41-44)

The connection is not random: the gilliflower, or girofée, is yellow with red streaks; the poem follows the speaker's association of the gilliflower with a particular loved woman's golden hair. Leaning over the gilliflower bed, her yellow hair mingles in his visual memory with the yellow flowers streaked with red, distilled into the "fierce tune" that is his battle cry and plays inside his head, as it does in the body of the poem.

But the stain of red? Perhaps he has simply transferred to this apparently idyllic memory the blood that is everywhere in his account of the tournament. He has already noted that blood sprinkles the golden gilliflower he wears on his helm ("Lord Miles's blood was dew on it," 7). But that innocent memory may conceal something more unsettling, as we slowly begin to realize. The staining of the yellow flower with blood may already be part of the memory to which he returns once more in closing:

I almost saw your quiet head
Bow'd o'er the gilliflower bed.
The yellow flowers stain'd with red.

Hah! hah! la belle jaune girofée. (57-60)

With this final repetition of the doubled image and the refrain, the insistent association of love and violent death in the yellow flower stained with red forces us to reconsider the tone of the whole poem. We are not told if the woman he recalls has herself been injured or killed, thus staining the flowers red as her head droops over them, nor do we know what his obscure relationship is to her and to this wounding, if it occurred. Rather, the insistent juxtaposition of the stained flower, the bloodied golden gilliflower on the knight's helmet, and the golden-haired woman leaning over the reddened yellow flowers suggests an obsessive mental activity obscure to the speaker but nonetheless troubling, both to him and to us. Color's structural role in the poem (in the refrain as well as in the thematic repetitions) derives from its importance as emotional intensifier and trigger of shifts in time or consciousness. It is an active agent both in the psychology of central characters and in the reader's formal experience of the poem.

The startling brilliance of color in these poems is often heightened by the contrast with a present-tense background of grey—or the threat of it. It rains
unforgivingly throughout “The Haystack in the Floods”—“the mud splashed wretchedly;/And the wet dripp’d from every tree / . . . / The tears and rain ran down her face” (10–14). The meadows the lovers ride beside are flooded and the hay that Jehane lies on is soaked. All the more startling are the sudden explosions of light and color: the bright blade and the line of blood we can hardly prevent ourselves from envisioning, as, with Jehane, we are compelled to watch in slow motion:

The long bright blade without a flaw
Glide out from Godmar’s sheath, his hand
In Robert’s hair; she saw him bend
Back Robert’s head; she saw him send
The thin steel down; the blow told well. (141–45)

Similarly shocking for its prolonged postponement, throughout the suspended moment of the rain and Jehane’s apparently frozen feelings, is the leap of flames that Godmar forces Jehane and the reader to anticipate as the only alternative to death by drowning (“Do you know Jehane, they cry for you;/Jehane the brown!/Jehane the brown!/Give us Jehane to burn or drown!” 106–8). In other poems vivid color gains force from the contrast with the dulled colors and senses of old age (for example, in “The Wind,” “Concerning Geffray Teste Noire,” and “Old Love”) or the starved, unnaturally dulled senses of someone cut off from sensory and emotional experience by unexplained magical or psychological forces or through physical imprisonment (for example, in “Rapunzel,” “Spell-Bound,” “The Blue Closet,” “A Good Knight in Prison,” and “In Prison”).

This dulling or fading out of color, and the general incapacity to feel (sometimes sensory as well as emotional) is several times compared to the colorless time before sunrise or at dusk, when color drains from the world. Such is the moment when Guenevere loses her desire for Launcelot in “King Arthur’s Tomb”:

As she lay last night on her purple bed,
Wishing for morning, grudging every pause
Of the palace clocks, until that Launcelot’s head
Should lie on her breast, with all her golden hair
Each side: when suddenly the thing grew drear,
In morning twilight, when the grey dawned bare
Grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere. (134–40)

But in the same poem Launcelot remembers the night spent in the garden with Guenevere before they began their long, passionate affair. He relives the colorless moment before dawn as the ground against which the sudden, renewed sight of her, holding scarlet lilies in the morning sunlight, provoked his awed wonder into love. Colorlessness, or the threat of it, is the background against which action and the blood or brilliant banners that accompany it, or love and its dazzling imagery of red gold hair and scarlet lilies, acquire their startling vividness for both characters and readers.

“The Wind” employs perhaps the most memorable use of color to disrupt a grey present with a profoundly disturbing past. The poem is a monologue by an apparently elderly man (“So I will sit, and think and think of the days gone by,” 7) sitting alone through the night with only the sound of the wind for company. Its stanzas are punctuated periodically by the three-line refrain that does not seem to belong to the monologue but rather to beat out a steady accompaniment to and commentary on it, addressing the wind and at the same time evoking its presence as a wandering and unhappy searcher after some lost innocence (“the lily-seed”)—not unlike the monologist in his reverie. But the wandering wind, like the old man’s memory, is not only sad but blind—and perhaps unkind:

Wind, wind! thou art sad, art thou kind?
Wind, wind, unhappy! thou art blind,
Yet still thou wanderest the lily-seed to find.
(4–6; refrain repeats ten more times)

The speaker’s momentary vivid image of what appears almost as pure color, or rather two colors with an intensity that is enhanced by their juxtaposition, prompts the reverie and releases the memory recounted in the body of the monologue: namely, the green hanging behind his chair with an orange lying on its folds. The contrast of green and orange is unusual in the world of these poems. For the speaker the colors are, in fact, grotesquely alive: from the green hanging, the woven dragons “grin out in the gusts of the wind,” and the orange has “a deep gash cut in the rind” (11, 12). The speaker fears that to disturb the orange would be to make it “scream” and “ooze out like blood from a wizard’s jar” (16, 17). Colors and image evidently lock up something immensely disturbing.

The speaker falls into a dream or reverie recalling a walk with “Margaret” on a hillside in early spring, the green of the grass dotted with daffodils—the primary color replacing the secondary mixture of yellow and red in the image he desires to leave undisturbed. As the dream-memory unfolds, he recalls that as he tried to kiss her, she “shuddered away from me,” but then “she tottered forward, so glad that I should prevail,/and her hair went over my robe, like a gold flag over a sail” (46, 50–51). This brief scene of love or rape ends as Margaret lies down on the grass with arms stretched wide, while the speaker ambiguously goes “down below” (57). Later he piles daffodils over her, but when
she does not respond he removes them one by one to uncover exactly the moment he has evidently avoided:

My dry hands shook and shook as the green gown shone'd again,
Clear'd from the yellow flowers, and I grew hollow with pain,
And on to us both there fell from the sun-shower drops of rain.

Wind, wind, thou art sad, art thou kind?
Winds, wind, unhappy thou art blind
Yet still thou wanderest the lily-seed to find.

Alas! alas! there was blood on the very quiet breast,
Blood lay in the many folds of the loose ungirded vest,
Blood lay upon her arm where the flower had been prest.
I shriek'd and leapt from my chair, and the orange roll'd out afar,
The faint yellow juice oozed out like blood from a wizard's jar;
And then in march'd the ghosts of those that had gone to the war. (72–83)

The red of the blood, drained from the yellow flowers in the beginning of the dream, now reappears to remind him of the gashed orange on folds of green, in a piece of mental color mixing. Or rather, the orange with its yellow juice was perhaps all along half-recognized, concealing and revealing the remembered blood momentarily covered under the deceptive innocence of the yellow flowers. Yellow, after all, is one of the constituents not only of orange but of green; subtract the red and its kinship to the green of spring grass and then spring love (and Margaret's dress) may be more evident. But the mind will not allow such chromatic evasions for long. We do not know exactly what happened between the speaker and Margaret, or why, but that is not really the point. Morris imitates the mind's action through the succession of color images with surprising economy and impact, following it as it tentatively touches, evades, and is finally overwhelmed by the rupture of an old wound and perhaps an old fear, long buried and not consciously acknowledged. Color and sound (the wind's refrain) create a highly patterned, repetitive poem that is, one might want to say, vividly decorative. But color also "screams," says the unsayable, becoming, as in early Pre-Raphaelite paintings, a potent expressive vehicle for the poem's psychological burdens.

Consider too the rambling "Concerning Geoffray Teste Noire." In this poem, the speaker's narrative—really as much a digression from as the supplement to Froissart's story, which its narrator announces—seemingly stumbles, stops, and is temporarily diverted each time he recalls the image of a woman's white skull in a coif of gold, exposed on the green grass where the speaker has laid down his pennon to prepare for what (we later learn almost incidentally) was anyway a failed ambush against the marauding local warlord called Teste Noire. The monologue's sudden, unexplained temporal leaps are apparently triggered, in the speaker's mind, by the image of the skeletal white of a woman's bones, thrown into relief against a background of color—gold, grass green, or blood red. The image reappears four times, as he moves from recounting the initial surprise on the day of the ambush, to the memory that incident in turn recalls—when, as a boy, he fainted upon seeing women's bones exposed on a day of blood and slaughter (during the Jacquerie). Returning to the moment of his discovery of the bones during the ambush, he dwells on them, imagining the story of the earlier ambush of a lady and her lover in which both were killed:

Over those bones I sat and pored for hours,
   And thought, and dream'd, and still I scarce could see
The small white bones that lay upon the flowers,
   But evermore I saw the lady . . . (141–44)

The poem modulates from memory (the discovery of the skeleton) to an earlier memory (the bones of women encountered during a bloody struggle), and then to the imagined image of the unknown woman at the moment of her death, now itself a memory he is recalling.

As the imagined image is recalled, it takes on the character of lived experience: "O most pale face, that brings such joy and sorrow/Into men's hearts . . . Your face must hurt me always" (144, 149–50, 153), "your brow/So smooth, unwrinkled ever" (155–56), the "piercing" sharpness of "joy . . . /That marcheth nigh to sorrow" (150–51) of the lover and then the "curved sword/That bites with all its edge" of her red lips observed (or rather imagined) in a kiss (173–74). Gold hair on the pale face tangles him once again as he walks in "green gardens" (162), and neither he nor the reader can be certain whether the palimpsest of memories takes him back to the discovery of a corpse, to the dream of the pale woman with gold hair and red lips whose corpse may once have been, or to an encounter with a woman in his own past. Speaker and reader lose the ability to separate the lived from the imagined. The haunting image in all these memories, however, is the same, a complex of white (pale face, white bones) against color—green grass, golden coif and the imagined or remembered red of lips or blood. While the narrative is wrenched back briefly to note Teste Noire's anticlimactic death months later in his own bed, this is only a way to return, as if irresistibly, to yet another repetition of the poem's central disturbing image:

In my new castle, down beside the Eure,
   There is a little chapel of squared stone.
Painted inside and out; in a green nook pure
   There did I lay them, every wearied bone;
And over it they lay, with stone-white hands
Clasped fast together, hair made bright with gold;
This Jacques Picard, known through many lands,
Wrought cunningly; he's dead now: I am old. (193–200)

In the closing image of the poem, the tomb in the green nook where he lays
every环卫iced bone and over which he erects the lover's statues finally fixes, as
a stone monument, the haunting memory. The palimpsest of memories ob-
scurely (to the speaker) connects his horror at the acts of war with the cruelty
of sexual love—the woman's, but also his own. Color—white, gold, green,
and red, the red repeatedly banished (bleached bones, stone-white statue) but
ever proximate in the mind's unwilling recall of blood and lips—marks the
intensity of a recurring image that finally derails the narrative altogether,
turning it into insistent, patterned repetition. As we shall see in other poems
in this volume, such patterned, compulsive repetition completely replaces nar-
native or dramatic action, emerging as the primary organizing force of the
poem.

Morris's techniques of abrupt transition with few or no narrative signals to
separate present from past, or one memory from another, imitate the appar-
tently unexamined moving consciousness of his lyrical subjects. "Concerning
Geffray Teste Noire" and "The Wind" are, like later modernist poems (and
some of Tennyson's), demanding of readers: we must leap narrative gaps, con-
nect what remains unconnected, and grasp, through the patterns of color
imagery, relationships between historical events and personal memories or past
events and present feelings. It is when we turn our attention from conscious-
ness represented in the poem to its effect on the reader that the critical poten-
tial of Morris's lyric intensity emerges. Demands on the reader differ from
poem to poem in this volume; a brief excursus into its formal models and ex-
periments will make it easier to specify the mental action that Morris's version
of lyric intensity explores.

A number of Morris's lyrics are dramatic monologues, spoken almost en-
tirely from inside the disturbed mind of one or more speakers. As in the dra-
matic monologues of Browning or Tennyson that Morris and his circle knew
intimately, the speaker (of "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire" or of "The Wind,
for example) does not draw connections or conclusions about his own alien-
ated moments—such as his (or her) use of color as a cover or substitute, as
a means of dissociation from the overwhelming emotion that might accompany
a conscious articulation of the speaker's involvements with the violence of sex
or death that the lyrics describe. The same is true of the poems that juxtapose
several voices in spoken or unvoiced internal monologues (such as "The Cha-
pel in Lyonsesse"): there is no narrative or reflective connecting tissue in the

poem. It eschews the reflective discursiveness that Arthur Hallam's review of
Tennyson's early poetry found characteristic of Wordsworth in favor of what
Hallam identified as the lyric intensity of Keats or Shelley or (early) Tennyson.
These poets, Hallam wrote, focus on sensuous presentational immediacy
rather than articulated analysis and on the "fusing" of thought and sense in
"the medium of strong emotion." Hallam stressed one consequence of this
approach: such poetry implicitly makes a case for sensuous reason, or feeling
after-truth—the emotional exploration of truth, as if (for Morris's speakers)
through a blind groping after meaning, or (as was more common for Tenny
son or Keats) the recognition of emotion, including aesthetic emotion, as
form of reason both to discover and present a "truth." Nineteenth-century
poets and critics from Keats to Pater (who was to call it "imaginative reason"
postulated such feeling-for-truth as an alternative mode of thought to con-
scious reason. Lyric intensity, Hallam argued, recovers the full range of hu-
man sensory experience, including those sensations that eighteenth-century
reason held to be unreliable and unquantifiable as accounts of objective real-
ity: taste, smell, sound, touch, but above all, color.

There is another conclusion to be drawn from Hallam's line of defense,
however, and the poetic experiments of Tennyson and Browning in the mid-
dium of the dramatic monologue seem to pursue it. This conclusion is that
the lyric that avoids its own commentary invites the reader to supply it—and
hence to reflect on the mental actions that the poem compels us to relive al-
most from the inside. The dramatic monologue, by introducing a greater de-
gree of distance (the speaker is a character in a particular dramatic setting,
often addressing a specific person other than ourselves) without falling into
narrative commentary and analysis, further encourages, even forces us to re-
fect on the workings of a mind presented seemingly without mediation, yet
with less demanding intimacy than the first-person, apparently confessional
lyric. In a dramatic monologue the speaker is usually not "confessing," or at
any rate is speaking with a rhetorical purpose we can grasp from the nature of
the dramatic situation—indeed, we must grasp, if we are not to be completely
in the dark about what is going on at the most basic level (see "My Last Ducch-
ess" or "Maud," for example). But, as in what John Stuart Mill famously de-
scribed as the "overheard" character of lyric poetry, the speaker of a dramatic
monologue, whatever his or her rhetorical designs on a listener, is not address-
ing us. We have time to reflect: this person is surely crazy, disturbed, or is
trying to persuade or imagined listener, probably with a particular end
in mind. What is he or she trying to hide or reveal? What does he or she avoid
seeing or naming, and why?

To what extent do Morris's poems encourage this simultaneous move-
ment of reflection in the reader? Strictly speaking, only "Concerning Geffray
Teste Noire” is a fully dramatic monologue, in the sense that it provides a specific occasion and an audience other than the reader for first-person speech. “The Defence of Guenevere,” while it focuses on the title character’s mind, speech, and actions before an audience, is ostensibly spoken by an unnamed and undeveloped witness who is not Guenevere. “The Wind” is an unspoken monologue without an implied listener, more like the “monodrama” of “Maud,” or indeed of Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” or “Childe Roland” (though in the last two cases, the speaker does at moments have an audience in mind—God, or the assembled company of dead heroes—even though the monologue is apparently unspoken). In these solitary monologues, the necessary release for us from the burden of sustained sympathetic response—the possibility of dividing our attention, of exercising both (appalled) sympathetic identification and reflection simultaneously—comes in part from our positing a profound otherness in the speaker. In Morris’s dramatic monologues, voiced or unvoiced, with or without implied listeners, that difference is in part conveyed through what seem to be preternaturally vivid and consistently foregrounded sensations of color and the erratic movements of mind and feeling they accompany or provoke. Color not only represents the oddness of another’s mind, it also, inevitably, comes to represent something irrational and strange in itself. Color’s “otherness” is a potent resource for the lyric poet.43

This is, I suspect, partly what Pater registered when he praised Morris’s volumes for their ability to inhabit a medieval sensibility from within (even when the subject was a Greek myth)—that is, to inhabit a not-modern mind and temper, to recapture and signify a profound historical otherness for modern readers. For Pater, through the language of disordered senses and sentiments ordered into art, Morris succeeded in making visible to a more analytic, historically distanced modern reader both connections invisible to the medieval mind (in the juxtapositions of violence and desire in deceptive memories that obscure agency and intention to the speaker) and others not ordinarily visible to a modern mind (its own resemblance to and difference from a medieval sensibility). Thus, Pater noted, a modern reader might recognize particularly the chilling absence of that special medieval intensity of interwoven sensory and spiritual desire, based as it was on a kind of hope not easily or naively held against the dissolving effect of modern physical and metaphysical investigation. Art such as Morris’s, Pater claimed, is like philosophy: it can “startle [the human spirit] into a sharp and eager observation,” startle it out of that “habit [that] is relative to a stereotyped world.”44 Such art, in other words, is born of a heightened attentiveness that it in turn provokes. In showing us a mind or an historical sensibility that works differently, it forces us to follow again, but with the double consciousness of our different ages, the twists and turns, the sudden leaps and associations, of an historically distant mental activity.

III

These critical or reflective possibilities, inherent in the dramatic presentation of lyric intensity, are found not only in Morris’s dramatic monologues or in poems that use a more directly dramatic structure (with more than one speaker), but also in those that combine one or more voices with the repeated but impersonal intonation of refrains. In these poems the role of emotion in the often minimal action of the poem may remain obscure: we are not given enough information to understand, in psychological terms, how action is motivated. The color is as startling as in those poems that take us directly inside the mind of the first-person lyric speaker, but it is less easily interpreted as psychological effect. Instead, Morris combines the disorienting and intensifying effect of touches of strong color against neutral backgrounds with more prominent patterning, both structural (stanzas and refrains) and thematic, where repeated decorative motifs—patterns in sound and color—draw attention to recurring memories and emotions. These formal patterns may suggest connections that remain unrecognized by the subjects of the poems, as they do in a first-person lyric like “The Wind,” where the fiction of an experiencing mind asks us to discover them. Such poems are instances of repetition as a source of both formal and thematic exploration.

In short lyrics like “The Gillyflower of Gold,” the decorative aspects of color patterns are more prominent than in “The Wind.” The phrase that gives the poem its title and regularly returns to organize its verse into stanzas is already a visual pattern in color. While this and related poems may remind the reader that Morris was to become England’s greatest pattern designer, when Morris published The Defence of Guenevere they spoke rather of his medieval sources: they are often inspired by medieval heraldry. “La belle jaune giroflée” is not only battle cry, refrain, and recurrent image, it is also the device the knight wears on his helm and, presumably, bears on his pennon and perhaps other items of his and his horse’s accoutrements: his coat of arms. The poems in Morris’s volume are littered with references to heraldic colors and colored devices.45 Heraldry provides both the particular color palette and much of the vocabulary of decorative patterns. Can a poem with such marked attention to surface artifice, and to an archaic form of such artifice, achieve lyric intensity? Does color here create or defuse emotional tension?

Surprisingly, Morris discovers in heraldic color patterns a new range of poetic resources, in part dependent on the odd status of heraldry for modern audiences. Using heraldic patterns in 1858 was a pointed anachronism; the
for a field, and is chosen so as to create visible contrast between juxtaposed colors. Permissible juxtapositions of color are governed by a strictly applied rule. While neither Morris nor those Pre-Raphaelites who depicted medieval banners, shields, and other forms of colored insignia in their paintings (Rossetti, Brown, Siddall, Burne-Jones) observed the strict heraldic rules for color combinations or adopted the special vocabulary of heraldic color, they did use a narrow range of contrasting colors drawn from the heraldic list, in many of the combinations most commonly found in heraldry, and in what might be called heraldic ways. Heraldic color categories are broad; the choice of specific tone or tint within each has no significance and can vary even with different realizations of the same personal emblem. “Pink” or “crimson” or “scarlet,” for example, or qualifications of basic colors such as “light blue” or “deep green,” do not occur in the official verbal accounts and are accidental rather than defining in visual representations. Similarly, gradation within a color field or on a device (from a dark to light shade, or between closely adjacent hues—yellowish green to bluish green) is not significant. This is also true with most of the color in these poems and pictures: there are no subtle variations in hue or tint, such as one might find in an account that attempted to approximate the richness of actual color observed on surfaces of different texture and reflectivity, seen under particular conditions of light and shadow. Only broad, clear hue differences count, and these are used to distinguish figure from field, or juxtaposed figures or fields from each other. In heraldic imagery, colors or color combinations, like the marks or devices themselves, need to be kept to a minimum and be easy to specify in order to fulfill their primary function—to be a readily described and replicated sign.

In the world of Morris's poems and tales, heraldic devices and colors function as an important part of the perceptual activities necessary for survival, but are particularly important as marks of honor and identity around which considerable social and emotional value has accrued. Morris uses the colored devices of heraldry for their imagistic vividness, as spots of color punctuating (and often structuring) the texture of a poem, but also for their potential to focus loyalties and angers, love and hate, as these motivate actions. And he extends these social uses, as we have seen, to more specifically lyric ends, using his recurring color patterns to signal and provoke the mind's erratic but compelling movements in defiance of gradual temporal and spatial progression. Because heraldic patterning suggests the presence of a code, however, it can also suggest that those mental and emotional actions have their own logic—that there is a way to "read" the relations of inside and outside, past and present, that make up subjective or lyric experience, while they contradict ordinary perceptions of sequential temporal progression or continuous three-dimensional space.
The closest analogue—though it is hard to say who is influencing whom—to Morris’s early poems can be found in Rossetti’s small, intimate watercolors from the second half of the 1850s. Here color is indeed lyric, possessed of an intensity and penetrating power that suggests heightened and disturbed emotional states. It certainly had this effect on Morris when he wrote poems for three of Rossetti’s watercolors ("The Blue Closet," "The Tune of Seven Towers," and "King Arthur’s Tomb"). But Rossetti’s use of color also organizes the picture into pattern and orders into rhythms both visual perception and psychological response in the spectator; these aspects of his pictures may help us to understand better the extraordinary, strange experiments of Morris in his most insistently patterned poems, such as "Rapunzel" (Rossetti’s favorite), "Two Red Roses Across the Moon," "The Sailing of the Sword," "The Tune of Seven Towers," "The Gilliflower of Gold," and, especially, "The Blue Closet.

In both poems and watercolors, color bears a heavy burden of articulation, in the absence of more usual reliance on gesture, facial expression, significant objects, or narrative elaboration to gloss or open out the psychological terrain of the representation to viewers. The watercolors, seen alone, are not immediately dramatic through facial expression or gesture, as were the early paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, nor do they provide other narrative clues to the psychological tensions at work that viewers of Victorian genre paintings, trained as readers by fiction, had learned to look for and interpret. While some of the watercolors can be glossed by readers who turn to the stories to which the titles allude—particularly the scenes from the life of the Virgin or from Dante that Rossetti made for Ruskin, or from a well-known story like The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra—others, such as The Tune of Seven Towers (plate 2) or The Blue Closet (plate 7), refer in no obvious way to a known story, presenting what appear to be fraught situations in which characters in the same space are lost in abstraction. While united by some minimal activity, they do not look directly at each other. These images shut viewers out, forcing them to rely on the more abstract but also expressive languages of color and patterned pictorial space.

The watercolors of 1856–59 particularly, with their predominantly red, gold, dark blue, and green colors and highly patterned medieval settings, are close to Morris’s poems and designs of the same years—not surprisingly, this was the period of the two men’s closest social and professional friendship (especially 1856–57). While some of these pictures use intense colors in startling combinations, equally striking are the claustrophobic and curiously organized fictive, psychological, and pictorial spaces or surfaces across which they are arrayed. Geometrically complex furniture and interior spaces (increasingly filled with ingeniously designed, often patterned objects) proliferate. The inventive chairs and tables that incorporate musical instruments in The Tune of Seven Towers and The Blue Closet have no real historical counterparts (though Rossetti did collect strange musical instruments in the 1860s). An excess of exuberant design of both furniture and its patterned surfaces seemingly invites the viewer to delight in intricate and ingenious patterns and constructions for their own sake. Yet such geometrical constructions are closely integrated with the picture’s meanings. The exuberant patterning, filling the picture surface, contributes to the sense of emotional inwardness the pictures convey, while the geometric organization of the compositions distinguish what one might call the levels of being on which figures are understood to exist. The pictures are full of sudden openings or views through to different levels, almost all interiors, and few allow glimpses of open sky. The “space” in these small watercolors is indeed more like a superimposition of planes that cannot be read easily according to the usual devices of perspectival representation—there are seldom avenues to graded recession for the viewer, but instead abrupt juxtapositions, seen through various square or rectangular openings, of near and far, above and below, in areas that often lack strong points of orientation (such as a horizon line). This organization of the picture surface relies rather on heraldic practices of dividing the armorial shield into geometric quadrants (especially visible in The Blue Closet), sometimes on the diagonal (The Tune of Seven Towers, The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra). The abstract division of a bounded surface area in Rossetti’s pictures is reinforced by the inside-out reversals of the color combinations of figure and ground (“interchange” in heraldic terminology) that organize some pictures. This is the case in the mirror-repeat of The Blue Closet, where interchange is translated into the organizational strategy for the entire picture surface, symmetrically split down the middle of the two-part instrument with the two women, again symmetrically arranged, but raising opposite arms to play, and dressed in contrasting colors; on the instrument there are heraldic painted as well as carved patterns.

Heraldic patterning in these small pictures seems to work as a powerful generating influence in the disposition of color that articulates what is at once fictional space and pictorial surface. It recalls heraldic rules of reading by which complex coats of arms (with a series of devices, represented on different scales on the shield divided vertically or into quadrants) are considered as a series of superimposed planes to be read from the most distant image (the field) toward the top or surface image. (This understanding of heraldic space permits complex bearings that incorporate family histories of marriages, second marriages, and so forth to be read; the order of superimposed planes is understood as temporal succession.) The crowding of figures and objects with and upon patterned surfaces in Rossetti’s pictures is similarly “readable” as a set of superimposed planes, structured into opposed but balanced halves or
quadrants, where patterned objects and surfaces within the depicted "space" repeat, in miniature, the organizing lines and color contrasts of the pictorial plane. While the major figures in the scene occupy the same plane, auxiliary figures are understood to occupy different social and even metaphysical spaces through their placement on different planes—the servant thrusting a branch in through the back window over the bed, itself in an alcove off and behind the room in which the figures in The Tune of Seven Towers sit, or the green-winged angels playing a set of bells, visible through a window opening behind a hedge from the enclosed garden in which St. George and the Princess Sabra gloomily embrace in The Wedding.

Morris's poems obviously resemble Rossetti's pictures in their use of vivid golds and reds and blues to represent medieval scenes, but the more subtle connections are to be found in their common exploration of pattern and plane as bearers of the experiential shapes and relations of time, memory, and feeling. In both picture and poem, narrative or descriptive information that would allow the relations among characters to be understood psychologically or narratively is replaced by heraldic practices of displaying relationships through superimposed planes divided vertically or diagonally to indicate shifts in social, temporal, and spatial location. Thus the figures or characters in picture or poem do not interact dramatically, nor can their relations be reconstructed through narrative clues or references; rather, both forms of art are interested in displaying the disjunctions (and abrupt, involuntary shifts or recurrences) that are the often jarring, discontinuous mental experience of what narrative smooths into continuous connection.

While poems like "Two Red Roses" and "The Sailing of the Sword" usefully foreground the importance of color in such formal patterning, the most interesting poems of this type explore the conceptual possibilities of color relationships while they retain a great expressive power to unsettle and provoke. I've already discussed the unsettling use of patterned repetition in "The Tune of Seven Towers" in chapter 1; in "The Blue Closet" color relationships within and between patterns intensify the poem's juxtaposition of sharply different spatial and temporal orders. The poem is a composite of a number of different forms and voices with passages that serve as refrains, though not through exact repetition. Color is used in a lyric way to increase sensory and emotional awareness of a moment of time. That moment is repeatable (here as ritual reenactment; in other poems, as involuntary memory) but is at first presented as apart from continuously changing history. The enclosed blue closet, where colors are definite and strong (the purple and green of Alice's and Louise's gowns, the blue tiles themselves, the gold strings of the singer's instrument) sets the duration of the song off from the flux and progress of time. In the closet, time is evidently suspended, marked only by the women's annual permission to make music, though their singing and playing is rhythmically regulated by the tolling bell outside.

But the closet exists against a backdrop of motion, aging, dulling, or erasure. That dulling or aging is at first localized in the refrain—it regulates change and provides an accompanying reminder of it, through sound rather than color (as the wind outside tolls the great bell, flaps the banner, and tumbles the seas). As the poem unfolds, however, we realize that the blue closet, a space constituted principally through color and music, is actually rather porous:

But, alas! The sea-salt oozes through
The chinks of the tiles of the closet Blue; (37-33)

The sea salt will eventually cover the definite colors and patterns of the tiles. Louise's lover, Arthur, on his long-ago visit brought "dusty snow" to sprinkle over Louise's white shoulders—and his blue eyes were already dimmed ("they grow grey with time") while his cheeks were pale, his lips grey (40, 47). Much as the central characters in "The Wind" or "The Gilliflower of Gold" seem to be caught in the mind's will to exclude certain kinds of knowledge, yet are unable to prevent the intrusion of memories whose connections they cannot consciously articulate, so the enclosed space of "The Blue Closet" (or of Rossetti's pictures The Blue Closet, The Tune of Seven Towers, or The Wedding) are also porous, concealing strange openings that abruptly give on distant places. In Morris's poem, it is not until Arthur returns at its conclusion to release the women, heralded by the "lily red" that shoots up through a curious opening in the floor, and leads Louise into "the happy golden land" that his eyes are restored to their "blue" and color is assured—but in "the land of the dead" (60, 72, 69, 62). Color in "The Blue Closet" is subject to decay, as are the human senses that are our only way to know it as color. But color also has an afterlife where it is as vivid as ever, whereas sound is repetitive, embodying the rhythmic passage of time and ceasing with it ("And in truth the great bell overhead/Left off his pealing for the dead, /Perchance, because the wind was dead," 49-51). By the end of the poem the bell tolls again but "their song ceased, and they were dead" (79).

One might say that this afterlife of color is the aesthetic artifact—the poem or picture that fixes mental space, with its willed exclusions and sudden openings, into an aesthetically satisfying pattern, imposing order and restoring the vivid, felt reality of color to what will remain unintelligible and constantly threatened with dissolution in the flux of conscious experience. To put it another way, the hermetic blue closet, marked with all the signs of temporal difference, spatial otherness, and psychological strangeness, persists in vivid immediacy through its artifice, much as the now-closed heraldic code survives
in decorative patterns and antirealist techniques of spatial and temporal organization. Poem and picture focus on the disruptive and potentially unsettling force of such aesthetic survivals: the interpenetration of normative senses of time, space, form, and color (or colorlessness) with these archaic but lastingly vivid alternatives to post-Renaissance, Enlightenment, and even romantic modes of thought and experience. The conjunction creates a peculiarly intense form of modern lyric, bringing home through the senses the troubled relations to personal and historical time and the disturbed perceptions of place and space that constitute an alternative view of the experience of modernity for late nineteenth-century readers and viewers.

Morris's poem is perhaps as oddly effective as it is because it turns on a continuing philosophical puzzle: color is a powerful sensory impression with a basis in physical stimulus, but it is nonetheless not a property of any objects, physical or nonphysical. Rather, it is always in excess of the things to which it appears to belong—about to lift off, as it were, and become something with a life of its own. Color can't be tied down. Color makes the lived moment seem intensely present or "real," yet as a property of things it is an illusion. A sense of color's elusiveness as well as its illusionseness—its impermanence (subject to fading through light or air or moisture) but also its resistance to efforts to fix it adequately in any language, verbal or mathematical—is always with us. No other sense can confirm it (as visual shape, for example, can be corroborated or altered through touch). Yet color belongs perhaps all the more strongly, given this ontological, epistemological, and perceptual elusiveness, to the life and motions of the mind. It can readily lend itself to patterns or hierarchies or systems of almost any kind: continuous as hue or tint or shade, color is also infinitely divisible. Without necessary shape or determinate boundaries of its own, it combines easily with shape and form—indeed, in our psycho-neural systems, the same stimulus is analyzed in several different ways, so that we may "see" the relation of color to shape in more than one way simultaneously. And it combines easily with feeling, memory, events in mental life, marks on the mind's surface, learned neurological connections, and the relationships among those symbols we call words. Color's flexibility, as a sort of mental state (a "chromatic state") that provides the illusion of "stuff" that is at once insubstantial, impossible to locate, and infinitely malleable, does indeed make it a useful tool with which to think or feel or dream. Color is a resource for painters and poets that can take them very far from the description of a knowable world of firm object boundaries and fixed spatial location, of sharp dividing lines and knowable relations between the perceiving consciousness and what it thinks it perceives beyond itself. It can reawaken a sense of the strangeness and otherness of objects, of persons, and of past historical moments. For mid- and late nineteenth-century poets, painters, and critics, restless within the constraints of realism, color was the way forward—a determining sign of the modern.

I have argued that Morris used color poetically to make vivid the world he evokes and to track the mind's parallel but different life: its attachments and evasions, its sudden, involuntary shifts into memory or dream. I have also suggested that while he used color patterning to create aesthetic distance and provide satisfying formal organization for his poetry, his poems retain and even sharpen the intensity anticipated in nineteenth-century lyric expression. The contrast between the expectations of modern readers and the pointedly odd, anachronistic codes that seem to control mental and physical space in these poems cooperates with a heightened sensory and emotional immediacy pursued through vivid color, painful distortions of bodily form, sudden openings and intrusions into physical space, and erratic, involuntary, and often violent mental associations. The result is poems that maintain aesthetic and historical distance while they come uncomfortably near, both mentally and emotionally. Expressive and conceptual uses of color changes and color combinations intensify for modern readers the lyric force of these poems of alienated minds in strangely articulated temporal and spatial settings, providing a disturbing alternative to the ordered worlds of realist representation and to optimistic narratives of gradual progress and prosperity in mid-nineteenth-century Britain.

These are on the whole unhappy poems: very often something happens that has a meaning or significance the character cannot grasp. Some wider connection is missed, and that leaves characters and readers unhappy with the sense of something possibly terrible that implicates them but escapes their understanding. Events occur offstage or as if at a distance, not assimilated or fully known—often historical events. Color not only marks these not-understood memories and brings them back with a painful lyric intensity, but also helps shape the poems about such failures at understanding into aesthetic objects with formal completion and brilliant colors that, while pleasing in themselves and in combination, are set against the lack of a sense of satisfying form or pleasure (for themselves and for us) in the lives of the characters. This makes the poems troubling and all the more haunting because what is vividly painful is also brought before us in an aesthetically crafted form. Morris's volume provides equivalents, in aesthetically memorable forms and colors, for a version of the "douleur morale" noted by Baudelaire, and the melancholy marked by Ruskin as peculiarly modern. The poem objectifies an experience not digested or understood by those to whom it happens, and in this sense is "about" modernity but does not offer either theories or programs derived from it; art is a kind of abstraction from sensation (including feeling) but it is not a
description nor does it offer prescriptions. One might say (with David Bromwich, reflecting on Keats’s poetry) that Morris’s best poems in *The Defence of Guenevere* also carry “a suggestion of completeness that brings out by implication the incompleteness of common life.” By mid-century the growing unease felt by many writers and artists about the unevenly shared attractions and deprivations of modern life gave new force to this distinction between the aesthetic and the lived.

Morris’s early poems take one step further what they initially share with the art of Keats and the romantic poets, painters, and critics who followed him. They develop from romantic roots not simply a general stance but also a particular focus: an interest in what I want to call lyric color as it evokes aesthetic completion while suggesting, criticizing, and suffering the incompleteness of modern life. *The Defence of Guenevere* can be linked with Baudelaire’s contemporary accounts of the piercing melodies of color in Delacroix’s paintings and his evocation of such effects in his own poems, with the peculiarly powerful pull of color and the melancholy that it induces as they are registered by Ruskin; and with similar and more conscious reflections to be found in Pater’s descriptions of real and imaginary works of art. I will turn to this longer history of lyric color, and its changed uses in Morris’s later work, in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Chromatic States**

Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere* poems rework a Keatsian belief in colorcentrality to aesthetic perception. His own use of lyric color, as we have seen, extends that interest to patterned repetition in design. Here Morris’s practical experience and his research into the theory and technologies of color relationships draw on a second and less familiar (to literary historians) story of color, as it was transformed from craft to “science” over the course of the nineteenth century. This double heritage of romantic poetics and color des theory can help to explain what might otherwise seem a puzzling change Morris’s uses of color in the later 1860s.

The change can perhaps best be illustrated by looking briefly at Morris’s work as a practical designer. Morris combines multiple colors in patterns in two quite different ways. In the first mode, which dominates his practice in the 1850s and early 1860s, he sets one color sharply against a contrasting one. In such works Morris composes in strongly differentiated hues, where color helps to create crisply defined lines and forms through contrast or relief—also to create disruptions and discontinuities—an effect that, as we have seen, he exploits in his early poems for its expressive and conceptual possibilities: a poetic strategy. In the second mode, which becomes increasingly import from the later 1860s, Morris draws on the subtler effects of juxtaposed color that are related through gradation. In this mode as colorist, which supplements rather than replaces the first mode in his later pattern designs (as in *Chrysanthemum*, plate 1, where he uses both), Morris uses combinations of closely related hues or of several shades of a hue to create subtler modulations within an overall schema, giving the illusion of movement or change within a rhythmic, tonally unified design. In wallpapers and printed textiles, his favorite multilayered patterns of diagonally curving plant forms intertwine to juxtapose an often broad range of tones and related hues, creating the illusion of continuous but not disruptive motion both across and between planes.