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William Morris in the Twenty-First Century



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Virtual Paradise: Editing Morris for the Twenty-First Century

I

Imagine a Victorian [writer] sitting before a computer browsing the World Wide Web. Watch this author click through research databases, follow links to commercial sites, send an e-mail to one of a multitude of correspondents ... and enter an appointment in an electronic calendar. If you could picture such a thing, who would the [writer] be?¹

For some people reading this, your response to the above question may well be a resounding 'not William Morris'. Had Morris lived in the twenty-first century I like to imagine that Burne-Jones would have produced one of his wonderful caricatures – or even a series – showing Morris first swearing at a malfunctioning computer, then hitting it, and finally throwing it with some gusto across the room. Or perhaps I've got it wrong, and Morris would be sitting upstairs on a London red bus with his laptop, lurching across the city and furiously typing the latest lines of *The Earthly Paradise*.

Morris never used the word 'technology' in his writings, so the hypothetical question of whether he would have been 'anti-technology' as an extension of the slightly erroneous view that he was 'anti-machinery' is not one we can really answer. Morris was against the use of machines where they degraded and devalued the humanity of the people made to work

¹ The opening words of Jay Clayton's *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace: The Afterlife of the Nineteenth Century in Postmodern Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 3. No prizes for working out his answer to the question.

them so that they were forced to become machines themselves, and when they were used to produce shoddy and inferior goods which lacked any signs of the individuality of the maker, but he was not at all against the use of machines where they 'minimiz[ed] the amount of time spent in unattractive labour'.² Our contemporary life is now inextricably linked to the sophisticated and complex machines we call computers. On the one hand the possibilities of what computers can do expand continually and in many ways our lives are enriched; on the other, 'information overload' and the tyranny of the email inbox do not nourish but oppress.

'Technology' seems a very twentieth-century word even though it has its roots in the seventeenth century when it originally meant 'a discourse or treatise on an art or arts; the scientific study of the practical or industrial arts'. By 1859 'technology' referred to 'the practical arts collectively', and this meaning makes clear how the Victorians did not make the same distinction between 'the arts' and 'sciences' that we have come to. Morris was certainly very interested in the practical arts and particularly, for my purposes here, in what we might call the technologies of the book. For example, the direct impetus to the establishment of the Kelmscott Press was Emery Walker's 1888 Arts and Crafts Exhibition Lecture in which Walker used photographic lantern slides – still very much a novelty in the 1880s – to project enlargements of incunabula and early typefaces onto a screen so that the construction of letterforms could be seen more clearly. It was this that inspired Morris to design his own typefaces. As William Peterson has said: 'the Kelmscott Press, the quintessential example of an arts-and-crafts longing for the pre-industrial age, was paradoxically built upon a foundation of photography, one of the most sophisticated forms of technology in late-Victorian England'.³ The lantern slides enabled Morris to see letterforms anew, in a way that the experience of looking

2 William Morris, 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil' (1884), in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p. 106. See also 'How We Live and How We Might Live' (1884) in the same volume, pp. 134–58.

3 William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 82.

at them on the page alone could not give. The developments in optical technologies which took place in the nineteenth century inaugurated a revolution in ways of seeing.⁴ In the latter part of the nineteenth century Morris harnessed these to his own project of transforming the book that is the Kelmscott Press.

II

No field of literary or historical study can remain vigorous without serious scholarly attention to the library of printed materials that is its foundation; and no poet will long command serious critical attention without solid editions upon which new generations of readers can be raised.

— ANDREW STAUFFER⁵

For a moment I'm going to minimize this frame of 'Morris and technology' and leave it at the bottom of my screen, so to speak. Let's open a new blank document now, and call it 'Editing Morris'.

At the time of writing the first draft of this essay, in 2005, the issue of editions of Morris's works was bothering me. This was as much as a university lecturer and teacher as a researcher. In book form it was (and still is) actually quite hard to find good editions with helpful annotations and notes through which to teach Morris. This is not a problem if we are talking about *News from Nowhere* – practically the only Morris text which stays permanently in print – but it is with just about everything else. It has

4 For a discussion of this point in relation to Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* volume see Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995). On the transforming powers of optical technologies more generally in the nineteenth century see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

5 Andrew Stauffer, 'Victorian Paperwork', *Victorian Poetry*, 41.4 (Winter 2003), p. 527.

always struck me as surprising, for example, that even as seminal a volume of poems as *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* – recognized as such by significant scholars in our own time: Isobel Armstrong said of the volume ‘these are perhaps the great poems of desire in the nineteenth century’ – does not remain available as a coherent volume, with notes, for scholars and students.⁶ You are most likely to encounter Morris’s poetry in contemporary book form today via some kind of selection, such as the Carcanet *William Morris: Selected Poems* (1992), edited by Peter Faulkner, which in the UK at least is still available. This has a good introduction, but no notes at all.

In the 1990s the Bristol-based publishers Thoemmes Press brought out the William Morris Library (again thanks to the good offices of Peter Faulkner as Series Editor) – thirteen volumes which reprinted works by or about Morris which had long been out of print. It was certainly helpful to have texts such as *Sigurd the Volsung* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* available again, and some of the volumes had excellent introductions – such as David Latham’s for *Poems by the Way* and Nick Salmon’s for his two large volumes of Morris’s contributions to *Justice* and *Commonweal* (which had not previously been published in book form) – and they were attractively produced. However, most of the volumes did not actually include notes to accompany the text. The Thoemmes Press editions of Morris’s own previously published works also highlighted another feature of many (though not all) recent reproductions of Morris’s writings – they took their source text from May Morris’s 24-volume *Collected Works*, published between 1910–15. Every volume in this series is now out of print.

Then in 2002 Routledge brought out a weighty, two-volume, freshly edited, annotated edition of *The Earthly Paradise*, produced by Florence Boos. The dedication to this edition is ‘To Morris’s readers, in the twenty-first century and beyond’, which, in the light of what follows, was remarkably

6 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 242. Margaret Lourie produced an excellent critical edition of *The Defence* volume in 1981 (Garland Publishing) but it has long since been out of print in book form. However, see part III for further discussion of this edition’s more recent life.

prescient. This edition struck me as significant for a number of reasons. First of all, it isn’t based on *The Collected Works*. As Boos notes in her detailed discussion of the history of the publication of *The Earthly Paradise*, May Morris’s 1910–11 edition ‘makes no comment about variations from the versions published in Morris’s lifetime’ and ‘in fact makes thousands of changes in punctuation and capitalization from Morris’s editions of 1890 and 1896.’⁷ Second, hardback scholarly editions such as this, produced in limited print runs and aimed at research libraries, have become very expensive. In 2010 this edition currently costs £250. Whilst this is probably good value for over 1,500 pages and more than 42,000 lines of poetry, not to mention the copious critical apparatus also included, none the less its cost ensures that this kind of scholarship still stays in the realm of the select few rather than being available to a wider number. Third, each volume of this Routledge edition opens with a generous selection of images and facsimiles of pages related to *The Earthly Paradise* and Morris in the 1860s and 1870s – so, for example, we find copies of Burne-Jones paintings and drawings which relate to the tales, photographs and paintings of Morris himself and reproductions of pages from the Kelmscott edition. This is sometimes, though by no means always, a feature of book editions – that they reproduce a limited number of images of the text as it appeared in original or significant publication formats. But of course there are constraints in terms of all the images being in black and white, and the number that most book editions will hold. To put it another way, most editions separate out the text from what Jerome McGann has referred to as a work’s ‘bibliographical codes’, which mark the material specificity of any given format of a text, be it in manuscript or book form.⁸

7 Florence Boos, Introduction to Volume One of *The Earthly Paradise by William Morris*, ed. Boos (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 36.

8 See McGann’s *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), where he argues that, ‘We must turn our attention to much more than the formal and linguistic features of poems or other imaginative fictions. We must attend to textual materials which are not regularly studied by those interested in “poetry”: to typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to “poetry” or “the text as such” (p. 13).

The Collected Works has become the standard edition of Morris that we use, and thus, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Morris's works en masse had not been re-edited for nearly 100 years. There has never been a scholarly critical edition of the works of William Morris. Andrew Stauffer's comment above, which heads this section, should give Morris scholars pause for thought. Many nineteenth-century writers – including some who are arguably less influential than Morris – have recently been or are being subject to re-editing according to modern scholarly practices. Stauffer also includes a list of the 'canonical Victorian poets' for whom this work of re-editing 'has long been left at least partially undone', and Morris is amongst them. He is writing in the context of a special issue of the journal *Victorian Poetry* which is considering the question 'Whither Victorian Poetry?', and he makes a further assertion which is extremely important in relation to Morris:

Victorian poetry will only flourish while we remember that editorial work and textual criticism are not optional, second-order exercises to be performed after a poet's critical fame is secure; they are absolutely fundamental to establishing the existence of a poet for a modern audience of critics and students.⁹

It's clear there is a job to be done – for a new century and a new generation – to establish Morris in this way, and it's for those of us who are researching and teaching Morris now to do it.

Why has Morris never been given this attention? I can think of at least three reasons: firstly, it's a big job, and that is daunting, and many hands – literally – must be involved. Second, as Andrew Nash suggests in his Introduction to a recent volume of essays on *The Culture of Collected Editions*, 'a collected edition ... has an air of finality and completeness' about it,¹⁰ and May Morris's twenty-four volumes of *The Collected Works*, plus the two additional volumes of *William Morris: Artist, Writer and Socialist*, have done well to seem as final and complete as most of us have needed for

9 Stauffer, 'Victorian Paperwork', p. 527.

10 Andrew Nash, Introduction to *The Culture of Collected Editions*, ed. Andrew Nash (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 2.

so long. Behind them, however, as Boos's *Earthly Paradise* demonstrated, is a sometimes hidden editorial process, as well as on occasions a pre-publication history of drafts and revisions, which a new major edition should bring more into the open. Third, I do wonder whether the fact that it was May Morris who edited *The Collected Works* means that scholars have been shy of presuming to do the same. May Morris's introductions to each volume contain a wealth of material and information which will no doubt continue to be used in future scholarship, and there is a warmth and immediacy to these 'valuable additions to the history of William Morris' that comes precisely from her closeness to the subject.¹¹ But the fact remains that we are now 100 years on and Morris's works need re-presenting for the new and changed conditions that we find ourselves in at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

III

In the next 50 years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination. This system, which is already under development, is transnational and transcultural.

— JEROME MCGANN¹²

Those new and changed conditions are that scholarly editing is undergoing its own transformation in the twenty-first century. Since the 1980s the notion that editing is about capturing for all time *the* 'definitive' text has been challenged, and there is also an increasing awareness that we need

11 Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story 1839–1938* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p. 259.

12 Jerome McGann, 'Textonics: Literary and Cultural Studies in a Quantum World', in *The Culture of Collected Editions*, ed. Andrew Nash (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 249.

to take into account the 'textual condition' of the works we read.¹³ Also, major editing projects have been undertaken as 'born digital' projects. In terms of nineteenth-century writers alone these include *The Swinburne Archive*, an electronic edition of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* Volume I, *The Whitman Archive*, an electronic edition of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, numerous electronic editions to be found on the *Romantic Circles* website, the (Emily) *Dickinson Electronic Archive* and *The Rossetti Archive*.¹⁴

My own work on Morris's poetry and the book led me to think that Morris is ripe for the kind of possibilities that an online edition can exploit. In June 2004 I sent a tentative email to Florence Boos outlining some of my thinking, and this resulted in my becoming aware of Florence's concerted efforts over several decades to get academic book publishers to take seriously a critical edition of Morris's poetry, and a conversation ensued as to what we could do about this now, in a new century. In November of 2004 we managed not only to be in the same country, but in the same city, and the *Morris Online Edition (MOE)* was thus born in the Dove pub, Hammersmith, a stone's throw away from where Morris and Emery Walker set up their own 'typographical adventures'.

That was 'then', as it were, and 'now' in 2010, *MOE* is well underway. It has found a home at the University of Iowa and a number of editions of Morris's works are 'under construction'. The 'Goals of the Morris Online Edition' are listed as follows:

The working goal of the Morris Online Edition is to provide readable annotated texts of Morris's poetry and selected prose, prepared in accordance with current scholarly and critical norms, using current technology for text-searching, manuscript

- 13 See, for example, Jerome McGann's seminal *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1992, 2nd ed. [1983]).
- 14 *The Swinburne Archive*: <<http://swinburnearchive.indiana.edu/swinburne/www/swinburne/index.html>> Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, Volume I: <www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ruskin/emp/index.html> *The Whitman Archive*: <www.whitmanarchive.org> *Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads*: <www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB/> The Electronic Editions page of the *Romantic Circles* website: <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/>> *The Dickinson Electronic Archive*: <<http://www.emilydickinson.org/>> *The Rossetti Archive*: <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>>

presentation, and comparison of multiple versions. Our longer-term hope is that we and our successors will bring these together in a complete scholarly edition of Morris's literary works online.¹⁵

The fullest edition to date on the site is that of Boos's edition of *The Life and Death of Jason*:¹⁶ this shows what is possible by way of creating what Peter Shillingsburg calls a 'knowledge site' as the potential for scholarly electronic editions in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Alongside carefully edited text, with necessary annotations, is the possibility of seeing facsimile pages of the Kelmscott edition from which the text is taken, using turn-the-page software to facilitate the reader's journey through the book version. Full supplementary information is given, including an introduction to the work, a detailed table of the collations/variants of editions published in Morris's lifetime, indexes of places and mythological persons mentioned in the poem, selections from contemporary reviews and more recent criticism, and illustrations from some notable twentieth century editions.¹⁸ It seems to me that anyone wishing to discuss *Jason* in future must reckon with this edition. There is nothing to compare with it by way of its comprehensiveness. Will the fact that these future discussions are using this 'born digital' edition make a difference? It might well.

I have also made use of *MOE* as a teaching tool. Margaret Lourie's comprehensive edition of *The Defence of Guenevere*, mentioned earlier as having been long out of print, has also been added to the site. At the very least this has made available a sound scholarly edition of Morris's first volume of poems to a much wider range of readers. Thus in my level three undergraduate course on Victorian Literature and Culture in autumn 2009

- 15 'Goals of the Morris Online Edition': <<http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/about.html>>
- 16 *The Life and Death of Jason*, ed. Florence Boos': <<http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/jason.html>>
- 17 See Peter L. Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google: Electronic Representations of Literary Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006). This is essential reading for anyone interested in scholarly electronic editions.
- 18 See 'Supplementary Material: *The Life and Death of Jason*': <<http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/supplementary.html>>

I was able to use the online edition of *The Defence* to get my students thinking about what 'Pre-Raphaelite' might mean as an application applied to poetry rather than to visual art (as it was in the review of the volume in *The Saturday Review* of November 1858).¹⁹ My students undertook this work within a discussion forum in a Virtual Learning Environment, having first been introduced to examples of Pre-Raphaelite paintings and poetry in class. If some of them confessed to being a bit baffled by what they were reading (as were some of Morris's first reviewers, of course) it was because the poems' medieval allusions and symbolist style did not seem that easily comprehensible within the scope of what they had thus far encountered as recognizably Victorian. Here Lourie's notes were invaluable to them in providing context and orientation. Even if Lourie's 1981 book had been in my university's library (which it isn't), they wouldn't all have been able to access it in the way that its now being within *MOE* has made possible.

The latter sections of this essay will discuss in more detail Morris's last volume of poems, *Poems by the Way*, and why this volume is particularly interesting in terms of *MOE* and in so doing I hope to make clear why Morris is an exemplary candidate to have his works re-edited for an online environment. I will also consider some of the wider issues raised by the prospect of electronic editions.

Jerome McGann, whom I have quoted several times, and who is one of the most influential figures in terms of textual and editorial re-visioning, has said that in creating *The Rossetti Archive* he wished to undertake 'a theoretical exploration of the general structure of handmade and machine-generated documents, on one hand; and, on the other, [an exploration of] the methodology of representing such materials in an electronically based "critical" format'.²⁰ The most important reason that McGann gives as to why Rossetti is well placed for such a project is that

19 Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, 20 November 1858, vi, pp. 506–7. This and other contemporary reviews are included as part of the edition's supplementary material: <<http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/defencesupreviews.html>>

20 Jerome McGann, 'The Rossetti Archive and Image-Based Electronic Editing', in *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 149.

Rossetti's textual work was executed with a profound consciousness of the expressive character of documentary materials. In his meticulous concern for every facet of the typographical and bibliographical features of his textual works, Rossetti showed his understanding that a text's communicative horizon extends far beyond the semantic order of things.²¹

If this is true of Rossetti, then it is surely even more so for Morris, whose concern for the textual and presentational contexts of his own writings started with the choice of the Chiswick Press for *The Defence of Guenevere* volume in 1858, developed significantly in the 1860s–70s with the unrealized project of an illustrated edition of *The Earthly Paradise* and Morris's experimentations with calligraphy, and culminated in the Kelmscott Press. In recent years a number of readings of Morris's texts as they appear in Kelmscott Press books – influenced by McGann's chapter on Morris and the book in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (1993) – have emphasized what Jeffrey Skoblow has referred to as 'the Book as object of total design' in their approach.²² Such readings highlight the materiality of experiencing a Kelmscott book: the vellum covers, the silk ties, the paper, the imprint of the letterpress, the layout of the text upon the page, the use of colour, the blank spaces of the wide margins, the effects of Morris's own typefaces, oversized initials and organic decoration. A reading attentive to these features will not focus on the semantics of the words on the page alone but on the inter-connectedness between the poem or narrative and its physical presentation, and out of this symbiosis comes meaning.

McGann has suggested that far from taking us away from the physical and material nature of books, 'digital tools return us to them'.²³ Whilst 'reading' a 'virtual' Kelmscott book is in some respects clearly *not* the same

21 Ibid., pp. 149–50.

22 Jeffrey Skoblow, 'Beyond Reading: Kelmscott and the Modern', in *The Victorian Illustrated Book*, ed. Richard Maxwell (University Press of Virginia, 2002), p. 239. See also Damian Judge Rollison, 'The Kelmscott Shelley and Material Poetics', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 15.4 (Summer 2004), pp. 55–73, and Rosie Miles, "'Beautiful and Ineffectual Angels": *Poems by the Way*', in 'The Poetry of William Morris: Desire, Narrative and Text' (University of London: PhD thesis, 2000), pp. 224–56.

23 McGann, 'Textonics', p. 252.

as an encounter with the 'real thing' (a point to which I return below), none the less the online context can offer a far wider range of readers than those allowed access to research libraries the opportunity to experience the original modes of publication of Morris's works. So alongside any re-edited Morris text, facsimiles of different contexts for that work should, if possible, be provided – such as the first and other significant editions and manuscript versions. Again, McGann and Dino Buzzetti have noted how facsimile editing has often been dismissed as not theoretical at all; by contrast they have argued that 'the facsimile editor's task is every bit as complex and demanding as the critical editor's'.²⁴ What digital tools have made possible is that 'one can now design and build scholarly editions that integrate the functions of the two great editorial models, the facsimile and the critical edition' so that these two approaches to texts can influence and permeate the other.²⁵ When we think of facsimile editions in relation to Morris we perhaps think of various reprints of Kelmscott books or of the Scolar Press *A Book of Verse* (1981). In these cases it is precisely the visual and presentational features of the works, over and above some kind of abstracted presentation of text alone, that warranted an edition which foregrounded such characteristics. However, such editions have usually lacked any critical apparatus, and have sometimes been marketed as aimed at the collector rather than the scholar. The ability of the digital medium to reinstate the visual alongside the verbal in ways that go beyond the limitations of either the facsimile or critical edition in book form make it an ideal platform for presenting the work of Morris, who came to elevate the integration of the visual into the printed word with all the force of his own ethical aesthetic.

24 Dino Buzzetti & Jerome McGann, 'Critical Editing in a Digital Horizon', in *Electronic Textual Editing*, ed. John Unsworth, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, & Lou Burnard (New York: Modern Language Association, 2006). <http://www.tei-c.org/About/Archive_new/ETE/Preview/mcgann.xml>. See also, Jerome McGann, 'Imagining What You Don't Know: The Theoretical Goals of the Rossetti Archive' (1997). <www.iath.virginia.edu/~jjmzf/old/chum.html> paragraph 6.

25 Buzzetti & McGann, 'Critical Editing', paragraph 20.

Poems by the Way – Morris's last volume of poems and in many ways neglected in terms of the amount of commentary on it over the past 100 years – is of great interest here, precisely because it is the only volume of Morris's poetry first published as a Kelmscott book, in 1891. Rather than being a falling away by Morris in terms of his interest in poetry by the 1890s, this volume strikes me as the apotheosis of what Morris wanted to do with his poetry throughout his writing life, which is transform it into a mode of textual production which is simultaneously verbal *and* visual, and in so doing he alters what it means to read. An online edition of this work would thus aim to show facsimiles of the Kelmscott edition alongside computer-readable text. I have also always thought of *Poems by the Way* as a kind of 'selected Morris' because it contains poems from the various periods of Morris's career, which touch on so many of his interests. The volume is of further note in relation to this project because of its 'intertexts': a considerable number of the poems in *Poems by the Way* appeared in very different contexts before they were collected together in the Kelmscott edition. So, for example, 'Error and Loss' first existed as 'Missing' in the calligraphic manuscript *A Book of Verse* (1870) and then in the *Fortnightly* (1 February 1871) as 'The Dark Wood'; 'To the Muse of the North' was first published as a prefatory poem to Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon's translation of *Grettis Saga* (1869); 'The Voice of Toil' appeared in *Justice* (April 5 1884) as 'Chants for Socialists, No. II'; 'The Woodpecker' was woven into the design of a tapestry of the same name. These few examples are representative of many more, but they demonstrate the range of diverse contexts in which *Poems by the Way* poems had previously appeared. All of these previous manifestations, each in their material specificity, are palimpsests that exist both behind and in dialogue with the Kelmscott Press edition. A 'knowledge site' such as *MOE* offers the possibility that all of these different contexts can be brought into visual and critical conjunction with each other and starts to lead towards what Shillingsburg hopes online archives/editions will help facilitate: that 'readings [of texts will be] conducted in relation to specific versions of a work'.²⁶

26 Shillingsburg, *From Gutenberg to Google*, p. 41.

MOE is not being conceived of as a 'traditional' book edition would have been understood in a pre-digital era (although what translates almost untouched from book form to digital form is the concern for quality and scholarship). Some born digital projects – *The Rossetti Archive*, *The Whitman Archive*, *The Blake Archive*, for example – deliberately describe themselves as such to make clear that they are networked collections of diverse textual and visual materials, and are not editions in a conventional sense. I agree with Neil Fraistat and Steven Jones when they say that 'the largest challenge of all is to produce an electronic edition that doesn't simply translate the features of print editions onto the screen, but instead takes advantage of the truly exciting possibilities offered by the digital medium for the scholarly editing of poetry'.²⁷ Absolutely. 'The medium is the message' is the defining proverb of the digital age, says McGann (after Marshall McLuhan), and what is key is that he sees the roots of this recognition as lying with the Arts and Crafts Movement and Morris's revolution in book design.²⁸

Another trajectory of the pre-history of the digital that takes us straight back to Morris is suggested by McGann when he says that our contemporary multi- and hypermedia devices are a 'profane resurrection' of the 'multimedia environments' that were medieval cathedrals.²⁹ In an oft-quoted comment, Morris also linked multimedia 'books' and medieval cathedrals:

I remember as a boy going into Canterbury Cathedral and thinking that the gates of heaven had been opened to me, also when I first saw an illuminated manuscript. These first pleasures which I discovered for myself were stronger than anything else I have had in life.³⁰

27 Neil Fraistat & Steven Jones, 'The Poem and the Network: Editing Poetry Electronically', in *Electronic Textual Editing*, ed. John Unsworth, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, & Lou Burnard (New York: Modern Language Association, 2006). www.tei-c.org/Activities/ETE/Preview/fraistat.xml paragraph 1.

28 See Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. xiii.

29 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

30 William Morris (no source given), qtd. in Joseph Dunlap, 'William Morris: Calligrapher', in *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, ed. Paul Needham (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library and OUP, 1976), p. 48.

Morris's conception of the book in the 1890s is entirely architectural. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has noted that at the fin de siècle 'design practitioners and theorists developed a whole new vocabulary for the book that borrowed its language from Gothic architecture. People now "built" illustrated books...', and the practitioner and theorist par excellence of such a vocabulary was Morris.³¹ In the lectures on good book design that he gave in the 1890s Morris is forever linking the space of the book to buildings he loves. What is the thing most to be longed for? A beautiful House. What is the next thing to be longed for? A beautiful Book.³² The 'architectural arrangement' of the book becomes not just important but absolutely necessary: the constructedness of the book – what it feels like to inhabit it as a reader, we might say – becomes as vital as the content.³³ For Morris books have become what Gaston Bachelard would call 'felicitous space[s]': they are lived in by the imagination and loved for both their intimacy and their sense of possibility.³⁴ And perhaps the most famous eulogy to the felicitous space of the book in relation to Morris was made by Burne-Jones when, bubbling over with enthusiasm at his part in its making, he described the Kelmscott *Chaucer* as 'like a pocket cathedral'.³⁵ Burne-Jones would go even further in bringing together the loved Morrisian spaces of the cathedral and the home and their proximity to the book when in 1895 he described his friend's purchase of two illuminated manuscripts: in a dizzy-

31 Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Poetry and Illustration', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman & Antony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 409.

32 William Morris, 'Some Thoughts on the Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages' (undated, incomplete and unpublished essay, c. 1892), in Peterson, ed., *The Ideal Book*, p. 1.

33 William Morris, 'The Ideal Book' (paper delivered to the Bibliographical Society on 19 June 1893), in Peterson, ed., *The Ideal Book*, p. 73.

34 See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 [1958]), p. xxxi.

35 Edward Burne-Jones, letter to Charles Eliot Norton (December 1894), qtd. in Martin Harrison & Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones*, 2nd edn. (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989 [1973]), p. 164.

ing image he says that Morris has 'got both Ely Cathedral and Winchester in his own very house'.³⁶

So in the 1890s Morris was bringing the multimedia space of the medieval 'book' into the privacy of his home. A hundred years later we started to do likewise with our desktops and laptops, inviting the awe-inspiring immensity of cyberspace into our studies and even our bedrooms. The language of architecture remains: significantly we talk of 'building' electronic editions and archives, and of pathways, navigation and sitemaps so that we can find our way around the complex and labyrinthine spaces we create.

IV

'If ye will read aright...'

— WILLIAM MORRIS³⁷

I have suggested that Morris's theories of the book in the 1890s are precursive of the expanded and exploded 'books' that are electronic editions. I am of course aware that the experience of a virtual book is different from encountering a physical book. Morris's comment 'let us say concerning the book that to cosset and hug it up as a material piece of goods, is surely natural to a man who cares about the ideas that lie betwixt its boards' is redolent of the litmus test criticism made by those who wish to argue that virtual books will never be the same as 'real' books: 'you can't take it to bed with you'.³⁸ Few of us would wish to confess – in public at least – to a

36 Mary Lago, ed., *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations 1895–1898 Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke* (London: John Murray, 1982), p. 36. Cited in Douglas E. Schoenherr, 'A Note on Burne-Jones's "Pocket Cathedral" and Ruskin', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 15.4 (Summer 2004), p. 93.

37 William Morris, from the 'Apology' to *The Earthly Paradise*. See Boos, ed., 'The Earthly Paradise' by William Morris, p. 53.

38 William Morris, 'Some Thoughts on the Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages', p. 1.

peccadillo for caressing our laptops. However, not all of Morris's attempts to realize the transformed book were to result in artefacts meant for such intimate cossetting: Elizabeth Helsinger notes that the planned illustrated edition of *The Earthly Paradise* in the 1860s was 'not a book intended for hand or lap or bed' but a book with more ceremonial presence.³⁹ 'Reading' Morris via MOE will be different from reading Morris in book form. 'Imagine', says McGann, with a glint in his eye, 'trying to read Wordsworth in that magnificent library of Babel, "The Cornell Wordsworth". Or Rossetti in the labyrinths of *The Rossetti Archive*'. He is only too aware of the 'bibliographical defamiliarization' that complex scholarly editions can inflict on their subjects, including the defamiliarization that can come through encountering works online.⁴⁰

It has been suggested that we are living in 'the twilight of the Age of the Printed Book',⁴¹ and that digital technology is bringing about a paradigmatic shift akin to the move from manuscript to print of Gutenberg's moment. This analogy is yet another instance of commentary on digital culture taking us right back to Morris: in his lectures on medieval manuscripts and early printed books the move from manuscript to print is one of irrevocable loss – it is the moment of rupture in the unity of the book due to the division of labour in the production of text and the creation of the ornamentation and decoration of that text.⁴² It is the Lacanian lost real which characterizes Morris's entire response to the medieval: by

39 Elizabeth K. Helsinger, 'William Morris Before Kelmscott: Poetry and Design in the 1860s', in *The Victorian Illustrated Book*, ed. Maxwell, p. 219.

40 Jerome McGann, 'Texts in N-Dimensions and Interpretation in a New Key', *TEXT Technology*, 12.2 (2003), p. 13. <http://texttechnology.mcmaster.ca/pdf/vol12_2_02.pdf> accessed January 2010.

41 Richard J. Finneran, Introduction to *The Literary Text in the Digital Age*, ed. Finneran (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. ix.

42 See William Morris, 'Some Notes on the Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages' (1894), in *The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book by William Morris*, ed. William Peterson (London & California: University of California Press, 1982), p. 14, and Rosie Miles, 'William Morris and the Gift of *A Book of Verse*', in *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, ed. Peter Faulkner & Peter Preston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. 136.

the nineteenth century the medieval can only ever be always already lost, but for Morris the longing for it, and the search to remake it anew in the present is the foundation of all desire.

So is our current, heralded move from print to digital textuality a further decline? Some would say so, perhaps most notably Sven Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994). Birkerts argues that 'as electronic communications assert dominance, the "feel" of the literary engagement is altered. Reading and writing come to mean differently; they acquire new significations.'⁴³ *The Gutenberg Elegies* is suffused with a sense of loss and anxiety as to what reading online means for the future of the entire humanist cultural project, so closely bound up as it is, argues Birkerts, with the era of print. Recently (in late 2009) a friend texted me to tell me (to confess?) that she had recently bought an e-book reader and that despite advance reservations she actually thought it was great and would not now go back to reading paper books. The part of me that absolutely loves and values books as solid, made, distinctive, dated, designed, paper-and-board 'things' found herself slightly stunned and couldn't respond. More recent commentators, however, have observed that the apocalyptic death of the book predicted in the 1990s has not actually happened.⁴⁴ Birkerts intended his comment as a lament, but read another way it signals new and hitherto-unexplored possibilities for the future of textuality. If in the 1890s 'reading and writing [came] to mean differently' because of Morris's Kelmscott Press, which had drawn on new technologies to make this a reality, and if Kelmscott Press books were Morris's attempt to make medieval manuscripts in a late nineteenth-century print context, then the vision of *MOE* could also be seen in part as an attempt to restore awareness of the visual and material facets of Morris's works for the twenty-first century, so that they might be read, if not exactly 'aright',

43 Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 6.

44 See John B. Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age: The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 310, and Part IV: 'The Digital Revolution', pp. 319–76, more generally.

then certainly with fresh eyes. My mingling of the senses here is deliberate: the narrator of the 'Apology' to *The Earthly Paradise* does likewise. If the reader will 'read aright' then the *Earthly Paradise* will reveal to her 'such wondrous things' (l. 30) as are *shown* by the 'wizard to a northern king' (l. 29) of the previous stanza: 'through one window men beheld the spring, / And through another saw the summer glow, / And through a third the fruited vines a-row...' (ll. 31–3). We could say that there is some kind of multimedia revelation happening here, never mind that wizards and windows have become part of our contemporary computer language.

What it will mean to 'read' Morris in an online medium I don't entirely know, but I hope that such readings will offer up 'new significations'. Glossing an article by Ana Parejo Vadillo in the 'Whither Victorian Poetry' discussions mentioned earlier, Isobel Armstrong comments that 'digital forms transform the questions we can ask of the text' and it is such epistemological opportunities that *MOE* has the potential to open up for future readers of Morris.⁴⁵ There are undoubtedly also pragmatic challenges here: it has often been noted that text on a screen needs to be presented in manageable and relatively small-sized chunks, and John Thompson has recently noted that some forms of content lend themselves more readily to an online environment than others, and it is not clear to what extent sustained narrative really 'works' online if it is presented just as it might be in a book.⁴⁶ As Morris wrote out of an era – and indeed a strong personal philosophy – which advocated the power of story, then this is an issue which needs to be taken seriously in the design of *MOE*. Could, for example, the 'framing' of the multi-layered narratives of *The Earthly Paradise* be harnessed to the notion of framing that can be built into web design? 'All this business of margins and frames, of boxes within boxes,' Skoblow reminds us, 'is [also] essential to Kelmscott [books]'.⁴⁷

45 Isobel Armstrong, 'The Victorian Poetry Party,' *Victorian Poetry*, 42.1 (Spring 2004), p. 14.

46 Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age*, p. 327.

47 Skoblow, 'Beyond Reading,' p. 249.

Even more importantly, 'we must produce [electronic] editions to help readers read',⁴⁸ as Peter Robinson has suggested. Fraistat and Jones reiterate this when they say that

the larger goal of an electronic scholarly edition should be not only to meet the current needs of the scholarly researcher but to stimulate and challenge 'scholars' of various kinds, including teachers, students, even poets and specialists in digital media, to use the text in order to make new knowledge.⁴⁹

Certainly the attractiveness and user-friendly nature of the interface should be important design factors. If Morris cared about the quality of design of his own 'multimedia' books then we can care about ours. Is the *Morris Online Edition* aesthetically attractive as a site? Is it an online place in which you would want to wander around and spend some time? Is it beautiful? Different readers may have different responses to these questions, but they are surely ones that have been considered in the design of *MOE*. My final word on what it might mean to read Morris in the twenty-first century goes again to Jeffrey Skoblow, who has said concerning Kelmscott books that reading Morris is 'this thing for which we lack a language', because our conventional practices and notions of what it means to 'read' a 'book' are so pushed on to new places by his work.⁵⁰ It is my hope that encountering Morris via the *Morris Online Edition* will also encourage those who do so to think about reading in as yet unimagined ways.

48 Peter Robinson, 'Ma(r)king the Electronic Text: How, Why and For Whom?', in *Ma(r)king the Text: The Presentation of Meaning on the Literary Page*, eds. Joe Bray, Miriam Handley & Anne C. Henry (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 318.

49 Fraistat & Jones, 'The Poem and the Network', paragraph 37.

50 Skoblow, 'Beyond Reading', p. 243.

V

Our epoch has invented machines which would have appeared wild dreams to the men of past ages, and of those machines we have as yet made no use.

— WILLIAM MORRIS⁵¹

When I originally wrote this essay in 2005 I ended by feeling a little like William Guest in the final chapter of *News from Nowhere*, waking up with a start after having seen the future. Nowhere, of course, is a largely bookless world: books serve primarily as historical memorials to the pre-revolutionary era. There is no need for them any more because the world has become book. Gone is the need for wizards and windows and tales of the Earthly Paradise to mediate between humanity and sensuous nature.⁵² Those of us who do not yet inhabit such an utopia still live very much in the world of books, 'uneasily poised' perhaps, between the era of the printed word and the era of the World Wide Web.⁵³ I agree wholeheartedly with Andrew Stauffer when he says 'it should be remembered that digital resources are not being created to wean us away from paper, but rather to turn us back to printed texts and written documents in their many revelatory details.'⁵⁴

So let us briefly travel to somewhere mentioned in *Nowhere*, a building that has been built to last well into the twenty-first century and beyond. There is something wonderfully fitting in the British Library of 1998 being a Morrisian building. The architect, Colin St. John Wilson, describes how

51 William Morris, 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil', in *Political Writings of William Morris*, p. 105.

52 See *News from Nowhere* chapter 22 for Ellen's explanation as to why books are no longer necessary. My thinking here is also indebted to Elizabeth C. Miller's paper on 'How We Might (Not) Read: *News from Nowhere* and Late-Victorian Print Culture', delivered to the *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century* Conference, July 2005.

53 J. Hillis Miller, 'Whistler/Swinburne: "Before the Mirror"', in *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 143.

54 Stauffer, 'Victorian Paperwork', p. 528.

In designing the British Library ... we have drawn widely upon the tradition of the English Free School, promoted by William Morris and John Ruskin, in which inspiration from Gothic architecture led to the concept of 'organic architecture' ... This is demonstrated not only in the adoption of organic forms that are responsive to growth and change, but also in the repertoire of sensuous materials that are particularly responsive to human presence and touch: leather, marble, wood and bronze.⁵⁵

This most tactile of buildings has been designed for the primary purpose of the housing of and study of one of the world's finest physical book and manuscript collections, including many by Morris. The material – and *materials* – are all, in terms of both the books and their home. Wilson opens his eloquent essay by inadvertently echoing Morris's ruminations on books and architecture when he describes the 'great library' as akin to a profane cathedral, which 'in fulfilling its proper role touches the hem of the sacred'.⁵⁶ This building and its contents reach far into the past, but must be constantly open to the future and the organic, inevitable, changes that will come in terms of the ever-evolving potential of the book. Wilson's view of the present and future is that 'electronic means of information transmission have indeed developed on a huge scale but they have proved to be not rivals but parallel resources in amicable symbiosis'.⁵⁷ The material and the virtual are already co-existing and in some ways electronic editions embody that. If the virtual has come to offer hitherto unimagined possibilities – wonders, even – then it is not because the material world has ceased to make us wonder. We may live part of our lives now looking at screens, but I also hope that frequently we go and sit under an elm tree – whether for real or metaphorically – with computers nowhere near us.

To return to where this essay started and its initial discussions of the changing definitions and understandings of technology, Margaret Linley (citing Heidegger) has noted that the etymological root of the word lies in the Greek 'techne', which 'links it to craftsmanship and skill as well

55 Colin St. John Wilson, *The British Library* (London: Scala, 2007), p. 18.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

as to the bringing-forth that is poiesis'.⁵⁸ For Morris his poetry, and its integration with and transformation through the form of the book, was always a practical making, as well as an act of imagination and thought, and the creation of electronic editions are also restoring the link between the arts and sciences that the Victorians understood technology to be about via the collaboration of humanities scholars with technical staff skilled in TEI markup, XML and web design and construction.

The *Morris Online Edition* is well underway. It is an ambitious, exciting and challenging project, and there is a lot to learn. For those involved in its making it is the contemporary equivalent of Morris sticking his arms in vats of dye up to the elbows, teaching himself how to burnish gold leaf and learning to use an Albion press. It will no doubt entail a considerable amount of trying to 'imagine what we don't know', as McGann has put it (and again Morris was quite good at that). To produce *MOE* as a large-scale archive will probably take a fair investment of money, a good deal of time, the commitment of a number of people – both editors and technical staff – and the co-operation of libraries owning Morris materials, particularly those holding copyright. But – and apologies here for appropriating a famous last line – 'if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream'.⁵⁹

58 Margaret Linley, 'Conjuring the Spirit: Victorian Poetry, Culture, Technology', *Victorian Poetry*, 41.4 (Winter 2003), p. 540.

59 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. Stephen Arata (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2003), p. 249.