The Green Borders of William Morris

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In the recent exhibition of Kelmscott Press books held by the University of Melbourne Library, we were treated to many examples of borders designed by William Morris. Some of these borders are repeats, but all draw on Morris's extensive repertoire of 'conventionalised' organic forms. Having spent some time studying the concept of nature in the work of Morris, it was these 'green' borders which attracted my attention at the exhibition, and in this short paper I would like to outline some of the sources for these borders and also to suggest that we can draw parallels between these and the so-called “green” contours of Morris's social thought.

Thus, in providing a contextual scenario for Morris's work at the Kelmscott Press, I wish to address not only the narrower, flowering and organic, "green" borders of his "typographical adventure" but the wider "green" perimeters of his social thought.

Many have indicated how the sources for the decorative borders Morris produced for the Kelmscott Press are complex and various: that Morris drew on both his own collection of medieval and renaissance manuscripts and publications as well as those at the Bodleian and British Libraries. He also drew on his own observation of natural forms in the gardens and the landscape around him and on his own earlier 'conventionalizing' of natural forms in pattern design. Thus one can recognise aspects of the Kelmscott borders in Morris's wallpapers, fabrics and tapestries, and in descriptions of the gardens of the eponymous Kelmscott House and Manor. It is not, however, my intention to explore these similarities here. I do feel, however, that it is useful to look briefly at two other sources for the borders produced by Morris at the Kelmscott Press: his doodles or marginalia, and his calligraphic manuscripts.

As Morris wrote or revised his poetry he frequently sketched flowers and foliage in the margins of his paper.
The Wood Beyond the World

Chapter I. Of Golden Walter and his Father

“While ago there was a young man dwelling in a goodly city by the sea which had the name of Langton on Holm. He was but of five and twenty winters, a fair-faced man, yellow-haired, tall and strong; rather wiser than foolisher than young men are mostly wont; a valiant youth, and a kind; not of many words but courteous of speech; no roisterer, nought masterful, but peaceable and knowing how to forbear; in a fray a perilous foe, and a trusty war fellow. His father, with whom he was dwelling when this tale begins, was a great merchant, richer than a baron of the land, a head-man of the greatest of the Lineages of Langton, and a captain of the Porte; he was of the Lineage of the Goldings, therefore was he called Good Young Walter.”

“Thus at a very basic level, the life brought to the margins of Morris’s text, can be seen to be of a “green” nature. These random patternings also point to the more formal decorated borders he drew while working on over 1500 pages of calligraphy, mainly in the 1870s, and which also provide an important source for the later Kelmscott borders. If we examine Morris’s earliest calligraphic work, it is possible to see that from the first his pages show vitality, understanding of colour and pleasure in the decorative qualities of natural forms. As he became more proficient, growth and movement become a more important part of his decorative schemes, with isolated clumps or sprays of plants and flowers replaced by verdant foliation that seems to “spring from the soil.”

In A Book of Verse, completed for Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1870, the frontispiece is almost entirely covered by green leaves, and green growth, emanating from the borders, pervades all the pages of poetry which Morris decorated. Though the verse itself is often pensive, the foliage, fruit, flowers, and vines are full of vitality. Similarly, in a manuscript version of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, which Morris concentrated upon in 1872, the foliate borders almost engulf the roman letters in the centre. Some have remarked that this treatment of fruit and flowers was “an admirable adaptation of an almost Pre-Raphaelite naturalism to the methods and limits of ornamental design”, and Morris’s daughter, May, claimed that each flower in its design was different and identifiable.

Later borders of the manuscripts produced by Morris, however, are bolder and point even more directly towards the stylised patterns of the Kelmscott Press. This can be seen in the blue and green acanthus leaves of the incomplete Odes of Horace and of the Æneid of Virgil, where delicate stems and foliage are replaced by bold growth. In this respect one can see in Morris’s last calligraphic manuscripts of 1875, the “vigorous acanthus... triumph over the less assertive willow.”

Morris ceased his calligraphic activities in 1875, and it was not until he set up the Kelmscott Press in 1891 that he again worked on ornamental borders (though he was decorating the margins of his notes and manuscripts as mentioned earlier). It has been estimated that in the next six years he produced over...
six hundred mainly foliate designs - comprising borders and initials, title-pages, inscriptions and printer's marks - and it is to these that I shall now turn to take one last look at Morris's page borders.

Although the same border appeared in the first five books, as the Press developed Morris produced a range of full, three-quarter, half, quarter and corner borders. These were numbered and recorded in his "bloomer book", which can now be seen at the Bodleian Library. Most consist of formal floral and vine patterns in white against a black background, but there are also hints of the organic flowers and foliage of earlier designs. Many have argued that verdant growth is the essential force one finds in all of Morris's patterns, and I believe we do find something of this "green" growth in the Kelmscott borders. The first secretary of the Press, Henry Halliday Sparling, noted that Morris "kept [the borders] alive ... by growing the pattern, bit by bit, solving the turns and twists as he came to them", and the borders often look as if they could go on growing. In this respect, we can find hints of the flowers and foliage familiar from the fabric and wallpaper designs. There are reworkings or suggestions of "Acanthus", "Rose", "Poppy", "Marigold", "Borage", "Fritillary" and even the grand movement of the river chintzes: "Wey", "Wandle", "Cray" and "Evenlode". These can be seen in the borders to The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye, The History of Reynard the Foxe, the wonderful frontispieces to works such as The Wood Beyond the World (complete with woodland and meadow-sweet bound Maid by Burne-Jones), the famous image of Morris's haven of rest encased in vine and acanthus for the Kelmscott News From Nowhere, or a rose rimmed tale from the Works of Chaucer.

The lively presence on the page of these borders, however, has provoked much debate about whether they call too much attention to themselves. Not everyone appreciates, as Burne-Jones did, being "snugly cased in the borders and buttressed up by the vast initials". Many have complained that the borders are distracting. It is, however, necessary to recognise that the borders' physical richness help to make the Kelmscott Press books an important cultural presence in the 1890s. Thus, although the books may be revivalist or backward looking in their typographical inspiration, they are also richly suggestive and forward looking in their desire to make an active statement. In this respect, Morris's "typographical adventure" was, as Bill Peterson has suggested, not merely a simplistic idealisation of the medieval world but a protest against the psychological and social disintegration produced by modernity. It spoke not only about typography and book design, but about how we ought to live. With this in mind, I shall now move on and examine the contexts for Morris's wider "green" thought.

By the second half of the 19th century, the English industrial landscape had become a source of shame to the Victorians, both as a physical existence and as a symbol of morality. Morris himself wrote:

Not only are London and our other great commercial cities mere masses of sordidness, filth, and squalor, embroidered with patches of pompous and vulgar hideousness, no less revolting to the eye and the mind when one knows what it means: not only have whole counties of England, and the heavens that hang over them, disappeared beneath a crust of unutterable grime, but the disease, which ... would seem to be a love of dirt and ugliness for its own sake, spreads all over the country, and every little market-town seizes the opportunity to imitate, as far as it can, the majesty of the hell of London and Manchester.

A significant part of the reform movement that attempted to address these conditions was that organised around the idea of open-spaces. As early as 1833, national discussion on the question of beauty and relaxation in the urban environment had begun with the report of the Select Committee on Public Walks. A public park and commons preservation movement subsequently developed that focused attention on the inadequacy of the urban environment, the need for improvement and the ideal of the "rus in urbe". By the latter half of the century groups organised around these principles included the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, Octavius Hill's Kyrle Society, and the Commons Preservation Society. All, as James Bryce of the Selborne Society expressed it, attempted "to defend nature against those plagues and pests which sought to worry her out of existence".

At an immediate and practical level, Morris gained some hope from these organisations springing up around him. Previously he had written:

The struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world. This was a bad look-out indeed, and especially so to a man of my disposition - with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind. Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing, and a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make all men contented together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world, and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley.

But although Morris might regret that T. H. Huxley could re-envision "man's place in nature", it was the work of the early environmental groups, often inspired and supported by natural science, which provided an early impetus for Morris to move into the public sphere. In 1877 he established the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in order to prevent over-zealous restorers from destroying England's
historic past, and as a result of common
interests, and many common members,
this society co-operated closely with
broader environmental organisations. 16

Alongside the call for more open
spaces, another facet of Victorian con-
cern for the environment was that per-
taining to immediate working condi-
tions. Agitation and reform
on this front contributed to the emergence of the vari-
ous projects of the paternalistic model factory and
city, village, or agricultural aggregations. 17
Certainly many of the ideas of these groups and
movements coloured and informed Morris’s imagin-
ing of “greener” land-
scapes: of “A Factory as it Might Be”, of the utopia
envisaged in News From Nowhere, and, somewhat
more problematically, of the conditions at his own
Morris & Co. workshops at Merton Abbey.

It is necessary to
recognise, even though I
do not have space to fully
explore it here, that the
crucial factor of Morris’s
“green” visions - of his
“factory as it might be”
(though not of his own
workshops at Merton
Abbey) was the eradica-
tion of the division of labour.
Thus, when people evoke
Morris in the context of the “green”
movement, they are invoking an anal-
ysis informed by the problems of nine-
teenth-century urban-industrial cap-
italism, rather than an explicit concern for
nature per se. That is, we should not
think of Morris in the context of those
who believe that environmental crises
can be adequately dealt with within cur-
rent socio-political and cultural arenas,
but in the context of those who explicitly
question and reject many of these are-
as. Of course, the most obvious context
for Morris in this respect is his socialist
ism, and, as the physical object of work,
nature was a key term in the formulation
of Marxian political economy, and in
Morris’s imagining of more appropriate
relationships between human industry
and the environment.

Following Marx, it was the profit
motive Morris blamed for the damage
done to the environment, especially its
creation of the industrial city. Capitalist
industrialism, with its voracious appetite
for the environment as resource and
dumping ground, had entrenched the
city’s alienation from nature and ration-
alisied urban culture’s psychotic habits.
Morris complained:

It is profit which draws men into
enormous unmanageable aggregations called towns ...
which crowds them up when they are there into
quarters without gardens or open spaces, profit
which won’t take the most
ordinary precautions
against wrapping a whole
district in a cloud of sul-
phurous smoke; which
turns beautiful rivers into
filthy sewers... Cuts down
the pleasant trees among
the houses, pulls down
ancient and venerable
buildings for the money
that a few square yards of
London dirt will fetch;
blackens rivers, hides the
sun and poisons the air
with smoke and worse... 18

Profit also divided
labour, and in Morris’s
terms not only did this
“expropriate” the people
from the land but it
also pitted “man against
man” in qualitatively
competitive rather than
co-operative work which
destroyed individual
creativity. It is neces-
sary to acknowledge in
this respect Morris’s
debt to other socialistic
thinkers such as John
Ruskin, Robert Owen,
Charles Fourier, Pierre-
Joseph Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin and
Edward Carpenter.

Nevertheless, there is an important
extent to which Morris’s importance lies
in the fact that he places more emphasis
on the desire for “a reasonable share in
the beauty of the earth” as the right of

Page 242 of The Wood Beyond the World by William Morris,
shows the organic character of his flower and foliage border designs.
everyone, rather than the necessity of the overcoming of nature at any cost. And, with nature acting as a guide to the conception of the object, to the materials used to make it, to the fashion in which it was made, to the environment in which it was made, and to the relationships which ensued when it was made, Morris developed a culture of nature in which he imagined that human labour:

...will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides: it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town... All the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature...20

This, then, is the context in which I believe we should view the environmental or ‘green’ Morris, a version that has been particularly visible of late.21 One of the three keynote speeches delivered at the William Morris Centenary Conference in Oxford suggested that Morris was in all his theories a “green” and that they “echoed” deep ecological, eco-spiritualist and eco-feminist theorists.22 While I recognise some of the ways in which comparisons can be helpful, I do not believe that we can invoke eco-centrism, eco-feminism, and eco-spiritualism as dominant features of Morris’s thought. Clearly, although Morris acknowledged the interdependent character of human relationships with the rest of nature, he is anthropocentric, unequivocally stating, rightly or wrongly, that humanity was nature’s crowning achievement. Nor did he believe that patriarchy or androcentrism is the main constituent that sanctions the oppression of nature, though he did address many of the issues of nineteenth-century socialist feminists. Nor is eco-spiritualism a feature of his thought. Though there are parallels between nature-centred native American spiritualism and elements of some of the societies imagined by Morris, generally I see more of an earthly, sensuous materiality in Morris’s work than a sense of awe and reverence in the face of nature. Surely, if we have to think of Morris as eco-anything, it should be as an “eco-” or “green” socialist, that is in terms of an ecological awareness framed within a language of equality and social justice. In other words, before one makes the move to claim Morris as an early “green”, we need to consider that many “greens’ claim to be motivated first and foremost by concerns for the eco-system. And when this is the case, and when it is stated that the significance of “green” thought is that it decentres the human being, we have to acknowledge that Morris - though he seeks a substantial paradigm shift in relations between nature and human industry - clearly does not do this.

Thus, though we can perhaps talk of the “green” borders to Morris’s life, as of the books made at the Kelmscott Press, we cannot move these borders to the centre and say that they constitute the text in its entirety. Though I believe that it is valuable to reclaim the contours of his thought which have beenervaluated in orthodox Marxist interpretation, or narrowed as they were co-opted into the history of the British Labour Party, or inoculated of all political meaning in order to make them suitable for more general aesthetic consumption, we can also dangerously overdo an alternative “green” interpretation. Again, if we let the “green” borders dazzle us, we lose the centrality of the text, of the human story, which was always central to Morris. Ultimately I find many problems with the labelling of Morris as “green”, believing that it is at times anachronistic, at times confusing, and provides patently false understandings of Morris’s work when he is unproblematically co-opted into newly constructed histories of “green” thought in the west. Thus, while I believe that an exploration of the concept of nature in Morris’s work can provide valuable perspectives on today’s “green” crises, that the concept of nature provides a way to see his work as a whole, and that this approach can save him from being seen merely as the “arty-crafty poetic upholsterer”. Morris’s “greenness” is something that should not cause a fundamental ‘red to green’ shift in studies of his life and thought. For me, the meaning of Morris in the year of his centenary should be tied unequivocally to issues of social equality and social justice, which entails, though is not formulated upon, a strong environmental awareness.

Notes


2 In a lecture first delivered before the Working Men’s College, London, December 10 1881, Morris spoke of this “conventionalizing of nature” as a treatment that “invents certain beautiful and natural forms, which, appealing to a reasonable and imaginative person, will remind him not only of the part of nature which, to his mind at least they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part”. ‘Some Hints on Pattern Designing’, in “Lectures on Art and Industry”, in The Collected Works of William Morris (hereafter CW), vol. XXII, ed. May Morris, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910-15, p. 181.

3 British Library, Add. MS 45,301, fol. 43.

4 Hendon Debating Society card: Barnet Libraries, Archives and Local Study Centre; sheet of doodles by Morris on Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings notepad: Sanford and Helen Berger Collection. The linking of these designs to those used in the borders for the Kelmscott Chaucer continued on page 15.
was made by Chris Miele for a panel at the recent “William Morris 1834-1896” exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.


8 John Hanna has argued that not recognising the growth motif in Morris’s work (by hanging his curtains or wallpapers the wrong way, for example) is contrary to Morris’s “art of environmental design”. See John Hanna, “A New Art of Environmental Design”, Journal of the William Morris Society, vol. VI, no. 4, Winter 1985-6, pp. 4-10.


11 For this aspect of Peterson’s eloquent analysis see especially pp. 4-8 of The Kelmscott Press. Fiona MacCarthy has also noted that the decorative borders create an alternative imaginary territory by “establishing connections with a half-recognised medieval landscape”, and by “drawing the reader into a new world of strange visual juxtapositions”. William Morris, A Life for Our Time, London, Faber, 1994, p. 619. In this sense the Kelmscott Press books echo the language of Morris’s novels of this period, such as The Wood Beyond the World, The Water of the Wondrous Isles and The Well at the World’s End. These works also map new terrain, explore new borders and boundaries of the environmental and topographical imagination, and even anticipate and influence further imaginings such as the “Middle Earth” of J. R. R. Tolkien, the woods beyond wardrobes of C. S. Lewis, and Ursula Le Guin’s “Earthsea”.


16 In the 1880s the S. P. A. B. and the C. P. S. worked together to save the London Charterhouse, Staple Inn and Barnard’s Inn. These links were still operational in 1947 when the Huxley commission on wild life conservation used the precedent of the ancient monuments act to justify the state protection of natural sites: “there is but a narrow gap”, the commission argued, “between these and the [nature] reserves, which are both ancient monuments and living museums - a living embodiment of the past history of the land” (see Ranlett, Checking Nature’s Desecration, pp. 479-501). On a more personal level, in the 1890s Morris was involved in campaigning against indiscriminate wood cutting and clearances in Epping Forest: championing the cause of the native hornbeams against “vile weeds like daisies and outlandish confiners”, writing to the press “on behalf of the trees”, visiting clearance sites to assess damage, and railing against the opinion of so-called experts. See Morris’s letters to The Daily Chronicle of 1895 in The Collected Letters of William Morris, vol. IV, ed. Norman Kelvin, (Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 268-278.


