

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA  
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND WILLIAM MORRIS: THE  
PURPOSE OF ART AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

by

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A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

1979



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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Professor Noel-Bentley for the careful consideration that he gave to this thesis.

My thanks to Heather and Steve for the comfortable space, to Warren for the detective work, to Dad for the encouragement, and to Mom for all this and some typing too.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract . . . . .	i
Chapter	
I. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris: The Purpose of Art and the Role of the Artist . . . . .	1
II. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Divine Inspiration: The Artist Attempting to Serve Man with God . . . . .	30
III. William Morris and the People: The Artist Attempting to Build an Earthly Paradise . . . . .	58
IV. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris: Contrasting Definitions of the Role of the Artist and the Purpose of Art . . . . .	87
Notes . . . . .	98
Bibliography . . . . .	107

## ABSTRACT

Because of the close ties between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris and the apparent similarity between their works, many Victorian critics assumed that their art was closely connected, seeing in it a self-conscious attempt to establish a second Pre-Raphaelite movement. While modern critics have modified the Victorian assessment somewhat, judging Morris's work to be free of Rossetti's influence, especially following the break in their friendship, a study of the primary sources indicates that the two artists were more deeply divided in their attitudes towards art than even the modern assessment allows. It is the purpose of this thesis to determine the extent to which Rossetti and Morris were divided in their views about art by studying their works, their letters, Rossetti's art criticism, and Morris's lectures.

Aspects of the personal interaction between Rossetti and Morris, especially the effects of influence and imitation, are studied in the first chapter, in relation to their views about art. Rossetti believed that the great artist is divinely inspired, standing apart from his fellows by virtue of his vision. For him, the artist's duty is to reveal man's relation to the divine, portraying the immortal nature of man. Morris, in contrast, believed that the artist speaks in the voice of the people, his proper concern being with matters mundane. The purpose of art, according to Morris, is to enrich and

to reflect the quality of this life.

The following two chapters deal with Rossetti and Morris individually, exploring the degree to which each artist's theoretical statements complement and illustrate his literary and visual work. Rossetti's views about art are expressed in early pieces such as "Hand and Soul", the sonnets "Old and New Art", and his numerous critiques of modern painters, and these opinions are reiterated, with only slight shift in emphasis, in later poems such as "Soothsay", "Transfigured Life", "The Song-Three", and the "Introductory Sonnet" from The House of Life. That Morris's views about art differ from Rossetti's is evident even in his early literary works, "The Story of the Unknown Church," The Defence of Guenevere volume, and The Earthly Paradise; rather than establish his connection with Rossetti, the attitudes expressed in these early pieces bear closer relation to Morris's own artistic theory, as it is articulated in his lectures or in his Utopian fiction, News from Nowhere.

Finally, the last chapter directly contrasts the attitudes towards art and the artist expressed by Rossetti and Morris in their literary works. While Rossetti's art attempted to portray the immortal nature of man, Morris's art posited the continuity of earth and the human spirit.

## CHAPTER ONE

### DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND WILLIAM MORRIS: THE PURPOSE OF ART AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris shared an intimate professional and personal relationship between 1856 and 1871, years in which they became mutually involved in several artistic projects. Although the divergence between Rossetti and Morris was shadowed in the early years of their relationship, in 1871 the two were still close enough to assume joint tenancy in Kelmscott Manor; from this point on their relationship deteriorated. Both men shared the unique ability to create in either the literary or the visual arts with equal competence. Further, their work was similar in its tendency to focus upon subjects from the past, usually derived from literary sources. As a result of these similarities, many Victorian critics yoked their work together, often to illustrate a second development of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Most modern critics have stressed the differences between Rossetti and Morris, which become increasingly evident in their later works, and consequently the term Pre-Raphaelite is no longer strictly applied to them. To supply evidence for this evaluation, critics usually contrast aspects of their later work, confining Rossetti's influence upon Morris to early productions.

Certainly Morris praised Rossetti as the guiding force behind

his short lived but intense devotion to painting: "Rossetti says I ought to paint, he says I shall be able; now as he is a very great man, and speaks with authority and not as the scribes, I must try"; and later, "I want to imitate Gabriel as much as I can."<sup>1</sup> Morris's poetry, however, does not result so directly from Rossetti's influence, and his letters confirm that his poetic endeavours prefigure their meeting.<sup>2</sup> Even in his early literary works, "The Story of the Unknown Church", The Defence of Guenevere volume, and The Earthly Paradise, many of the statements that Morris makes about the purpose of art and the role of the artist suggest that his attitude differs significantly from Rossetti's; rather than establish his connection with Rossetti, these statements bear closer relation to Morris's own artistic theory, as it is later articulated in his lectures or in his Utopian fiction News from Nowhere.

As the division which exists between the work of Rossetti and Morris has not been fully explored, this thesis aims to clarify the division by comparing the artists' statements about the purpose of art and the role of the artist. The first chapter will compare statements which appear in their literary work, supplemented by their comments outside the literature, in letters, lectures, or criticism. Significant aspects of the personal interaction between Rossetti and Morris, especially the effects of influence and imitation, will be examined in relation to their views about art. The following two chapters will deal with Rossetti and Morris individually, exploring the degree to which each artist's theoretical statements complement and illustrate his literary and visual work. Finally, the last chapter will compare

Rossetti and Morris more directly, defining and underlining the differences between their work.

While Morris's mature statements about the purpose of art and the role of the artist are found mainly in extraliterary sources from his later years, Rossetti's views are well articulated in his early work, in both his literature and criticism. Early pieces, such as "Hand and Soul", the sonnets "Old and New Art", and his numerous critiques of modern painters, express an attitude towards art which he retains throughout his work. Later poems, such as "Soothsay", and "Transfigured Life", "The Song-Throe", and the "Introductory Sonnet" from The House of Life, exemplify this continuity.

Even in a summary comparison, it becomes immediately apparent that Rossetti's estimation of the purpose of art and the role of the artist differed radically from Morris's point of view. Rossetti believed that the artist must study his own soul for transcendent revelations. In "Hand and Soul" he described the successful culmination of the artist's quest for a moment of perfect creative inspiration; the painter Chiaro is confronted by a vision of his own soul, which represents the triple ideals of love, truth and beauty, and in which his connection with the Divine and mankind is revealed. Rossetti describes this visitation in mystical terms:

Give thou to God no more than He asketh of thee; but to man also, that which is man's. In all thou doest, work from thine own heart, simply; for his heart is as thine, when thine is wise and humble; and he shall have understanding of thee. One drop of rain is as another, and the sun's prism in all; and shalt thou not be as he, whose lives are the

breath of One? Only by making thyself his  
 equal can he learn to hold communion with thee,  
 and at last own thee above him. . . Know that  
 there is but this means whereby thou mayst serve  
 God with man:--Set thine hand and thy soul to  
 serve man with God.<sup>3</sup>

If the painter's hand portrays his soul, so must the poet's, as the sonnet "Transfigured Life" suggests. The poet cannot merely transcribe his emotions, but must give them new birth and meaning in his work:

So in the song, the singer's Joy and Pain,  
 Its very parents, evermore expand  
 To bid the passion's fullgrown birth remain  
 By Art's transfiguring essence subtly spanned;---  
 ("Transfigured Life", XL, p. 94)

The artist, according to Rossetti, receives a special gift of grace, Divine insofar as it represents the Eternal, his creative performance being thus inspired and ecstatic.

As the passage quoted from "Hand and Soul" suggests, Rossetti believed that the artist must celebrate both his humanity and his special connection with the Divine, which places him apart from common man; the artist can expect man to "own thee [the artist] above him." As opposed to the deliberate didacticism of the uninspired artist, who appeals to his mind rather than to his heart for truth, and becomes "as a cloth drawn before the light, that the looker may not be blinded. . .but. . .sheweth thereby the grain of its own coarseness", Rossetti suggested that the inspired artist becomes a natural mediator between God and man ("Hand and Soul", p. 553). He envisioned a cosmos divided into a tri-level hierarchy--Divinity, artist, and common man;

while each of these levels is informed by elements of the human and the Divine, the proportion of the latter determines ascendancy. Although the artist's position in this scheme sounds very like the place awarded to the angels in the Renaissance Great Chain of Being, Rossetti's insistence upon the artist's humanity, his physical existence, discourages this parallel.

Rossetti assumed then, that the artist's transcendent visions strike a responsive chord in the hearts of men, an attitude typically expressed in his art criticism:

From time to time, however, a poet or a painter has caught the music, and strayed in through the close stems: the spell is on his hand and his lips like the sleep of the Lotus-eaters, and his record shall be vague and fitful; yet will we be in waiting, and open our eyes and our ears, for the broken song has snatches of an enchanted harmony, and the glimpses are glimpses of Eden ("Kennedy", p. 575).

If Rossetti claimed that all men are artists, he believed this only insofar as they can grasp the artist's vision, insofar as they, too, are possessed of a "poetic" soul.

Although Rossetti believed that a great artist must be inspired, he did not undermine the importance of skill and intellectual energy to a final work. He recognized a difference between the inspired conception, only visited upon those who practise introspection, and the careful execution which must ensue. On these grounds, Rossetti elevated Memling above his mentor Van Eyck:

Van Eyck's picture at the gallery may give you some idea of the style adopted by Memling in

these great pictures; but the light and colour is much less poetical in Van Eyck's, partly owing to his being a more sober subject and interior, but partly also, I believe, to the intrinsic superiority of Memling's intellect.<sup>4</sup>

Morris opposed Rossetti's view directly: "That talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense. . . I may tell you that flat, there is no such thing."<sup>5</sup> He believed that the fine arts are perfected by those who "have won mastery over their craft by dint of incredible toil, painstaking and anxiety."<sup>6</sup> According to Morris's theory, the artist, with his craft perfected, should discover his subject in the tradition that he shared with his people; his work should then unfold organically. While he would have agreed with Rossetti that an artist should communicate his deepest, most genuine passions, Morris believed that these are only meaningful if they grow from and thereby embody the passions of his fellow men; the poet must become "the voice through which the poetry of mankind speaks."<sup>7</sup> From Morris's point of view, every man is an artist, since the best art communicates with the people in a voice that is as theirs.

And so Morris believed that every man is literally an artist; he claimed that the fine arts are bound in symbiotic union to the lesser arts, the handicraft art of the people, in a healthy, creative society. According to his view of art history, the lesser arts are the foundation and definition of all creative endeavour, as they exemplify so well the primary aim of art: "Art made by the people and for the people, as a joy to the maker and the user."<sup>8</sup> He believed that the fine arts had developed as an offshoot of the lesser arts only when

civilization grew in complexity:

Time was when the mystery and wonder of handicrafts were well acknowledged by the world, when imagination and fancy mingled with all things made by man; and in those days all handicraftsmen were artists, as we should now call them. But the thought of man became more intricate, more difficult to express; art grew a heavier thing to deal with, and its labour was more divided among great men, lesser men, and little men; till that art, which was once scarce more than a rest of body and soul as the hand cast the shuttle or swung the hammer, became to some men so serious a labour, that their working lives have been one long tragedy of hope and fear, joy and trouble. This was the growth of art; like all growth, it was good and fruitful for awhile; like all fruitful growth, it grew into decay; like all decay of what was once fruitful, it will grow into something new (XXII, p. 9).

As this passage suggests, Morris suspected that the nineteenth century, a period of decadence and decline, could not adequately nurture artistic creativity. He feared the degrading effect of growing mechanization upon the people; as a daily pursuit useless toil had replaced the lesser, decorative arts. He believed that the people were suffering in that they no longer received pleasure from art; art, itself, was suffering in that it no longer reflected the vital impulses and emotions of society, having become rather the expression of a small elite group.

Morris's hopes for art lay in the future, as he believed that the existing society must be shaken to its roots, if man was to move beyond merely mechanical or wholly intellectual thought, and deal instead with his imagination, intuition and emotion; man must

reactivate his faculty for non-rational perception, which both fosters and informs all meaningful creative work. The society in News from Nowhere, Morris's ideal, is organized on the belief that handicrafts, both useful and creative, can supply all man's needs; these activities are encouraged above intellectual pursuits, as one scholarly character in the novel laments:

I know he thinks me rather a grinder, and despises me for not being very deft with my hands: that's the way nowadays. From what I have read of the nineteenth-century literature (and I have read a good deal), it is clear to me that this is a kind of revenge for the stupidity of that day, which despised everybody who could use his hands (XIV, p. 20).

As the novel emphasizes, Morris believed that society must aspire to conditions which allow, simple, happy, and equal existence for all. He predicted that this change would occur, either by revolutionary upheaval or, as his more optimistic letters suggest, by peaceful evolution. In "The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle", a letter of 1893, his position is clarified:

I do not believe in the possibility of keeping art vigorously alive by the action, however energetic, of a few groups of specially gifted men and their small circle of admirers amidst a general public incapable of understanding and enjoying their work. I hold firmly to the opinion that all schools of art must be in the future, as they have been in the past, the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the beauty and the true pleasure of life. And further, now that democracy is building up a new order, which is slowly arising from the confusion of the commercial period, these aspirations of the people towards beauty can only be born from a condition of practical equality of economical condition amongst the

whole population. Lastly, I am so confident that this equality will be gained, that I am prepared to accept as a consequence of the process of that gain, the seeming disappearance of what art is now left us; because I am sure that that will be but a temporary loss, to be followed by a genuine new birth of art, which will be the spontaneous expression of the pleasure of life innate in the whole people.<sup>9</sup>

The past is often idealized in Morris's literature, sounding more like his Utopia than an historical account:

Telling a tale of times long passed away,  
When men might cross a kingdom in a day,  
And kings remembered they should one day die,  
And all folk dwelt in great simplicity  
("The Earthly Paradise", III, p. 84).

In his lectures, though, Morris admitted that political oppression and violence existed in the Middle Ages; these were balanced by general creative pursuit in the lesser arts and a strong sense of community so that "it was possible then to have social, organic, hopeful progressive art; whereas now such poor scraps of it as are left are the result of individual and wasteful struggle, are retrospective and pessimistic" (XXIII, p. 89). For Morris, nineteenth century art was "only a survival of the organic art of the past."<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Morris, who redefined the term art as it is generally understood by emphasizing the genres of the lesser arts above the fine arts, Rossetti was content to reform fine art within the bounds of its existing genres; because he believed great art to be divinely inspired, he criticized art that reflects conventional response. One of the founding principles of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was that art need not follow the dictates of the Royal Academy and the rules laid

down by Joshua Reynolds in his discourses. Rossetti condemned the influence of these dictates and rules in contemporary paintings, suggesting that exhibitions had begun to resemble one another when so many artists "are striving to do exactly the same thing as others. . . have done,--making use of exactly the same means as those who have gone before them, in hope of the same result and no more" ("Exhibition of Modern British Art at the Old Water-colour Gallery, 1850", p. 571).

It follows that Rossetti believed that great art may be created in any age, as the truly inspired artist relies upon himself, his soul, to comprehend visions of the Divine. Unlike Morris, Rossetti believed that great works from the past should spark a spirit of healthy rivalry in the artist; past masters should encourage the painter to hope that his will be "The hand which after the appointed days / And hours shall give a future to their past" ("The Husbandman", LXXVI, p. 100).

Although Rossetti shared Morris's admiration for many works from the mediaeval period, he did not restrict his appreciations to this age alone, as the eclectic nature of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's "List of Immortals" indicates; Jesus Christ heads the list of "the few far-seeing ones who revealed vast visions of beauty to mankind," ranging from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael to more contemporary artists such as Shelley, and Keats, Tennyson and Browning.<sup>11</sup>

The "List of Immortals", celebrating in unison the accomplishments of both painters and poets, illuminates a second point significant to Rossetti's definition of the artist. He believed that both poet and painter, when divinely inspired, shape visions of the one truth; the

poet sings "snatches of an enchanted harmony" and the painter paints "glimpses of Eden". In simple terms, both embody thought in a physical form. In Platonic terms, which Rossetti seemed to favour, both lend physical shape to thoughts which are themselves what Shelley called "The awful shadow of some unseen Power"; both painter and poet attempt to see beyond the veil of mortality. Thus, while the "List" is prefaced with a disavowal of Christian doctrine, Jesus Christ is honoured as the supreme artist for the undeniable depth and impact of his visions.

Rossetti used the word poetry as a metaphor for artistic vision; an inspired painting or poem comes from an artist's "poetic" soul. Describing C. H. Lear's painting of a Keatsian subject, Rossetti referred to the poetry of both artists:

he, [C. H. Lear] working from his own poetical resources, has found a sympathetic echo in the words of a brother poet. The heard melody is indeed sweet, so sweet that the unheard may scarcely exceed it; but the parallel is unnecessary; they are like voice and instrument. This picture should hang in the room of a poet: we will dare to say that Keats himself might have lain dreaming before it, and found it minister to his inspiration ("C. H. Lear", pp. 574-575).

For Rossetti, Lear's work is more than a literary narrative or a genre painting, as it is informed by the same type of poetic vision which inspired Keats. Of course he was well aware that technique separates the two mediums; Mackail reports Rossetti's early conviction that the poetic medium had been perfected by Keats, prompting his advice to Burne-Jones: "If any man has any poetry in him. . .he should paint,

for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint it."<sup>12</sup> Within the medium of the visual arts, still open to experiment and improvement, Rossetti believed that the greatest achievements could still be made; certainly the concerns of the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, primarily focussed upon painting, suggest this bias. As William Michael Rossetti pointed out, however, Rossetti's youthful aspiration to excellence in the visual arts was not fulfilled when he finally estimated his achievement:

I have not unfrequently heard say that he considered himself more essentially a poet than a painter. To vary the form of expression, he thought that he had mastered the means of embodying poetical conceptions in the verbal and rhythmical vehicle more thoroughly than in form and design, perhaps more thoroughly than in colour.<sup>13</sup>

While for Rossetti painting and poetry alike record the artist's inspired vision, Morris believed that "all the arts hang together" as every work expresses a moral statement (XXII, p. 21); for Morris, art and morality, both individual and social, are inseparable:

However, I cannot forget that, in my mind, it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion. Truth in these great matters of principle is of one, and it is only in formal treatises that it can be split up. (XXII, p. 47).

His appreciation and evaluation of art is shaped by this attitude. In a letter of 1873, written during his tour of the Florentine art galleries, Morris contrasted Burne-Jones's aesthetic appreciations to his own responses, which were more moral and philosophic:

I ought to say a great deal about works of art here, but I had rather wait till I see you and we can talk over it. I am not at all disappointed with Italy, but a good deal of myself: I am happy enough, but as a pig is, and cannot bring my mind up to the proper pitch and tune for taking in these marvels; I can only hope that I shall remember them hereafter. . . I venture to think though that there is another side to it which may at least make one sad; change and ruin and recklessness and folly and forgetfulness of 'great men and our fathers who begat us'--it is only in such places as this that one can see the signs of them to the full. Well you remember my ways at Troyes, don't you? and they are scarce likely to be better in Florence: Ned already complains of me that I seem to pay more attention to an olive-tree or a pot than I do to a picture--mind you, though, an olive-tree is worthy of a great deal of attention, and I understand more of pots than of pictures.<sup>14</sup>

Burne-Jones's response was more akin to Rossetti's than to Morris's, as he was immediately sensitive to the intrinsic aesthetic value of the work itself; Morris was allied with Ruskin in his concern to connect art and ethics, as the critic Gerald Crow states: "To Morris, as to Ruskin, the principles governing art can be extracted from the moral and the natural order and are constant and external to art itself."<sup>15</sup>

While Morris's theoretical statements imply his belief that nineteenth-century art had fallen from greatness, he still expressed admiration for several contemporary artists. He outlined the obstacles to the fine arts in an age so antagonistic to beauty:

Therefore the artists are obliged to express themselves, as it were, in a language 'not understood by the people'; nor is this their fault; if they were to try, as some think they should, to meet the public half-way, and work

in such a manner as to satisfy only those prepossessions of men ignorant of art, they would be casting aside their special gifts, and would become traitors to the cause of art which it is their duty and glory to serve: they have no choice save to do their own personal work without any hope of being understood as things now are; to stand apart as possessors of some sacred mystery, which, whatever happens, they must at least do their best to guard: and by their isolation their loss is great.<sup>16</sup>

Morris believed that great contemporary artists shared his sense of the important past, and used their work to recall or reflect aspects of it; they, too, understood the deficiency of the nineteenth century, and automatically located their subject in the more vital traditions of the past: "the great artists I have been speaking about are what they are in virtue of their being men of very peculiar and especial gifts, and are mostly steeped in thoughts of history, wrapped up in contemplation of the beauty of past times. If they were not so constituted, I say, they would not in the teeth of all the difficulties in their way to be able to produce beauty at all" (XXIII, p. 147). In his Life of William Morris, Mackail records Morris's desire to guard mediaeval achievements against unnecessary contemporary refinements, as evidenced by his advice to Burne-Jones, his intimate friend and his favourite artist: "Sir Edward Burne-Jones told me that Morris would have liked the faces in his pictures less highly finished, and less charged with the concentrated meaning or emotion of the painting. As with the artists of Greece and of the Middle Ages, the human face was to him merely a part, though no doubt a very important part, of the human body."<sup>17</sup> If the nineteenth-century artist was able to fix his eyes

upon the true beauty of the past, despite the contemporary corruption which surrounded and threatened his vision, he possessed, in Morris's opinion, outstanding moral wisdom and strength. He commended painters that "have developed and expressed a sense of beauty which the world has not seen for the last three hundred years", not only for the quality of their work, but also for their moral commitment:

Once more those devoted men who have upheld the standard of truth and beauty amongst us, and whose pictures, painted amidst difficulties that none but a painter can know, show qualities of mind unsurpassed in any age-- these great men have but a narrow circle that can understand their works, and are utterly unknown to the great mass of the people: civilization is so much against them, that they cannot move the people (XXII, pp. 35, 38).

Morris cited similar criteria when he praised the Pre-Raphaelite painters in his opening address at the 1891 exhibition of their paintings; Mackail describes his presentation:

Professing himself a humble member of the school, he stated as his deliberate conviction that its principle masters, Rossetti, Millais, Holman Hunt, and Burne-Jones, were names that ranked along side of the very greatest in the great times of art; then, not labouring this point, he commended their example to all artists, not primarily for any technical quality, but for the virtues of patience, diligence and courage. These were the qualities that went to make great men; and great men might be trusted to do great work.<sup>18</sup>

As Jessie Kocmanova summarizes, Morris's was an "essentially humanistic approach to the evaluation of art": "Above all, Morris valued the human quality in art, and the artist's enthusiasm for what he wished

to create."<sup>19</sup> This is especially true in reference to Morris's view of contemporary art, the quality of which he believed singly determined by the artist's wisdom and dedication.

Although Morris praised Rossetti with the other Pre-Raphaelite painters, it is difficult to determine his attitude to Rossetti's work in any full sense, because his statements so often conflict. Certainly, in his youth Morris admired both Rossetti and his work. As late as 1870 he reviewed Rossetti's poems generously, concluding, "Nor do I know what lyrics of any time are to be called great if we are to deny that title to these."<sup>20</sup> A tone of genuine appreciation seems pervasive throughout the entire review, despite Morris's reluctance to "puff" his friends, making this critical exercise objectionable to him: "I have done my review [i.e. of D. G. Rossetti's Poems] just this moment--ugh'".<sup>21</sup> As the split which occurred in their personal lives testifies, however, Rossetti's approach to life and art became increasingly antithetical to Morris's. On the basis of two letters Morris wrote in 1872, objecting to Rossetti's disruptive presence at Kelmscott, William Gaunt postulates their incompatibility:

The individual life of what was called 'the artist' Morris had now had the opportunity of examining at close quarters, without any of the false glamour round it which was imparted by youth and innocence. That hooded glance of his had taken in every detail, one may be sure, had weighed its feebleness, its tawdriness, its egotism, its self-indulgence, its sordid and furtive complications which rose like mud in a stagnant pool on some slight stir of the waters. What was to be set on the other side of the balance?--that after much fret and fuss, some expression of this emotional chaos was transferred to canvas or paper for the idle entertainment of a rich man