

AN INDEX OF THEIR MAKER:
MORRIS'S LABOUR IN *A BOOK OF VERSE*
AND THE KELMSCOTT *POEMS BY THE WAY*

David Faldet

For William Morris art was inextricable from labour. Morris grounded his ideas about art and society in his own powerful love of objects that bore the physical trace of the labourer's work. He sought, both as reader and as creator, "that loveliness and order which only the hand of man guided by his soul can produce" (*Works* 23: 205). For this reason, it is not surprising that Morris was concerned about the physical presentation of his poems. This is something, however, which readers of his poetry in anthologies or later editions are not likely to know unless they are closely familiar with the story of his life and work. The presence of Morris's hand in the production of his own poems was best realized in the decorated manuscript entitled *A Book of Verse* that he gave to Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1870. Yet it was a goal toward which he aspired in all his poetry, as in his Kelmscott collection entitled *Poems by the Way*. Morris connected the life and the creative demands of the maker of books with the making and the presenting of poems. The poems in his decorated manuscripts and Kelmscott books, therefore, represent the perfect realization of one of his aims as an artist: integrating a visual trace of himself with the beauty and the message of his poems.

In considering Morris's interest in the physical presentation of his poems and his concern for the labour of their maker in their production, it is helpful to begin by remembering how much of his life was devoted to work in visual design. Though, as an artist, Morris worked in areas of art that had largely been taken over by machine production, one important distinction of Morris patterns was their hand production. Morris and the Morris firm employed the personal dimension of hand production in an area of printing (wallpaper and fabric) that was no longer considered art. So, too, with his books. By 1870 the copy of a book, an individual copy of a large commercially printed edition, had long been a standard and acceptable form of "transcription," but Morris's decorated manuscripts and Kelmscott books were a minor rebellion against this commonplace.

Though Morris championed the common or "useful arts," he believed firmly that the labour of one person cannot replicate that of another. His keen sense for