

Masking the Text: Essays on Literature & Mediation in the 1890s by Nicholas Frankel. High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2009. 279pp. + 39 b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-1904201144. \$65.00; £40.00.

Possessed of a sensitive eye and ear, as well as a deep knowledge of textual theory and book art, Nicholas Frankel enlarges aesthetic experience for his present-day reader in his excellent study of 1890s texts. In gathering together ten of his essays, many of which had appeared previously, Frankel usefully offers a prismatic view of 1890s writers and book artists who, he argues, were “singularly preoccupied with ‘masking’ texts” and with plumbing our full responses in acts of co-creativity. Under the topic of text as mask, Frankel interrelates carefully chosen examples by a number of artist-writers from the decade, including Oscar Wilde (on whom Frankel provides four essays), James Abbot McNeill Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley, George Meredith, William Morris, Michael Field, and male poets of the Rhymers’ Club. He subdivides the book into sections on “Mediating the Text” and “Literature and the Medium of the Book.” While the book’s central voice is Oscar Wilde, other writers and artists pivot around him, even occasionally displacing him.

Frankel enlarges aesthetic experience, in part, by conceiving richly of the text itself, as Morris and Dante Rossetti had so beautifully done a century and a half before. In the tradition of the Pre-Raphaelites and of modern textual scholars such as Jerome McGann and Peter Shillingsburg, Frankel attends to far more than formal and linguistic features of primary texts. He decodes the bindings, typefaces, page formats, print designs, and other textual phenomena of original editions, showing them as intimately related to meaning. Unless we are schooled in William Blake or the Pre-Raphaelites, we may regard these faces of literature as secondary or as, perhaps, important only when considering the production side of creativity. We tend to ignore them too often. Yet, a verbal text is far more than the words on the page needing a reader’s interpretation. As E.B. White’s spider Charlotte well knew, and effectively performed for her audiences, a text is a web of linguistic, imagistic, and graphic codes whose location, temporal durability, and indefinable magic all matter.

Embracing the idea of a multi-dimensional text, Frankel treats reading in a similarly complex and nuanced way as a multi-layered mental activity. Following Shillingsburg, he explains the process of reading as an active assimilation of varying aspects of the material face or mask of the text, such as its size, colour, weight, design, length, paper, ink, layout, and binding – before attention to words or images. We take in materiality in a flash, he would maintain, before we turn to other operations of reading. Moreover, our very quick, sometimes unconscious, assimilation of the embodied text bears