

## A Note on Burne-Jones's 'Pocket Cathedral' and Ruskin

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Edward Burne-Jones's comparison of the Kelmscott Chaucer to a 'pocket cathedral' has become one of his most widely quoted utterances. Indeed Susan P. Casteras even used it as a very effective title to an exhibition: *Pocket Cathedrals: Pre-Raphaelite Book Illustration* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1991). Burne-Jones originally penned it in a letter of December 1894 to his friend, Charles Eliot Norton, the American scholar and man of letters, professor of art history at Harvard:

And so you don't like Chaucer – that is very sad – for I am beside myself with delight over it. I am making the designs as much to fit the ornament and the printing as they are made to fit the little pictures – and I love to be snugly cased in the borders and buttressed up by the vast initials – and once or twice when I have no letter under me, I feel tottery and weak; if you drag me out of my encasings it will be like tearing a statue out of its niche and putting it in a museum – indeed when the book is done, if we live to finish it, it will be like a pocket cathedral – so full of design and I think Morris the greatest master of ornament in the world – and to have the highest taste in all things . . .<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the passage Burne-Jones consistently sees the book in terms of Gothic architecture. His illustrations are 'buttressed' by Morris's vast decorated initials and if you take one out of its context on the page, it is 'like tearing a statue out of its niche'. After piling up those architectural images, he finally reaches a climax, comparing the whole completed book to 'a pocket cathedral'.

Burne-Jones did indeed have a way with words, but in this instance he was quoting someone that he himself would have admitted was a far greater word-smith. He was quoting from Ruskin, and since Norton was as much a friend and disciple of Ruskin's as he was, there was no need to tell *him* that he was quoting from *Praeterita*, Ruskin's charming 'Outlines of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps Worthy of Memory in My Past Life', as he subtitled the publication in 1886. Burne-Jones had in

fact read it in installments that began to appear in July 1885, calling it in a letter to Ruskin himself 'that most heavenly book'.<sup>2</sup> When Ruskin coined the memorable phrase, he was describing the acquisition of his very first Mediaeval illuminated manuscript, a little fourteenth-century Hours of the Virgin:

But now that I had a missal of my own, and could touch its leaves and turn, and even here and there understand the Latin of it, no girl of seven years old with a new doll is prouder or happier: but the feeling was something between the girl's with her doll, and Aladdin's in a new Spirit-slave to build palaces for him with jewel windows. For truly a well-illuminated missal is a fairy cathedral full of painted windows, bound together to carry in one's pocket, with the music and the blessing of all its prayers besides.<sup>3</sup>

Ruskin's image is an arresting one and it is no wonder that Burne-Jones, with his acute and retentive memory, thought almost ten years later that it was the perfect way of describing the Kelmscott Chaucer, which took so much of its inspiration from the Mediaeval illuminated manuscripts that Ruskin was describing.<sup>4</sup> He took Ruskin's image of a fairy cathedral in one's pocket and came up with 'pocket cathedral', confident that Norton would immediately understand the reference.

In a letter to Frances Horner, Burne-Jones described the deep love he had for such 'painted books', a life-long fascination that began with Morris by his side at the Bodleian Library during their Oxford days:

I don't care for personal property, but if I did I think it would be for painted books – they are such little worlds all to themselves – and many a time I have gone to the British Museum to get away from this obstreperous world, and in a book have found what I wanted without fail – so that really, when the word treasure is said, I think of a fat little thing that opens to a hundred visions [shades of Aladdin and his Spirit-slave!] – I have one – a big choral book from Certaldo that Dante must have seen being made when he called upon Boccaccio in that city...<sup>5</sup>

Although he did not use the Ruskinian image in this particular letter, the comparison of a Mediaeval illuminated manuscript to a Gothic cathedral became one of Burne-Jones's standard modes of expression. It came up no less than twice in a luncheon conversation recorded by his studio assistant, T. M. Rooke, when he was telling his guests about Morris's ever-expanding appetite for purchasing expensive painted books – he did not have to go to the British Museum any more to see masterpieces of their kind:

Morris has had a terrible life this last three weeks, haven't you heard what's happened to him? Well, about a fortnight ago he had a book sent to him (haven't you heard of the Huntingfield Psalter?). Well, for once to borrow a simile from Little Rooke, it's like Ely Cathedral, and he's given £800 for it and it's all his own and he's got it in his house ... And the other day someone wrote to offer him another book [the Tiptoft Missal], and at first he was rather by way of running it down ... [but] when I saw it I thought it was such a beautiful book (since in fact it wasn't I that was going to buy it but he) I advised him to buy it, and he went home that Sunday night and wrote off a cheque for £750 for it, and then he had a six and thirty hours of *torture* ... till, finally on Tuesday morning he gets a letter to say it's his. So he's got both Ely Cathedral and Winchester in his *own very house*.<sup>6</sup>

In suggesting that 'Little Rooke' was the author of the comparison – which has now modulated from 'pocket' to 'Ely Cathedral' – could it be that his devoted assistant had also taken up the phrase and used it frequently? Burne-Jones was apparently teasing, for everyone at the table, Georgie, Sebastian Evans, W. A. S. Benson and Rooke himself, knew that he was quoting a much-loved passage from *Praeterita*. The compelling image had entered his verbal bloodstream, rising unconsciously to the surface in both his written correspondence and his daily conversation.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), p. 164.
2. G[eorgiana] B[urne]-J[ones], *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (New York and London: Macmillan & Co., 1904), I, p. 41. Georgie herself called it 'that wonderful piece of autobiography' (p. 261).
3. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., *The Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1908), xxxv, p. 491 (Vol. III, chapter I, paragraph 19).
4. On Burne-Jones's powers of memory Frances Horner commented, 'all books he had ever read (and they were innumerable) remained clear and deeply cut in his memory, and could be drawn upon at will'. *Time Remembered* (London: William Heinemann, 1933), p. 105.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18.
6. Mary Lago, ed., *Burne-Jones Talking: His conversations 1895–1898 preserved by his studio assistant Thomas Rooke* (London: John Murray, 1982), p. 36 (24 May 1895).