

Victorian



William Morris

1834-1896

So now, amidst our days of strife,
With many a matter glad we play,
When once we see the light of life
Gleam through the tangle of to-day.

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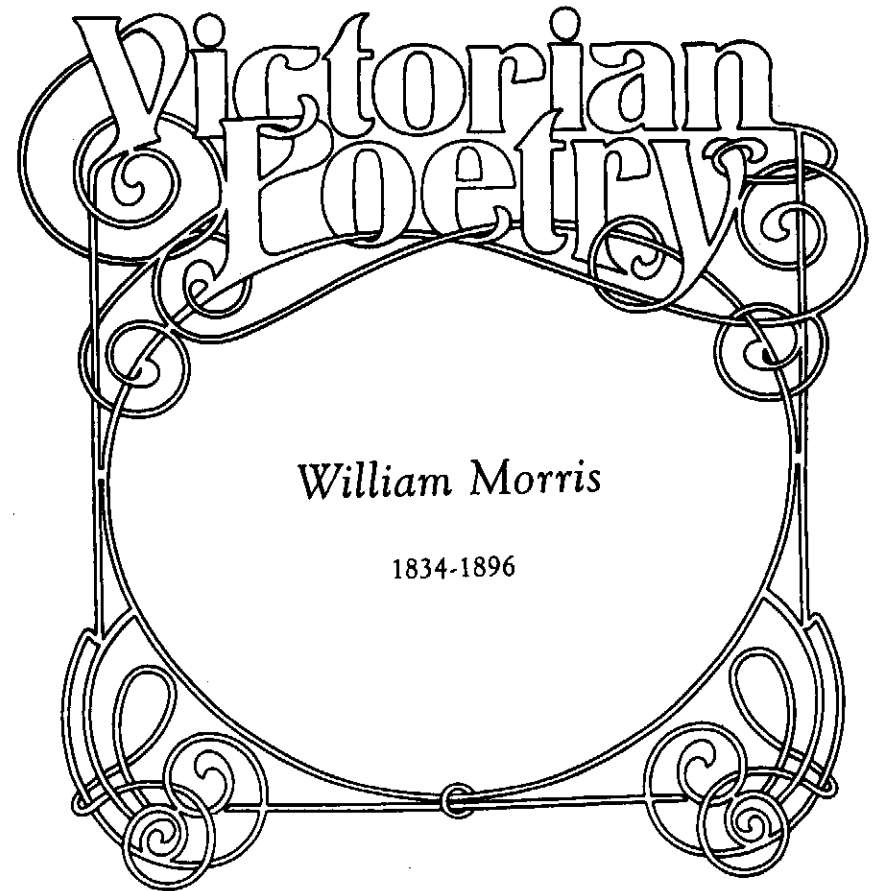
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Florence S. Boos
Guest Editor

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 - 13 For a detailed analysis of this topic, see my discussion of "Presentational Forms: Unconsummated Symbols in Kant, Masson, Mansel," *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (London: Athlone, 1987), pp. 161-174.
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Dissident Language in The Defence of Guenevere

KAREN HERBERT

WILLIAM MORRIS' *THE DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE* (1858) INVESTIGATES the role of language and memory in the often contradictory relations between private desire and community sanction. Specifically, Morris asks the subversive question, "How can language and memory resist absorption into conventional narrative and conceptual patterns?" As Florence S. Boos's study of the oppression of female autonomy indicates, the *Defence* is, in large part, a social criticism.¹ Constance W. Hassett, too, identifies subversive strategies in the volume: details of physiognomy and self-reflexive language project a "counter-cultural force" of indeterminate meanings.²

If we read Morris' career retrospectively, we notice that the "seeds" (Morris' characteristic term for dialectical genesis) of his later socialism appear in the *Defence* poems as the individual's relations to society and to the various "pasts" or histories which inform and, to some extent, preform consciousness. The dialogic structure of the dramatic poems furthers this interchange between the voices of self and Other: whether direct or indirect, the voices of the narrator and/or character(s) may be complementary or contradictory depending on how each sees his/her aesthetic and social function. Similarly, in the ballads, form and content overlap as the required formalities of rhyme and refrain accentuate linguistic or social arguments. The attempts of the *Defence* speakers (either narrators or characters) to translate ideas or events into praxis take the form of "transgressive narratives" which David Riede defines as the alternate and political voice of a counterculture.³ The failure of these attempts—despite the ordering mechanisms of memory—results from an inability to perceive valid correspondences between the individual's interpretation of experience and the interpretation proffered by society.

Writing to Cornell Price in 1855, Morris expresses his awareness of the effect of memory on experience: "I had some kind of misgivings that I might be disappointed with Rouen, after my remembrances of it from last year; but I wasn't a bit" (*Letters*, 1:22). A similar reading through present memory to a past event informs the consciousness of speakers in the *Defence* who struggle to stand outside their personal and historical moment in order to resolve the discrepancies between self and society or, to use Hans Robert Jauss's opposition, between expectation and experience. Language,

with its subversive inclination toward reticence and polysemy, mediates between experience and reflection; the degree to which consciousness and society are reconciled is left to the reader to decide. As is the case with Morris' early tales in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856), the absence of guidelines for the reader looks ahead to his fascination with saga literature, another genre in which suggestion rather than statement directs interpretation.

Whether in an Arthurian, Froissartian, or fantastic society, the speaker's discourse centers upon the asymmetry between his/her private response to events or actions and the political or ethical response that society demands. This search for praxis, the search for some form of correspondence between consciousness and experience or between theory and its application, fails when the ruptures between the self and its world cannot be overcome, or at least understood. However, as Blue Calhoun points out,⁴ this failure is not the failure of the individual but of an aging and dysfunctional society—an insufficiency Morris sees recurring in the moral and cultural lassitude of the nineteenth century. Both eras represent a downward or retrograde movement in the historical cycle. The protagonists in the *Defence* struggle to overcome this internal and social fragmentation by articulating the incoherencies between public and private ideologies. But in addition to their acknowledgement of contradiction, the *Defence* characters move tentatively toward a conception of society and language which Herbert Marcuse defines as “multi-dimensional”⁵ or capable of fostering, rather than silencing, the controversial implications of history, dream, and repressed desire.

Myths are originally ideological, argues Northrop Frye, and help to define society by revealing the shared knowledge which shapes a functioning culture. When no longer believed, Frye continues, myths lose their ideological purpose and become “literary.”⁶ In the *Defence*, Morris locates his poems in periods when both myth and history are beginning to lose their effectiveness as organizing structures for belief; instead, they are becoming rituals without meaning or, in the terms of Morris' lectures, “ornament” devoid of “meaning” (CW, 22: 106-112). As a result, those individuals who seek a reformulated code of behavior and belief which substantiates private desires do so without the support of cultural history or myth. The recourse to memory, to nostalgia, and to an obsession with particularity, an obsession stemming from a need to reinvest the material aspects of life with meaning, characterizes efforts to define praxis as a performative personal myth. In *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris extends this individual yearning for praxis to the universal quest for a redefinition of the utopian myth.

As they confront the inadequacies of outmoded mytho-historical formulas, the heroes and heroines in the *Defence* resist social alienation and fragmentation; in a sense they anticipate Marx's query about the relation between historical eras and the changing relevance of the language of myth: “Is

Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead?”⁷ Because the *Defence* characters resort to personal rather than community myths (Frye's myth of freedom as opposed to his myth of concern), they fail to evolve beyond their isolation. The poems' interpretive reticence or lack of “generosity” reflects the characters' inability to comprehend their relation to themselves and to their Arthurian, Froissartian, or fantastic society. Nevertheless, because they enter into the Browningsque struggle which Peter Harpdon calls “the straining game” (CW, 1:43), or the effort to create personal order out of social chaos, they do achieve (to use Morris' words) “that momentary insight into what the whole thing means” (CW, 8:225) during their speech act, the aesthetic moment which is the poem.

Guenevere is a case in point. Her monologue encapsulates the volume's overall focus on mythical and linguistic incompatibility. Guenevere's narrative exposes the asymmetrical breakdown of conventional linguistic and chivalric codes; the lack of correspondence between these systems is the subject, as sub-text, of Guenevere's argument. Her guilt or innocence is not Morris' main concern; instead, he directs attention to how Guenevere uses language—figurative language in particular, to extricate herself from her “one-dimensional” society. Because her historical situation bounds her speech and consciousness, Guenevere's linguistic space, like her physical space, is minimal; as a result, both her narrative and her body movements are convulsive, passionate attempts to free herself from verbal and spatial confinement.⁸

Memory and imagination, from Marcuse's early and optimistic perspective the sources of subversive or “negative” thought, give Guenevere the psychological and aesthetic space she needs in order to assess her love; this she does by contrasting her actions to her society's response to these actions. As most critics of the poem point out, the account of the choosing cloths structures Guenevere's argument; ironically, however, her life has been determined by a lack of choice.⁹ She did not choose Arthur; instead, as Malory explains, she was “delyverd” to Arthur, together with her dowry of the Round Table and its one hundred knights, by her father, King Lodgreaunce.¹⁰ Pertinently, Malory “silences” Guenevere: during the period of her arrival at Camelot and her betrothal ceremony she speaks not a word. Morris' poem, then, gives Guenevere a voice: “But, knowing now that they would have her speak” (CW, 1: 1). This voice allows her to retaliate against the verbal and sexual falsehood that initiated and defined her marriage: “for a little word, / Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove / Stone-cold for ever?” (CW, 1:2). Conversely, the man who chose her, Arthur, and the man who accuses her, Gauwaine, are silenced in the “*Defence*” and, indeed, in each of Morris' four Arthurian poems. The scene of the “*Defence*” does not appear in Malory and, therefore, suggests Morris' early interest in the production and reception of language, myth, and ideology. Guenevere learns that unregenerated myth and ritual become repressive forces.

Analogy emphasizes the discrepancy between the expectations of society and Guenevere's "reading" of her experience. Because she is morally and linguistically isolated, Guenevere's recourse to metaphor and simile—or the expression of the unknown in the context of the known—moves her closer toward her private realization of praxis, the understanding of the conflicting claims of her culture's "theory," or morality, and its practice.

Her progression from bewilderment and wonder to understanding and wonder confirms her suspicion that these conflicts nullify her society's right to pass moral judgment. Gauwaine's "lie" (like the "little word / Scarce ever meant at all" [CW, 1:3] of Guenevere's wedding vow) is a synecdoche for the linguistic hypocrisy and reified morality of his era. As Marcuse suggests, the words of the "established vocabulary" recreate, define, and condemn the "Enemy" according to a preferred design.¹¹ Guenevere's figurative language removes her from the confines of such officially sanctioned semantics to the realm of freedom: she speaks of "well-known things" (CW, 1:1) in a new language capable of expressing desires which lie beyond the permissible linguistic structures of her era. Her argument fractures the fixity of the word-referent liaison of closed or controlled discourse. Her monologue is subversive because she neither feels nor speaks as she "ought" (CW, 1:1); thus, she circumvents the poem's premise of controlled language: "But, knowing now that they would have her speak" (CW, 1:1). As she warns her audience, language is unstable: it only "seems" a simple matter "To talk of well-known things past now and dead" (CW, 1:1). If Guenevere's listeners are unaware of the subtleties of irony, metaphor, and simile, they may, indeed, miss the connotations of her monologue. The narrator, too, plays with simile and metaphor: "As though" at the beginning of the second stanza qualifies the layered meanings of "shame" in the tercet. The implication that her cheek burns from something other than shame is confirmed by parallel imagery in the poem's last stanza: "joyfully / Her cheek grew crimson" (CW, 1:10).¹² Throughout, the narrator's interpolations suggest that we should respond critically both to Guenevere's argument and to the narrator's ambiguous response to this "glorious lady fair" (CW, 1:2).

As a self-reflexive image, the "allegory" of the choosing cloths announces not only Guenevere's strategy of figuration but also Morris' strategy of innovative, elusive symbolism: like his Guenevere, Morris reshapes reified associations between word, image, and concept into the active dialectics of unfamiliar structures. When standard linguistic forms empty, the moral categories of right and wrong, truth and lie follow suit. Propriety in language and behavior evolves dialectically according to historical circumstances; symbolically, Guenevere's purple clothing reorders and "renames" the determinate morality suggested by the separate red and blue of the choosing cloths. Because, for her, interpretations in accord with custom no longer suffice,

Guenevere narrates her memories to herself and her accusers in the innovative and vital frame of symbolic and metaphoric analogies. These devices, together with periphrasis ("There was one less than three / In my quiet room that night" [CW, 1:9]), help Guenevere to regain language's revolutionary "power of negation" in which images meaningful to her "refuse and refute the established order" (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional*, p. 62).

Because the angel only "seems" to speak God's commands, the "truth" of the parable is doubly equivocal. The angel's refusal to guide his "reader's" interpretation of the cloths corresponds with Guenevere's enigmatic "defence" and with Morris' attitude toward the reader of the 1858 poems and, indeed, toward the readers of his oeuvre as a whole: "I will not tell you, you must somehow tell" (CW, 1:1). Guenevere refashions memory into a form which will make her past comprehensible to her rather than defensible to her audience. She is not merely unrepentant but, in her eyes, has done nothing worthy of repentance. Social disorder within kindred relations, within the class hierarchy, and within the chivalric code reflects and repeats the asynchrony between Guenevere and the natural, fertile world of the seasons during her loveless marriage to Arthur. This exclusion from sexual fulfillment also excludes and alienates her from the conventional moral and linguistic categories of "false or true" (CW, 1:3). Guenevere's extended simile describing her "fall" presents, in sensuous, Pre-Raphaelite imagery, not her failure but the failure of society to provide adequate spiritual or ethical deterrents: there are only the "small stones" that give "small leaven" and "far off . . . ships" that offer no hope of rescue. Bereft of meaningful and coherent strictures, Guenevere creates her own revolutionary ethics: love as a part of the natural world, physical beauty as a spiritual attribute worthy to be deified, and the reinvestment of life with the essential passions of joy and "green hope" (CW, 1:9).

At the same time, if language is to reflect these ethics, it too must be renovated. Words which only "seem" (this verb recurs in the speech of both Guenevere and the narrator) to express universal truth need to be assessed in the context of private truth; this is why Guenevere loves Launcelot's "wonderful words, that all mean verily / The thing they seem to mean" (CW, 1:9; emphasis added). Because society's allocation of right and wrong is incompatible with private (and natural) desire, true and false become relative and historical. Guenevere's reinterpretation of these categories allows her to reiterate and, moreover, to believe that her articulation of her subjective "truth" ineluctably counteracts Gauwaine's "lie." Her emphasis, in her refrain, on the verbalization of truth and lie ("God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie") intimates that because neither is immutable, truth and language may not necessarily coincide. Thus, Guenevere defends the veracity of her speech act rather than the morality of her love act. Toward the end of his

career, in *The Glittering Plain* and *The Wood Beyond the World*, Morris returns, but with less sympathy, to this philosophical and social issue of the separation of discourse and truth.

Rhetorical questions, abrupt changes from reflective language to the performative language of the immediate scene, and image or word chains ("stone," "tell," for instance) link the narrative present with the linguistic and conceptual spheres of metaphor and remembered events. This dialectic involves the performative language of the monologue with the inoperative language of the establishment. Guenevere's "slipping" down the well worn path is then, metaphorically, her descent from the "worn" or obsolete language of convention into the "strange new joy" (CW, 1:4) of the coincidence between insurgent experience and discourse. For Guenevere, private, subjective truth is preferable to no truth, and she finds her truth through metaphor and simile. Thus, the "Defence" explores not the integrity of Guenevere but the integrity of language itself. When Guenevere directly challenges Gauwaine's "reading" of her past, she reverts to the public language of beguilement and intimidation; she also appropriates her past by translating it into the subversive terms of an interrogative and individual critique of history: "is there any law / To make a queen say why some spots of red / Lie on her coverlet?" (CW, 1:6). The destiny of the Round Table is inextricably linked with that of Guenevere because, as the symbol of the chivalric code, its effectiveness begins and ends with Guenevere's acquiescence to the values it embodies.

Guenevere's non-compliant discourse argues convincingly that, as a complement to the beauty of the natural world, her physical beauty is as valid a measure of morality as is the hypocrisy and insincerity of Mellyagraunce. By association, Guenevere's "windy shriek" and the "shrill winds" (CW, 1:2,6) which, she threatens, will haunt Gauwaine, reinforce the image of Guenevere's voice as the subversive voice of change and natural freedom threatening the future of the established order. Silence is her last strategy: "I will not tell you more to-day" (CW, 1:10); because these words repeat the angel's refusal to interpret the semiotics he presents, they frame the poem with assertions of the revolutionary potential of private moral judgments. Through the shaping of her personal and historical memory, Guenevere struggles to extricate herself from the language and consciousness of her era and by so doing attests to the individual's power and right to contradict the conventions of a decaying society and to translate official history into personal, subjective narrative.¹³ By defining her experience, an experience for which society has no name other than "sin," with metaphor and silence, Guenevere remains at odds with her community but reconciles herself to her own (and Morris') revolutionary consciousness. The narrator's similes in the last three stanzas, together with the opening parable, frame the poem with the liberating force inherent in

figurative language—language which by its juxtaposition of the known and the unknown moves the receptive speaker/listener/reader dialectically toward a higher level of understanding. Guenevere uses poetic analogies between past and present, fact and impression, and public and private to return her to a position akin to that of Friedrich Schiller's naive poet, one who perceives love to be a pre-moral and innocent part of the harmonious union with nature. Nor the culturally formulated ideal of love but its sensual reality directs Guenevere's desire to recover prelapsarian and therefore innately moral experience: "one so longs / To see you, Launcelot; that we may be / Like children once again, free from all wrongs" (CW 1:9; emphasis added).

Guenevere's monologue, with its verbal and gestural intensity, substantiates Marcuse's claim that because songs of liberation are, by definition, out of step with the present, they often take the form of memory or dream. In order to enrich the "impoverished language of ideology," Marcuse, like Schiller, argues for the need to break the "immediate identification of reason and fact, truth and established truth" (*One-Dimensional*, p. 85). Guenevere's shaping of memory is also a shaping of truth into a personally relevant form. Moreover, her monologue questions the very issue of "false or true" (CW, 1:3) in a society which forfeits its right to judgment by adhering to inoperative values, reified truths, and a facile morality. In Marcuse's terms, Guenevere's "defence" is "linguistic therapy—that is, the effort to free words (and thereby concepts) . . . [and to demand] the transfer of moral standards (and of their validation) from the Establishment to the revolt against it" (*Essay*, p. 8). Launcelot's propitious arrival attests to the performative power of subversive language. By reintroducing the image of Guenevere's flushed cheeks and the intensity of "joy" which accompanies her love, the narrator suggests the vitality, resilience, and tenacity of the revolutionary impulse.

A similar subversive pattern of memory, speech, and the passage of narrative time underlies the other three Arthurian poems in the *Defence*. "King Arthur's Tomb," "Sir Galahad," and "The Chapel in Lyonesse" continue Morris' enquiry into decaying values and the efforts of "transgressive" language to reveal and transcend this decadence (Riede, p. 104). The articulation of memory, shaped by the liberating device of analogy, refigures the past in more meaningful—but still limited—forms. Each speaker seeks to escape entanglement in his/her past experience and, more importantly, in the establishment's reading of this experience. Inevitably, these searches for a comprehensible past and a coherent voice are seditious in effect if not in intent.

Whereas, in "The Defence" Launcelot rides at "headlong speed" (CW, 1:10) to rescue Guenevere, in "King Arthur's Tomb," his horse's "steady nodding" (CW, 1:14) epitomizes the nightmarish monotony of the joyless narrative present. Memory generates the contrast between this "grey" present and the joy of the "old garden life" (CW, 1:11). At the same time, a parallel but very different

change in perception leads Guenevere to a regressive view of the natural freedom of fulfilled desire. By means of a metaphoric change in linguistic framing, she "erases" her previous redefinition of the experience for which there is no name; in order to do this, Guenevere relinquishes the revolutionary connotations of figurative analogy and reverts to the hegemonic and facile categorization of "sin" and "hell." The natural landscape (through which Launcelot rides) now appears to her as grey "lumps of sin" (CW, 1:15), and stone is now associated not with the garden but with Arthur's tomb and as such symbolically frames or enshrines the morality of the traditional hierarchical culture. Whereas Launcelot associates the color grey, the image of the wall, and the "dismal load" (CW, 1:14) of present time with the deferral of illegitimate desire, Guenevere now reinterprets these signs from the hegemonic context of a discourse of compliance. As her references to the grey downs, to hemlock, and to the unnatural birthright of the bar sinister indicate, dialectics have broken down: hostility rather than harmony again characterizes her relation with nature. Guenevere's second "fall" is, then, her translation of sexual and psychological liberation back into social forms of guilt and sin.

Because Launcelot remains beyond this sanctioned, compliant discourse, he is oblivious to the cultural ciphers which identify Arthur's tomb. His "tale" of jousts and tournaments does not, indeed, "last beyond the whitewashed wall" (CW, 1:11) because memories of Guenevere displace his reflections on these public and ethically laudable activities until, at last, his sense of his public, heroic self dissipates. However, as the narrator's ironic tone implies, Launcelot is largely unaware of the present genesis of the myth that will reify him within the establishment's textual canon:

till whether good or bad

He was, he knew not, though he knew perchance
That he was Launcelot, the bravest knight
Of all who since the world was, have borne lance,
Or swung their swords in wrong cause or in right. (CW, 1:11)

Just as Guenevere constructs her "defence" from subversive poetic analogies, so Launcelot frames his nostalgia for the "old garden life" with simile and metaphor or, symbolically, "unnamed colours" (CW, 1:12) reminiscent of Guenevere's choosing cloths. The intense innocence and honesty of Launcelot's recollections of his spiritual and physical love for Guenevere and, through her, for nature, suggest both the "naive" poetic vision described by Schiller and the perception of the new Adam identified by Marcuse as the precondition for reformulated and revolutionary vision: the "primary" experiences of touch, taste, hearing, and smell, "must change radically if social change is to be radical, qualitative change."¹⁴ It is this ability to "frame a desire" (CW, 23:281), Morris' term from his Socialist lectures, which Guenevere forfeits when she rejects the

subversive discourse of the "Defence"; indeed, the Guenevere of "King Arthur's Tomb" suppresses even the desire to choose between meaningless convention and fulfillment: "I cannot choose / But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep / From loving Launcelot" (CW, 1:16). Launcelot, however, whose words still mean "the thing they seem to mean" (CW, 1:9), recognizes that an artificially imposed moral standpoint also restricts Guenevere's linguistic freedom:

thy heavy law, O Lord,
Is very tight about her now, and grips
Her poor heart, so that no right word

Can reach her mouth. (CW, 1:17)

With Guenevere's death, one threat to Arthurian order (metaphorically, the threatening wind that "set the silken kings a-sway" [CW, 1:13]) dissipates and the image of the bell, previously associated with desire, reacquires its traditional symbolic function of a church bell.

Like Guenevere, Galahad suffers the emotional agony which comes from the rejection of freedom and fulfillment in this world. The thematic imagery of the bell and stone, together with alienation from nature and a sense of the futility of time, links Galahad with the Guenevere of "King Arthur's Tomb." Just as Arthur's death provides a potential moral "space" for Guenevere and Launcelot, so Galahad's rebellious discourse creates the possibility for his liberation from the spiritual and ethical restrictions of the codes of the Round Table. However, like Guenevere, Galahad succumbs to the awe and dread inspired by traditional religious beliefs. In "Sir Galahad," a third, and often ironic, view of Arthurian society "rewrites" the narrative memories of Guenevere and Launcelot. The "Defence" is Guenevere's linguistic ordering of her life beyond sanctioned morality; "King Arthur's Tomb" recapitulates this life first from Launcelot's point of view and then from Guenevere's repentant or ideological perspective; "Sir Galahad" looks back at Guenevere and Launcelot from both a subversive or romantic (Galahad's longing for physical fulfillment) and a conventional or "realistic" (Christ's pessimistic interpretation of earthly love) standpoint. Each poem's design includes an authoritarian and repressive presence: Gauwaine, the orthodox Guenevere, and Christ respectively. In "Sir Galahad," Christ's command ("look and listen" [CW, 1:27]) effectively silences the rebellious interior discourse of Galahad's "musing" (CW, 1:26) and substitutes the sensuous (and sensual) appeal of a morality drama for Galahad's yearning after *cupiditas*. Thus, Galahad is "unarm'd" both sexually and linguistically by the "holy ladies" (CW, 1:28) who re-arm, yet, symbolically, emasculate him. Although Bors's news of the failure of the grail quest confirms Christ's predictions, it also suggests the transience of oligarchical authority.

In turn, Sir Galahad's concluding words in "The Chapel in Lyoness" imply that Ozana's paradise is secular rather than sacred; accordingly, the four Arthurian poems present the eventual ineffectiveness of social, political, and religious systems which repress individual desire, discourse, or volition. Historically, the movement from Guenevere's lament that, as Arthur's wife, she must be "stone-cold for ever," through her symbolic return to this frigidity beside "the carven stone" of Arthur's tomb, to Galahad's reference to the celibacy which makes him "like a man of stone" (CW, 1:24) suggests the progressive deterioration of an epoch. Ozana's metamorphosis into a symbol of verbal and physical reification completes this movement.¹⁵ When Ozana explains "My frozen speech would not well out; [with plays on "well"?] / I could not even weep" (CW, 1:31), in effect he describes the situation of the speakers at the conclusion of each Arthurian poem.

Commitment to an outmoded cause and submission to imposed values may indeed allow for sacred vision but only as a substitute for individual desire and complete experience; this paradox leads Ozana to admit that he "cannot fathom" (CW, 1:32) or decode the words of his anticipated epitaph—words which identify his moral and social function within his own culture. Similarly, in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," the hero's dilemma reflects a contradiction between the discourses of desire and duty. Like the Arthurian speakers, Peter Harpdon seeks, as Frederick Kirchoff suggests, "validation through narrative" (p. 96). Precisely what it is that requires validation in these poems is not easily defined because cryptic statements (Guenevere's "But just that which would save me" [CW, 1:10] and the omission of Gauwaine's charge, for instance) combined with Morris' refusal to judge his characters encourage interpretive plurality and indecision. The Guenevere poems ask but fail to answer whether to be outside conventional morality is to be immoral. Good and evil, virtue and vice, right and wrong may be perceptual, historically determined categories: Guenevere's love translates into a sinful "thing" (CW, 1:17) but is made so only by her revised definition. Morris re-creates Guenevere, Launcelot, Galahad, and Ozana as individuals who, whether consciously or unconsciously, resist the roles and rituals prescribed for them by society.

As dissenter, victim, and lover, Peter Harpdon complicates the poems' dialectical relations between memory and language by substituting fantasized for actual memory. The distancing effect of dramatization accomplishes this substitution: trusting in the veracity of private speech, Sir Peter, certain that "a few minutes' talk" (CW, 1:38) will dispel the pernicious effect of "lies" (or "public" speech) on Alice's love, creates an imagined discourse which subverts the dominant political discourse: "I like to think . . . what I should have said / What she, my darling, would have said and done" (CW, 1:38). However, because Alice does not believe the rumors labelling her lover as a traitor, Sir Peter's

fantasized reconciliation scene contrasts ironically with Alice's monologue: her accurate anticipation of Peter's loyal death "correct" his underestimation of the strength of her loyalty to him. Both reveries are broken by a trumpet call, both reflect upon imagined or actual gossip, and both use symbolic structure (the garden, Avalon, the kiss) in the imaginative resolution of unbearable realities.

Sir Peter's numerous allusions to "talk" as a verb and as a noun reflect the poem's preoccupation with speech, whether internal or articulated, private or political. As in the "Defence," "lie" and "truth," like betrayal and loyalty, become entangled. Akin to Guenevere's monologue, Peter's "talk" fills time and redefines his understanding in the context of a mythical and imaginative narrative (the siege of Troy); again like Guenevere, Peter measures his personal sense of honor against the slippery "cross purposes" (CW, 1:38) of political discourse and intrigue. With his honor tainted by this society's moral degeneration, Sir Peter faces death with feelings of loss and confusion; he echoes Ozana, another *Defence* speaker who is alienated from his era: "but I am all wrong" (CW, 1:53). Resolution—for Ozana fulfillment in love and for Sir Peter fulfillment in the veracity of politically innocent speech—lies beyond this world: "And if at all, after a thousand years, / I see God's face" Peter promises Clisson, "I will speak loud and bold, / And tell Him you were kind, and like Himself" (CW, 1:52).

Sir Peter himself acquires this integrity of language when, in the moments before his death, his words convey an almost divine perfection and love and loyalty: "few words he spoke; not so much what he said / Moved us, I think, as, saying it, there played / Strange tenderness" (CW, 1:58). Although the effect of Sir Peter's words is reported by the squire or "mouthpiece" (CW, 1:55), Alice responds to their spiritual connotation by displacing her love for Peter onto first the messenger and then Christ. Both displacements center upon spoken language. Alice begs the squire to "talk faster" (CW, 1:55) in order to intensify, yet abbreviate, the moment of anguish when she learns of Sir Peter's death, the details of which she imaginatively denies by wishing them to be "a made-up tale" (CW, 1:57). In an evasive strategy, her erotic scene with Christ as an earthly lover, Alice prays that her "chatter" will compel Christ to console her not by his touch but by his speech—the articulation of the Word itself. Although her grief distances her from the "talk" (CW, 1:60) in the streets, Alice identifies with an Arthurian ballad being sung beneath her window and likens her life's tale of "love and fate and death" (CW, 1:60) to that of Launcelot and Guenevere. Perhaps, she speculates, she and Sir Peter will be the subject of such songs in the future. Drawing attention to this self-conscious artistic technique, Alice sees through her grief to wonder that she "should make a story in this way" (CW, 1:60); that is, like Ophelia, Alice interprets her anguish in the context of the poetic imagination's universal and eternal capacity to promise a conceptual freedom beyond political and social constraints.

Linked by their wish fulfillment, by their focus on the contradictions be-

tween public speech (the discourses of national interests and street talk) and intimate speech, and by their likening of emotional anguish to a physical pain which makes the head "twist" or "crack" (CW, 1:38,56), the psychological dramas of Peter and Alice provide their creators with an alternate, preferable reality. At the conclusion of his imaginary dialogue, Sir Peter unconsciously leaves out the conditional verb forms, thereby eliminating the distinction between fantasy and reality. Alice, too, uses language to rewrite her immediate past: "Suppose this had not happen'd after all? / I will lean out again and watch for news" (CW, 1:60). Thus, "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" is an examination of discourse types—political lies, private truths, personal and traditional mythmaking—and of their effect on time, memory, and reality. History itself becomes a chess game in which moves are determined by players who talk "nonsense" (CW, 1:50); individual histories are "songs" (CW, 1:60) or narrative dramas composed by those who, like Guenevere, imaginatively rewrite their experience as a space of linguistic and psychological freedom. Although these attempts cannot succeed, their creators are aware that, as Marcuse explains, "the 'language' of art must communicate a truth, an objectivity which is not accessible to ordinary language and ordinary experience" (*Essay*, p. 40).

If the generosity of meaning is oblique in *The Defence* volume as a whole, in the "fantastic" poems it is opaque. Instead of focusing on a speaker who rearranges memory and discourse into patterns of desire and liberation, these poems move inward to the subconscious realm of sensations and images as they exist prior to the intervention of rational patterning. By locating the fantastic poems in their pre-rational (or dream) dimension of consciousness, Morris explores the psyche's potentiality for a release from unconditioned responses to image placement and juxtaposition. Marcuse explains this liberating process in the context of Marx's theory of the emancipation of the senses:

The existing society is reproduced not only in the mind, the consciousness of men, but also in their senses; and no persuasion, no theory, no reasoning can break this prison, unless the fixed, petrified sensibility of the individuals is "dissolved," opened to a new dimension of history, until the oppressive familiarity with the given object world is broken—broken in a second alienation: that from the alienated society. (*Counterrevolution*, pp. 71-72)

In "The Wind," perhaps the best known of the fantastic poems, the speaker's progressive movement away from an already alienated "reality" toward the dimension of dream reality accomplishes this break with the "given object world," or the world of the reader's lived experience and textual expectations. The four opening lines and their enclosed refrain meet expectations of logic and lyric; that is, they "make sense." In the next section, cause and effect relations are, indeed, at work as the speaker's repetition of the anticipatory "will" emphasizes; however, this sequential logic is strictly his. Although Morris incorporates a few "translatable" and familiar symbols (the blood or-

ange, for instance), on the whole the monologue's associative movement of imagery, as well as the meaning contributed by the refrain, is coherent only to the narrator. Like other *Defence* speakers, he organizes, shapes, and predicts on the basis of memory, dream, and poetic analogy; however, in "The Wind" these processes occur within a psychological, rather than tangible, reality where commonplace images borrowed from the material world seem unfamiliar. Not the inherent identity of each image or act, but their juxtaposition creates this conceptual alienation. Because similar dialectics of known and unknown structure poetic analogy, "The Wind" (and indeed, fantasy itself) may be read as an extended metaphoric exploration of the psychological process of estrangement.

"Metaphor is potentially revolutionary" argue M. A. Arbib and M. B. Hesse and is so because of the perceptual shift it demands from the reader.¹⁶ In "The Wind," the unchanging refrain lulls the reader with its predictable, incantatory rhythm until the absence of sense becomes unremarkable; thus, the refrain provides the reader with aesthetic and conceptual security against any inclination to deny the poem's verisimilitude. Following the narrator's "dream" (CW, 1:108) of his lover's death on a daffodil-covered hillside, the third section of the poem confirms the narrator's earlier expectations: when he moves his chair, "faint yellow juice" does "ooze out like blood" (CW, 1:107, 109) from the orange and "the ghosts of those that had gone to the war" (CW 1:109) do become part of his material fantastic reality. This verification of the narrator's causal logic also endorses the reality of an alternate perceptual dimension, a dimension which is subversive because, as a metaphor of the possible, its alignment of the known and the unknown generates doubt, not disbelief. The narrator's fantastic, psychological narrative present gives him no relief from the second level fantasy (or reality fantasized by memory) of the reverie: he cannot organize his imagery into a structure which promises freedom. He is, in fact, entrapped by the ideology of the images he creates; as Marx and Marcuse claim, our perception of sensuous imagery and the language we use to translate or interpret this imagery defines our "reality." "In Prison" enacts this relation between language and imprisonment: as signs of residual, inoperative discourse, the "grim walls, square-letter'd / With prison'd men's groan" (CW, 1:145) confine the speaker literally and figuratively within words as walls.

As a whole, *The Defence* is a poetic dramatization of possibilities for alternative and often subversive modes of seeing and speaking. Morris examines the propensity of poetic form for the containment of subversive voices and, alternatively, for the "openness" of the past to revision by subjective and poetic voices. When read metaphorically against reality, the fantastic poems, too, articulate the integrity and presence of alternate perceptual vantage points. By attempting to re-create the "multidimensional" (Marcuse) content of language, Morris unsettles his readers' expectations of form and content. "Six knights, / Their

heumes are on, whereby, half blind, / They pass by many sights" (CW, 1:140), writes Morris in "Near Avalon"; this image may well be a metaphor for the narrow vision of tradition, a constraint which the *Defence* volume works to overcome.

Notes

- 1 Florence S. Boos, "Sexual Polarities in *The Defence of Guenevere*," *BIS* 13 (1985): 181-200. She argues that the *Defence* poems present Morris' "'defence' of female passion and sexuality, against the social hierarchies and emotional suffocation they depict" (p. 181).
- 2 Constance W. Hassett, "The Style of Evasion: William Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*," *VP* 29 (1991): 113.
- 3 As David Riede points out, "transgressive writing, almost regardless of its content, could be a form of political activism" ("Transgression, Authority and the Church of Literature in Carlyle," *Victorian Connections*, ed. Jerome J. McGann [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1989], p. 104).
- 4 Blue Calhoun, "'The Little Land of Abundance': Pastoral Perspective in the Late Romances of William Morris," *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris: Papers Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association*, ed. Carole Silver and Joseph R. Dunlap (New York: William Morris Society, 1976), pp. 55-75.
- 5 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964; Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 198-199.
- 6 Northrop Frye, *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (Markham: Viking, 1990), pp. 31-34.
- 7 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, trans. Richard Dixon, 45 vols. to date (New York: International, 1975-), 28:17.
- 8 For alternative interpretations of Guenevere's "performance" see Jonathan F. S. Post, "Guenevere's Critical Performance," *VP* 17 (1979): 317-327; and Ellen W. Sternberg, "Verbal and Visual Seduction in 'The Defense of Guenevere,'" *JPRS* 6, no. 2 (1986): 45-52. However, Guenevere is not, as Sternberg believes, chained to the stake: "She walked away from Gauwaine . . ." (CW, 1:1).
- 9 For an alternative interpretation of the visual and verbal "semiotics" of the choosing cloths, see James P. Carley, "'Heaven's Colour, the Blue': Morris's Guenevere and the Choosing Cloths Reread," *JWMS* 9 (1990): 20-22.
- 10 Eugene Vinaver, ed. *Thomas Malory: Works* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 60.
- 11 Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 73-77.
- 12 Margaret A. Lourie, however, suggests that Guenevere's arguments reflect emotion and shame rather than "deliberate rhetoric" (Introduction, *William Morris: The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, Garland English Texts 2 [New York: Garland, 1981], p. 14). However, as Frederick Kirchhoff notes, her narrative indicates that she regards not her past acts but Gauwaine's accusation as "shameful" (*William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872* [Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1990], p. 88).
- 13 Charlotte H. Oberg argues that Guenevere's memories dominate the poem and "neither she nor her creator, Morris, is concerned overmuch with her sin" (*A Pagan Prophet: William Morris* [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1978], p. 157).
- 14 Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 63. Marcuse's insistence on the need for a revitalized, self-conscious awareness of experience brings to mind Walter Pater's celebration of the experiential moment in his review (1868) of the *Defence* and *The Earthly Paradise*, vol. 1. As Peter Faulkner notes, this review is "rather more subversive of orthodox Victorian morality" than Pater's subsequent revised forms of this review (*William Morris: The Critical Heritage* [London: Routledge, 1973], p. 79).
- 15 Although Morris wrote "The Chapel in Lyonesse" before the three other Arthurian poems, his choice of its placement in the volume suggests the poems' sequential meaning. For a different point of view, see Kirchhoff, pp. 99-100.
- 16 Michael A. Arbib and Mary B. Hesse, *The Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), p. 156.