

Victorian Poetry



William Morris
1834-1896

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

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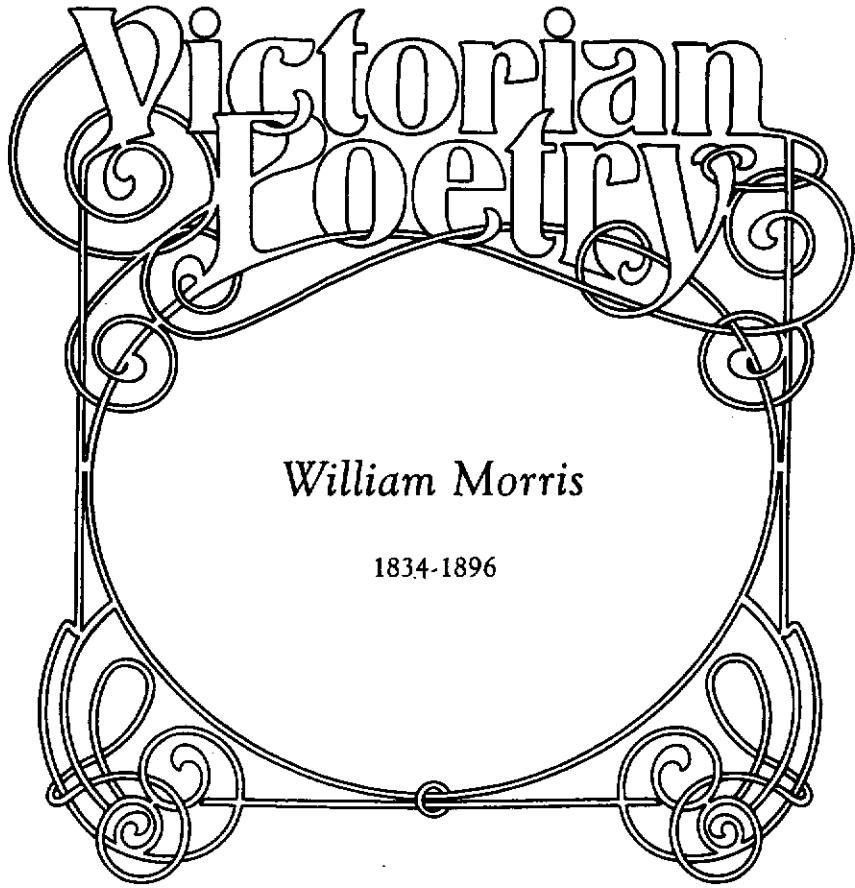
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valuable.

But I will. I believe Morris' poetry offers a blend of lyrical questioning, historical compassion, principled resistance to oppression, and unaffected celebration of the joys and losses of daily life. It therefore seems likely to me that Morris' attention to persistent social enigmas, and the resonances of his poetry with the practical and visual arts, will continue to evoke surprise and recognition from the readers who follow us, and will inspire creative interpretations in the generations to come.

Notes

- 1 Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
- 2 May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), 1:xx.
- 3 Josephine Guy, *The British Avant Garde in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

Arthurian Ghosts: The Phantom Art of "The Defence of Guenevere"

W. DAVID SHAW

IN DESCRIBING HER DEAD HUSBAND AS A MEDIUM THROUGH WHOM HISTORICAL and legendary voices once spoke, Jane Morris in Richard Howard's monologue, "A Pre-Raphaelite Ending" offers an important insight into William Morris' Arthurian verse in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858). "It was, through him," Jane Morris muses,

"an ancient voice speaking, or a voice from
a previous life
jerking the words out
of a body which it had
nothing to do with."

(Untitled Subjects, 1915, "A Pre-Raphaelite Ending," ll. 166-171)

As Howard's persona suggests, Morris writes as a kind of medium: by conjuring legendary Arthurian ghosts he combines the seer's gift for hearing voices with the ventriloquist's gift for projecting them. In this essay I want to examine three devices Morris uses to make his medieval conjurings more ghostly than Browning's art of resurrecting ferociously alive and energetic historical ghosts in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and *Men and Women* (1855).

In a larger study of dramatic monologues that is still in progress I hope to show that a sequence of monologues like *The Ring and the Book* has less in common with a historical drama like Tennyson's *Becket* or *Queen Mary* than with a historical séance in which Browning, like any ventriloquist with a talent for hearing voices, assumes the same role as his spiritual medium, Mr. Sludge. In conducting a séance at which readers may eavesdrop on the one-sided conversation of historical ghosts, the poet who writes dramatic monologues is the channel of communication between the living and the dead; like Christ, another risen soul, he is the Way, and no one can come to the spirit world except through him.

Morris' first and most important means of ghostly conjuring is to turn his words into soulless bodies, like victims of Alzheimer's disease. When Guenevere uses words like "gracious" and "verily," she seems to have lost all memory of what they traditionally mean. The body's survival of its soul's departure might seem at first to produce a merely materialist or fleshly art, as critics from Robert

Buchanan to Jerome McGann have in fact argued.¹ But in practice, except for moments of tactile drubbing and brute sensory horror in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" and "The Haystack in the Floods," the effect of Morris' hollowing out the referential soul of words is usually the opposite of tactile. In trying to bury the concepts that words normally signify, Morris confers on these corpses the posthumous life of resilient ghosts. To banish a phantom by first evoking it is already to endow that phantom with spectral life.

A second way of making the Arthurian poems ghostly is to perform death-like operations on their syntax and diction. In "King Arthur's Tomb," for example, the hyphenated oxymoron of a living that is "half-sleep, half-strife" (CW, 1:11; l. 16) compacts the death-in-life status of Morris' own ghostly conjurings. The phantom art of "The Chapel in Lyonesse" is also made spectral by the use of archaisms. Several words at the ends of quatrains—"a-pear," "a-pace," "is writ," are intelligible to the eye and ear but are no longer found on any reader's tongue. They are ghostlike, because they share the life-in-death of an obsolete idiom.

Equally spectral is Morris' use of a third device, self-voiding. Readers of Morris' phantom art are caught in a double bind. To expose Guenevere's rhetorical sleight of hand in the title poem is to reveal that to fall in love with words and visual surfaces is to fall in love with pictures. But because it is impossible to read a poem as if it were a gallery of pictures, the reader who interprets the poetry sooner or later has to conjure from its visual surfaces the ghosts of its departed moral and religious meanings. And to do so is to fall into the very trap that Guenevere has set for her victims. She hopes that readers will bestow on the ghosts of meanings she has banished from her speech a resilient posthumous life. So to resist Guenevere's seduction is to make the poetry impossible to read. And to make the poetry intelligible is to perpetuate her error. The art of William Morris is a phantom art, because it is self-voiding and spectral, an art that demonstrates its own impossibility. In order to understand the poetry the reader must first commit a version of the errors that the poet behind the mask implicitly repudiates and condemns.

Language as a Soulless Body

Jerome McGann, in speaking of Morris' materialist aesthetic, is simply the most recent critic to repeat Robert Buchanan's charge that the Pre-Raphaelites are a fleshly school of artists. But Morris' retention of the mere material husks of language, signs over which the ghosts of dead or departed referents keep hovering, usually produces poetry that is the opposite of materialist. Its indeterminate syntax, contradictory clues, and self-voiding narratives produce instead a phantom art through which Arthurian characters keep flitting like ghosts in a séance

or disturbing memories in a dream. The detached "hair," "head," and "wandering . . . mouths," which leave the "hands" far behind them in "The Defence of Guenevere" (1:5; ll. 128, 131, 136, 138), levitate like bodies on the ceilings of baroque churches, or—if that seems too ecclesiastical—like the exuberant play of released skeletal parts in Tennyson's *danse macabre*, "The Vision of Sin."

Even as the sensory husks of language are being made ghostlike by the transformation of Guenevere's rising "breast" into "waves of purple sea" and the sound waves in her throat into the sensory marvel of rising ripples, Guenevere's persuasive redefinition of key words like "wonderful," "gracious," and "true" is causing morality itself to undergo a sea-change. One of the most seductive and phantomlike features of the poem is its redefinitions, which allow moral ideas to survive as beautiful aesthetic ghosts. Though the words "gracious" and "true" retain their favorable emotive meanings, their descriptive meanings are altered beyond recognition:

will you dare,
When you have looked a little on my brow,

To say this thing is vile? (1:8; ll. 236-238)

am I not a gracious proof—
.....
... also well I love to see
That gracious smile light up your face, and hear
Your wonderful words, that all mean verily
The thing they seem to mean.
(*"The Defence of Guenevere,"* 1:9; ll. 241-250)

As "grace" declines from the favor of a gracious God or virtuous knight to mere grace of manner or bearing, virtue and vice become matters of good or bad taste. Words mean "verily," Guenevere insists, if they are "the thing they seem to mean." But if appearance is the only reality and words are mere sensory marvels, like the ripples of sound that rise in Guenevere's throat, they cannot be what they seem to be. If truth has any referential meaning, Lancelot cannot be true. And if he is true, the word "truth" has to be redefined as a pure intuition of moral values, like our intuition of color, for example, which is always a sensory presentation, just as perceptions of good and evil are in the ethical theories of G. E. Moore. For Morris, the poet behind the mask, Guenevere's understanding of truth is a self-voiding concept, made obsolete as a ghost at the very moment a correspondence theory of truth is invoked to reaffirm the traditional distinction between what a thing is and what it refers to or means.

As if to alert us to the scene-stealing theatricality of Guenevere's performance, Morris allows the auxiliary verb of illusion to multiply at an alarming rate: "making his commands / Seem to be God's commands" (1:2; ll. 31-32); "She stood, and seemed to think," (1:2; l. 58); "seemed to chime" (1:2; l. 64, italics

mine). As form supplants content, even the act of "never shrinking" is registered as a metrical expansion, swelling out the hypermetric second line with an extra syllable: "Though still she stood right up, and never shrunk, / But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!" (1:2; ll. 55-56). Despite the Miltonic syntax, which frames the noun between two adjectives, the "lady" is glorious and brave, not because she is one of Milton's moral heroines, but because she is a dazzling actress. The musical dynamics of her voice—its crescendo and fall—are more potent than any libretto she is called upon to render.

More enamored of the sound of words than of their sense, she discovers that the "little change of rhyme" (1:3; l. 66) is as much a feature of her own frugal terza rimas as of the chimes that keep ringing out the name of King Ban's son. Even the terza rima's two enclosing rhymes are ghostlike echoes of the contained rhymes in each preceding tercet (ABA, BCB, CDC), which enjoy a kind of phantom life in the rhymes that survive them:

"Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you were quite alone and very weak;
Yea, laid a dying while very mightily

"The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
Of river through your broad lands running well."
(*"The Defence of Guenevere,"* 1:1; ll. 16-20)

The evocation of "the narrow streak / Of river through your broad lands running well" (1:1; ll. 19-20) is less a description of the landscape than of the visual surface of the tercets, with their thin middle line of verse "running well" between the broad enclosing outer rhymes, and surfacing like ghosts as the dominant rhymes of the next tercets. Sometimes the end words create a phantom rhyme for the eye alone. The rhyme survives, like the poem's moral values, only as part of an intricate visual surface. "Blow" replicates "brow" visually, but fails to create a rhyme for the ear. Because the same is true of "die" and "mightily" and "commands" and "wands" (1:1-2; ll. 2, 4, 16, 18, 31, 33), the drama for the eye is not always a drama that the ear can share.

Lethal Words

Without disturbing the surface perfection of the terza rimas, which seem calm and unruffled to the eye, the ellipses and two-way meanings in "The Defence of Guenevere" convey to the ear an indeterminacy that begins to unravel the syntax, even disintegrating at moments into breakdowns and stammers: "Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, known" (1:2; l. 41). As a dramatic monologue, "The Defence of Guenevere" owes the formal arrangements of its fluent iambs and tercets to William Morris, the poet behind the mask. But to its dramatic speaker the monologue owes the flashes of feeling in its indeterminate

syntax and short swoops of phrasing:
then I could tell,

Like wisest man how all things would be, moan,
And roll and hurt myself, and long to die.
(*"The Defence of Guenevere,"* 1:2; ll. 42-44)

Is "moan" a noun or a verb? Will nature make a universal moan, or are we to understand an ellipsis of the human subject that aligns Guenevere's "moan" with the succession of verbs—"roll and hurt myself, and long to die"—in the next line?

Equally ghostlike is the way Morris' Arthurian characters declaim into the void. Even when Launcelot and Guenevere are in each other's presence in "King Arthur's Tomb," they talk past each other with the result that neither answers the other. The silence at the end of "The Defence of Guenevere," when the queen refuses to speak another word but turns sideways to listen for Launcelot, is truly a void. The absence of any answer is as audible as a gong.

Six times in "The Blue Closet" the italicized refrain can be heard tolling toward the grave. Shadowing the ultimate ellipsis of death is the blankness of the fourth refrain, where death is precisely the absence of sound, signaling both the wind's death and Arthur's. Most affecting, however, are the blank intervals and losses of sound in the last refrain, where only the tumbling sea is left to toll the death of the king, the sisters, and the wind, and finally the slow expiry of language itself.

Another lethal operation that Morris performs on words is the blissful wandering in one way of the disembodied mouths that meet among the leaves and sorely ache:

—In that garden fair

"Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
I scarce dare talk of the remembered bliss,

"When both our mouths went wandering in one way,
And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
Our hands being left behind strained far away."
(*"The Defence of Guenevere,"* 1:5; ll. 132-138)

The lines betray a strong weakness for oxymoron, for the intense pleasure of what is painful, and for the sure accuracy of moving in unison by committing what is also an act of moral vagrancy or wandering off course. There is even an inspired economy in the tight tautology of "this is true, the kiss / Wherewith we kissed in meeting" (1:5; ll. 133-134), which uses cognate forms—"the kiss . . . we kissed"—to mirror the death-dealing tautologies that every worshiper of sense in Morris' Arthurian poems seems greedy to embrace.

As Christopher Ricks observes in *Beckett's Dying Words*, language becomes deathlike when it acquires the power to mean its own opposite:²

Why did your long lips cleave
In such strange way unto my fingers then?
So eagerly glad to kiss, so loath to leave
When you rose up? ("King Arthur's Tomb," 1:18; ll. 249-252)

There is a lethal aliveness in the verb "cleave," which can mean "cut asunder" as well as "cling to." Usually, words are tipped with arrows: when Tennyson's Ancient Sage exhorts the skeptic to "cleave . . . to the sunnier side of doubt" (l. 68), he uses "cleave" to point in one direction only.³ But Morris gives us the axis without the arrow: even as Arthur's "long lips" "cleave . . . unto" the fingers, they also seem to "cleave . . . in two," mutilating what they kiss. We catch the flicker of an "anti-pun" in the archaic preposition "unto," which is no longer alive on any speaker's tongue. The phantom meaning of "in two," which is mordantly alive in the preposition "unto," cannot be wholly banished from the mind once it is raised. As in dreams, where there are no contraries, the paralyzing possibility that Arthur's lips are long because they tarry long, to immobilize and kill as well as kiss and revive, makes the language deathlike. We feel what Ricks calls "the torpedo-touch" ("The Antithetical Sense," p. 136) in a verb like "cleave," whose antithetical senses give the kiss a sinister glow. Like Tennyson's Maud, whose ghostly glimmer has the luminous appearance of a ghost, Launcelot, for all his ardor and lust, has the emotional vigor of a vampire.

If Guenevere moves her auditors, it is not by her arguments, but by the inspired simplicity of her language:

"Do I not see how God's dear pity creeps
All through your frame, and trembles in your mouth?
Remember in what grave your mother sleeps."
("The Defence of Guenevere," 1:6; ll. 151-153)

By rotating the simple sounds—"creeps," "tremble," "Remember"—she imagines what is otherwise beyond imagining, the "dear pity" of God and the severed head of her accuser's brutally murdered mother. The "awful drouth / Of pity" (1:6; ll. 156-157) which "drew" that "blow" is not so much a trope as a rotation of sounds that turn the speaker slowly toward the darkness of death.

What Morris tries to capture in the unheard words that are forever rising to the surface of his Arthurian poems is death the void, the absence of consciousness. When Galahad hovers on the edge of oblivion, the poetry's imperfect rhymes—"weary," "Miserere"—and strong seventh-syllable caesuras drift into easeful death with him:

Right so they went away, and I, being weary,
Slept long and dream'd of Heaven: the bell comes near,
I doubt it grows to morning. Miserere!
("Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery," 1:28; ll. 150-152)

The words are what they say, a drift into oblivion, and as such mimetic. But they are also anti-mimetic, a presentational assault on mimesis, since the subsiding cadences are also the unspoken subject, which keeps rising to the surface of the poem, becoming indistinguishable from the flagging metrical pulse which all but stops at the late-breaking caesura, barely able to sustain its beat to the end of the line.

Morris' renovation of clichés also makes dying forms of language curiously alive: "And you were quite alone and very weak; / Yea, laid a dying" ("The Defence of Guenevere," 1:1; ll. 17-18). Though "lay a dying" is a commonplace, Guenevere imagines someone who is not merely lying or reposing in a near-death state. She is "laid" or placed somewhere, as one is said to be "laid" in a grave. To be "laid a dying" is to be interred in a grave while one is still in the act of dying but not yet dead. Like a cliché's power to mingle life and death, there is an unimaginable horror in the Poe-like phantasy of burying someone alive.

Morris uses clichés and puns to bury the living and quicken the dead. Even his narrator's cliché, "The tears dried quick" (1:1; l. 10), is animated by antithetical energies in the pun on "quick" and in the moist eyes and "cheek of flame." As two physical forces contend against each other, the "quick" or fast drying of the eyes buries the shame that the burning cheeks ought to keep alive in a revival of the forgotten etymology of "quick."

A Self-Voiding Art

A purely presentational art is self-voiding: it drains its representations of any stable meaning. Morris voids Guenevere's fictions by subverting their authenticating mechanism: the beauty and nobility of her physical gestures. The "passionate twisting of her body" (1:2; l. 60), which bears a "trace" of the very "shame" it is said to efface (l. 59), alerts us to several other contradictions in her story. Her tacit admission of guilt in line 13, "God wot I ought to say, I have done ill," contradicts her several protestations of innocence in defiance of Gauwaine: "God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie" (1:1, 5, 10; ll. 48, 144, 285). One and the same event, Guenevere's adulterous love for Launcelot, is presented in several conflicting versions that allow her simultaneously to affirm and deny that it ever took place.

The same two-way pull can be felt in the migration of a word like "slip" through several stanzas. The slippage is partly a matter of slipping gracefully across the breaks between tercets. Morris' enchanting confusion of moral and aesthetic slippages is also captured in a series of lovely "cadences" or falls:

as if one should

Slip slowly down some path worn smooth and even,
Down to a cool sea on a summer day;

Yet still in slipping was there some small leaven

Of stretched hands catching small stones by the way

.....
No minute of that wild day ever slips

From out my memory (1:4; ll. 93-106)

The moral slippage of the word "slip" is beautifully disguised as a refreshing slip down a seaside path on a summer day. The cord that binds Guenevere to Launcelot, and which is her only tie to God, prevents her slipping on the stones. If the past is dreadful only to those who lose all memory of it, as Tennyson's lotoseaters maintain, then this slipping down the path is also the opposite of slippage, for it continues to bind that day to memory with gratitude and affection.

Even repetitions have a morally numbing effect: Arthur's "little love" hollows out the queen's marriage vow, turning it into a "little word," which is further diminished by a third use of "little," the power of Launcelot's love to make Guenevere "love God . . . a little" (1:3; ll. 83, 86, 90). Such repetitions are valued, not for their meaning, which is hollowed out by casuistry and special pleading, but for their enigmatic formal qualities, like a refrain in a ballad or a recurrent cadence in music, whose "fall" resonates more seductively each time it is heard.

The kind of purely presentational text that Morris tries to write, a text with musical or vocal "falls" but no moral ones, demonstrates its own impossibility. This is because a dramatic monologue like Guenevere's or an interior monologue like Launcelot's in "King Arthur's Tomb," Galahad's in "A Christmas Mystery," or the sisters' in "The Blue Closet" always requires a performative speech act: an act of ghostly conjuring or summoning. And to conjure ghosts is both referential and non-referential, both *re-presentational* and *re-presentational*. To the extent that ghostly conjuring evokes something new, like God's performative decree, "Let there be light," it can sustain Morris' new presentational aesthetic. But to the extent that ghostly conjuring is still a grounded act, an act of hearing voices that antecedently exit and then finding an art form to project them, the dramatic or interior monologue is not a genre that allows Morris, like the "idle singer of an empty day," to bracket either legend or history. In *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* Morris cannot create an earthly paradise of heroes and heroines who, because they never lived, "can ne'er be dead" ("Apology," *The Earthly Paradise*, 3:1; ll. 7, 19). On the contrary, Morris' Arthurian poems conjure the shades of heroes and heroines who are very dead indeed. Because they return like the ghost of Arthur, "stiff with frozen rime" in "The Blue Closet" (1:113; l. 68), to accompany the sisters across the bridge of death, they are consigned to a vigorous half-life as mere ghouls or vampires.

The Oddity of Morris' Achievement

As Cecil Lang observes, Morris' Arthurian poems are "like no others in the language, before or since, even in his own works."⁴ The sheer oddity of these beautiful poems, which trace "the drift of ghosts through a nightmare of passion," in J. H. Buckley's haunting phrase,⁵ is even stranger when we remember that Morris believed "it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion."⁶

Morris is what A. Dwight Culler calls an "Alexandrian poet."⁷ In love with the obscure corners and by-ways of legend, and seeking out neglected aspects of the Arthurian stories in order to retell them from unfamiliar angles, he is literally eccentric in his off-center efforts to reach the center. Intrigued, like Ovid, by female points of view that male writers had tried to marginalize, Morris exercises his fastidious imagination on the most remote and forgotten episodes. As in "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," where the true subject is a mere increment or gloss to a Froissart chronicle, the marginalia and the text have a way of switching position, just as they do in the glosses of Jacques Derrida, which become more important than the texts they are glossing. Incidents that are merely peripheral or off-stage in Malory—Launcelot's visit to King Arthur's tomb or Guenevere's defense before her judges—move to center stage in Morris.

Though few of Morris' Arthurian characters are as holy as Galahad, they are all secular equivalents of the holy, because they inhabit a spiritual territory of chapels, palaces, and tombs that Morris rigorously segregates from the workaday world. Guenevere's forensic rhetoric is purist art in disguise, because like purist art it is conspicuously useless and pointless. Because nothing Guenevere says is likely to convince a jury not already converted to her cause, the gratuitousness of her performance turns into a sustained travesty of the aesthetic ideal Morris formulates in his mature prose criticism. Far from throwing over art's absence of point the halo of the sacred, Morris, like Ruskin, defends in his criticism a theory of art for work's sake, not art for art's sake. Declaring that "art is man's expression of his joy in labour,"⁸ Morris opposes any purist separation of art or craft from the everyday world.

Like Matthew Arnold, however, who embraces neo-classicism as a critic but practices Romanticism as a poet, Morris' poetic theory and practice radically diverge. In Morris' most beautiful early poems the absence of moral or rhetorical ends is shown to possess inherent value. The tenderly darkened fingers, the shadow in the hand that looks like wine inside a gold-colored cup, the breast rising like waves of purple sea are enough to make Guenevere a heroine, not because all things are equally heroic or beautiful to Morris, but because they are all equally indifferent. A "terrible beauty" attaches to Launcelot and Guenevere, not because they represent a class of special people, but because

they present the special class of love's martyrs and aesthetes. Their purity would be less inviolable if it were not so arbitrary.

In Morris' purist poetry severe abstention from all practical habits of perception that would associate blue with fidelity, for example, or green with amorous passion requires a medieval scholar like Johan Huizinga heroically to suppress his understanding. Readers must see with Ruskin's "innocent eye" what a child might see, or what the retina of the eye might register if it could be cut off painlessly from the brain. To renounce representation by offering immediate presentations of tear-filled voices or rippling words rising in the throat is to emancipate the sensory medium.

Nothing is more eloquent in such poetry than an abstract posture like Guenevere's leaning eagerly in an immovable gesture, tense with expectation, as she strains like a leashed greyhound to catch sounds of her deliverer's voice. In abandoning the representation of outcomes, such poetry ends at the penultimate moment, offering mere hints and indications. If Launcelot is coming to save her, he comes as a mere wraith or phantom, like Ulysses at the end of Wallace Stevens' monodrama, "The World as Meditation." Morris perfects a ghostly art in which the portraits are a caricature, the narratives a phantom, and the medieval past a mere dissolving dream.

In stripping away the pompous drapery of convention, Morris even reduces his speakers to cartoon-like travesties:

"Christ! my hot lips are very near his brow,
Help me to save his soul!—Yea, verily,

Across my husband's head, fair Launcelot!
Fair serpent mark'd with V upon the head!
This thing we did while yet he was alive,
Why not, O twisting knight, now he is dead?"
("King Arthur's Tomb," 1:17; ll. 207-212)

Strip away the rhetoric, and what we find is the twisting serpent body of the knight seduced by the queen over the head of her husband's corpse. Salvation lies in a caricature of Launcelot, the branded snake, a Cain among outcasts. Because one form of caricature is to be brutal or vulgar, Morris occasionally flaunts what is out of place in a picture, spoiling the composition. After praising Guenevere as glorious and fair, for example, the narrator in "The Defence of Guenevere" scorns the picture he has just painted of her by exposing in the "passionate twisting of her body" (1:2; l. 60) a gesture that is ugly and deformed. Even the pictures of Galahad and Sir Ozana expiring on their death beds are stunted and pathetic caricatures: we seem to be looking at corpses "laid out," as George Santayana says, "in pontifical vestments."⁹

Often, as in "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," Morris is most faithful to

a medieval chronicler like Froissart when he omits all psychological speculation and allows a pictorial description of outward circumstance to acquire tragic force on its own. As Huizinga says, "Froissart's soul was a photographic plate."¹⁰ After boasting that such a soul knew nothing of the tale he has imaginatively reconstructed from a pile of bones, Morris' narrator decides to imitate Froissart's more objective methods by forgoing introspection and speaking simply as a connoisseur of art, like Browning's Duke at the end of "My Last Duchess":

Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!
("My Last Duchess," ll. 54-56)¹¹

This Jacques Picard, known through many lands,
Wrought cunningly; he's dead now—I am old.
("Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," 1:81; ll. 199-200)

Praising the effigy of stone-white hands and bright gold hair commissioned by him for the slain lovers, Morris' speaker finds he can chart the undertow of oblivion and come at last to the abyss in things only by remaining wholly on the surface.

Conclusion

To interpret Morris' Arthurian poetry is to re-present it in the language of critical discourse. If all critical commentary is allegory (an assignment of conceptual meaning—or lack of meaning—to poetic signifiers), then every critic of these poems is committing a version of the representational error Morris' necessarily unsuccessful attempt to void language of concepts is designed to expose. So to interpret Morris' early poetry by reducing it to allegory is necessarily to misinterpret it, and to interpret it correctly is to defeat the critical intelligence by not talking about it at all. Strictly speaking, interpreters are reduced to either silence or misreading. This perhaps explains why it is hard to write well about Morris' early poetry, which, like much analysis of prosody, tends to produce readable commentary that is inaccurate or accurate commentary that is unreadable.

We can formulate this conclusion another way by saying that to fall in love with Guenevere's pagan beauty is presumably to love less well the ghosts of such departed mediations of her value as her virtue and her goodness. Johan Huizinga cites numerous examples in the late Middle Ages of the mindless multiplication of such moral ghosts. For Olivier de la Marche, to use one of Huizinga's examples, each article of female costume symbolizes a virtue: "the shoes mean care and diligence, stockings perseverance, the garter resolution" (p. 209). It is not merely that each thing means something, but that each thing means almost anything. It is clear that, like the symbolic meanings of the blue and red wands in

"The Defence of Guenevere," such virtues as diligence, perseverance, and resolution survive only as ghosts of their original moral meanings, and that the search for these virtues in shoes, stockings, and garters has become a meaningless intellectual pastime.

Whereas T. S. Eliot's "blue" in "Ash Wednesday" has an assigned connotation, "blue of larkspur, blue of Mary's colour" (IV. 10),¹² Morris' "blue" is an unconsummated symbol. Its meaning exhausts the freakishness of arbitrary caprice:

"And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;
No man could tell the better of the two.

"After a shivering half-hour you said:
'God help! heaven's colour, the blue:' and he said, 'hell.'"
(*"The Defence of Guenevere,"* 1:2; ll. 34-38)

It is possible, of course, that the use of "blue" as a floating signifier is historically grounded. Morris may expect us to know that blue, originally a symbol of fidelity in love, came in the Middle Ages to represent its own opposite. As Huizinga explains, "by a very curious transition, blue, instead of being the color of faithful love, came to mean infidelity, too, and next, beside the faithless wife, marked the dupe. In Holland the blue cloak designated an adulterous woman, in France the 'cote bleue' denotes a cuckold. At last blue was the color of fools in general" (p. 272).

Though it is historically accurate to say that Morris dramatizes the phase of culture that Huizinga analyzes in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, a historian of ideas would be equally justified in arguing that Morris is not merely re-presenting medieval symbolism in its decline but is also exploring the nature and function of the presentational forms that his Victorian contemporary, H. L. Mansel, analyzes in *Prolegomena Logica* (1851).¹³ Unlike a conceptual representation, Mansel says, the poet's presentational images can be immediately "depicted to sense or imagination." Whereas representative or discursive signs "fix the concept in understanding, freeing its attributes from the condition of locality, and hence from all resemblance to an object of sense,"¹⁴ the poet's presentational images are examples of representative ghosts, or what Susanne Langer calls "unconsummated symbols." As in music, to which Pater says all art aspires, the presentational language of Mansel's poet possesses, in Langer's words, all "the earmarks of a true symbolism except one: the existence of an assigned connotation."¹⁵ Because Morris' Arthurian poems abound in presentational language that possesses the outward form or the ghost of a representational sign without its conventionally assigned significance, the lovely cadences or "falls" in his verse, which are vocal but not moral "falls," approximate music's "unconsummated" form of symbolism. In short-circuiting the process of using a word to represent a concept that is then denoted by a sensory object, Mansel's presenta-

tional forms play an increasingly important role in the poetic theories and practice of such Victorians as Arthur Hallam, David Masson, Walter Pater, and A. C. Swinburne, who often use images to project meanings too elusive for conceptual language to express. Offering an explanation of such anti-mimetic mimesis, or what I prefer to call "representational ghosts," by analyzing the intuitional theory of logic and knowledge that informs them, Mansel's *Prolegomena* is a work we know Pater admired, since he praises its "acute" philosophy in his essay on "Style." The *Prolegomena Logica* no doubt influences Pater's own purist criticism, including the well-known analysis of Morris' verse in Pater's 1868 essay on "Aesthetic Poetry."

Paradoxically, the harder Morris' Guenevere tries to bury the ghosts of moral judgment, the more these phantoms survive their burial by returning to haunt her. To opt for the flesh rather than the spirit is not, as we might first think, merely to slay the latter in the act of giving life to the former. Rather it is to fall victim to a phantom art, to an art that conjures shades from the gloom. These are shades that, as F. H. Bradley says of "the ghosts of Metaphysics," never "speak without blood . . . and accept no substitute."¹⁶ In hovering resourcefully between a historical re-presentation of late-medieval symbolism in its decline and a pure presentation of sensory forms, Morris produces a phantom art that is neither one nor the other. The historical ghosts that Morris conjures in his Arthurian poems are mere ghosts of ghosts, mere phantoms of the departed representations that Huizinga identifies in the decline of late-medieval symbolism. And the purist forms that these poems cultivate are never entirely pure, because the theological and moral ghosts they try to exorcise refuse to die. Like phantoms, they enjoy a resilient posthumous life.

To conjure ghosts and converse with shadows the poet must first become a shade. Morris apparently thought of his own early poetry as a penitential exercise, a rite of exorcism to which he must first submit, before producing the kind of "mighty art" he extols in "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization." Though his Arthurian poems are, in his own words, the mere "reflection and feeble ghost of that glorious autumn which ended the good days of the mighty art of the Middle Ages,"¹⁷ they remain the strangest and most beautiful poems he ever wrote, poems to which generations of readers keep returning with enduring satisfaction.

Notes

- 1 See Robert Buchanan, "The Fleshly School of Poetry," *Contemporary Review* 28 (1871): 334-350, and Jerome McGann, "A Thing to Mind: The Materialist Aesthetic of William Morris," *HLQ* 55 (1992): 55-74.
Other perceptive modern readings of Morris' Arthurian poems include: Florence S. Boos, "Historicism in William Morris' 'The Defence of Guenevere'" in *King Arthur*

- Through The Ages*, Vol. 2, ed. Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. 81-104; Patrick Brantlinger, "A Reading of Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*," *VN* 44 (1973): 18-24; James P. Carley, "'Heaven's Colour, the Blue': Morris' Guenevere and the Choosing Cloths Reread," *JWMS* 9 (1990): 20-22; Virginia S. Hale and Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "Morris' Medieval Queen: A Paradox Resolved," *VP* 30 (1992): 171-178; Constance W. Hassett, "The Style of Evasion: William Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*," *VP* 29 (1991): 99-114; John Hollow, "William Morris and the Judgment of God," *PMLA* 86 (1971): 446-451; Jonathan Post, "Guenevere's Critical Performance," *VP* 17 (1979): 317-327; David G. Riede, "Morris, Modernism and Romance," *ELH* 51 (1984): 85-106; Carole G. Silver, "'The Defence of Guenevere': A Further Interpretation," *SEL* 9 (1969): 695-702; and David Staines, "Morris' Treatment of His Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*," *SP* 70 (1973): 439-464.
- 2 Christopher Ricks, "The Antithetical Sense," *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 128-145.
 - 3 *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 3:140.
 - 4 Cecil Y. Lang, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 509.
 - 5 Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1951), p. 176.
 - 6 William Morris, "The Art of the People," *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures by William Morris* (New York: Longmans, 1903), p. 66.
 - 7 A. Dwight Culler, *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 90-92.
 - 8 William Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy," *On Art and Socialism: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: Longmans, 1947), p. 139.
 - 9 George Santayana, "Penitent Art," *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Norman Henfrey (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), p. 274.
 - 10 Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1949), p. 292.
 - 11 *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 1:350.
 - 12 T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (New York: Harcourt, 1936), p. 116.
 - 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.
 - 14 H. L. Mansel, *Prolegomena Logica: An Inquiry into the Psychological Character of Logical Processes* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1851), p. 14.
 - 15 Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Mentor, 1948), p. 195.
 - 16 F. H. Bradley, *Aphorisms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), aphorism 98.
 - 17 William Morris, "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization," *Hopes and Fears for Art*, p. 211.

Dissident Language in The Defence of Guenevere

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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,