The Style of Evasion: William Morris’ The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems

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WILLIAM MORRIS’ POETRY HAS SO OFTEN BEEN CALLED ESCAPIST THAT IT might seem needless to inquire what it escapes from. By his own account, “the attractions . . . of poetry” forestalled the development of “socio-political ideas.”1 His opening to The Earthly Paradise argues explicitly that art is a means of forgetting industrial England’s “smoke” and slums, while a lecture of 1891 restates the Pre-Raphaelites’ rejection of “the ugliness and sordidness” of contemporary life.2 Morris’ apparent evasion of the modern was so complete that one reviewer of The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems (1858) complained about the neglect of “the living world” in “Mr. Morris’s very chivalrous little pictures.”3 Even the admiring twentieth-century critic who sees the concern of the volume with “the obscure deaths of young men” as a reaction to the Crimean War (1854–56) concedes that “revolutionary meanings” are conspicuously absent.4

Such unanimity about Morris’ manifest concerns, however, neglects the evidence of The Defence of Guenevere, which registers unease with nineteenth-century culture at a level deeper than the thematic. The thirty poems of 1858 may make no direct allusion to Victorian life, but they marshal formal means in a way that builds a case against the contemporary. This essay proposes that the unsettling strangeness of Morris’ style can be read as resistance to conventional assumptions about the autonomy of the individual and the normal behavior of language.

I

One of the peculiarities of The Defence of Guenevere is that its characters shiver, totter, start, jerk, and pant. Their actions are so fitful, their limbs so oddly articulated, that they become at moments indecipherably alien. When a woman’s lips are said to “arch and move / In such wise that a language new
I know” (“Geffray,” ll. 169–170), the compliment should be taken as encouragement to examine the link between this fetishizing of the body and Morris’ skewed sense of selfhood. If further inducement is needed to pursue this connection, there is a useful hint in Walter Pater’s belated review-essay; there he launches a telling analogy: “The poem which gives its name to the volume is a thing tormented and awry with passion, like the body of Guenevere defending herself.” Pater sees correctly the relation between Guenevere’s twisted figure (“‘Defence,” l. 60) and the contorted body of her poem. A study of such deformations leads to a recovery of the poetics of the volume and its critique of individuality. The body language of the characters and of the poetry itself, with its looming details and stiffened rhythms, can be shown to enforce an awareness of persons and poems in the materiality of their identity.

Throughout the Guenevere volume, the body turns clumsy whenever the mind recoils. Numerous characters besides Guenevere succumb to writhing dread, but the most vivid physical response is Launcelot’s. The queen’s abuse reduces him to coiling misery: “O twisting knight . . . shake now and shiver” (“Tomb,” ll. 212–213). Distress also compels twitching fretfulness (“strangely with her fingers fair / She beat some tune upon the gold,” “Wings,” ll. 84–85) and startlingly indecorous positions; one supplicant proposes lying down “my face on the bare stone / Between your feet” (“Peter,” ll. 671–672).

At its most intense, emotional strain is sensory impairment. Love and malice can obscure vision (“‘Their howling almost blinded me,” “Judgment,” l. 10), while fear and intimidation prompt clumsily literal attempts not to see impending horrors:

\[\text{She saw at once the wretched end,} \\
\text{And, stooping down, tried hard to rend} \\
\text{Her coif the wrong way from her head,} \\
\text{And hid her eyes. (“Haystack,” ll. 40–43)}\]

The physicality of bewilderment is a theme these poems insist on, going well beyond the usual correlation of mental condition with physical expression. Characters are so persistently uncomprehending, their mental blanks so vividly mapped by physical responses, they seem nearly devoid of extracorporeal identity. In effect, neither the fact nor the illusion of serene self-possession receives much support in this volume. By ignoring the possibility of a core of self untouched by external circumstances, the implied definition of the individual pushes in the direction of the material.

The body becomes prominent in The Defence of Guenevere not only through images of contortion, but in the strange narrative lingering on its parts. Changes of visual scale bring isolated features up close. As one woman weeps, a few “wretched tears” roll “past her ears” (“Wings,” ll. 160–161);
the abject Galahad stares at his shoes ("Galahad," l. 13). Passages of this sort are customarily regarded as pictorial and evaluated in the same breath as Pre-Raphaelite realism. What constitutes verisimilitude in a painting, however, promotes different effects in a poem. The presence of bodily detail bears on the pace of things, attenuating or stalling verbal momentum. The result, as in the above cases, can be an imposed or uneasy stillness. Repeated delays of this sort create an awareness not only of the conspicuous ear or foot, but of the impeded narrative. The poem is no longer the transparent vehicle for a story, but a material medium with its own durational properties. The physicality of the character and the poem come to prominence together.

The body language of the Guenevere volume finds its best Pre-Raphaelite analogue not in the brothers' naturalism, but in their fascination with anti-academic body types and poses. Their antipathy to rounded limbs and elegant attitudes was an avowed element in their rebellion against the aesthetics of "central form." This view of reality—handed down from the eighteenth-century and impressed upon painters through Reynolds' Discourses—posits "an ideal beauty, superior to what is to be found in individual nature." The brothers' programmatic insistence on forced and awkward postures questions everything the academic doctrine implies, especially the hierarchies through which the elder generation interprets the world. The younger artists not only reject the mandated repression of particulars, they resist the subordination of the physical to the essential in the understanding of human nature. Thus the famous wood shavings of John Everett Millais' Christ in the Carpenter's Shop are less relevant to the bodily details of the Guenevere volume than his angular Joseph stretched across the work bench and the "wry-necked" Christ and Mary that so offended Dickens. The vines and water weeds in Holman Hunt's A Converted British Family are less germane than the figure hunched at the lower edge of the picture (Illus. 25).

More pertinent still are the Rossetti watercolors done throughout the period of the composition of the volume. In The Wedding of St. George and Princess Sabra, for example, the lovers present a visual mass of angled limbs, cramped bodies, and jutting chins (Illus. 221). That certain poems follow specific Rossetti pictures is, of course, well known; and of these "King Arthur's Tomb" shares an emphatic commitment to the unconventional handling of human figures. For Arthur's Tomb, Rossetti invents an extraordinary posture (Pre-Raphaelites, Illus. 213). Squeezed beneath apple boughs, Launcelot yearns toward Guenevere across a life-size effigy of Arthur. Morris' poem follows suit, specifying that Guenevere came upon Launcelot in the "place of apple-trees" (l. 123) as "he lay / On Arthur's head" (ll. 186-187). The knight's position is both strange and difficult. The pose amply suggests the outcome of the tale. There is to be no erotic
solace for Launcelot and no clarifying rejection of passion. There will be Guenevere’s obscure malevolence and his own bodily swoon.

A second peculiarity of the Guenevere volume is the preoccupation with wounding, maiming, and other forms of cruelty. Sheer strangeness may make such things readable, but there is a narrative factor at work too, one that suits the corporeality of the poems generally and the attention paid to bodily detail. Whenever hostilities are treated, the tendency to identify the human with the anatomical is pushed to a particularizing extreme. Instead of massive pain, the victims of these episodes endure isolated wounds. In effect, the many injuries and punishments are inflicted not so much on persons as on individual body parts. Combatants experience sword blows as if a punctured heart or breast were somehow a localized trauma (“Chapel,” l. 8, “Geffray,” l. 89). When such stabs prove fatal, the perplexed onlookers hardly know how to think about them. Guenevere, for example, in a moment of grotesquely displaced concern, speaks not of trying to save a life, but of repairing a corpse. The “cloven head” of a tournament casualty bears

no marks now of Launcelot’s bitter sword,
Being by embalmers deftly solder’d up;
So still it seem’d the face of a great lord,
Being mended as a craftsman mends a cup. (“Tomb,” ll. 229–232)

A similar perception of the body as a material aggregate allows captors to order the mutilation of prisoners and to specify the severing of hands or ears. This oddly discrete sense of the human physique suffuses the narrative generally. Even outright murder is rendered as an affair of the head and neck:

From Robert’s throat he loosed the bands
Of silk and mail . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . .
... she saw him bend
Back Robert’s head; she saw him send
The thin steel down. (“Haystack,” ll. 138–145)

When this particular throat-slitting is accomplished, the physiological fragmentation—the diction warrants this last term—continues. In a frenzy of malice, Robert’s enemies “beat / His head to pieces at their feet” (ll. 150–151, emphasis added). It is not an exaggeration to say that most of the painful episodes of the volume are managed like maimings. Throughout The Defence of Guenevere, there is a pronounced affinity between the squint of an assailant’s eye and a narrator’s. Both parcel out the body’s members, repressing as needed their knowledge of the bodily inhabitant. The parallel is explicit in “Concerning Geffray Teste Noire.” Here, a soldier remarks amid his tale of ambushed lovers, “easy this to tell” (l. 135). The narratees, to be sure, do not feel the story the way they felt their death throes, but it is nonetheless true that the narrative rests upon a defeat akin to malevolence. Such recurrent
callousness may not be the result of any inherent brutality on Morris' part so much as a spontaneous resistance to the notion of self-presence as it is traditionally understood. Accounts of torment, including the self-reported cases where the speaker has been subjected to cruelty, resist the sufferer as a whole person. Even in poems that might conceivably have been managed as dramatic monologues, the consciousness of pain goes willingly unexplored ("Riding," "Avalon," "Prison"). The subject's interiority is refused.

This strategic limitation extends to narratives of every sort, even to the telling of one's love. The enamored speaker of "Praise of My Lady" maps his beloved as a series of erotic sites, moving slowly from forehead to throat and from wrist to "tender palm" (l. 77). When, in his lingering perusal, four stanzas attend to the mouth, the abusiveness of such detailing becomes evident. The admiring observer pries into her erotic discontent, noting that the woman's lips are "parted longingly" and "swift . . . / To pluck at any flying love" (ll. 51, 53-54). The coarseness of this attempted identification marks a radical departure from customary generic assumptions. The lovely body is traditionally interpreted as the sign of inner beauty; the woman is valued as a transcendently non-carnal being. But such essential autonomy is precisely what "Praise of My Lady" fails to establish; the fair woman is no more compelling in her interiority than any other character in the volume.

Interpretatively, such unsatisfactory litanies and probings (see also "Love," "Eve") can be rationalized as evidence that the lovers' encounters did not or will not take place. As the speakers grope towards an unrealizable presence, the reductiveness of their language serves notice of the absence it cannot cure. But it should be noted that even when lovers share one another's company, the account stays peripheral and discrete. Close embraces are rare, and a kiss has a targeted, pained, and slightly improbable air: "both our mouths went wandering in one way, / And aching sorely, met among the leaves; / Our hands being left behind strained far away" ("Defence," ll. 136-138). The lovers in the volume regard one another almost as combatants do and aim their kisses at brows, cheeks, eyelids, ears, feet, and backs of hands. When erotic attraction is literally hateful, the wish to annihilate the woman requires little revision of the itemizing formula. The sadism of Godmar's blazon in "The Haystack in the Floods" typifies even as it contaminates all the litanies of the volume; a witch's death, he gloats, would be a "piteous end" for Jehane's "long fingers, and long feet, / And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet" (ll. 111-112).

The congruence between the hostile and the erotic implicit in so many of the Guenevere poems becomes an overt structuring device in at least one. "The Judgment of God" is a jarring love poem by a man who once maimed an enemy: "tell me how / His hands were cut off at the wrists" (ll. 19-20). While preparing for combat, this mutilator praises his beloved's "sweet chin
and mouth" (I. 54) and asserts her devotion using a startlingly barbarous exaggeration: "you . . . / Would burn your hands off, if that pain / Could win a kiss" (ll. 38-40). The manual form of the speaker's earlier crime might be the motive for his bizarre figure of speech; but it is not necessary here to explore his psychology. Rather, it should be noted that the coincidence of severed and burned hands emphasizes distortions that are typical of the entire volume. Morris' lovers speak in ways that dismember the beloved.

This tendency can be restated in terms of what the lovers do not say; they avoid the traditional aspiration to merge with the beloved. They ignore the kind of symbolism so prevalent in Rossetti's *House of Life*; there are no birth-bonds, no mirrored eyes, no obscured borders of self and other, no exchanges of self-presence. Love is never said to breathe "through two blent souls." In premising the affinity of the beloved and the enemy, *The Defence of Guenevere* effects a rupture with the traditional understanding of the wholeness of the individual. By showing no interest in the dynamics of erotic or compassionate identification, it approaches an anti-individuality that is remarkably non-Victorian. That combatants should be represented as refusing empathy is not surprising, but it is unexpected that lovers should be so depicted and that the entire volume, down to its slightest narrative features, should enforce that refusal.

II

In "The Defence of Guenevere," there is a notable moment when the Queen directs attention to the issue of verbal integrity. Explaining her delight in Launcelot's company, she praises his "wonderful words, that all mean verily / The thing they seem to mean" (II. 249-250). This insistence on the paradox of Launcelot's adulterous honor launches a volume-long series of observations on the behavior of language and the play of meaning. In a constant and deeply embedded fashion, the *Guenevere* poems challenge commonly held assumptions about referentiality, verbal wholeness, and intentional fullness. To begin with, Guenevere is cynical about ordinary language use; her phrase "wonderful words" implies a contrast with non-wonderful speech and the slippage it allows between words and meanings. Language, in her experience, has only tenuous connection with reality; literal facts, including those of Gauwaine's accusation, have the impact of falsehood.

Guenevere is not, however, a serious advocate of non-duplicitous language. On the contrary, she excuses her actions on precisely the grounds that her own utterances do not mean what they seem; her marriage vow, for example, is "a little word, / Scarce ever meant at all" (II. 86-87). The gap
between intention and articulation is Guenevere's moral loophole. A more startling phenomenon—because so linguistically canny—is Guenevere's knowing manipulation of the division internal to language. Exploiting the rift between the material and the semantic, her defense relies less on the explanatory force of words than on their duration. Language consumes the minutes until rescue arrives. Moreover, since it plainly suits her purpose to empty words of their meaning, Guenevere becomes explicit about the physicality of word-production. She calls attention to her speech as a bodily event of great beauty: “See through my long throat how the words go up / In ripples to my mouth” (ll. 230–231). She stresses, too, the acoustic pleasure of hearing her voice with its “gentle queenly sound” (l. 244).

If all this suggests that Guenevere's view of language is contaminated by self-admiration, that does not make it untypical. In poem after poem, the characters talk about language as something empty and material. They speak of verbal misadventures as nonsemantic episodes: words can be wafted out of context, “I heard some knights say something yestereve, / . . . words far apart” (“Peter,” ll. 501–502); or blocked of articulation, “no right word / Can reach her mouth” (“Tomb,” ll. 200–201). The metaphors in the volume give unexpected life to sounds and transcriptions of sounds. Launcelot, for example, knows that battle cries “bite verily like steel” and that Guenevere’s “name-letters” make him “leap” (“Tomb,” ll. 360, 72). Throughout, there is a persistent interest in such acoustic forms as expletive or babble (“Rapunzel,” ll. 156–160) and in the unmotivated nature of the sign. In one instance, both the principal and the auditor of an anecdote are discovered to have the same name: “Alleyne is paid now; your name Alleyne too? / Mary! how strange” (“Geffray,” ll. 27–28). The coincidence—remarked with a “Mary”—shows names to be moveable properties without substantial connection to the name-bearer.13 This particular manifestation of linguistic arbitrariness is emphasized by the way names drift throughout the volume. Within the limited compass of thirty poems, there is an odd reduplication of Roberts and Gileses, Alices and Isabeaux.

Repetitions of all sorts abound in the Guenevere volume and underscore its materialist approach to language. In some instances reiteration of single words creates interpretative possibilities. When a woman moans “I cannot choose but sin and sin” (“Haystack,” l. 96), she might be dreading continuous sin (sin and sin again) or a choice between sins (sin or sin). Both notions fit her circumstances. But in the case of repetition beyond the double, the effect is a nearly contentless palpability. When a character says that it is “still night, and night, and night” (“Tomb,” l. 102), the situation feels like semantic collapse. The word, however, is not failing him; rather its function has shifted from the realm of meaning to that of performance. Iteration is a form of stalling, a mode of serious play that lends itself to
many uses. Oftentimes, it is a mark of desperation. When Guenevere imagines someone moaning, “If only I had known, known, known” (“Defence,” l. 41), the excess conveys futility (see also “Tomb,” l. 181, “Peter,” l. 713). Elsewhere, a knight uses a tripled word to signify and mime the pointlessness of negotiations with an enemy: “Talk, and talk, and talk, / I know this man has come to murder me” (“Peter,” ll. 226–227). Their vacuous parleying will, however, allow time to maneuver for a strike. The knight’s life, like Guenevere’s, may depend on the temporal value of his words. In a more elaborate way, Launcelot too exploits the duration of the repetitive interval. Wildly impatient on his long night ride to Guenevere, he uses familiar narratives to measure his terrain. His stories, unfortunately, prove literally too short: “I tell myself a tale / That will not last beyond the whitewashed wall” (“Tomb,” ll. 30–31).

Launcelot’s strategy not only locates a value in narrative distinct from its meaning, it also identifies a nonsemantic standard for closure. While his virtually geographic sense of ending is the result of unique circumstances, the Guenevere volume as a whole supports his notion of physically measured completion. In a variety of ways these poems strain the customary bond between meaningful resolution and formal conclusion.

On some occasions, completion is a psychological matter; the ending arrives as a speaker’s motivation wanes. The final lines of “Riding Together” register the silencing power of despondency: “I take no heed of any weather, / The sweet Saints grant I live not long” (ll. 51–52). On other occasions, the break-up of the poem is a bodily event. In “Praise of My Lady” both longing and language are felt along the throat. The formal ending coincides with constriction of the air passage: “I choke” (l. 86). A few especially interesting conclusions manipulate italicized refrains. By changing the physical presentation of the poem, such lines visualize the materiality of language; they openly display its productive and concluding force. “Sir Giles’ War-Song,” for example, closes with a soldier’s boast, “I pulled him through the bars to ME, / Sir Giles, le bon des barrières” (ll. 17–18). As this crossing-the-bar is reported narratively, the roman-faced stanza pushes into the previously italicized space of the refrain. The narrated transgression of boundaries is finalized by the graphic behavior of the poem itself.

Collectively, these strikingly different endings reveal that The Defence of Guenevere is, in its way, a speculative volume. The versatility with which these poems play themselves out shows that completion is a matter of options, not inevitabilities, a feature-in-itself, not a fade-out. Their constant realignment of the thematic and physical aspects of ending constitutes a meditation on the rifted nature of language. At issue ultimately is the bearing of this linguistic doubleness on rival conceptions of poetry. The volume offers poems that imitate a speaker and express his or her fictional
meanings. But it also savors the materiality of poems per se and proclaims an aesthetic mode of being unrelated to any speaker’s intentions.

Even if scrutiny of the endings is confined to thematic resolution, the Guenevere volume shows itself chary about endorsing any speaker’s meaning or that of any individual poem. The statements that poems appear to make are provisional, not permanent. “Spell-bound,” for example, is a delicate allegory of masculine inhibition in which the female imperative seems clear: the timid bride must aggressively seek her groom. A few poems later, however, when another woman accepts this very role and is “slain outright” (“Wings,” l. 212), her unexplained fate necessarily disrupts the preestablished value of the female quest. Each poem breeds doubt about the other’s apparent message, and together they unsettle naive assumptions about determinable meaning. In general, the stability of the Guenevere poems is not attached to intended value judgments. Emphatically marked “finished,” the poems are nonetheless free to become undone and problematic. By not allowing individual poems to evaporate into fixed statements, the volume assumes a remarkably un-Victorian position on meaning. Its radical stance, moreover, was not unnoticed by contemporaries. One early review protests the “general moral impression conveyed” by The Defence of Guenevere and its failure to consider that “poetry is concerned about human...duties” (Faulkner, p. 46). The reviewer may or may not be correct about the function of art, but his wish for a poetry of ethical statement is a commonplace of the era; and he is right to see that these poems do not support his view. The Defence of Guenevere works in a variety of ways to scrutinize, qualify, or prevent settled meanings.

The physicality of The Defence of Guenevere—its attention to the somatic and the nonsemantic—extends to its engagement with the poetic medium. All poetry, as Jakobson’s well-known formulation makes clear, is characterized by the palpability of the signifier; and as commentators only occasionally remember, the poetic sound-image privileges the acoustic property of stress. Simply put, the physicality of a particular body of poetry is a function of rhythmic prominence. What distinguishes the aesthetic practice of The Defence of Guenevere is that the play of stress is emphatic and the choice between rhythmic traditions a matter of overt concern. Here again, Walter Pater provides a leading insight. When describing “The Defence of Guenevere,” he calls attention to its phonic quality: “the accent falls in strange, unwonted places with the effect of a great cry” (Pater, p. 191). The word “accent” is not simply a metaphor for
"emphasis" but a technical term for syllable prominence. Pater is approving, in other words, the "strange, unwonted" rhythm of the poem. Since the Guenevere volume is more often faulted than praised for its metrical dislocations, this endorsement requires amplification.

The strain Pater admires begins as early as line three:

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek. (ll. 1–3)

The line moves haltingly because of the inversions "close to" and "touching." The phrase "close to," moreover, is a second-foot trochee, a phenomenon known to be particularly disruptive. Rossetti gives oracular warning against it in a letter to his brother: "I hereby solemnly declare that 'the trees waving which breezes seem to woo' is no verse at all, and should say 'The waving trees.'"15 The judicious Hopkins specifies only rare use—"scarcely ever in the second foot"—in his preface on "Sprung Rhythm."16 Modern prosodists who disbelieve in the metrical foot would agree that there is rhythmic tension in line three, but would point to the paired stresses (hand close, mouth touching) by way of explanation. (The more common and less tense variation, the spondee, usually involves three consecutive stresses as in l. 2 cited above, "wet hair backward.") The pairings in l. 3 violate the expectation of evenly spaced metrical beats. The effect in this instance is admirable, a stiff tentativeness that mimes Guenevere's own. Later in the poem, the pairing technique propels the verb "smote" out of its overly suspended syntax:

Sure knowledge things would never be the same,
However often Spring might be most thick
Of blossoms and buds, smote on me." (ll. 71–74, emphasis added)

Such rhythmic obtrusiveness clearly reinforces Guenevere's sense of herself as passion's victim.

These two passages employ a relatively conservative technique; they connect rhythmic variation to the condition of the represented speaker and function within the well-developed pentameter tradition. Bolder instances of metrical play occur in poems which are non-iaambic or non-pentameter or both. "In Prison," for example, is a rhythmically unambiguous piece that works well to suggest a captive's restive weariness:

Wearily, drearily,
Half the day long,
Flap the great banners
High over the stone;
Strangely and eerily
Sounds the wind's song,
Bending the banner-poles. (ll. 1–7)
This stanza is unamenable to foot scansion, though a consideration of verse-contours helps to generalize its method. The falling pattern of lines one and five provides a norm against which those with paired accents feel slowed. The unrhymed final line registers as trailingly irresolute. "In Prison" may be described as rhymed free verse, but generically it is a strong-stress poem cast into half-lines. As a single adaptation of a historical meter, the poem would be of only passing interest; but it is, in fact, representative of the commitment of the volume to rhythmic palpability. Overall, the thirty Guenevere poems include only seven cases of iambic pentameter, of which only one is unrhymed; Morris' practice in the volume, therefore, might be described as a move away from blank verse. The Defence of Guenevere evades the form—the movement, the body—that English tradition regards as most nearly speech-like. This is a matter of consequence, one that is pursued explicitly in the single blank verse poem in the volume.

There is a moment in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" when the bereaved Alice overhears some street singers:

what is it then they sing?
Eh? Launcelot, and love and fate and death;
They ought to sing of him who was as wight
As Launcelot. (ll. 709-712)

In her opinion, "they ought to sing" of Sir Peter's fate. Alice wants to hear a popular version of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" which itself comes to an end by appending the overheard song of Launcelot:

To his death from his birth
He was muckle of worth,
Lay him in the cold earth,
A long grave ye may delve. (ll. 740-743, sixth of seven stanzas)

There are at least two ways to view this concluding arrangement. On the one hand, the street song is an appropriate supplement; one tale of failure reinforces another. On the other hand, such abrupt proximity virtually insists on discontinuities. The pairing adjoins thematically irrelevant materials and, more importantly, completely disparate styles. The graft of a metrical romance in rhymed strong stress onto a drama in blank verse brings generic rivalry to the fore. Suddenly, the existence in English of two rhythmic modes becomes a prominent fact; the differences between what commentators variously describe as the popular and literary, the native and foreign, the four-beat and five-beat, or the ballad and bourgeois traditions become apparent. As an oppositional pair, "Sir Peter" and its coda force the issue of poeticy per se; together they expose the limitation and possibility inherent in such material features as rhyme or a fifth beat. Formal preferences are shown to bear directly on such vexed issues as the merits of fictive speakers versus anonymous voices, or transparent speech versus emphatic song.
To be specific, the dramatic body of the poem selects the techniques which have historically proved most amenable to the representation of speaking voices. The iambs balance alternation against stress-timing for a subdued rhythm; the non-rhymes avoid phonemic prominence at line breaks; the pentameters resist insistent beat patterns and promote interlineal momentum. Together these factors subordi nate the poetic medium—all the more strongly because they have become conventional. The palpability of the verbal construct offers relatively little distraction from the speaker's thoughts. In short, the formal technique fosters the illusion of a speaker. There remains, however, a real question whether the creation of individual voices is a wholly satisfactory aesthetic accomplishment.

The coda on Launcelot suggests not. This narrative premises an anonymous voice of communal transmission. It too employs a style conducive to its end, one “shaped for ready oral recurrence.” The strong-stress rhythm, which gives isochrony dominance over alternation, has a characteristic “swing” that sticks pleasurably in the memory. The rhymes and verse length, by promoting line-integrity and stanzaic coherence, have similar force. These features, precisely because they resist rhythmic evenness, enjambed flow, and transparency, insure gratifying performance and the enduring life of the poem.

The choice between these modes involves mutually exclusive advantages. A poetry that mimes a speaking subject affords, among other things, the psychological pleasure of identification. Poetry made for recitation exploits the deeply embedded joy of performance, the public play of the signifier. The inclusion of both modes in “Sir Peter” insinuates an ideology of style. The poem takes the position that technical features are not neutral formalisms; it denies that a historically emergent style is an inevitability or an unmixed gain. In disrupting its initial commitment to the pentameter tradition, the poem subverts a strongly marked canonical preference and the values it implies.

By challenging the notion of poems as “so many utterances of so many . . . persons,” “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End” qualifies its participation in the assumptions of the culture about represented speakers and the deep interiority that “overheard” speech is thought to adumbrate. Were it an isolated feature, a coda might exert little subversive force; but this particular intrusion coincides with numerous other challenges to an essentialist concept of the human person. Rhythmic choice in this instance enforces the tendency of the entire volume towards a decentered, physical understanding of selfhood.

The choice, moreover, is endorsed in a remarkably emphatic way. In her final lament, Alice says, “I never thought / That I should make a story in this way, / A story that his eyes can never see” (ll. 717–719). The phrase
“this way” refers to the desolateness of Alice’s life and, at another level, to her aesthetic existence within “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End.” This witty self-reference could have made a very tidy ending. It would have solicited consent to the “way” of the poem in representing its principals: its formal transparency and its privileging of voice. But instead, the metrical romance intervenes, constituting an alternative that Alice herself endorses. When she says “perhaps they will . . . make songs of us” (ll. 715–716), she refers to songs like Launcelot’s. From her vantage as a speaker within a blank verse drama, she voices a desire to be inscribed in another kind of poem. Her choice falls on a genre that deploys the voices of many people without representing her own, a genre that eschews the interiority of a verbalizing subject. This preference, coupled with the seven-stanza citation in the coda, solicits aesthetic approval of a very different “way” of making a story.

Alice’s wish, of course, begs the question of genuinely oral transmission. Since unrecorded song fades like the wind’s “tune” (“Galahad,” l. 6), the Guenevere volume is repeatedly concerned with the way words become “square letter’d” (“Prison,” l. 13). The obtrusiveness of print styles and typographic marks makes it mercilessly clear that the Guenevere poems exist in transcription. Graphic coding reaches peculiar excess in the hypervisualized conclusion of “The Tune of Seven Towers”:

If you will go for me now,
I will kiss your mouth at last;
[She sayeth inwardly,]
(The graves stand grey in a row.)
Oliver, hold me fast!

“Therefore,” said fair Yoland of the flowers,
“*This is the tune of Seven Towers.*” (ll. 37–43).

Given its emphatic differences in print, this stanza approaches the physicality of a two-dimensional design. The varying indentation, punctuation, and lettering endow the simply worded proposition “This is the tune” with extraordinary complexity. The poem can be made to yield various meanings, but the point worth stressing is that an adequate close reading necessarily reacts to the “unpronounceable, nonphonemic” marks of inscription (Ong, p. 83). For the volume to stress both the acoustic and the non-acoustic might seem methodologically incoherent. And while such a state of affairs need not be objectionable, the contradiction is, in fact, only apparent. The fascination with the physical identity of words in type is but a continuation of the volume-long attention to their material identity. Both interests point in the same direction, that is, away from semantic abstraction. Both locate verbal stability elsewhere than in the signified.

For some of the characters in the volume the visibility of words is naively seized on as a guarantee of meaning. The already-written is assumed to be inevitable. Those who claim that “the first fitte is read” (“Haystack,”
l. 128), or who see “writing on the wall” (“Tomb,” l. 311), imply that pending events are unalterable. But such pre-scription has no predestinating force, especially in the case of the most extraordinary kind of writing in the volume—the inscribing of the body. The ability to score his rivals earns Launcelot a metonymic name: “all the land / Calls [him] Arthur’s . . . sword” (“Tomb,” ll. 247–248). The trope is bitterly invoked when Guenevere reproaches the king’s betrayer as “a crooked sword . . . that leaves a scar” (l. 372). She may be right in insisting on the irrevocability of the hurt to Arthur, but her accusation commits the fallacy of misplaced permanence; the significance of a scar is not fixed. This same error costs another character his life. There is a moment when Peter Harpdon must decide how to deal with an enemy: “I do not wish to kill him, / Although I think I ought; he shall go mark’d, / By all the saints, though!” (“Peter,” ll. 254–256). This decision involves not only a choice of cruelties, but a choice of messages. Peter intends for the scars to be read; they are to mean “traitor punish’d” and to argue his own mercifulness in not executing this captive (l. 271). Unfortunately, it proves a disastrous misjudgment to assume that such marks are permanently attached to a particular meaning. As events run their course, these slashes become signs of Peter’s own shame, his “fame . . . sullied” for mutilating a kinsman (l. 280), and they require his death-sentence. The irony of this tale, put simply, is that neither intention nor inscription establishes permanent signification.

The lover of “Praise of My Lady” feels a conscious unease about the future of his meaning. Anxious that his words inspire permanent adulation, he concludes with explicit instructions: “I charge you . . . in this rhyme, / . . . To kneel before her” (ll. 82–85). Such imperative endings are, to be sure, a ballad convention. But in The Defence of Guenevere, the vagaries of the signifying process revitalize this codified worry. In one instance after another, words refuse to do their users’ bidding. Verbal purpose is constantly thwarted. In resisting their speakers’ expressed desires and one another’s themes and formal means, these thirty poems form a “strange, unwonted” collection that takes issue with its cultural milieu. If nineteenth-century England’s significant structures include its definition of the person as well as the art forms supportive of that definition, then The Defence of Guenevere is a profoundly disaffected volume. The Victorians, whether viewed in light of their legal, economic, or literary history, professed confidence in the autonomous individual. Artists and entrepreneurs alike assumed that men and women willed coherent actions, intended determinable meanings, and remained, despite life’s eventualities, self-constant at “the deep heart’s core.” These are clearly not the assumptions that fuel poetic process in The Defence of Guenevere. The poems expose the naiveté of an intentionalist approach to meaning. They reject interiorized accounts of
their many lovers and victims. They refuse to treat language as transparent. That the alternative assumptions of the volume are only occasionally specified, as in Alice's wish, does not blunt its counter-cultural force. The oddities of the poems constitute a manifesto; they are thoroughly at odds with their times. The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems is a sustained act of aesthetic non-compliance; its every artistic move is a sign of resistance. 

Notes

5 William Morris, The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York, 1981); subsequent references to Morris' poems are cited from this edition by short title and line. A list of full titles appears at the end of these notes.
8 In a reconstructed conversation with Millais, Hunt says, "You cannot pretend that this work of yours is academic. If [an academic painter] undertook the subject, you know perfectly well that . . . there would be no kind of variety in the shape of the faces, not one would be out of the oval in any degree . . .; all their limbs, too, would be of the same pattern" (William Holman Hunt, "Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood," in Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James Sambrook [Chicago, 1974], p. 30).
10 See illustration 26 in The Pre-Raphaelites, published by the Tate Gallery (London, 1984); in the accompanying commentary Malcolm Warner cites Dickens' description in Household Words 15 (June 1850) of Millais' Christ as "a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-haired boy in a nightgown," and Mary as "a kneeling woman" with a "dislocated throat" (p. 78).
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11 See Rossetti's *The Blue Closet*, *The Tune of Seven Towers*, *Arthur's Tomb*.


16 Prosodists generally agree that duple meters seem speech-like because the alternation of strong and weak syllables is "already fundamental to the language" (Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* [London, 1982], p. 71). For a Marxist analysis of this speech-like quality, i.e., "the effect of an individual voice 'really' speaking," see Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London, 1983), p. 46.


19 John Stuart Mill's famous distinction, "eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard" (*Essays on Poetry* by John Stuart Mill, ed. F. Parvin Sharpless [Columbia, South Carolina, 1976], p. 12), formulates the canonical preference for poems that contemplate "the world within." Mill dismisses narrative poetry out of hand, especially ballads: "Considered as poetry, they are of the lowest and most elementary kind" (p. 7). It is this generic valuation with its privileging of interiority that the *Guenevere* volume resists.


**Titles Cited**

Avalon Near Avalon  
Chapel The Chapel in Lyoness  
Closet The Blue Closet  
Defence The Defence of Guenevere  
Eve The Eve of Creyc  
Galahad Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery  
Geffray Concerning Geffray  
Teste Noire  
Haystack The Haystack in the Floods  
Judgment The Judgment of God  
Love Old Love  
Peter Praise  
Sir Peter Harpdon's End  
Praise of My Lady  
Prison  
Rapunzel  
Riding Together  
Spell-bound  
King Arthur's Tomb  
The Little Tower  
The Tune of Seven Towers  
Towers  
War-Song  
Wings  
Golden Wings