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The Golden Chain
Essays on William Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism

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judgment" (287). It is as if Morris has resolved his problem by recognizing that whatever he achieves must ultimately help to create a more perfect and peaceful world. By showing us an image that incorporates both the green and the gold, morality and passion, he points to his solidifying artistic values. For the author of these romances, history will only become progressive when the individual can channel his determination, perseverance, and passion in such a way that events lead to the creation and preservation of beauty in the world. Before Morris, as before his protagonists, there "lay a great space of flowers" (290).

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3. J. W. Mackail seems to imply this preoccupation in his The Life of William Morris (London: Longmans, 1899), I, 78-86.

4. I am indebted to Dr. Carole Silver for pointing out to me that this Abraham is found in Morris' description of Amiens in "The Churches of North France," Collected Works, I, 365.


7. See Lindsay, p. 64.

8. The material in italics has been deleted in Collected Works. I include it because it seems necessary for the sense. See The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. No. 10 (October 1856), p. 634.

HEROIC DISINTEGRATION:
Morris' Medievalism and the Disappearance of the Self

Frederick Kirchhoff

The abrupt shift in manner and subject between William Morris' 1850s writing and the narrative poetry he wrote when he resumed his literary career in the mid-1860s is among the puzzles of his development. Terse symbolism gives way to leisurely storytelling. Dramatic monologues are replaced by elaborately mediated narrative structures intended—it would seem—to forestall the possibility of psychological confrontation. Doubtless there are biographical explanations for the profound differences between The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine romances (1856) and The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (1858) and the longer narratives he began publishing nearly a decade later, The Life and Death of Jason (1867) and The Earthly Paradise (1868-70). These years saw Morris' marriage, the building and desertion of Red House, and the formation of "the Firm"—all profound influences on his work. But a more useful explanation for the transformation of Morris' literary style lies in the early writing itself. Powerful as they are, his romances and poetry of the 1850s failed Morris because they did not accomplish what he intended them to accomplish. They did not provide him with an identity. Indeed, they threatened him with a spectre of non-being of the strategies of his later writing sought with varying success to conceal.

Sex and violence, the characteristic themes of this early work, have long been favorite modes of adolescent self-expression. I take it for granted that Morris used the medieval setting and characters of his early work to project an identity forbidden him by his own time and place in history—specifically, to give freer reign to the promptings
of his libido than more "realistic" fiction would have permitted him. That the member of a quasi-medieval "Brotherhood" which took Sir Galahad as its patron should seek to construct his own identity in romances about quasi-medieval men and women—including Sir Galahad—is hardly unexpected. What is unexpected are the poems and romances Morris actually wrote. He did not idealize the Middle Ages—as he did later in his career. The most forceful quality of this early work is its brutal realism. Nor did he idealize the figures of the heroic self with which he seems to have identified. Instead, he projected figures whose identity is fragmented or otherwise incomplete and whose erotic drives (almost) inevitably not merely to personal suffering—which could be explained as a symptom of Morris' own guilt—but to a loss of the grounds of individual being itself. This pattern is reflected in the ambiguous loci of certain of the narratives and—more dramatically—in the disjointed structure of their first-person narrations.

"And truly, no man dared stop us, and we went" (267), Florian explains at the conclusion of chapter one of "The Hollow Land" ("Struggling in the World"). He and his family have avenged themselves on Swanhilda, and now, defying threats of establishment justice, they march out of the church and town they have called their own. We turn the page.

Chapter two ("Failing in the World") confronts us with a simple but unexpected assertion: "Now at that time we drove cattle in Red Harald's Land" (267). The deictic now is unspecified; nevertheless, their "failing" has already taken place. The proud men of the House of the Lilies are reduced to mere outlawry. And we are left asking why, for all their pride and power, they fled the position they appeared ready and able to defend. The explanation appears to be guilt. "Had our House been the devil's servants all along?" (269) Florian soon asks himself. But Florian never articulates the connection between guilt and his self-imposed "failing."

He appears oblivious to the causal structure of his own actions. And as a consequence, he "fails" also in organizing the contents of his own memory. As a narrator, Florian remains the victim of events that merely happen—just as he was their victim as a participant in the events themselves.

Throughout Morris' early poetry and prose we are faced with similar narrators who are unable to impose a coherent pattern over their own storytelling. Surely, there is a connection between this incoherence and Morris' much vaunted fluency as a writer. "Well, if this is poetry," we are told he remarked, "it is very easy to write." But does not his unwillingness to grant his work the status of self-conscious effort suggest discomfort with his own creativity—with the gesture of imposing himself simultaneously on his friends and his materials as "a poet"? (That he deceived his friends into believing "The Willow and the Red Cliff" his "first" poem argues this interpretation.) And is not this failure of nerve precisely the sin of his narrative persona? Medievalism overcame his inhibitions both psychosexual and poetic. But this is precisely the problem: the poems and romances are insufficiently repressed. Their shifting imagery and structure suggest the unrestrained function of Freud's primary process, in which "condensation of ideas and intermediate or compromise-functions are obstacles to the attainment of the identity which is aimed at.1 They devolve, in other words, toward a state of being prior to organized personality. Unrestrained by the dominance of a controlling ego, Morris' fantasies follow a path of least resistance away from complex integrations, to simple, less demanding embodiments of the self. As a result, their style both prevented Morris from projecting an adequate identity within and through the works and forced him to depend more heavily on the reader's participation than he could comfortably accept once his audience became a larger, more heterogeneous group than the Oxford "Brotherhood."
whitewash (applied, as I said, on this scale in 1771) lies on everything so. Before that
time, some book says, the church was painted
from end to end with patterns of flowers and
stars, and histories. Think! I might have
been able to say something about it then,
with that solemn glow of colour all about me
as I walked there from sunrise to sunset;
and yet perhaps it would have filled my
heart too full for speaking, all that beauty;
I know not.

The movement of this passage is characteristic.
Morris' recollections are "dim"; his capacities as
a descriptive writer, suspect. Was there a figure
of a bishop? Is there really "some book"? Or are
the patterns of "flowers and stars, and histories"
a fantasy of the beholder? The description takes
us from precision to ambiguity, from concrete
detail to fantasy, from sureness to uncertainty. And
as the figure of Morris becomes increasingly ill-
lusory, the cathedral itself ceases to be a dis-
tinct edifice at a distinct place in time and be-
comes instead a shadowy collection of memories and
sensations. As a consequence, Morris' evocation
of the "builders, still surely living, still real
men and capable of receiving love" is something
very different from Ruskin's socioeconomic evoca-
tion of the medieval artisan in "The Nature of
Gothic." Ruskin's historical construct enabled
him to explain the historical fact of gothic archi-
tecture; Morris', to make the architecture dis-
appear.

In a radical effort to forestall this diffu-
sion of the perceiving consciousness, "The Story
of the Unknown Church" carries the communion of
perceiver and builder one step further—to out-
right identity. Walter, the narrator of the ro-
mance, is at once a figure in the past and a fig-
ure in the present, and as a result, he turns out
to be nowhere at all. On first glance, the
ice might seem to be a means of evoking the
rit of the Middle Ages. But on closer scrutiny,
et's tale suggests anything but the spirit Mor-
elsewhere attributes to gothic architecture.
ually unfulfilled, his life dwindles into a so-
istic celebration of death—his life's work, a
ument soon forgotten in time. And what is left
a collage of brilliant natural images: "glimpses
the great golden corn sea, waving, waving, wav-
for leagues and leagues; and among the corn
burning scarlet poppies, and blue corn-flowers;
the corn-flowers were so blue, that they gleamed,
seemed to burn with a steady light, as they grew
ide the poppies among the gold of the wheat"
). The reiterated "burn" suggests a natural
ld whose very intensity lays waste the achieve-
ts of the human imagination. The Church is gone,
"if you knew the place, you would see the heaps
by the earth-covered ruins heaving the yellow
into glorious waves, so that the place where
church used to be is as beautiful now as when it
\d in all its splendour" (149).
Thus the process begun in "The Churches of North
ace" is complete. The speaker has become a dis-
bodied voice from limbo; his craftsmanship, a heap
ruins fast returning to the soil. Nowhere is
is' ambivalence toward human achievement more
ngly expressed than in his ecstatic description
ature assuming sway over the remains of Walter's
ch. After reading the story, it is strange to
cross Peter Faulkner's note: "It shows Morris'
ound feeling for medieval architecture." And
we recollect that Morris himself began study-
architecture the same month the tale was print-
it is difficult not to read the story as an ex-
ion of misgivings about his own creative po-
aunderstanding between himself, his sister Margaret,
and her betrothed Amyot (whom Walter loves "better
than anyone else in the world" [153]) is the central
riddle of the romance. For his withdrawal from
world is not an act of self-sacrifice to an aesthet-
ic ideal, but an evasion of failure in the world,
the success of which lies in its capacity to obfus-
cate the actual relationship between Walter, Mar-
egaret, and Amyot.
Three readings suggest themselves. (The ambigi-
guity is typical.) In each, Walter is implicated in
Amyot's death and his art, accordingly, explained,
not as an expression of guilt but as an extenuated
strategy to forestall guilt. The first, which I
feel no compelling reason to explore, posits a
strong sexual component in Walter's "love" for Am-
yot. The second and third, which strike me more
forcefully, assume Walter's equally repressed "love"
of his sister.
No one has, to my knowledge, made a case for
Morris' homosexuality; however, Jack Lindsay has
convincingly argued the significance of Morris' re-
ationship with his sister Emma.4 "The Story of the
Unknown Church" intensifies this relationship by
eliminating family rivalries. Orphaned in child-
hood, Margaret grew up under the protection of her
older brother (a telling reversal of the older sis-
ter-younger brother relationship between Emma and
William). Walter does not overtly identify Amyot as
an intruding figure, but this function offers one
possible explanation of his complex feelings toward
his friend.
When the tale begins, Amyot is "sway (as I
thought) fighting in the holy wars." He appears at
the foot of the scaffolding on which Walter and Mar-
egaret are at work, and Walter, who "had no hopes of
seeing him for a long time, perhaps ... never," is
almost "beside" himself with what he calls "joy."
But the next morning he finds Amyot "lying dead,
with his hands crossed downwards, with his eyes
closed, as though the angels had done that for him"
(155-37). Once again, we are faced with a narrative disjunction. Amyot's death, like his sudden return, is unexplained. Not, it would seem, simply because Walter has no explanation, but because he is unable to face the possibility that he has himself, at least by unconscious desire, killed his friend. Thus, when Walter ascribes Amyot's death—metaphorically—to "the angels," he perhaps implies a very different agency. But the strategy backfires. Instead of having his sister to himself, he watches her die of grief and wastes the remainder of his life compulsively ornamenting the lover's tomb. Ironically, Walter, like Morris the storyteller, has become a commemorator of the past rather than a celebrant of the present. Medieval art is replaced by medievalism: the challenging image of the medieval artisan is replaced by an "easier" prototype of the creative self. ("For I was not as one on earth now, but seemed quite away out of the world" [158]. Walter admits parenthetically—thus linking himself with the shadowy narrator of "The Churches of North France.")

Yet in omitting a key element of the story, I am not being entirely fair to Morris' conception of the narrator. This element is the series of fantasies in which Walter indulges himself immediately preceding Amyot's return. He is carving the figure of Abraham, "holding in his two hands the corners of his great robe, so that it made a mighty fold, wherein, with their hands crossed over their breasts, were the souls of the faithful, of whom he was called Father" (152). As his mind wanders, this "quiet and solemn" Abraham gives way to a very different representation: "I rather thought of him as he looked when he chased those kings so far; riding far ahead of any of his company, with his mail-hood off his head, and lying in grim folds down his back, with the strong west wind blowing his wild black hair far out behind him, with the wind rippling the long scarlet pennon of his lance" (153).

With the logic of dream, the scene is transformed to the bank of a stream. Someone touches Walter on the shoulder. It is Amyot, but "his face had changed so, it was so bright and almost transparent, and his eyes gleamed and shone as I had never seen them do before. Oh! he was so wondrously beautiful, so fearfully beautiful!" Walter stoops to drink; the river vanishes "and I dreamed that I was in a boat by myself again, floating in an almost land-locked bay of the northern sea, under a cliff of dark basalt." There is a castle on the cliff with "a great white banner floating, with a red chevron on it, and three golden stars on the chevron," and "grrowing in a cranny of the worn stones, a great bunch of golden and blood-red wallflowers." A battle ensues; someone casts the banner down and it falls over Walter "from my feet till over my breast." A knight uproots the wall-flowers, holds them in a hand "white and small, like a woman's," then throws them down and they fall into the boat behind Walter's head. Amyot appears looking like "a man just risen from a long illness." Walter reaches out to embrace him; the find themselves in "a lovely garden" where music is playing. They walk, looking at one another, until Walter turns his head away. The music abruptly ends "in a long wail" and Amyot disappears (153-55).

This fantasy sequence has two functions. It offers a paradigm of battle, defeat, reunion and loss we can apply to Amyot's return and death. More significantly, it underlines the problematic nature of Walter's relationship with Amyot and, as such, argues a very different reading of the romance from what I have been putting forward. The transformation of Abraham from passive father to active warrior suggests the two sides of Walter's personality: his "paternal" relationship with Margaret and his vicarious identification with her lover Amyot. It would seem to follow that the death of Amyot is necessary not because he has come between Walter
and his sister, but because Walter must kill his own sexual desire for Margaret. The fantasy of the warrior Abraham with his lance and "long scarlet pennon" is thus an image of Walter's own overt sexuality (no longer willing to sublimate itself in art), which leads inevitably to the figure of Amyot rendered "fearlessly beautiful" by the intensity of his libido. But when Walter attempts to drink from the rushing stream—to transform the potency he has projected into Amyot to his own image of himself—the vision is shattered and replaced by a scene in which Walter is seen as a corpse floating in a coffin-like boat on a landlocked body of water (anti-theetical to the stream) and alienated from the distant image of integrated masculinity (the towered castle, now in the hands of his androgynous shadow). Abraham's pennon becomes the banner which is torn from the tower and transformed into Walter's shroud. Amyot weakens and, despite the attempt to reconstruct his and Walter's initial duality in a prelapsarian garden, disappears altogether. The key gesture is Walter's turning away: he murders—that is, represses—his own libido and comes to pay the consequences.

Walter's free associations recapitulate the events of the core narrative. His attempt to assert his own sexual identity leads to the image of individual isolation. Perceived as an event of primary psychic process, the sequence of his associations exemplifies the substitution of one idea for another through which, Freud argues, "they swerve away from the path which would have led onward from the first idea." Giving into his impulse toward wish-fulfillment, Walter is thus drawn inevitably in the direction of the "easiest" mode of self-assertion. Positive aggression gives way to the merely hostile act of withdrawal. And as a result, he loses both a sure sense of his own identity (he is "not as one on earth") and the capacity for creative action. For unlike his "paternal" carving of Abraham, the mortuary sculpture is not an example of creative sublimation; it is a neurotic compulsion, the artistic significance of which is questioned by the historical perspective of the romance.

The apparent contradiction of Amyot's double role as an outsider threatening Walter's relationship with Margaret and a double embodying the "inside" threat of Walter's own libido need pose no problem. For the "inside" double is effectively an "outside" threat to the brother-sister relationship. (Indeed, even the threat of homosexuality boils down to just the same, or a very similar, function.) Each reading takes us to the same conclusion: self-assertion disrupts relational equilibrium and thus leads to guilt, withdrawal, and the disintegration of identity. And the possibility of alternate readings merely underlines the overall indeterminacy of Walter's narrative.

This indeterminacy, of course, is not limited to Walter's story-telling. It characterizes the early romances as a whole. Seen as a model of the artist, Walter thus accounts for more than the problems of his own narration. His Abraham fantasy suggests a moment of unconscious choice: the artist is offered the opportunity to identify with his own aggressive, sexually assertive potential. Instead, he allows his imagination to "swerve away" from this image, which is inevitably replaced with an image of loss. Nostalgic celebration of the past—that is, Morris' own medievalism—is accordingly not a vicarious celebration of his own latent heroism. Rather, it represents a refusal to accept the burden of heroic stature. Medievalism thus enables Morris to express—and apparently justify—personal insecurities that a contemporary setting would dismiss as self-pity. Indeed, his one attempt at Victorian realism in The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, "Frank's Sealed Letter," takes self-pity about as far as it can go.
Art plays a similarly ambivalent role in "The Hollow Land."6 Fighting naked in the ruined hall of his forefathers, Florian wounds Red Harald (Swanhilda's son and consequently his family's bitterest foe), then nurses him back to health. Harald teaches Florian to paint, and together they decorate the building with scarlet and yellow paintings of what Harald calls "God's judgments"—but Florian identifies as portraits of the chief characters in the story. Through having transformed their violence and desire into art, Florian is rewarded with Margaret, and together they find their way to "a hollow city in the Hollow Land" (290).

But their entrance is at best equivocal. It is achieved at the cost of Florian's new-found brotherhood with Harald—who has come, remarkably enough, to represent significant elements in Florian's own personality. And as Margaret and Florian enter "the golden gate" of the "hollow city," they find only "a great space of flowers" (290). Florian, unlike Walter, gets his Margaret. Yet instead of leading her into a heavenly city filled with joyous men and women, he confronts another manifestation of the flowers that cover the ruins of Walter's church. And as they pass through the gate (itself an analogue to the tomb of Margaret and Amyot), they effectively pass into a narrative limbo akin to Walter's. Suddenly we discover that Florian has been speaking to us from a locus we cannot comprehend; we are back to the opening sentence of "The Story of the Unknown Church": "I was the master-mason of a church that was built more than six hundred years ago" (149). Amyot or Harald, in both romances the figure of the libido is effectively removed, and as a result we are no place with no one.

Similar patterns recur in the other romances. Characters who embody or act out gestures of strong sexual assertion are invariably punished or destroyed. Personae appear and disappear without warning; identities shift; quests for self-understanding reach one dead end after another; narrators disintegrate before our very eyes. "A Dream" and "Lindenburg Pool" use the device of dream-vision to explain the narrator's relationship to his narratives. In both instances, the device enables him to sidestep the need to make causal connections.

Just how, why, and when whatever happens to the two lovers in "A Dream" is left to the reader's imagination. Perhaps they are punished for putting their love to an unnecessary test, although it is more likely that they are punished for putting love over "duty" to society. Hugh, the first narrator within the dream, can at best "tell you some of it, not all perhaps, but as much as I am allowed to tell" (159). "Allowed" by whom? Presumably by Morris himself, who also lets us discover—later, inadvertently—that Hugh has been dead for over a hundred years. Once again, a narrative voice speaks to us from nowhere about happenings he can only partially explain. Moreover, it is a voice whose precise relationship to the events of the core narrative remains teasingly obscure. At the end of the dream, the lovers, after centuries of separation, broken by occasional brief reunions, are united in death and their ashes buried in a church in a marble tomb with a carving of "their figures lying with clasped hands; and on the sides of it the history of the cave of the Red Pike" (175). One would like to have a look at this "history," since it might tell us more than Morris' internal narrators. Yet as an act of closure, the tomb (like Walter's in "The Story of the Unknown Church") suggests the inadequacy of memorializations—the inability of the artist (here, the carver) to represent what he can never have really known. This reticence, of course, is typical of the early romances. Here, it is specifically a refusal to come to terms with a romantic legend while at the same time working the legend for all it is worth. But double-dealing has its rewards: the speakers of the tale find themselves in
a narrative and psychological limbo their extrication from which is blocked by unspecified but powerful prohibitions.

The identity of the narrator of "Lindenborg Pool" is similarly in question. He is at once a nineteenth-century gentleman guilty of murder and a thirteenth-century priest victimized by the macabre practical joke of a "bold bad plundering baron" (248). The grounds of guilt are (for once) explicit; nevertheless, the connection between the two historical layers of the story remains unspecified. The actions of the medieval priest should justify those of the modern protagonist, but Morris cannot bring himself to adumbrate the necessary parallels. The attempt to find identity in the past—i.e., in Lindenborg Pool—conjures up more than the narrator is willing or able to explain.

"Golden Wings," the one tale in which the hero is allowed erotic fulfillment, ends in civil chaos and—once again—a narrator without a locus. (He dies in his own narrative.) On the other hand, the "successful" heroes of "Svend and His Brethren" and "Gertha's Lovers" achieve moral victory at the price of sexual frustration. Sjur, having performed his function, disappears at the end of "Svend"; Svend himself, along with his brothers, sets sail "westward" and is never seen again. Yet the tale has a coy pendant: "Here ends what William the Englishman wrote; but afterwards (in the night-time) he found the book of a certain chronicler which saith" that 550 years after "the death of Svend the wonderful king," knights of his folk sailing eastward came upon the city from which he fled, its inhabitants frozen in postures of brutal death, "a fearful punishment...for sins of theirs" (243-44). Characteristically, Morris disavows the conclusion of his own tale. He will not himself tell us what happens to Svend or assume responsibility for the fate of the men who drove him from their city. Instead, poetic justice is meted out by "a certain chronicler" whose account he stumbles upon "in the

night-time"—that is, in the time of dreams and other untrustworthy phenomena.

Leuchnar, the renunciatory anti-hero of "Gertha's Lovers," is granted the privilege of dying for his lady, but it is Olaf and Gertha who dominate the tale's closing pages. They, not Leuchnar, rate a memorial—"a mighty Church above the place where they lay, in memory of Olaf's deeds and Gertha's love" (224-25). But the church is left incomplete. The unspoken suggestion is that the completed edifice would, by virtue of its finality, terminate the people's memory of the two lovers. Which in turn suggests another rationale for the structure of the early romances. Their incompleteness keeps the past alive—a view that substantiates Spatt's interpretation of their theory of history. Morris, in other words, makes a bond with the Middle Ages at the cost of narrative coherence. Yet insofar as narrative coherence is a function of the integrated identity of the narrator, the narrator sustains his bond with the Middle Ages at the cost of his own identity.

These patterns are not found exclusively in Morris' early prose; they also characterize the poetry of The Defence of Guenevere. There is an undercurrent of diffusion in the title poem of the collection. The longstanding debate over just what Guenevere's "defence" consists in reflects the poem's movement away from moral or even psychological certainty. The poem is difficult to categorize because Guenevere is a collection of memories, passions, and rhetorical ploys, rather than a coherent character. Her lax syntax substitutes free association for reasoning. Her speech ends with the arrival of Lancelot not just because that's the way the story goes, but because there is no agent within Guenevere's monologue strong enough to exert closure. Doubtless, Morris' difficulty in coming to terms with Guenevere underlies the poem's indeterminacy. He is at once attracted by her unrepresed sexuality and unwilling to commit himself fully to its cause.
On the other hand, the companion poem, "King Arthur's Tomb," shows us Lancelot himself in the process of disintegration. Dazed with passion and the heat of the August afternoon, he falls asleep; stricken by Guenevere's remorse, he faints, she scrambles away. The crucial events of the poem occur through the failure of consciousness. (Jehane's sleep in "The Haystack in the Floods" is a parallel gesture.) Both characters are uncertain as to what they want from one another. The confused elements of their dialogue--nostalgia, rage, desire, love, guilt, fear--mirror the moral confusion through which they must pass if they are to assume the saintly roles legend attributes to them. But the nature of Guenevere's saintliness is clear from her last speech in the poem:

Alas, alas! I know not what to do,
If I run fast it is perchance that I
May fall and stun myself, much better so,
Never, never again! not even when I die.
(23)

Christian virtue is simply running away—and hoping to fall and stun oneself out of erotic consciousness. Just as "The Defence of Guenevere" is not really a defense, the final encounter between Lancelot and the queen is an evasion of finally encountering.

The central figure in the other pair of Arthurian poems—"Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery" and "The Chapel in Lyonesse"—is the knight who was to have been patron of the "Brotherhood." Galahad's doubts may well reflect Morris' own, and in the first of the two poems he states them unequivocally. By espousing his celibate quest for the Sangrael, Galahad senses himself "a man of stone, / Dismal, unfriended" (24). Structurally, the central vision of the poem opposes these doubts with divine reassurances, but Sir Bors' account of the inglorious failures of the other knights undercuts the force of the promise. Moreover, the second poem in the pair returns

Galahad to the same doubts he expressed in the opening section of the first. Both poems seem constructed as moral statements that deliberately subvert their own intentions. Galahad's model heroism crumbles into doubt, moral confusion, and a prophecy at best arbitrarily linked with the human figure in the poem. And in the process his identity disintegrates. Instead of finding a human center to legend, the poems analyze the figure of Galahad into components incapable of reassembling themselves. Only in the final quatrains of "The Chapel in Lyonesse" does he approach any kind of synthesis—but this is through vicarious identification with Sir Ozana, not the development of his own conception of self.

The Arthurian poems de-mysticize legend; the Froissart poems perform the more ambitious task of deconstructing history. Sir Peter Harpdon's "End" has its poetic correlative in the unexplained transition between the third and fourth scenes of the poem. The "hero" has no longer sufficient power to organize the retelling of his own history. Fittingly, the final scene shifts from Sir Peter altogether. He is already undergoing the belittling transformation from life into legend. What is left of him are Alice's incomplete memories and the bits and pieces of Morris' poem.

Given the correlation between heroic disintegration and narrative discontinuity, it is appropriate that Morris' most telling exemplar of fourteenth-century decadence is a narrator incapable of telling a straight story. Dianne Sadoff has explained the interrelationship of love and war in Newcastle's imagination. What concerns me is the manner in which this interrelationship informs the narrative structure of his poem "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire." Through a remarkable process of association, what begins as a public anecdote metamorphoses into a concentric pair of private recollections at best tangentially related to Teste Noire. The poem functions as self-analysis; by
confronting the traumatic experience of his boyhood initiation into violence, Newcastle liberates his repressed sexuality, which in turn expresses itself in his fantasy over the knight's lady. This fantasy intensifies to the point of breaking into the present tense, and thus disrupts the terms of the poem itself. The poem ceases to be historical recollection; past and present are no longer distinguishable categories of experience.

His father's macabre injunction, "'John, look! look! / Count the dames’ skeletons!'" (78), seems to have triggered the association of sex and violence that colors his adult life. As Sadoff argues, he can only conceive of sexual fulfillment as a form of destruction. Free rein to his erotic impulse leads, step by inevitable step, to death of the self. Like Galahad, John attempts to avert this death by imaginative participation in someone else's passion. He builds a monument in his chapel for the bones of the two dead lovers. But the sculptor is dead and his work, like the tomb in "The Story of the Unknown Church," has not survived. Finally, all Newcastle has won for himself is the sad awareness, "I am old" (81).

If we read the poem as Newcastle's attempt to assert an heroic identity, we must count it a failure. The narrator—who is not even sure whether his name is English or French—wishes to convey his story to Froissart ("the Canon of Chimay") in order to insure himself a place in history. The poem is thus a record of consciousness striving ineffectually to integrate itself through memory, falling, through a sequence of free associations that further undermine his narrative identity, into a vicarious identification with two lovers who may not have been lovers at all, and lapsing at last into the only category of self left—old age.

But Newcastle's failure is not merely representative of the waning of the Middle Ages. Once again, one of Morris' early personae enacts gestures of recreation and commemoration akin to those of the

nineteenth-century medievalist. Just as Morris failed to re-create the positive spirit of medieval architecture through his portrait of Walter the master-mason, and just as he failed again and again in his other quasi-medieval poems and romances to project an effectively organized image of the self, so Newcastle, too, seeks vainly to mask personal failure with a public gesture of commemoration—the ironic inadequacy of which becomes the ironic clincher in the poem's account of his failure. If medievalism was the medium of Morris' libidinal projection, then his early poems and stories argue that it did not accomplish all he presumably hoped to achieve from it. Instead of an heroic identity, it confronted him with the absence of identity—which in poems like "The Wind" and "The Blue Closet" becomes overt psychic derangement.

Is it any wonder, then, that Morris stopped writing poetry like The Defence of Guenevere? Moreover, does it come as any surprise that the dramatic immediacy of his early writings gave way to the elaborate narrative control of The Earthly Paradise? The poetry of the 1860s distances us from psychic immediacy by carefully placing the events it narrates at a prior and therefore irretrievable time in history, and further, by identifying them, in many cases, with legend or tradition rather than "factual" human experience. If The Defence of Guenevere gives psychological reality to legend, The Earthly Paradise metamorphoses psychological realism into "story." The only events that are dramatized are those of story-telling itself, and this dramatization supports the identity of the ultimate storyteller. However, the chief means of self-definition in Jason and The Earthly Paradise is not narrative structure but voice. And in this respect the poems of the 1860s are a logical development of those of the 1850s. In the latter, unpressed desire overwhelmed and thus disintegrated the ego, along with its narrative dominance; in the former, desire is held in check by nostalgia. But does not this very
condition of survival? The Wanderers control their story-telling precisely because they have failed in their quest.

The frame narrator controls the work as a whole through images of historical loss, a method which in turn subverts his own narrative dominance; writing in a medieval mode, he need not be taken seriously as a nineteenth-century poet. What was un-stated in the earlier writing is thus explicit in The Earthly Paradise. What was out of hand in The Defence of Guenevere is thus brought under control—albeit a control that questions its own pretensions to authority. And it is this deliberate lowering of expectations that accounts for the general flatness of many of the narratives and our general sense that The Earthly Paradise, despite its strengths, is a dead end, both for Morris and for English poetry.

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Notes

2. For an interpretation of the theory of history underlying the early romances, see Hartley S. Spatt, "William Morris and the Uses of the Past," Victorian Poetry, 13, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1975), I-9.
5. See The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, p. 535.
7. For a current bibliography, see Dennis R. Balch, Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb,' Victorian Poetry, 13, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1975), 61.