

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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The Defence of Guenevere and Morris' contributions to The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine are published in Volume I of The Collected Works of William Morris. All references to pages in that volume are given without the volume number, e.g., (123). References to pages in other volumes of The Collected Works are accompanied by the volume number: (IV, 123). References to pages in May Morris, William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist are preceded by AWS: (AWS,I,123).

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The William Morris Society expresses its appreciation to The Tate Gallery, London, for permission to reproduce Arthur's Tomb by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and to The Society of the Antiquaries of London for permission to print six hitherto unpublished poems by William Morris.

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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1. Max A. Wickert, "Form and Archetype in William Morris, 1855-1870," Dissertation, Yale University 1965, p. 33; John Hollow, "William Morris and the Judgment of God." PMLA, 86 (1971), 446-51.
2. William Morris, The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends, ed. Phillip Henderson (London: Longmans, 1950), pp. 15-16.
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.
5. Hartley S. Spatt, "William Morris: The Languages of History and Myth," Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University 1975, p. 3.
6. Jack Lindsay, William Morris: His Life and Work (London: Constable, 1975), p. 64.
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 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 personae? 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."

There are good reasons to associate the narrator of "The Story of the Unknown Church" with Morris himself. The romance derives from his attempt to compose a Ruskinian account of Amiens Cathedral ("The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens," published a month after "The Story of the Unknown Church"). Morris had trouble writing the essay and abandoned his plan to follow it with accounts of other French churches. Just why he had trouble is evident from his methodology, for Morris claims he is able to reconstruct the past only by establishing a relationship with a set of imaginary men and women: "thinking of their passed-away builders I can see through them very faintly, dimly, some little of the mediaeval times, else dead and gone from me for ever; voiceless for ever. And those same builders, still surely living, still real men and capable of receiving love, I love no less than the great men, poets and painters and such like, who are on earth now; no less than my breathing friends whom I can see looking kindly on me now" (349).

He instinctively substitutes an imaginary society for concrete description. This substitution implies the general theory of historical reconstruction he developed later in his career,² but in the essay on Amiens its prime effect is to question the authority of the perceiving consciousness. Which is not to say Morris underplays the role of the first person. Far from it. The first person is central--insofar as the essay has a center--but its very centrality (or simply repetition?) leads us to distrust the perceiver's authority. He writes:

I have [a] dim recollection of seeing when I was at Amiens before, not this last time, a tomb which I liked much; a bishop I think it was, lying under a small round arch; but I forget the figure now. This was in a chapel on the other side of the choir. It is very hard to describe the interior of a great church like this, especially since the

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. (353-54)

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 illusory, the cathedral itself ceases to be a distinct edifice at a distinct place in time and becomes 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 evocation of the medieval artisan in "The Nature of Gothic." Ruskin's historical construct enabled him to explain the historical fact of gothic architecture; Morris', to make the architecture disappear.

In a radical effort to forestall this diffusion of the perceiving consciousness, "The Story of the Unknown Church" carries the communion of perceiver and builder one step further--to outright identity. Walter, the narrator of the romance, is at once a figure in the past and a figure 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 spirit of the Middle Ages. But on closer scrutiny, Walter's tale suggests anything but the spirit Morrell elsewhere attributes to gothic architecture. Usually unfulfilled, his life dwindles into a somber celebration of death--his life's work, a monument soon forgotten in time. And what is left is a collage of brilliant natural images: "glimpses of the great golden corn sea, waving, waving, waving for leagues and leagues; and among the corn were burning scarlet poppies, and blue corn-flowers; the corn-flowers were so blue, that they gleamed, and seemed to burn with a steady light, as they grew beside the poppies among the gold of the wheat" (149). The reiterated "burn" suggests a natural world whose very intensity lays waste the achievements of the human imagination. The Church is gone, "if you knew the place, you would see the heaps of earth by the earth-covered ruins heaving the yellow sea into glorious waves, so that the place where the church used to be is as beautiful now as when it stood in all its splendour" (149).

Thus the process begun in "The Churches of North Devon" is complete. The speaker has become a disembodied voice from limbo; his craftsmanship, a heap of ruins fast returning to the soil. Nowhere is Morris' ambivalence toward human achievement more strongly expressed than in his ecstatic description of nature assuming sway over the remains of Walter's church. After reading the story, it is strange to come across Peter Faulkner's note: "It shows Morris' profound feeling for medieval architecture."³ And if we recollect that Morris himself began studying architecture the same month the tale was printed, it is difficult not to read the story as an expression of misgivings about his own creative potential.

Walter fulfills at least part of the program of the Oxford "Brotherhood" by taking vows as a monk. However, the connection between Walter's celibate craftsmanship and his role in the triangular

relationship 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 the world is not an act of self-sacrifice to an aesthetic ideal, but an evasion of failure in the world, the success of which lies in its capacity to obfuscate the actual relationship between Walter, Margaret, and Amyot.

Three readings suggest themselves. (The ambiguity 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 Amyot. 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' relationship with his sister Emma.⁴ "The Story of the Unknown Church" intensifies this relationship by eliminating family rivalries. Orphaned in childhood, Margaret grew up under the protection of her older brother (a telling reversal of the older sister-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 "away (as I thought) fighting in the holy wars." He appears at the foot of the scaffolding on which Walter and Margaret 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"

(155-57). 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 lovers' 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 "growing in a cranny of the worn stones, a great bunch of golden and blood-red wall-flowers." 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; they 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 "fearfully 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 (antithetical 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."⁵ 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; questers for self-understanding reach

one dead end after another; narrators disintegrate before our very eyes. "A Dream" and "Lindenberg 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 "Lindenberg 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 Lindenberg 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. Siur, 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 come 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.⁷ 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 unrepressed 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 scampers 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 demythologize 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.⁸ What concerns me is the manner in which this interrelationship informs the narrative structure of his poem "Concerning Gefray 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 re-creation 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, unrepressed 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 unstated 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

1. The Interpretation of Dreams in The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 535.
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), 1-9.
3. William Morris, Early Romances in Prose and Verse (London: Dent, 1973), p. 297.
4. William Morris: His Life and Work (London: Constable, 1975), pp. 26-33.
5. See The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud, p. 535.

Land," see my related essay "Morris' 'Childe Roland': The Deformed Not Quite Transformed," The Pre-Raphaelite Review, 1, No. 1 (Nov. 1977), 95-105.

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.

8. See "Erotic Murders: Structural and Rhetorical Irony in William Morris' Froissart Poems," Victorian Poetry, 13, Nos. 3 - 4 (Fall-Winter 1975), 11-26.