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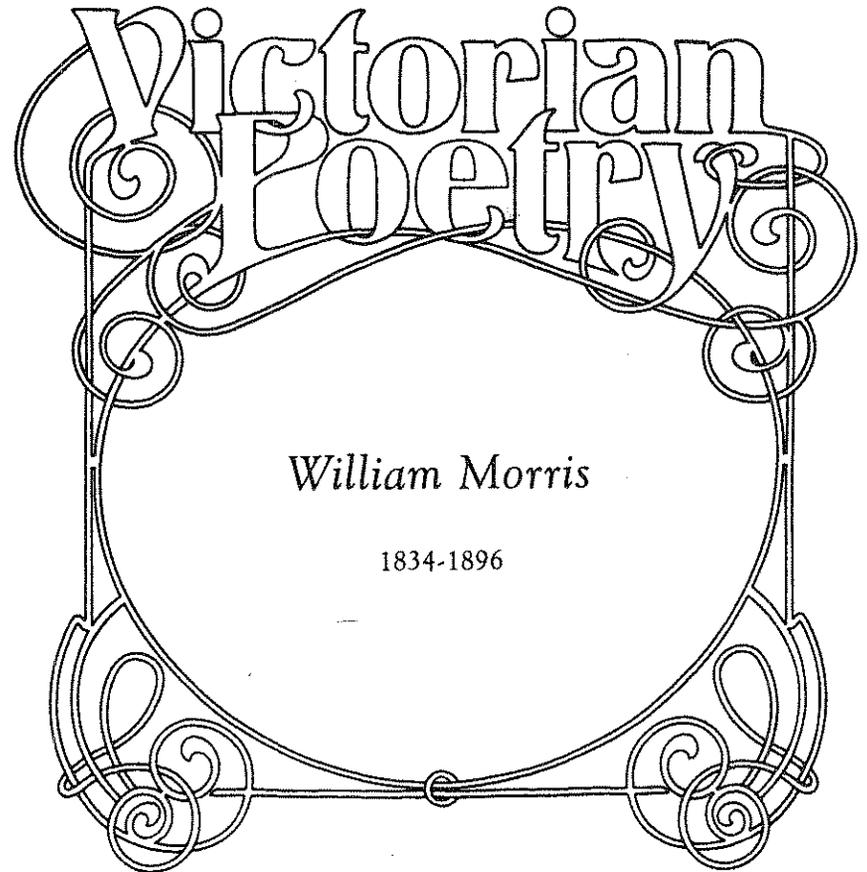
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Florence S. Boos
Guest Editor

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WILLIAM MORRIS WAS MORE OR LESS UNIQUE AMONG "MAJOR" POETS OF Victorian Britain, in that poetry was only one of his more strenuous life-endeavors. He was, of course, a prophetic preservationist and environmentalist, an early translator and popularizer of Icelandic literature, an author of historicist and futurist prose romances, and a charismatic political activist, whose ideals have hovered over the theory and practice of British socialism. But he was also a pioneer of interior, book- and print-design, whose deeply attractive contributions in these fields have figured heavily in recent exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Grolier Club and Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, and grace the more mundane pages of mail-order catalogues.

His poetry has never lacked for admirers, but its originality and experimental qualities might have been better appreciated had he accomplished somewhat less in other areas of his life. It has proved difficult for many twentieth-century critics to sort out the relations between his various endeavors, much less identify with them, and easy to assert or suggest that he could not possibly have maintained the theoretical acuity, reflective equilibrium, and care for language thought characteristic of "great" (or at least canonical) poets.

The essays of this volume suggest otherwise. Throughout his career, Morris celebrated decorative beauty, erotic love, and elegiac compassion as their self-sufficient ideals, but practical, social, and "everyday" preoccupations impinged on his works' descriptions, ambience, and choice of plots. He was the major Victorian poet most concerned to expose the toll of war, celebrate the burdens and delights of manual and artistic work, mark forms of class oppression, and write poetry that embraced animals and plants as something more than images or symbols for human fate.

These pragmatic recognitions of material reality underlay his poetic perceptions as a matter of course, but he did not bring them to the forefront of his work as poetic subjects till middle age, and most of his poetry explicitly depicts heroic endeavors and conflicts in love. All the same, few other Victorian poets portrayed landscape with the eye of an explorer as well as an artist, or described objects with a comparably deep sense for the intentions of their makers, and the processes by which they were made. In Morris' work, heroic effort and complex emotions blended naturally with lost life-worlds of

craft work and small randomly preserved vestiges of human history.

These multiple registers of perception prompted him to take somewhat different poetic paths than those of contemporaries, such as Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti and Swinburne, or successors, such as Hopkins and Wilde. Among other things, they provided a historicist framework for his carefully researched uses of archaic language, and his appeals to allegory and recasting of folk legends and medieval sources in service to consciously populist ideals.

Morris also experimented much more consciously and extensively with different poetic styles than did most of his poetic contemporaries. Browning and Tennyson evolved too, of course, but one can at least discern the indirections of *Red Cotton Nightcap Country* in those of *Sordello*, and anticipate the monologist of "Oenone" in that of the 1830 "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind." Morris, by contrast, deliberately changed his style after *The Defence of Guenevere*, and composed thereafter in several different metrics, modes, and styles. He also sought radically different subjects and concomitantly novel forms almost to the end of his life, from *The Defence* to *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, and from *Love Is Enough* to *The Pilgrims of Hope* and the poetic interludes in *The House of the Wolfings* and final romances. Picasso's many shifts in style are often viewed as marks of genius, but many critics have dismissed Morris' experiments as evidence of his "facility," that is, "superficiality": could anyone who made several stylistic beginnings have pursued common coherent ends?

To answer this question, and understand the trajectory of Morris' poetry, one should first understand certain inherent dualities or *coincidentiae oppositorum* in his aesthetic allegiances—a preoccupation with historicism, for example, that coexisted with an immediate sensuous lyricism, and a preoccupation with literary violence which alternated with deeply felt celebrations of poetic peace. One can then examine in more detail some of the ways in which Morris differed from his poetic contemporaries, for his radicalism, historicism, communitarianism, and willingness to engage in certain forms of poetic experimentation diverged from qualities commonly associated with high Victorianism and early modernism.

William Morris' contemporaries viewed him primarily as the author of *The Earthly Paradise*, and to a lesser extent of *The Life and Death of Jason* and some later works. Readers of *Victorian Poetry* will be well aware that most later critics sharply reversed this judgment in favor of *The Defence of Guenevere*, which these critics interpreted as a youthful proto-modernist text of implausible intensity. This profile ultimately persists, for example, in Fiona MacCarthy's comprehensive new biography, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*.¹ MacCarthy makes some sustained efforts to evaluate the poems on their own aesthetic terms, but reimposes the usual canon in her summary assessment: "I would not press the claims of Morris' own favourite *Sigurd the Volsung*;

it is too large, too chant-like. Volsungs are out of fashion. . . . But there is much to reward the modern reader in Morris' early poems, *The Defence of Guenevere*, short, spare, edgy narratives of violence and loss. And most of all his 1890s novels repay reading, *The Wood Beyond the World*; *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*; *The Well at the World's End*" (p. ix).

By contrast, the articles of this special issue of *Victorian Poetry*, planned to mark the centenary of Morris' death, offer a more inclusive and eclectic view of Morris' poetic development. They also suggest that other parts of his poetic oeuvre remain valuable—for the variety of their plots and aesthetic effects; for the novelty of their experimental efforts to blend poetry and prose; and for their embodiments of complex and philosophically sophisticated beliefs about language, history, and the fundamental sources of emotion.

Morris wrote assorted juvenilia in his teens and years at Oxford, mostly personal lyrics and romances in simple ballad meters. He then began *The Defence of Guenevere* (1859) as an exploration of Malorian, Froissartian, and other quasi-medieval plots and thematic lines. In marked contrast with other Arthurian and medieval poetry of the 1850s, Morris' *Defence* poems were blunt, lyrical, and tragic. They imagined in immediate subjective terms the violence, horror, loss, and dislocation of consciousness suffered by ordinary men and women, in quasi-historical "courtly" conflicts at Camelot, and in fourteenth-century campaigns of the Hundred Years' War.

Pater aptly remarked that *The Earthly Paradise* conveyed "the desire of beauty heightened by the knowledge of death," and this phrase also applies retroactively to *The Defence*, for these poems have often intrigued and startled by their intense immediacy, semantic fragmentation, and abrupt internal shifts of consciousness. The work's historicism was incipiently oppositional in its celebration of "Gothic" values of incompleteness, effort, anonymity, and indifference to conventional success, and its title poem heralded Morris' lifelong preoccupation with women's expressiveness and potential entrapment in marriage. These were unusually explicit forms of empathy for the time, and they identified the twenty-four-year-old Morris as a mild social "liberal."

Critics savaged *The Defence* for allegedly slavish emulation of Tennyson, Browning, and Rossetti, and Morris' early work was in fact influenced by his friends D. G. Rossetti, R. W. Dixon, and A. C. Swinburne and others. Most of the members of this group, in turn, read and admired the works of Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Coventry Patmore, Robert Bulwer-Lytton, and Alexander Smith. Certain attributes of Morris' poetry appeared in *The Defence* in mature form, however: his secular otherworldliness and passion for authenticity; his historically informed medievalism; and his need to interpret love and fidelity as political as well as erotic ideals ("The political is personal, and the personal is political").

Morris' historicism, in particular, was essential to his poetic and personal

identity. In the years that followed, he painstakingly sought ways to render his medieval and historical poetry more authentic, turning in the process from the nineteenth century models with which he had begun to other, more original sources—Chaucer, Boccaccio, William of Malmsbury, German folklorists, and Scandinavian saga-writers, among others (“*saga*,” in Icelandic, means both “story” and “history”). During the early and mid-60s, he began to draft lucid poetic versions of Greek, German, and Scandinavian legends, among them a tale of Scandinavian mariners he called “The Wanderers,” and he developed these over time into *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-1870).

As Morris composed *The Earthly Paradise*, his style also gained in narrative pattern, emotional resonance, and prosodic skill. He chose stories of an increasingly fantastic, mythical, and complexly ironic cast, and shaped the plots of the stories to reflect recurrent passions, obsessions, and ideals. His evolving preoccupations and radical changes in poetic style recognized the fragility of human relations and achievements. They also celebrated the origins of popular literature in anonymous storytelling, and the recurrent roles of transmitter, speaker, and audience as authentic sources of this literature’s unwritten history.

Certain significant aspects of this *Earthly Paradise* style persisted throughout Morris’ later writing. Among these were his tendencies to (a) project a *direct lyric voice*, often in the guise of a poet or “singer”—most conspicuously in the “Apology”; (b) *refract* or *relativize* this “voice,” often in imbricated series of narrative frames—a muted version of this appears in “Apology”—poet’s ironic self-characterization as the “idle singer of an empty day,” and this “singer” later intervenes in “The Doom of King Acrisius,” “The Writing on the Image,” and other tales; (c) deploy certain forms of explicit *moral and metaphysical allegory*—most conspicuously, perhaps, in “Ogier the Dane” and in “Bellerophon in Lycia”; and (d) make extensive *mythopoetic use of folk and saga material*—more generically in “The Fostering of Aslaug,” and more concretely and “realistically” in “The Lovers of Gudrun.” Refracted variants of the “singer”’s direct voice, for example, reappear in *Love is Enough*, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *Poems by the Way*, and the hymnodic “Chants for Socialists,” and inset counterparts of it linger in the lyrics of the prose romances, often cast as communal “songs.” Temporal and narrative shifts of perspective are present in *Love is Enough* and *The Pilgrims of Hope*, and explicit allegory is central to *Love is Enough*. Myth-entwined counterparts of moral allegory finally permeate the saga-derived conflicts between revenge and remorse which rule *Sigurd the Volsung*.

Morris kept an extensive journal during his visit to Iceland in 1871, and the experiences there in 1871 and 1873 inflected his poetic sensibility in lasting ways. For *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*, he had drawn on wide

knowledge of classical and medieval sources, but his stay in *Ultima Thule* gave him a chance to think about his own plot—what he most admired, how he wished to resolve the *aporiae* of his life. The conclusions he reached directed the future course of his political and poetic career. Other aspects of Morris’ style-shift emerged in *Love Is Enough*, a radically personal verse-“masque” which appeared in 1873. Arranged in a miniature fractal series of narrative iterations, the poem meditates on the displacement of love into hope, and makes open-ended appeals for universality and audience-participation. Indeed, Morris’ later poetry and prose romances can be viewed as a series of attempts to resolve a dialectical conflict between the reconciliatory ethos of *Love Is Enough* and its “negation” in the bitterly tragic *Sigurd the Volsung*. In the end, the resilient spirit of “Love” determined the fluidity and pace of his final imaginative writings.

In 1877, four years after *Love Is Enough*, Morris brought out *Sigurd the Volsung*, a four-book epic poem based loosely on the *Volsungasaga*. Morris’ extended “nordic” poem of twilight struggle is utterly remote in plot from the delicate allegory of renunciation of *Love Is Enough*, but even here he managed to project some of the patterns mentioned above into an originary tale of brutal conflict between two aristocratic houses of medieval Northern Europe. As he had already done in “The Lovers of Gudrun,” *The Earthly Paradise*’s dramatic reworking of the *Laxdaela Saga*, Morris rearranged legendary materials in rather drastic ways. He expanded and interpreted hundreds of incidents in *Sigurd* to express his personal preoccupations with love and endurance, and transmuted the original epic’s carnage and macabre disruptions into a poetic tragedy of fulfilled prophecy and fate. As in Morris’ other poems, his women characters also assumed more active roles than they did in his source. The epic plot ostensibly celebrates male heroism in a warrior-dominated society, but the poem’s most important women determine much of its action, and all but Grimhild are admirable and/or courageous in their culture’s terms.

Even so, the polar tensions of the “dialectical conflicts” between loss, renunciation, and the attainment of ultimate meaning remained apparent in *Sigurd*, more so than in other works—in the unrepentant vengefulness of many of its major characters, for example, and the horrific, near-masochistic descriptions of the cycle’s extended final battle-scenes, unique in Victorian poetic representations of war. Critics have justly noted that *Sigurd*’s protagonists sporadically express certain social ideals, but their agonistic lives of unceasing dynastic conflict provide, in my view, few plausible realizations of such economic ideals. What the poem’s antiphonal pattern does furnish are intricate motifs of prophecy, foresight, and cyclical unraveling, which permit deeply flawed characters to “reform” before their death and express incongruously noble ideals. Viewed in this light, *Sigurd*’s dramatic embrace of opposites in suspension yields a work of prosodic brilliance, structural originality, and emotional inten-

sity and narrative depth.

One may wonder why Morris ceased to write such strikingly polarized poetic works (I have in mind the contrast between *Sigurd* and *Love Is Enough*) at the height of his technical powers. He continued to be moved by a contrapuntal sense of “tragic” and “romantic” approaches to a common subject matter. He might therefore have found other poetically and historically appropriate subjects for these polarities, and consolidated his reputation as a poet of epic scope into the twentieth century.

One possible answer is that Morris, in the end—like Pharamond, his hero in *Love Is Enough*—set aside one “love” for another. Wider sympathies and a mature social conscience led him to attempt new subjects and literary media—poetic prose, for example; novellas-in-poetry; and lyric-within-narrative, a genre he virtually made his own. His growing radicalism and socialist commitments also impelled him to seek ways to appeal to audiences broader and less formally educated than the readers of the *Fortnightly Review* or the *Athenaeum*.

Many years later, May Morris also recalled her father’s wry remark that “A man shouldn’t write poetry after fifty.”² Morris was fifty in 1884, the year he left the Social Democratic Federation to co-found the Socialist League. He continued to write poetry all the same, with a social and communal focus, and in more accessible forms. But he also sought to write for a literate “popular” audience, and talk to it about certain recurrent human needs—for social justice (“fellowship”), and for a new aesthetic, one that might express the harmonies of a better social order, and encourage forms of affection wider than individual and familial “love.”

The Pilgrims of Hope, which appeared serially in *Commonweal* during 1885, expressed some of these new aims. The only long British poem celebrating the ideals of the Paris Commune, *Pilgrims* was a near-unique document in the social history of nineteenth-century political poetry. It was also a proto-feminist work—the only male-authored nineteenth-century narrative poem which set forth programmatic socialist-feminist tenets about a woman’s right to sexual autonomy. It blended and recombined basic motifs from *Love Is Enough* and *Sigurd the Volsung* in a vastly different, near-contemporary setting, and its tone of mingled celebration and empathetic regret lingered in its two immediate prose successors, *A Dream of John Ball* and *The House of the Wolfings*. Indeed, some of *Pilgrims*’ lyrical passages—like other shorter poems Morris wrote for *Commonweal* and the Socialist League—anticipated the secular, hymnlike vision of a transmuted world that appears in the poetic interludes of the last prose romances.

Pilgrims was also formally innovative as an experimental verse novel. Richard, the poem’s narrator, experiences familial disruption and social upheaval, and these experiences are refracted in its disrupted time-se-

quences, deliberate narrative discontinuities, and interludes of visionary emotion. The result was a rough-cast verse-novel style Morris might well have refined and extended, had he not turned to various forms of polemical and visionary prose in the last decade of his life.

Six years later, in 1891, Morris published *Poems By the Way*, whose modestly casual title reflected the fact that he had first drafted a number of them in the early 1870s. Several poems recast Scandinavian accounts of ill-fated love in artful stanzaic and metrical variations. Others drew on his time in Iceland, or reflected Morris’ more anthropological, “folk”-centered priorities in meliorative tales of rewarded love. Still others employed the unmediated personal voice of *The Earthly Paradise*’s lyric singer. A final category of poems brought together most of his “Chants for Socialists.” Morris was a laconically lapsed Anglican, and few would include him in the extensive company of Victorian hymn writers, but he wrote extraordinarily successful hymns for a different, secular church.

Most critics have also neglected the hundred-odd pages of poems Morris interspersed throughout the late prose romances, especially the “German” romances, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, which he wrote for *Commonweal* in 1888 and 1889. Almost all moments of high emotion in *The House of the Wolfings*—prophecies, histories, avowals of love, and commemorations of the dead—provided occasions for such interspersed lyrics, and these heightened and varied the tales’ prose narration in often surprising ways. In *Wolfings*, for example, several of the interpolated poems experiment boldly with medieval Scandinavian meters, and these unexpected rhythms bring to the narrative a sense of surprise, exoticism, and heightened authenticity. *Wolfings* provides an especially striking instance of the framing of poetry in an accessible prose narrative, and the interspersal of choral and expressive verse in otherwise terse accounts of locally significant, quasi-historical events. In *The Roots of the Mountains*, the poetic interludes are briefer, and their more formal, generic and iconically abstract meters serve to celebrate social aspects of Wolfing life, memorialize past conflicts, and honor the Wolfing dead. Morris intended the tale’s retrospectively utopian lyrics to express the values of a quasi-democratic “tribal” society at peace with itself, and these poems’ antiphonal patterns suggest deep natural recurrences that underlie human desires. They resonate with assurance, and are unique achievements of their kind.

In summary, Morris’ poetry continued to evolve after *The Earthly Paradise*, as he recast traditional legends and meters, balanced tales of ill-fated love with celebrations of natural cycles of rebirth, and found new ways to blend the rhythms of poetry and natural speech. His quasi-populist efforts to seek less “elite” and more varied audiences and explore new styles and modes of expression expressed a personal belief in utopian communism and the efficacy of “hope,” but they also anticipated and paralleled some of the generic and thematic innovations of the fin de siècle.

For this centenary volume, I have chosen nine essays by scholars from four countries and three continents which consider something of the range of Morris' poetic work. Two essays are devoted to various aspects of *The Defence of Guenevere*, three to *The Earthly Paradise*, one to *Sigurd the Volsung*, two to *Poems By The Way*, and a final essay sketches an overview of Morris' importance to the generation of the 1890s. A separate volume could—and perhaps should—be devoted to *The Life and Death of Jason*, *Love Is Enough*, and *The Pilgrims of Hope*.

In "Arthurian Ghosts: The Phantom Art of 'The Defence of Guenevere,'" W. David Shaw reexamines the spectral and indeterminate rhetorical effects of the dramatic monologue and title poem of Morris' volume. He argues that Morris' use of archaisms conferred on his words "the posthumous life of resilient ghosts" and demonstrated the "phantom" nature of the poet's art. According to Shaw, the poem's self-conscious puns and metrics enforced its preoccupation with death, and "its purely presentational art" evaded conventional definitions of truth. The poem's imagery accurately reflected the denatured qualities of late medieval symbols and iconography, and anticipated techniques later employed to good effect by Pater, Swinburne, and the poets of the fin de siècle.

In "Dissident Language in *The Defence of Guenevere*" Karen Herbert studies the dissonance in Morris' early poetry between individuals' personal interpretations of experience, and those imposed by an ambient social order. Herbert finds this dissonance inevitable in a medieval social order whose myths had failed to compel belief (compare Shaw's claims about medieval symbology), and observes that Morris saw this situation recapitulated in nineteenth-century Britain. In this context, Guenevere's monologue is indeed subversive, for "they would have her speak," but she refuses to speak as she "ought." Like Schiller's "naive" poet, Guenevere finds instead forms of "dissident" language more consistent with her own consciousness.

Herbert also traces these patterns through other Malorian poems of *The Defence*, and argues that "Morris recreates Guenevere, Lancelot, Galahad, and Ozana as individuals who, whether consciously or unconsciously, resist the roles and rituals prescribed for them by society." In a variant of this pattern, she interprets the work's Froissartian poems, such as "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," as "an examination of discourse types—political lies, private truths, personal and traditional mythmaking—and of their effect on time, memory, and reality."

In "Literal and Literary Texts: Morris' 'Story of Dorothea,'" David Latham considers the ways in which Morris reconstructed this discarded *Earthly Paradise* tale to detach it from his source's normative judgments, and to express his own evolving ethic of life's fragility and the power of art. Latham concludes that Morris' final decision to excise the tale from *The Earthly Paradise* altogether reflected a desire to preserve the integrity of the sequence as a whole, in which

Morris strove to demonstrate "how individual mutability is transcended through the communal effort toward creative renewal."

In "The Highest Poetry': Epic Narrative in *The Earthly Paradise* and the *Idylls of the King*," Amanda Hodgson reviews Victorians' views of epic poetry as a persuasive heroic myth with a putative historical rationale, compares this ideal with characterizations later introduced by Bakhtin, and remarks that Victorian poets were drawn to more fragmentary and skeptical "epics" which pointed the impossibility of ultimate certitude or finality, in poetry or in life. Morris' *Earthly Paradise*, in particular, offered striking examples of this more elenctic and aporetic ideal, whose "narrative strategy [was] persistently both to claim, and to undermine, authority." In examining its narrative aims, Hodgson also reconsiders several of the work's many framing devices and deliberate resorts to narrative ambiguity—the wryness of the apology, for example, mentioned above; its repeated absence or deferral of expected forms of closure; and the cyclical nature of the tales themselves—as means to suspend judgment about the tales' internal resolutions, and render "the complex relation between the tale and telling . . . the center of the poem."

Tennyson's *Idylls* and Morris' *Earthly Paradise* spoke to common Victorian anxieties about the relation of myth and history, and therefore about the origins of several of their most rigidly imposed constitutive beliefs. In this context, Hodgson contrasts *The Idylls*—in which Tennyson reproved the knights of Camelot for their tendency to mistake the "false" for the "true" (the mythical for the real)—with *The Earthly Paradise*, in which Morris suggested that "there may be value in retaining knowledge of the myth so long as it is recognized as myth and not misread as history." In this spirit one can (re)interpret the poem's overt waiver of epic certainties, and its explicit embrace of the value of iterated communal narration, however fragmented and transmuted such narration might become.

In "The *Laxdaela Saga* and 'The Lovers of Gudrun,'" Linda Julian reinterprets and assesses Morris' intentions for this *Earthly Paradise* tale as a saga adaptation and independent work. She notes the extent to which he deepened the characters' emotions, removed sub-plots and sanguinary details, downplayed the saga's Christianity, and omitted extraneous allusions to magic and implausible feats of physical prowess. Among other changes, for example, Morris invented a romantic first meeting between the young Gudrun and Kiartan, shifted the blame for Kiartan's death from Gudrun to her brothers, and created a haunting scene in which Gudrun stands over Kiartan's body as she reviles Bodli for his murder. More generally, Morris greatly heightened the imagery within the tale which foreshadows its conclusion, and wove a tapestry of interpolations and allusions to "tales" and "stories" into its internal structure. As Julian observes, such changes unified the work in significant ways, and made a raw feud between local *bændur* into an allegory of heroic persistence in adversity, and a testimony

to the solace of art.

In "All for the Tale: The Epic Macropoetics of Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung*," Herbert Tucker interprets Morris' complex epic in the light of his broader aims for art, and his ability to "convert. . . dumb misfortune into a lucid and inclusive plot." Tucker observes that *Sigurd* is distinctive among nineteenth-century epics in its unshaken faith in the efficacy of the tale itself, also manifested in the characters' "sense of engrained, instinctive reflection that is unrepentant, disenchanted, and reckless of all but what the tale shall sing." Construing the epic's motive as a mythic ethos of completion, he also argues that forms of knowledge and relation within the tale derive from narrative transmission, and that "the highest pitch of intellect [within the tale] manifest[s] itself in pure prophecy."

Tucker also reminds us that Morris intended the poem to be "read . . . at oral-delivery pace," and that he later used the poem's heroic measure—designed to form a rapprochement between a popular and "noble" style—in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, his translation of the *Odyssey*, and many verse interludes in the later prose romances. Tucker offers several close readings of single lines in the context of the wider plot, and argues that many aspects of the poem's "micropoetics" of sound, metaphor, and plot-nuance mirror cadences which bind and order the structure of the poem as a whole. He also speculates about the motives for Morris' choice of such an unrelentingly remote and uncontemporary epic subject, and concludes that the poem's "deepest premise" is its "storicism"—a "cross of stoicism on historicism"—an ardent "conception of what it might mean to belong to a line and have a stake in a plot." In *The Argument of William Morris's The Earthly Paradise*, I pointed out parallels between Morris' views and those of the ancient Stoics, and have several times used the words "stoic" and "historicist" to characterize the cosmopolitan cultural pluralism and ethical imperatives that underlie *The Earthly Paradise* and later prose romances, so I found it interesting that Tucker also discerns in *Sigurd*—which predated by several years Morris' commitment to another narrative of historical change—"that precious thing, the unbeholden testament of a believer without a creed."

In "The Summation of a Poetic Career: *Poems By the Way*," a rare critical discussion of Morris' last published collection, Kenneth Goodwin argues that this often neglected volume offered a reflective review of his life and earlier work, and a "continuous poetic commentary" on his personal and political evolution. Goodwin also reviews the dating and publication for the volume's fifty-five poems in detail, compares them with their earlier published versions, and offers informed speculations about the intentions behind their revision and rearrangement. Of a later group of twenty-five poems, for example—which included his socialist chants and sections from *The Pilgrims of Hope*—Goodwin observes that each of the types of poetry represented formed part of a wider oeuvre which Morris chose not to reprint in this volume.

In commenting on the selections Morris included from *The Pilgrims of Hope*, Goodwin also suggests that *Pilgrims* itself reflected Morris' recognition that his "political activities, his commitment to Communism, made it impossible for him to express any longer the notion that life oscillated inexorably from happiness to misery, from hope to fear." He concludes that *Poems By the Way* offered Morris a chance to assess the achievements and disappointments of his life, convey a "balance of mood . . . more engaged and more tranquil" than his earlier work had expressed, and affirm his socialist commitment in selections more "inclined towards the philosophical" than toward direct political activity.

In "The Male as Lover, Fool and Hero: 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks,'" Peter Faulkner finds in this strangely titled poem anticipations of certain aspects of the late prose romances. Faulkner believes Morris democratized Müller's myth of a solar hero to render it both female and male, and that the eponymous protagonists' dual name reflects reciprocity rather than loss of individuality. He also interprets the poem's many pastoral and folkloric symbols as part of a comedic pattern, and notes that Morris sets fulfillment of individual desire in a wider context of "the continuation of the lives of the community." The result, he suggests, is a "distillation of the mood and spirit of the quest romance itself."

In the volume's last contribution, "Morris, the 1890s, and the Problematic Autonomy of Art," Norman Kelvin reviews Morris' relation to Pater, Wilde, Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, and the writers of *The Yellow Book*, and considers Morris' significance for his contemporary audience, and indirectly for us. On at least one occasion Morris claimed that his later prose romances had no political or allegorical subtext, and Kelvin finds other sources of common ground with aestheticism in Morris' resistance to efforts to separate "the spiritual from the physical," and his equation of the decorative arts with pleasurable work. Nevertheless, Kelvin reminds us that the mission of an avant garde is to prepare the way for multitudes, and "the larger public that regarded his decorative work as advanced, associated the pleasure his art gave them with a vision on Morris' part that they knew to be socialist." Finally, Kelvin finds in Morris' practice an "essential autonomy of art," and this autonomy, a conviction which he shared with his fellow writers and designers of the 1890s, evokes "an energy that carries them, finally, beyond self-containment, beyond their own boundaries."

We have our own "boundaries," of course, as we mark the centenary of Morris' death and the forthcoming birth of a new century. A natural approach to the *fin de millénaire* would be to carry the centennial cursor forward in some way, but I will first rephrase Kelvin's question, and ask how one might compare Morris with his "decadent" near-contemporaries, among them Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Thomas Hardy, Ernest Dowson, Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, or Vernon Lee.

To what extent was this vigorously romantic late-Victorian dissident also a proto-aesthetic poet? It seems to me that the elegantly muted visual patterns Morris designed in the 80s and 90s were as proto-"modernist" as the delicately colorful ones he crafted in the late 60s and 70s were "Victorian." Both patterns were excellent of their kind. And so, I believe, were the different modes of poetry Morris cultivated during his career.

Morris' poetry—early, middle, and late—anticipated one theme that became central in various ways to fin-de-siècle writers—the blocking or interdiction of love. Poets and other writers in the 90s often argued explicitly or implicitly that gratified love (hetero- or homosexual) is not only unattainable, but in some cases even unimaginable. Examples abound: Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol," Mary Coleridge's "The Other Side of the Mirror," Rosamond Marriott Watson's "The Witch," Hardy's "Satires of Circumstance," Arthur Symonds' "The Loom of Dreams," and Lionel Johnson's poignant "The Dark Angel." In his preoccupation with doomed or postponed love—displacement and sublimation, if you will—Morris also seemed to anticipate certain forms of Freudian *Unbehagen in der Kultur* (the original title of *Civilization and its Discontents*) that one commonly associates with the age that followed him.

Even Morris' historicism and fondness for archaic medievalism in the 1880s and 90s had "modern" aspects, for his later research methods were self-consciously anthropological and receptive to the original sources he knew—as deeply grounded in them as his early work had been in the romantic renditions of Walter Scott, Charles Kingsley, and medieval compendia in the 1850s and 60s. Josephine Guy has remarked in *The British Avant Garde in the Nineteenth Century* that British writers who wished to subvert authority typically sought to find radical antecedents in reconstructions of the historical past, whereas their continental analogues tended to reject such antecedents.³ If Guy is right (and I believe she is), it becomes thoroughly understandable why the late Victorian poet who most fervently embraced radically revolutionary ideals experimented with so many traditional aesthetic forms.

Likewise the quasi-Biblical imagery and overtones of Morris' secular-humanist "religion of humanity" is surprisingly consistent with a fin-de-siècle affinity for iconic, ritualistic, and spiritualist motifs, found in such late-century and turn-of-the-century poets as Alice Meynell, Michael Field, Francis Thompson, or even W. B. Yeats. The emblematic, strongly patterned, and self-referential aspects of Morris' poems are equally "aesthetic," and his social concerns allied him with several contemporary and subsequent writers of "new woman" fiction. It is not coincidental, therefore, that his writings—especially *News from Nowhere* and his essays on the decorative arts—were admired by contemporary feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Emma Lazarus, and by feminist-utopian writers of subsequent generations. Many writers have commented by now on the "tree-hugging" qualities of Morris' belief in a communion between

the natural world and its inhabitants (recall that Ellen actually embraces a tree toward the end of *News from Nowhere*), and the ecological urgency of his political ideals seems much clearer now than it did to Morris' own socialist descendants half a century ago.

Many significant aspects of Morris' poetry and beliefs were independent of the trends that flowed around him, of course—as he would have wished. Modern appeals to alienation, "silence and cunning," for example, were utterly foreign to Morris' firm belief in the social nature of identity. His temperamental holism and awareness of the interrelatedness of human lives—indeed, of all life—prompted him to hope that one might create a literature that would benefit an entire people, and this ambitious aspiration remains one of the broadest visions ever indited of fully social literature in an even broader kingdom of aesthetic ends.

No writer could accomplish more than a modest part of such a task, of course, or even suggest what forms its realization might take. But this was hardly to Morris' discredit. He was exactly right when he wrote to Bruce Glasier, without false modesty, that "my life ha[s] been passed in being defeated; as surely every man's life must be who finds himself forced into a position of being a little ahead of the average in his aspirations" (*Letters*, 2:684).

As for the emerging political ideals which underlay much of his later poetry from *Love Is Enough* through *The Pilgrims of Hope*, these surfaced first in the realms of allegory—in his many apostrophic appeals to "love," "courage," and "hope." Morris once wrote to his wife that he thought "imaginative people . . . want to live to see the play played out fairly—they have hopes that they are not conscious of." The mingled effortlessness and strenuously urgent qualities of Morris' poetry similarly expressed the healing power of such "hope"—eternally recurrent, and eternally deferred.

In the end, I believe, Morris' sense of such "allegorical" ideals was neither Victorian nor fin-de-siècle—not of its own time, or perhaps of any other. It expressed his deeply personal desire to narrate stories of utopia to new audiences, and resolve into words new forms of political and artistic "hope"—an infinite task, for the object(s) of hope can never be fully represented, in any language we can speak.

As Morris' poetry bridged the span between the mid-Victorian Gothic realism of *The Defence of Guenevere*, the self-questioning epic doubt of *The Earthly Paradise*, the appeal to a metaphysics of narrative imminence in *Sigurd*, and the allegorical realism of *The Pilgrims of Hope*, so one or more of these aspects of his work will likely reemerge in another century. Victorian readers could not predict which Morris poems would be admired by "modernists," however, or these in turn have understood the rationale for the recent revival of interest in his long poetic narratives. So I really should not try to predict what in Morris' poetry readers of the twenty-first century might find

valuable.

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

Notes

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

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

W. DAVID SHAW

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

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

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

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

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

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