

DISLOCATION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY
IN NARRATIVES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

Many aspects of William Morris' lifework reflect Victorian responses to the decrement of time, and his sense of countervailing renewal and communion grew more mature politically and poetically as he aged. His early prose romances, juvenile poetry, undergraduate essays, Malorian and Froissartian poems, lectures on medieval art, translation of Icelandic sagas, design of books, tapestries, and stained glass after medieval patterns, agitation for the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, and even some of the motivations of his socialism -- all may usefully be examined through this lens. Especially interesting are the patterns of development in his romance narratives; narratives from several stages of Morris' literary work reveal persistent structural and thematic patterns which evolve in complexity and degree of resolution, and form a clear index of his poetic growth. Examples are the shifts between the prose romances that were his first published work and his most extended mature narrative poem, The Earthly Paradise. I will examine the early narrative, "A Dream," and contrast it with one of the Earthly Paradise's inset medieval tales, "Ogier the Dane," and to a more limited extent with the frame and narrative structure of The Earthly Paradise as a whole.

In these works many of Morris' personae suffer fragmentation and near-extinction of identity, states which give rise in turn to dream visions of redemption and recovery. The myths to which Morris was attracted may terrify as well as comfort, but at least give assurance that individual experience is not utterly idiosyncratic or incomprehensible. Perhaps because Morris tended to identify past and future, he resisted devaluation of past heroism; in contrast, say, to Carlyle, his narrators seldom assert that claims of already-renowned heroes are fraudulent, but often that courageous actions have lacked due recognition.

The early prose romance, "A Dream," which appeared in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine for March, 1856, the month of Morris' twenty-second birthday, is an excellent miniaturization of several characteristic features of Morris' early narratives. Fourteen years later "Ogier the Dane" appeared as the medieval tale for August in volume II of The Earthly Paradise. "Ogier" is one of the more beautiful and less familiar of the Earthly Paradise tales, and the only one placed with some care in historical time (Ogier is born into the France of Charlemagne, and reincarnated one hundred years after his first death). The frames of The Earthly Paradise as a whole and "Ogier the Dane" in particular rework themes and patterns of "A Dream," and anticipate others which appear in the final prose romances of the late 80's and