

WILLIAM MORRIS' "LAND EAST OF THE SUN AND WEST OF THE MOON":
THE NARRATIVE AS PLACE

William Morris' few recorded statements on the nature of art are deliberately evasive. Temperamentally averse to making claims for his own work and suspicious of Romantic subjectivism, he resisted public theorizing about literature. Yet no other Victorian poet was more concerned with the social function of his work or more willing to trace the literary impulse to its historical and psychological origins. Blue Calhoun rightly sees "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" as Morris' "final commentary on the relationship of real and aesthetic experience" within the framework of The Earthly Paradise (1868-1870).¹ "Final," I take it, refers neither to the poem's position in the collection of Earthly Paradise narratives (number fourteen in twenty-four) nor to its role in the development of Morris' thought, but rather to the completeness with which it explores its central issue: the relationship between tale and teller and, by extension, the role (or value) of literary expression. If, as I have argued elsewhere, The Earthly Paradise is a poem about story telling,² it is here that Morris most directly addresses himself to the psychological function of his own fantasies. On an elementary level, this function expresses itself in the relationship between the internal narrator ("Gregory the Star-gazer") and his three-part dream (the fairy-tale itself).³ Calhoun calls Gregory's experience of his dream "a negative parallel to the story," but this view, while true for the simple structural analysis she applies to the poem,⁴ both fails to deal with the role of language and story-telling within the internal narrative and underestimates the accomplishment of Gregory's creative act. Moreover, her initial distinction between "real and aesthetic experience" reinstates the very dualism Morris' poem attempts to deny. Seen in its entirety, "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" exemplifies, not a high-level theory of poetics, but a practical notion of the literary artifact that includes both its origin in the mind of the poet and its function in the collection of social contexts for which it has significance.

In the transitional passage that follows the preceding Earthly Paradise story ("The Death of Paris"), Morris lays the groundwork for his treatment of these issues. The Elders respond to the tale with a mixture of pain and pleasure:

Well-nigh they blamed the singer too, that he
Must needs draw pleasure from men's misery;
Nathless a little even they must feel
How time and tale a long-past woe will heal,
And make a melody of grief, and give
Joy to the world that whoso dies shall live. (V, 22)⁵