

Memory and Character in
William Morris'
"Judgment of God"

One of the difficulties posed by William Morris' brilliant dramatic monologue, "The Judgment of God," from The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (1858), is its jumbled and confused chronology. In 1871, H. Buxton Forman observed that "the actual point of time whereat the monologue is spoken is anything but clearly distinguished from points of past referred to."¹ But the speaker's abrupt and, seemingly, arbitrary transitions between points of a remembered past and the immediate present suggest that the poem is to be read as an interior rather than as a spoken monologue. Although the concluding four and a half lines of the poem are clearly spoken aloud by Roger to his squire, John, the preceding lines, with their absence of defined, explicit chronology constitute a silent, interior language through which the knight, Roger, who is about to enter into trial by combat with the Hainault champion, Sir Oliver seeks, at this moment of personal crisis, to discover an order and meaning in his own past life.

An immediate problem of chronology is presented by the opening lines of the poem.

Swerve to the left, son Roger, he said,
 "When you catch his eyes through the helmet
 slit,
Swerve to the left, then out at his head,
 And the Lord God give you joy of it!"
The blue owls on my father's hood
 Were a little dimm'd as I turned away;
This giving up of blood for blood
 Will finish here somehow to-day. (ll. 1-8)²

Is the past indicated by "said" earlier "to-day," or does it refer back to a more distant past, to an earlier trial by combat "where we did that wrong" (ll. 13-14), when "so near the fighting was" (ll. 36-37)? The fact that the "howling" of the Hainaults (l. 19) is occurring in the present, foreground situation of the poem and that this howling almost blinds the speaker (l. 10) might explain why the blue owls on the hood of Roger's father "were a little dimm'd" as he gave his tactical counsel. Still, one is puzzled as to how the howling can affect Roger's vision. Is he instead withdrawing