

ends and the central vision fading, we are then close to anarchy, a state of confusion in which old rituals are deprived of their original life and force. In *The Defence of Guenevere*, Morris depicts the plight of two select societies, two kingdoms of force—the medieval and the Victorian—in a way that foreshadows Yeats's apocalyptic vision of the modern world:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.³¹



chapter three

Pastoral: the
Mood of Idleness

For words alone are certain good:
Sing, then, for this is also sooth.

Yeats, "The Song of the
Happy Shepherd"

IDLENESS AS IMPERSONAL AESTHETIC ~~~~~

PASTORAL poetry is distinguished from the romantic lyric or narrative by its detachment. When the romantic describes a natural landscape, he "sees into the life of things." The more classical pastoralist maintains a certain distance from the object. Perception is the goal of both writers, but symbolic penetration of the subject is of less concern to the pastoral poet than comparative evaluation. Although Morris did not admire classical writers like Milton, his own aesthetic suggests a strong preference for both detachment and realism. If these principles did not make him a confirmed classicist, they did clearly establish his aesthetic beliefs as antiromantic. In describing her father's reaction to modern drama, May Morris noted his admiration of the Noh play and its use of masks to detach the actors and to universalize the substance of the drama: "The convention should be more marked, and people should once again act in masks, to simplify and detach the persons of the drama" (*CW* 22:xxvii). The pastoral mask that Morris himself assumes in *The Earthly Paradise* seems based on an impersonal aesthetic especially appropriate to his social philosophy.

Morris's aesthetic is not systematic, nor is it explicitly literary. His own affinity for crafts and his interest in the education of craftsmen limit his comments to practical concerns of the "lesser arts"—the "crafts of house-building, painting, joinery and carpentry, smith's work, pottery and glass-making, weaving, and many others"—all decorative arts which he distinguishes from architecture, sculpture, painting, and we might add, literature (*CW* 22:3-4). Undoubtedly his interest in


age provides communal pleasure and a temporary suspension of rational complexity as the tellers and listeners release racial memory to re-create the simplest and most basic archetypes of their shared heritage:

They told of poets' vain imaginings,
And memories vague of half-forgotten things,
Nor true nor false, but sweet to think upon. (CW 3:83)

Finally, as the tales begin, we see that Morris's concept of historic or personal truth evades pragmatic categories. The stories that follow explore the human potential to reduce experience to its essential motives, limitations, and pleasures. They momentarily recall

times long passed away,
When men might cross a kingdom in a day,
And kings remembered they should one day die,
And all folk dwelt in great simplicity. (CW 3:84)

Without the experience of the Wanderers, the innocence of the tales would have no meaning, and without the idyllic innocence of this art of the people the frustrated energy of the Wanderers would find no channel back into the sensuous, communal experience that characterizes history, art, and life.



chapter five The Four Seasons of Man and Society: the General Structure and Volume j

And nowe to shewe howe man
chaungeth twelve tymes evyn as
the twelve monethes do.

Kalender of Shepberdes

STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

TO DESCRIBE the organization of the *Earthly Paradise* tales is inevitably to confront their similarity. In subject and style they have struck more than one reader with their repetitions, diffuseness, and display of Morris's apparently uncalculated "instinct for story-telling."¹ Easily seduced by the narrator's claim of randomness, most readers are content to assume a fairly arbitrary arrangement of the poet's favorite stories from a "now altered world."

Most often, generalizations about unity are limited to remarks about Morris's "medieval method," the term used by Mackail to describe the "architectural design of a great body of poetry." Our discussion so far has questioned the appropriateness of "romance" as a label for Morris's method, and this is clearly what Mackail has in mind when he discusses "the plan of a cycle of romantic stories connected by some common purpose or occasion."² Assuming the particular limitations—thematic and stylistic—of this interpretation, however, we can learn something of Morris's *kind* of unity by recalling the structural principles of the medieval narrative cycles.

Defining form and meaning in medieval romance, Eugène Vinaver distinguishes between Aristotelian structure and the "acentric composition" of the medieval cycles: "Whereas the Roman doctrine of *amplificatio* or *auxesis* was concerned with the art of making small things great, of 'raising acts and personal traits above their dimensions' in a kind of upward move-

ment, the medieval variety of amplification was, on the contrary, a linear or horizontal extension, an expansion or an unrolling of a number of interlocked themes." It is the neutralizing effect of this interlocking, horizontal development that sustains continuity and accounts for the "tapestry" quality frequently cited in *The Earthly Paradise*: "And since it is always possible, and often even necessary, for several themes to be pursued simultaneously, they have to alternate like threads in a woven fabric, one theme interrupting another and again another, and yet all remaining constantly present in the author's and the reader's mind."³ Finally, the "unity" of this kind of composition derives from its lack of center or single goal. Its expansive potential gives it its "cyclical" quality.

The unity of *The Earthly Paradise* is clearly of this sort, however much Morris departs from the philosophical assumptions of the period of romance. He values the apparently random flow of narrative achieved by the romancers; it suits what Swinburne, intending no compliment, called his "slow and spontaneous" style.⁴ More important, however, are Morris's modifications of the medieval instrument. The random atmosphere is retained but its submission to the shaping effect of the double frame of the poem gives it a thematic "center." This unifying principle might be described as pastoral meditation. Simple, archetypal myths of past civilizations are repeated in a pattern and context that suggest the eternal cycle of nature, man, and culture. The suggestion of acentric composition is important to Morris's transmission of the "art of the people," but he controls its design in three major ways that are characteristic of pastoral anthologies.

First, the possibilities of infinite horizontal extension are checked by the treatment of the individual stories as idylls, with their strong sense of aesthetic closure, their balanced sequential relationships of comparison and contrast, and their characteristic pastoral themes. Second, their collection within a calendar structure transforms the generic meaning of "cycle" into the overt theme of eternal recurrence. And third, the

presence of the idle singer gives the work social and personal coherence. As narrator, he links fictional and real worlds, especially in a cultural sense; as speaker in the lyric interludes, he introduces the elegiac stance of a modern pastoral poet whose goal is observation and perception of likeness or unlikeness, the kind of vision that leads to idyllic anagnorisis.⁵

The individual tales combine the traits of two related Greek forms that constitute types rather than genres—the idyll, a short descriptive piece of human or natural interest, and the epyll, a little story.⁶ Both the descriptive and narrative qualities are characteristic of the pastoral poem, whether it be technically designated as idyll, eclogue, elegy, or song. In fact, even when the content of such a poem is neither pastoral nor idyllic in the sense of embodying the quality of life heretofore described, its distinguishing formal trait is its limited scale. Plot issues are simplified; the minute description of concrete natural setting assumes primary importance; and the sense of closure of the created world is insured by a comprehensive frame around the poem or tale as well as by internal descriptive frames that interrupt and deactivate the forward movement of heroic plot.⁷

Morris's tales, even when we view them as heroic myths, are inevitably submitted to these kinds of structural limitation. The framework story itself, which provides meditative continuum, also serves to interrupt, arrest, and distance heroic motion. The Wanderers speak of a "story's death" (*CW* 3:239), of the tales as "images of bygone days" (*CW* 5:396), of "stirring deeds long dead" (*CW* 6:176). Like the idle singer, they are also aware of the constructed artificiality of the "measured falling of that rhyme" and "the cadence of that ancient rhyme" (*CW* 4:125, 159). Within the tales action is frequently generated and then frozen through images of stasis and through a style that creates pictorial tableaux. Many of them are enclosed by quiet descriptive frames that suggest pastoral life. Earlier in *Jason*, Morris has the dead hero discovered by "some shepherd of the lone grey slope" and his simple friends, "vine-dressers and

their mates, who through the town / Ere then had borne their well-filled baskets brown" (*CW* 2:296). Representative of the pastoral frame in *The Earthly Paradise* is the setting of "The Death of Paris," where the tale's narrator concludes:

I cannot tell what crop may clothe the hills,
The merry hills Troy whitened long ago—
Belike the sheaves, wherewith the reaper fills
His yellow wain, no whit the weaker grow
For that past harvest-tide of wrong and woe;
Belike the tale, wept over otherwhere,
Of those old days, is clean forgotten there. (*CW* 5:21)

The idyllic content of the tales is closely related to structure in its reductive quality. Without reference to the pastoral overtones of his remarks, Walter Pater contrasts the *Earthly Paradise* stories with the mood of "delirium or illusion" in the earlier, more romantic poetry. He calls the transition a process of simplification, of movement from enchanted evening to "the great primary passions under broad daylight as of the pagan Veronese." Pater summarizes:

Complex and subtle interest, which the mind spins for itself may occupy art and poetry or our own spirits for a time; but sooner or later they come back with a sharp rebound to the simple elementary passions—anger, desire, regret, pity, and fear: and what corresponds to them in the sensuous world—bare, abstract fire, water, air, tears, sleep, silence, and what De Quincey has called the "glory of motion."

This reaction from dreamlight to daylight gives, as always happens, a strange power in dealing with morning and the things of the morning. Not less is this Hellenist of the Middle Ages master of dreams, of sleep and the desire of sleep—sleep in which no one walks, restorer of childhood to men—dreams, not like Galahad's or Guenevere's, but full of happy, childish wonder as in the earlier world.⁸

We could enumerate the distinctively pastoral touches of this simple daylight world as they emerge in sources as various as Theocritus, Virgil, Spenser, or even Wordsworth and Keats: the conflict of youth and age, the value of solitary singing, an attitude of simple fatalism, the glimpse of peaceable kingdoms, visions of love thwarted and fulfilled, the dangers of pride in possessions, and naturalistic communication between men and gods. The repetition of these tropes establishes several pastoral themes: celebration of the earth, a vision of communal society, and submission to fate.

In addition, however, the organization of the tales provides a series of comparisons and contrasts within individual volumes, and each volume in turn takes on a particular thematic coloration. The result is that while we remain acutely aware of the static discreteness of each idyll, we also begin to recognize the patterns suggested by juxtaposition and ultimately sequence: "Alternate song is what the Muses love" (*Virgil* III: 59).

It is impossible to deny the implication of progression in any sequential arrangement, especially when it is associated with the seasons of the year. The calendar suggests cyclical as well as linear progression, and poets have variously utilized the pattern of eternal recurrence as a pessimistic or optimistic metaphor for man. Like Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, Morris manages to do both, just as he employs the ideas of both repetition and progression. One obvious implication of the tales is the unavoidable repetition of personal and historical aspiration and failure. If their similar style dissipates interest it is because the poet challenges the possibility of unique experience. Nature has its pattern, and man his: life leads to death and finally to rebirth, but it is not for the individual man to decide how or when he will be absorbed into the great cycle. Nor is he apt to perceive the moments of transition in medias res. What continues and repeats again is not individual deed or will but the typical experience of a culture.

Man is more attuned to linear progression, to the changes

that lead toward his death. This painful recognition is the source of the concept of the ages or seasons of man, a metaphor that generalizes rather than particularizes man's fate. It functions in medieval works like the *Kalender of Shepberdes* to remind man of his end. The four volumes of *The Earthly Paradise* suggest such a structural scheme. Utilizing ancient calendar structure, Morris begins his year with spring and devotes a volume of tales to each subsequent season, concluding with winter, the traditional season of death. Both the *Kalender of Shepberdes* and Spenser's *Shepheard's Calendar* work on a similar structure, though Spenser adopts the new calendar year that begins in January. Spenser thereby achieves a particularly "northern" pastoral tone that reflects the Anglo-Saxon preoccupation with the physical hazards and emotional realism of winter. Morris achieves a similar effect, primarily through his cultural and psychological delineation of the Wanderers.

Although his division of months is different from Morris's, the Maister Shepherde of the *Kalender* offers a clear conventional statement of the seasons-of-man theme:

It is to be vnderstonde that there be in the yere iiij. quarters that is to be callyd vere . Imnus . estas . and . autunnus. These be the foure seasons in the yere . as Prymetyme is the sprynge of the yere as Feueryere . Marche . and . Aprell. Those thre monethes. Than comethe sommer. as. May . June . and . July. and in those iii. monethes euery herbe . grayne . and tre in his kynde is in his moste strengthe and fayrnesse euene at the hygheste. Thanne cometh. Autonne . as August . September and . October . that all these fruytis waxethe ripe and be gaderyde and howsyd. Than comethe . Nouember . December . and Janyuere . and these iii. monethes is the wynter. The tyme of lytell profite. We shepardis saythe that the age of a man is. lxxii. yere and that we lekene but to one holle yere . for euermore we take vi. yere for euery moneth. as Jenyuere . or Feueryere . & so forthe for as the yere chaungeth by the twelue monethes.⁹

An intricate description of each age of man follows, dividing the ages of man and the year into seasons and months. Spenser also makes his twelve eclogues "proportionable to the twelve monthes," and simultaneously stresses the four seasons of man's life. It is significant that despite Spenser's January–December arrangement Colin Clout refers in the December eclogue to the older seasonal tradition. The argument for the eclogue follows:

This Aeglogue (even as the first beganne) is ended with a complaynte of Colin to God Pan; wherein, as weary of his former wayes, hee proportioneth his life to the foure seasons of the yere; comparing hys youthe to the spring time, when he was fresh and free from loves follye. His manhoode to the sommer, which, he sayth, was consumed with greate heate and excessive drouth, caused throughe a Comet or blasing starre, by which hee meaneth love; which passion is commonly compared to such flames and immoderate heate. His riper yeares hee resembleth to an unseasonable harueste, wherein the fruites fall ere they be ripe. His latter age to winters chyll and frostie season, now drawing neare to his last ende.¹⁰

The *Earthly Paradise* arrangement, while it cannot be totally "proportioned" to this pastoral design, nevertheless offers irresistible invitation to a similar reading. In addition, it is helpful to think of Morris's organization as an embodiment of the seasonal *mythoi* assigned by Northrop Frye to the major genres (a linear-symbolic pattern he also follows in describing romance alone). Briefly, spring is associated with comedy, summer with romance, autumn with tragedy, and winter with irony. Concurrently he traces the cycle of romance, the genre that Morris modifies by style and perspective into a pastoral mode, from the birth of the hero in spring to his integration into and withdrawal from society in summer, fall, and winter.¹¹

Volume 1, including the tales of March and April, focuses

on the birth, youth, and marriage of heroes in three of its four stories. The youth of the hero is associated with the comic interest in the integration of society. Age and fate are also introduced as themes, the first primarily as a barrier to youth and the innocent society, but emphasis is on the carefree phase of the hero's youth, when, as Colin Clout says, "flowrd my joyfull spring, / Like Swallow swift I wandred here and there."

In the second volume the wandering is much more directed (though less controlled) toward the satisfaction of love-longing, "that unkindly heate" which Colin regrets. Every tale is a quest, and almost every quester seeks immortality in the form of love: in pastoral terms, "A comett stird up that unkindly heate, / That reigned (as men sayd) in Venus seate." The tenor of the volume is highly idealistic: motives and events are unusually subject to supernatural agency, and the otherworld permeates the natural setting of the stories. It is appropriate to both pastoral and romance tradition that the summer volume include eight quests for immortality. For the pastoral poet it is a season of driven desperation:

Forth was I ledde, not as I wont afore,
When choise I had to choose my wandring waye,
But whether luck and loves unbridled lore
Would leade me forth on Fancies bitte to playe:
The bush my bedde, the bramble was my bowre,
The Woodes can wnesse many a wofull stowre.¹²

And the myth critic reminds us that summer, the season of romance, epitomizes the apex of the hero's life and typifies the form of the quest.

The middle volumes, II and III, reveal a contrast even as they mark a transition. The otherworldly idealism of II is suddenly juxtaposed with the earthly topics of III, primarily separation and death. Even "Acontius and Cydippe" shows young love shadowed by the inevitability of age and death. The heroes are driven less by supernatural force than by human error, espe-

cially in the last two stories. The Wanderer who introduces the climactic tale of Gudrun tells his listeners:

Therefore, no marvels hath my tale to tell,
But deals with such things as men know too well;
All that I have herein your hearts to move,
Is but the seed and fruit of bitter love. (CW 5:250)

The "seed and fruit" figure, foreshadowed by the "harvest-tide of woe and wrong" in the first story, summarizes the concerns of the volume and sets it in the pastoral tradition of human harvest that Colin Clout describes in similar terms:

Thus is my sommer worne away and wasted,
Thus is my harvest hastened all to rathe;
The eare that budded faire is burnt and blasted,
And all my hoped gaine is turnd to scathe:
Of all the seede that in my youth was sowne
Was nought but brakes and brambles to be mowne.¹³

This third volume, the darkest of the entire work, is also Morris's closest approximation to tragedy, the *mythos* of autumn that balances fate with human weakness, especially *hybris*, in precipitating fall. In contrast to comedy and romance, tragedy tends to convey an atmosphere of mimetic reality, a quality that critics have tended to associate, correctly it seems to me, with Morris's increasing interest in the sagas that provide the primary sources for the volume.

The winter volume, IV, marks something of a departure from either of the symbolic patterns we have described. To some extent it treats age, and it does embody the meditative perspective of a winter eclogue. In the Wanderers who listen there is recognition that "Winter is come, that blowes the baleful breath, / And after Winter commeth timely death."¹⁴ The tone of the tales, however, is closer to the irony which Frye associates with winter. The bright, cold distance of resigned perception that is strongly conveyed through the idle

singer in the winter lyrics finds its counter in the tales which redefine the hero. Male or female, this hero moves into the fire of experience and out again, maintaining a balance of fidelities to man and earth. Hercules in the first tale announces the type via his strange committed distance. He is motivated less by supernatural power, intellect, or greed than earlier heroes. His "merry" spontaneity gives him the quality Yeats attributes to his mysterious but accessible Chinamen carved in lapis lazuli. The emergent hero accepts vicissitude with the assumption that "all things fall and are built again, / And those who build them again are gay."¹⁵ Through the new hero Morris intimates that the linear movement toward death may also signal the possibility of rebirth, even if the poet as individual man can participate in this part of the great cycle only aesthetically.

The value of this kind of reading of the poem is that it accommodates Morris's dialectical approach, his simultaneous use of linear and static structures. It also expresses his "extra-verted" aesthetic that fuses personal and cultural experience. The cyclical interpretation, especially popular with myth critics, has often been applied to the whole work of a writer. Dwight Culler's reading of Arnold's poetry is a fine example. He validates his pattern by reference to the thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle of the dialectical theory of history in Herder, Goethe, Novalis, the Saint-Simonians, and Carlyle. The reading itself, however, describes the personal progress of poet (and personae) through a symbolic landscape.¹⁶

For all the similarity of symbol, Morris's cycle has more affinity with historical myth. Describing civilization in an early lecture, he utilizes the organic, seasonal metaphor which we have seen in the "seasons of man" pattern: "So it has been seen before: first comes the birth, and hope scarcely conscious of itself; then the flower and fruit of mastery, with hope more than conscious enough, passing into insolence, as decay follows ripeness; and then—the new birth again" (*CW*22:11). His approach recalls Virgil's fourth eclogue; it also appears in Hesiod, the source of the Golden Age idea, and Ovid, who

repeats it in the *Metamorphoses*; both were admired by Morris. In the first book of that work, Ovid announces his theme as change and fancifully relates the creation of the world. Man's appearance heralds the age of gold, an innocent phase that is free of competition, the necessity of law, or the violation of the earth. Free also of overpopulation or curiosity, it is characterized primarily by the absence of aggressive instincts. The succeeding ages of silver, bronze, and iron mark the growth of aspiration, greed, and significantly, quest. The race of bronze, remarkably similar to the world of Morris's second volume, introduces the notions of the voyage of conquest and the search for treasure. The age of iron, like Morris's volume III, is an era of "fierce strife" when all human loyalties disappear. Thus the last phase is the deluge, with which Jove punishes man and restores to the "satyrs and fauns and nymphs of hill and wood" their rightful heritage, the earth. Into this vision of completed cycle, when "earth is earth again,"¹⁷ Ovid weaves his mythologies of gods and men, always retaining the theme of metamorphosis, an idea at once literal and metaphoric.

The effect of this approach is a strange sense of perpetual motion with rhythmic interruption. Richard Wilbur describes it, with reference to Ovid, in his poem about the children's game of statues: the children fling each other

and then hold still
In gargoyles attitudes,—as if
All definition were outrageous. Then
They melt in giggles and begin again.

The unconscious children in their game "weave and then again undo / Their fickle zodiacs."¹⁸ For their conscious adult observers, however, the game becomes an uncomfortable mirror of their own roles, their familiar and necessary myths.

Such is the effect of Ovid's narrative method, but to an even stronger degree, Morris's, with its emphasis on idyllic stasis

as its aesthetic center. For the Wanderers and the Elders, for the poet and the reader, the tales of four seasons recall man's necessity for myths about himself and about history. Each volume presents one phase of this vision through the pastoral calendar metaphor. The year "That these old men from such mishap and strife, / Such springing up, and dying out of dreams / Had won at last" is finally a symbolic year, itself the subject of meditation on the cycles of nature, man, and civilization. In a sense, the meditation carries its participants beyond despair or hope into an imaginative realm that suspends conventional responses: "In the perspective of the great elemental cycles—the mystery of spring and birth, the inevitability of winter and death—the sphere of man's ambition assumes its true proportion. The pastoral becomes the vehicle for his acceptance of his human condition."¹⁹

VOLUME I: SPRING, THE GOLDEN AGE OF MAN AND SOCIETY ~~~~

In the first tale, "Atalanta's Race," the hero seeks the help of Venus to attain "The golden age, the golden age come back!" While the Golden Age is characteristically relegated to the distant past, the establishment of a simple, harmonious society is foreshadowed at the story's end by the marriage of Milanion and Atalanta, by the marriage of Michael and Cecily in "The Man Born to Be King," and the marriage and victorious return of Perseus and Andromeda in "The Doom of King Acrisius." Although the fulfillment of love is an obvious thematic concern in most of the *Earthly Paradise* stories, it is not elsewhere so repeatedly associated with "a new society" that "crystallizes . . . around the hero and his bride." Marriage signals the "theme of the comic . . . the integration of society, which usually takes the form of incorporating a central character into it."²⁰ Two corollary interests of the volume give this "integration" its particular meaning and tone. One is the delineation of the heroes as young and innocent "outsiders" whose alienation is false and whose integration is preceded by or concur-

rent with actual birth into hostile social circumstance that must be overcome in a process of discovery or with metaphorical birth into love which releases chastity into creative innocence. The second subsidiary theme introduces and repeats the nature of the barrier to integrated society, the old order, represented by the aging king/father who seeks to deny natural process and the inevitable triumph of youth, love, and community. The figure of the tyrant occurs in each of the four stories, and in the last three it receives titular and narrative focus to an extent that makes these tales homilies against aspiration.

The comparative elements in the tales thus treat spring topics: the birth of the hero, the creative innocence of love, and the beginning of new community. The narrative pattern emphasizes integration by moving the hero (or heroine) from isolation, often in the natural world which educates him, into a city setting where he loves, marries, and blends the old order with the new. Countering this movement is the gradual defeat of the blocking agent, the doomed king, whose potential isolation grows into true alienation that balances the false alienation of the hero at the beginning of the story.

Because the first story sets the tone of the volume, it deserves a careful examination. While "Atalanta's Race" stops short of a vision of society, it traces the emergence of its agents from isolation into love. Narrative focus is on the consciousness of Milanion; yet the thematic center of the tale is Atalanta, who is rescued into love from the static chastity of Diana-worship. Because her kind of innocence makes Atalanta's character inaccessible, Milanion receives sympathetic and more extended treatment. The similarity to Keats's handling of the Porphyro-Madeline story is striking. The presence of a blocking agent, Atalanta's father, makes it clear that her destructive dedication to chastity is imposed, not natural. The conventional abandoned royal child (*CW* 3:89-90), she is figuratively yet unborn. She is described in her cruel victories over unfortunate suitors as "breathing like a little child / Amid some warlike clamour laid asleep" (*CW* 3:88). Her innocence is directly associated