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**The Pastoral
Vision of
William Morris:**
*The
Earthly Paradise*

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repetition of that blessed state when "we see into the life of things." Because the goal is a state of being and knowing that is dependent on a wide range of experience, the closure of society and its a priori demands must be abandoned. Thus the hero is deliberately alone. Because the desired state of being is continuous process, the journey is apt to be endless. Experience—the pleasure of the mind in excursive, kinetic activity—is quite literally the motive force of romantic journeys.¹⁶

Second, the locus of romantic journeys is an otherworld, but it is natural. The great chaotic flux of the sea is cited by Auden as the setting of self-discovery, and we are equally aware of the awesome presence of mountains, of storm, and of darkness and light—especially the "celestial light" of the visionary experience. But we are also aware of more commonplace phenomena, in various fields and vernal woods. The function of this natural locus is what gives it the supernatural aura of the traditional otherworld: its multiple mystery, chaos, beauty, and order are correspondent to the same qualities in man, and his fusion with nature, however temporary, is a sacred encounter.

Finally, the form of the romantic journey, for all its similarity to earlier quests, is also unique. Certainly there are instances of long narrative journeys. Endymion's quest for the ideal is an important example, as are the travels of Byron's heroes. This kind of quest story is the basic structure for many of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, including the framework story. The search for experience is embodied in narrative form and reflected in two shorter romantic forms which use metaphoric journeys to deal with the theme of cognition: the ballad and the dramatic lyric, especially the monologue. According to Morris, the mode he chose for *The Defence of Guenevere* was "more like Browning than any one else, I suppose,"¹⁷ though the dramatic lyric was also a favorite form of Wordsworth and Coleridge, especially in their conversation poems: meditative quests that move toward revelation through particular observations at a particular time with a particular auditor. The

ballad, suggested by other poems in the volume, emphasizes character less than monologue, but it similarly stresses dramatic progression and its concurrent revelation by indirection for the reader. Its strongly predicative structure and its "terminology of cognition and interaction," says Josephine Miles, produce a dramatic poetry which "admits conflicts and the difficulties of life, recognizes the low, even the hell, which may be on earth,"¹⁸ and which had direct influence on the dramatic monologue.

The meditative quest of the mind is seen in the conversation poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the odes of Keats, and in the most important "unfinished journey" of the period—*The Prelude*. These poems, in the opinion of Robert Langbaum, constitute the "poetry of experience." They are works in which "meaning is a movement of perception." By observing an object or situation that is both present and changing, the speaker "moves through a series of intellectual oscillations toward a purpose of which he is himself at each point not aware." The changing insight determines the organic structure of the poem, and the "final" conclusion, in terms of rational abstraction, is less important than the sense of shifting relationship between the observer and the object. The personal intensity gives the poetry its lyric force and shape, and the poet's creation of a speaker and often a listener gives it dramatic objectivity. Langbaum's argument is that these romantic poems are part of the evolution of the dramatic monologue, which he sees as the culmination of romantic form and sensibility.¹⁹

QUEST AND *THE DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE* ~~~~~

In the light of all these comments about Morris's legacy of energy, *The Defence of Guenevere* presents a paradox. We can immediately sense the romantic idiom of the poems. The volume is written in a strongly active mode, and the characters are engaged in active conflict, mental or physical. Like the

romantics before him, Morris is interested in the individual struggle for self-definition within the larger social context that seems variously dull, uncomprehending, and destructive. The positive appeal of "questing" is presented in two ways. The first is more or less literal, the quest for honor in the Arthurian Grail stories, and the quest for (glory) on the field of battle in the chronicles of Froissart. The second is the metaphoric search for self-realization and vindication. In this mode Morris explores the characters of Guenevere, Launcelot, Sir Peter Harpdon, Sir Galahad, and others.

The force of this romantic assertion, however, is checked by an even more powerful sense of failure. It is not the failure of the individual but of the society that destroys even the idealistic dream of action and deprives the hero of the bases of "experience." This vision of destruction comes in part from Morris's medieval sources, those works written later than the romances by men who shared Morris's belief that a vision of action is ultimately a social vision. In a fragmenting society, adventure becomes narcissistic; its energy is destructive rather than creative.

The medieval sources, especially Froissart's *Chronicles*, projected a theme of the dissolution of society and the failure of warfare. One critic has described the atmosphere of Froissart as a "*bildlichkeit* of widespread destruction, of blood and rapine lying just beneath the colourful and the fascinating and the legendary in the . . . account of the Hundred Years' War."²⁰ Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a second important source, was a product of roughly the same period,²¹ and while it derives much in style and flavor from the French romances of chivalry, its overriding emphasis is on the rise and fall of a society and its ethical bases. Recent critics argue that the unity of the work depends on this theme of dissolution, specifically the revelation of the corrupt reality that underlies "the fair chivalric surface."²² It is significant that the major Arthurian poems in *The Defence of Guenevere*, the first four poems of the volume, are based on events which come after the Grail quest in the

denouement of the narrative ("Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb") or events which emphasize failure in the quest itself ("Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" and "The Chapel in Lyonesse").

In short, Morris drew on sources or parts of sources in which atmosphere was closer to realistic or "mimetic" concerns than idealistic ones,²³ and in doing so he made the Middle Ages not so much a metaphor for the Palace of Art as for contemporary society. The theme which emerges is the romantic theme of perception, but the poet does not see synthesis. Instead he sees the destructive disparity of purity and force, of innocence and experience.

The title poem presents a situation that is typical of the volume: in an attempt to vindicate unity of being, a character is thwarted by hostile social circumstance. Based roughly on Malory, Book XIX: chapters 1-9 and Book XX: chapters 1-8, the poem dramatizes the trial of Queen Guenevere, who must defend herself against charges of adultery with Launcelot in order to avoid death by fire. Implicit in Malory's and Morris's accounts is the notion that both incidents which provide evidence for the prosecution have been arranged by members of a decadent society.

The poem plunges into the experience of the speaker at a moment of intense conflict which is external and internal.²⁴ She must literally defend her life against her accusers, whose values emerge through her implications; but more important, she must defend her integrity, values, and mode of being. To do the first, she must cater to her audience; to do the second, she risks the loss of sympathy of that same audience. Her conflict as much as her situation wins the sympathy of her second unseen audience, the reader. In terms of progression, the second goal, an appeal for mercy, precedes the demand for justice.

Broadly speaking, the content of Guenevere's defense falls into two categories that parallel her goals. She talks about the happy innocence (double implication—experiential and legal)

of her love with Launcelot, an experience that is primarily conveyed through natural imagery associated with spring, Edenic purity, and a safely enclosed garden world; and she dwells with equal vividness on the violence of the incidents of treachery. Here imagery is dominated by blood and instruments of war, especially the sword. It is the two worlds—of love and war, of nature and machine, of quiet lovers and martial groups, of innocence and experience—that dominate the consciousness of Guenevere. As her defense progresses, she realizes, as do we, how literally the second world has invaded and now surrounds the first. She sees herself as the lone survivor of the lost world of love—an isolated figure surrounded by a hostile crowd. Except for her prosecutor, Gauwaine, the unfriendly society of auditors are referred to only as “they,” and their silent threat is mirrored in Gauwaine’s gestures as Guenevere nervously acknowledges them. At the same time, we see another dimension in Guenevere’s situation: proudly aware of her status as queen and as Launcelot’s chivalric “prize,” she is part of the world that accuses her.

In the first sixteen stanzas of the poem, Guenevere appeals directly to the positive emotions of her listeners. She is at first very aware of her audience, deferring to “knights and lords,” and she seems in control of her argument. It is an object lesson to illustrate the basis of her actions, and it acknowledges both conscious choice and fate. The red and blue cloths are indeed objects of choice “of your own strength and mightiness,” but because human limitation prevents foreknowledge, fate ultimately determines the meaning of the choice. This is Guenevere’s first appeal to human complexity, as it is her first reference to the principles of fate and human passivity, which underlie the next sequence of the monologue. At this point, she senses failure, asserts her belief in her truth and Gauwaine’s lie, and continues in another vein.

The next division (stanzas 21–48) is the core of the poem. Like the Wife of Bath’s “digressions,” it marks a descent—into the past through memory and into the deeper recesses of con-

sciousness that evade the complete control of the speaker. We can never say that Guenevere loses awareness of her listeners, but Morris clearly intends a new phase that suggests immersion in her experiences. He implies her sincerity and loss of manipulative control when he describes her loss of shame now (*CW* 1:2), the “passionate twisting of her body,” and later, the awkwardly handled suggestion that “I lose my head e’en now in doing this” (*CW* 1:5). The memory sequence takes on the improvisational intensity of all poems of experience as she relives the beginning of her love with Launcelot. The past has the vividness of the present and the resonance of a Wordsworthian spot in time:

No minute of that wild day ever slips
From out my memory; I hear the thrushes sing,
And wheresoever I may be, straightway
Thoughts of it all come up with most fresh sting.

(*CW* 1:4)

One element of this section has special importance—the use of natural imagery. It suggests the natural necessity of the love encounter; it associates Guenevere with natural beauty; and it suggests the Edenic innocence of her relationship with Launcelot.²⁵ The first idea seems most conscious for Guenevere, who feels the force of fate in the events. She indirectly compares her state of mind to the seasons, whose progression is inevitable. Her life had progressed toward the autumnal emotions of death in life. In this state she was passive, a *tabula rasa* for those vernal impulses that “on that day” awakened her and pierced her to the bone. Here nature changes from metaphor of inevitability to direct cause. The second association, the psychological unity of Guenevere with nature, proceeds from the first. The atmosphere is both sexually concrete and mystical. Passively victimized by natural beauty, she experiences it in a way that suggests epiphany. She feels the union of body’s beauty and natural beauty—her hand held “up against the blue”:

what would I have done
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,
And startling green drawn upward by the sun? (*CW* 1:5)

She shouts and watches "trancedly" while the wind moves.

The third idea, the Edenic theme, is suggested by the "quiet garden walled round every way," and by the introduction of Launcelot in biblical rhetoric: "In that garden fair came Launcelot walking." His presence completes the perfection of paradise. The effect of this sequence is captured in Guenevere's word "bliss." The harmony of man, woman, and nature within the walled garden creates a universe of love. Its *raison d'être* is not the lusts of the blood—a kind of limited internal necessity—but the fulfillment of natural order, a larger necessity that Donne insisted belonged to a holy elect, not "dull sublunary lovers, . . . whose soul is sense." The ironic note in Guenevere's recollection is that her love-paradise, unlike Donne's, derives its appeal from the kind of innocence that is childlike, innocent of intent or control. She later states that she and Launcelot were like "children" (*CW* 1:9), and later also the green of the garden is associated with youth and hope.²⁶ It is significant—for her self-image as much as her defense—that she recalls only the initial event of their meeting (as does Launcelot in his similar reverie in "King Arthur's Tomb"), implying what she will never admit, a subsequent fall into consciousness. The implication is made explicit with the break in her narrative and her return to a more rational style.

As Gauwaine turns away, apparently unimpressed, Guenevere again directs her attention and method to her audience, abandoning the positive appeal for emotional integrity and adopting the negative tactics of her listeners—verbal force, destructive logic, and accusation:

Ah God of mercy, how he turns away!
So, ever must I dress me to the fight;
So—let God's justice work! Gauwaine, I say,
See me hew down your proofs. (*CW* 1:6)

In this final section of the poem we move to events that are more recent and to a kind of verbal activity that reflects the interests of her audience. Guenevere attempts to discover the truth of the two incidents that are central in the evidence of the prosecution. The truth that she wishes to reveal is not in her actions but in the betrayal of Mellyagraunce first and then Gauwaine. The re-creation of events is no less vivid than before but more consciously controlled. Her chief tactics are to present the violence (associated with Mellyagraunce) and treachery (associated with Gauwaine) of her accusers and to contrast it with the quietness, loyalty, and openness of her relationship with Launcelot. In a sense she makes herself the champion of chivalry.

Mellyagraunce is portrayed as a "beast," by turns cunningly vicious and cowardly. He treats others as beasts as well—"setter of traps." He also is a victim of his emotions, but they are not the emotions of quietude and bliss earlier given Guenevere's blessing; they are the fluctuating moods of a man who has turned the potentially pure power of knighthood into "cursed unknighly outrage." The sword, traditionally the symbol of sacred heroic power, has become a profane surrogate for those who lack true courage and self-control. Armor conceals weakness when it should reveal strength. In both incidents designed to trap the lovers, Launcelot, "my knight" who embodies the old honor, is surprised unarmed. In the first incident he wins by using the strength of his hands and then by defeating Mellyagraunce in superior swordplay. He temporarily vindicates the old power of chivalry. In the second incident, the trap set by Gauwaine, Launcelot must escape.

Gauwaine is accused of a sin more dangerous than violence—guile. To Guenevere, his hyper-rational nature poses a greater threat than Mellyagraunce's thuggery. Guenevere dramatizes this point in the short sequence (stanzas 75–81) that separates her narration of the two incidents. In this self-celebration she again associates herself with nature and says that innocence is self-revealing. Illusion and duplicity, she implies,

belong to the consciousness of a decadent world. Reality and truth are what can be readily seen. Such a view, however, assumes the purity of both observer and object. And at this point, we can assume neither.

The act of seeing has increasing significance in Morris's work. It is important to the multiple perspectives of *The Earthly Paradise*; it is important to Guenevere's monologue as well. Insight is a chief interest of monologue, and it is double: the insight of the character as he struggles through a particular experience and the insight of the reader into the character. The two revelations are often, as Langbaum says, in disequilibrium.²⁷ What we learn about the character is different from and more than what he learns about himself.

What Guenevere sees about herself is related to what she tries to show her audience. As she attempts to reveal her innocence and their duplicity, she realizes that the two ways of seeing are incompatible. "They" cannot see her as she sees herself: "Am I not gracious proof?" We infer that the case, arranged to accommodate a viewpoint already limited, is closed before and in spite of her defense. "There, see you," she says; "See me . . ."; "Look you . . ."; but she might well say that justice is indeed blind. She acknowledges defeat by breaking off her defense: "By God! I will not tell you more today, / Judge any way you will—what matters it?"

What the reader sees about Guenevere is more complex. As we said initially, her self-vindication is based on conflicting styles—the assertion of innocence that is unconscious and self-revealing and the use of highly conscious manipulative tactics. There is no indication that she perceives the paradox. Her intense immersion in the memories-of-love sequence is undeniable, but in the total context of her self-conscious performance, it takes on the quality of wish more than reality. We do not have to, and in fact cannot, sympathize with the limited vision of her audience, to see that Guenevere's humanity is her consciousness she would so like to discount. She

cannot avoid seeing on both levels. In this respect she transcends her auditors. Ultimately, then, the poem shows the reader a contrast between complex human vision and a Cycloplan vision that is close to blindness.

It is clear that the poem's dichotomies are not an aberration so much of character as of society. Frye and Auerbach point out the medieval tendency to order experience according to conflict of opposites—the forces of evil against the forces of purity. By exploring character in realistic terms, Morris shows the complexity of the results in the individual and culture. When the ideal decays—if it ever existed—there is a "dissociation of sensibility." Guenevere's society sets innocence and experience in antithetical conflict rather than potential harmony. It associates truth and consciousness with obvious fact, legal evidence, and power, and reduces the once powerful ideal of purity to childlike chastity. And it indicates that salvation is possible only through force. Launcelot, his horse, and his sword are the final instruments of justice. In this case the sword is good as well as powerful, but we are ironically aware of its double edge. *Are we?*

Morris's choice of Guenevere as heroine underlines the passivity that is one recurrent theme in the volume. Guenevere is not the only lady who must be rescued by force or who functions as the prize of the quest. Others who share the dubious honor are Rapunzel, the damozels in "The Blue Closet," or perhaps most notably, Lady Alice de la Barde in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End." After hearing of her lover's death, she mourns that she could not "go about with many knights" and force the villain Guesclin to his knees:

And then—alas! alas! when all is said,
What could I do but let you go again,
Being pitiful woman? I get no revenge,
Whatever happens; and I get no comfort,
I am but weak, and cannot move my feet,
But as men bid me.

(CW 1:60)

Lady Alice, like Queen Guenevere and Jehane of "The Haystack in the Floods," is strong-willed, sensitive, and intelligent, but ultimately she is a victim of the system that pits force against weakness.

This negative passivity is more obviously associated with unconsciousness in "The Blue Closet." The measured simplicity of its form is especially appropriate to a situation and events that are as mysterious to the characters as to the reader. The poem, written in a ballad style, is on every level a song of innocence. It delights and mystifies the reader because the characters seem oblivious to the paradox of their situation: a world of simple security that is permeated by horror. The ladies, doubly enclosed in a room *within* a tower "between the wash of the tumbling seas," are arrested in their static, charming innocence. They sing "Let the children praise [the Lord]," and singing, describe past happiness and present reality with a wistful clarity that records details without judgment or understanding. Their sense perception juxtaposes the brilliant colors of the garments, the closet, and the harpsichord's gold strings with the deadly imagery of snow, the oozing sea-salt, and the gray lips of the dead Arthur. The dialogue, while it does move the vague narrative from life to death, another resolution by rescue, lacks the cognitive progression of the monologues. Instead it intensifies by repetition the mood and theme of helpless innocence. Death in life is simply transformed to death, and the dimension of cognition is subordinated to passive acceptance: Lady Louise, rescued to death, cannot see (*CW* 1:113). She must be guided by Arthur and her ladies. The song, sometimes a symbol of aesthetic permanence, ceases when the characters die because it has not been a vehicle for life at all—simply a means of enduring until the exchange of one unknown state for another.

The passivity of women in the volume is significant because it stands in contrast to the vital and "radical" innocence of the heroines who emerge in Morris's later works—beginning with Danae, Psyche, and Aslaug in *The Earthly Paradise* and cul-

minating in the late romances with Ellen (*News from Nowhere*) and Birdalone (*The Wood beyond the World*). In *The Defence of Guenevere*, however, the theme is expressed in the plight of men of war as well. 40

The antithesis of empty turbulence and static despair is a characteristic concern in the three poems concerning King Arthur's questing knights—Sir Launcelot, Sir Galahad, and Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy. In "The Defence of Guenevere" we saw Guenevere's reveries of innocence framed by the teeming world of martial reality. The irreconcilable conflict between modes of experience is explored in a different but complementary way in "King Arthur's Tomb," a kind of companion piece. Again the structure is dramatic, and the last meeting of Launcelot and Guenevere is handled as a turbulent dialogue. The central character, however, is Launcelot. It is his poem, as much as the first one was Guenevere's. His central consciousness is established by the poet's descriptive frame, and Morris makes it clear that the poem's dominant mood is the static and ironic despair which marks the end of the questing knight's career. It is in this sense a poem about abortive conclusions, separation, and spiritual death. The atmosphere is hardly comparable to Malory's, where both characters are sad but devoutly resigned to contemplative seclusion.

The melodrama of the confrontation is preceded by the poet's description of Launcelot and the setting of this final quest. It is primarily a night journey of a "dazed," "giddy," and "wearied" (*CW* 1:14) knight to the tomb of his king and to his lady, veiled and black-robed to signify rejection of the world Launcelot represents. For Launcelot this last journey back to the scene of past happiness and departures to glory reflects the collapse of society and of his own knightly control. With Arthur dead and the Round Table dissolved, his kinetic identity is lost:

. . . whether good or bad
He was, he knew not, though he knew perchance
That he was Launcelot, the bravest knight

Of all who since the world was, have borne lance,
Or swung their swords in wrong cause or in right.
(*CW* 1:11)

Like Guenevere in the earlier poem, he tries to vitalize the present with memory. In his attempt the central vision is Guenevere and "the old garden life" when she "loved to sit among the flowers" (*CW* 1:11). The sense of paradisaic stasis is especially strong in two figures. He compares himself to Enoch translated:

. . . her mouth on my cheek sent a delight
Through all my ways of being; like the stroke
Wherewith God threw all men upon the face
When he took Enoch, and when Enoch woke
With a changed body in the happy place. (*CW* 1:12)

Then he envisions Guenevere as a blessed damozel, "lily-like," under pale stars in the green sky:

Because the moon shone like a star she shed
When she dwelt up in heaven a while ago,
And ruled all things but God. (*CW* 1:12-13)

In the same evening he recalls here, he woke from fitful sleep

when before me one
Stood whom I knew, but scarcely dared to touch,
She seemed to have changed so in the night;
Moreover she held scarlet lilies, such
As Maiden Margaret bears upon the light
Of the great church walls. . . . (*CW* 1:13)

Launcelot's memory creates a virgin Guenevere, just as her memory had in her defense. The idealization of his vision is made clear when he confronts the living woman—mad and "blighted" (*CW* 1:14) in such contrast to the vision that he is even more stunned. Just when he has created an Edenic image of Guenevere, she appears as fallen sinner to accuse him of

creating her present state. Then she too elegizes lost happiness and finally accuses him of infidelity to Arthur and to chivalric honor:

Here let me tell you what a knight you are,
O sword and shield of Arthur! you are found
A crooked sword, I think, that leaves a scar
On the bearer's arm, so be he thinks it straight. (*CW* 1:22)

Unable to cope with the dichotomies of vision, Launcelot protests weakly and finally faints, awakening on the tomb with a sense of loss stronger than the one he felt on arriving.

Morris is clearly not interested in placing blame on either Launcelot or Guenevere as independent, rational agents. He is more concerned with the irrational excesses that are released by circumstance and that show the simultaneous desire and incapacity of the mind to deal with contradictory experience. The immediate circumstance is Arthur's death and all that it evokes of fragmented order and lost ideals. Unlike Malory, Morris reunites the lovers over the tomb itself. Again unlike Malory, Morris intensifies the emotions of the two, suggesting that each is mad—Guenevere violently and Launcelot passively. The purity of the chivalric code has made and unmade them, and neither can synthesize the poles of innocence and experience. E. D. H. Johnson's comments on the contrasting use of dream and madness in Tennyson are relevant also to Morris: "Thus, dream usually appears in Tennyson's poetry as a condition in which the individual fulfills inherent needs of his own nature; but madness is treated as a disease brought on by overexposure to harsh circumstance and expressing an inability to compensate. Through dreams outer and inner tensions are equalized; madness results from the failure to make any such adjustment."²⁸

The other two Arthurian poems concern the quest for the Grail, and both suggest that its elusive idealism nourishes a few while the many fail. In "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" the final arming and spiritual preparation of Galahad is the topic, but the atmosphere emphasizes disillusionment. An-

other study in consciousness, the poem shows Galahad's human isolation just before he receives the final vision of the Grail and the promise of heaven. It is characteristically the isolation from love that induces his sadness, and his reaction is similar to Launcelot's at the beginning of "King Arthur's Tomb." Drowsy and weak, he is incapable of comprehensive vision. He stares at the ground feeling "heartless and stupid" (*CW* 1:24), like Rossetti's observer of the woodspurge, and he thinks of the promise of love allowed the more human and foundering knights.

In spite of the lengthy rebuttal of this longing and God's promise of life in the eternal garden, and in spite of the ritual arming for the final quest, the human dimension is reinforced at the end of the poem by the entrance of Sir Bors and his report of the world of reality: for all the others the vision has failed. The knights have been hacked, shamed, and foiled by the very same emblem endorsed by heaven—the sword of conquest.

"The Chapel in Lyonesse" produces interpretive difficulty. Like "The Blue Closet," it suggests less narrative than atmospheric meaning. Curtis Dahl has offered a reading to support its narrative unity and to argue its relation to the Grail story. The latter notion has more grounds because of various Grail images—the bloodless spear, the red and white samite cloth, the mysterious chapel setting—and the references to Launcelot, "far away" and apparently lost on the quest. Although the exact meaning of Ozana's transformation, when he begins "to fathom it," is puzzling, a more important element is the dramatic use of three characters to present contrasting degrees of perception. What they see is less important than how they see it.

Dahl judiciously points out Ozana's heroic limitations:

In the Arthurian cycle Sir Ozana is of no great stature as a hero and is nowhere specified as one of those knights who sought the Grail. Usually he is mentioned only as

one of a group. He fights in battles; he is smitten down in tournaments; he is captured while vainly guarding the Queen; he fails to heal Sir Urre; he is imprisoned; he serves before the King at table. Often he and his fellow second-rate knights of the Round Table are defeated and have to be rescued. More than once he is grievously wounded. He is one of the forty foolish knights who pledge themselves under Gawain to find the missing Launcelot or die in the quest. As King Arthur predicts, they are unsuccessful and therefore forsworn.

The constructed situation of the poem depends upon Ozana's heroic anonymity "as a typical, frequently unsuccessful knight of the Round Table, a man who can represent the ordinary unheroic person. Ozana is not Prince Hamlet, merely an attendant lord."²⁹

In the poem Ozana lies mortally wounded, perhaps under circumstances he cannot understand. His struggle is the attempt to comprehend the meaning of his life as a knight, to try to "fathom" how he might be considered either "true" or "good." His initial failure in vision is implied by his feverish madness. Whether Ozana in his dark night begins to fathom his success or failure is not clear, but his movement in perception is obviously dependent on the presence of Sir Galahad, who brings calm. As he watches, Ozana's "madness" abates and the mysterious gold hair, associated with love-loyalty, assumes soothing significance. The implication is strong that Ozana is a "good knight" *because* of his human limitation and need for companionship.

Higher vision in the poem belongs to Galahad, whose "great blue eyes" stare at "strange things" inaccessible to the reader or Sir Bors. Again serving as the chorus to a "mystery," Sir Bors functions as the agent who sees and marvels at the extremes of perception presented in Ozana and Galahad—the ordinary and the extraordinary. His presence suggests a third kind of vision—like the narrator's in *The Earthly Paradise*—a middle vision that acknowledges human complexity. In this

poem and the preceding one, it is as if Morris cannot see the Grail either. Like Bors, he is interested in this world rather than the next. Unlike the romancers, he prefers the ordinary society that the quester leaves behind.

Finally, we should notice the other men of action in this volume, the knights who seek honor on the field of battle. Most of these characters are drawn from Froissart and reflect the attraction and failure of warfare as a source of self-fulfillment.

"Sir Peter Harpdon's End" is the most successful of these poems. Its dramatic force reveals the character of the good knight and the brutal context that renders that character impotent. Sir Peter is the complete soldier. The opening dialogue with Curzon, his lieutenant, reveals his code and implies that the situation will soon test it. The imminent defeat lends force and poignancy to his convictions. Three ideals emerge in this conversation: the ideal of loyalty, the ideal of pragmatism in battle, and the ideal of the active pursuit of life and honorable death. The first is revealed in his attitude toward Curzon, "good lump" (*CW* 1:38), who is treated with brusque gentleness and good humor. The second is shown by his firm treatment of prisoners, whose treachery is recognized for what it is and who must be killed in spite of their masonry skills that Sir Peter badly needs. The third ideal, suggested throughout the poem by Sir Peter's vitality in the face of defeat, is stated first to Curzon to cheer him in these grim circumstances, which summarize the situation of the whole volume:

. . . look you, times are changed
And now no longer does the country shake
At sound of English names; our captains fade
From off our muster-rolls. At Lusac Bridge
I daresay you may even yet see the hole
That Chandos beat in dying; far in Spain
Pembroke is prisoner; Phelton prisoner here;
Manny lies buried in the Charterhouse;
Oliver Clisson turn'd these years ago;
The Captal died in prison; and, over all,

Edward the prince lies underneath the ground;
Edward the king is dead; at Westminster
The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.
Everything goes to rack—eh! and we too.
Now, Curzon, listen; if they come, these French,
Whom have I got to lean on here, but you?
A man can die but once; will you die then,
Your brave sword in your hand, thoughts in your heart
Of all the deeds we have done here in France—
And yet may do? So God will have your soul,
Whoever has your body. (*CW* 1:37)

Later Sir Peter defends his English loyalty to his cousin Lambert, who will soon betray country and family for personal power. Sir Peter compares his situation to the Trojans', whose losing cause was justified by belief and tenacious courage. Inspired by "fair Helen" and her acts of "great beauty," they fought "in a mad whirl of knowing that they were wrong." He continues:

Now
Why should I not do this thing that I think,
For even when I come to count the gains,
I have them on my side: men will talk, you know,
(We talk of Hector, dead so long ago,
When I am dead, of how this Peter clung
To what he thought the right; of how he died,
Perchance, at last, doing some desperate deed
Few men would care do now, and this is gain
To me, as ease and money is to you.
Moreover, too, I like the straining game
Of striving well to hold up things that fall;
So one becomes great. (*CW* 1:43)

It is the "straining game of striving well" that motivates Sir Peter throughout his "end." It is also a belief in life—in the value of love, companionship, and beauty—that sustains him and gives him human dimension when he must die. The irony,

of course, is that he does not die in battle "doing some desperate deed" but by betrayal. The pettiness of Lambert, Guesclin, and even Clisson, makes them a brutal and mechanistic crowd, as inhumane as Mellyagraunce with his soldiers. We can hardly call Sir Peter an innocent, but we can call him a victim—the ordinary good soldier whose singular integrity is cut down by a bloodthirsty coalition.

His Lady Alice recognizes the anonymity of his death. No "men will talk" as he dreamed. She alone will remember and praise his deeds. So she eulogizes him, numbering his virtues which

yet avail'd
Just nothing, but to fail and fail and fail,
And so at last to die. (CW 1:60)

The lone individual against the crowd was introduced with Guenevere. It continues through the volume. Sir Peter is in his own way a triumphant example. More famous are Robert and Jehane of "The Haystack in the Floods." Or there is the narrator of "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," whose shock of recognition on seeing two slaughtered lovers in the flowering wood shifts the legal tone of his report into elegy. In "Golden Wings" the paradisaical plenitude of life in "a walled garden in the happy poplar land" is suddenly reduced to a single scene of ruin—natural and human:

The apples now grow green and sour
Upon the mouldering castle-wall,
Before they ripen there they fall:
There are no banners on the tower.
The draggled swans most eagerly eat
The green weeds trailing in the moat;
Inside the rotting leaky boat
You see a slain man's stiffen'd feet. (CW 1:123)

This recurrent juxtaposition of the individual and the crowd, the innocent and the experienced, the natural and the brutal,

and of love and war develops a thematic concern with the ironic disparities of life, the unnatural separation of the kinds of experience that make life whole.

A simple and powerful expression of this disparity occurs near the end of the volume in "Riding Together," a poem narrated by a lone survivor. He recalls the last ride with a comrade who was slain. He himself is a prisoner. The ironic tone of the poem is generally conveyed by the sudden destruction of peace and comradeship by massive slaughter. It is expressed in particular ways also. Morris sets the events at the time of a "ceremony of innocence"—our Lady's Feast. He uses a simple rhyme scheme and stanzaic form that employs incremental repetition of innocent elements, especially the weather. The weather—hot, bright, sunny, clear, and fresh—mirrors the freedom, joy, and innocence of the friends who ride steadily toward conquest in the East:

And often as we rode together,
We, looking down the green-bank'd stream,
Saw flowers in the sunny weather,
And saw the bubble-making bream. (CW 1:135)

When their "threescore spears" are suddenly met by the "thick" ranks of the "pagans," the weather carries the force of the irony in its juxtaposition with death: "His eager face in the clear, fresh weather, / Shone out that last time by my side." In rapid action "the little Christian band" is "drown'd," "as in stormy weather / The river drowns low-lying land." And in the "lovely weather" his friend reels and dies and the narrator is bound and carried to prison, now heedless of "any weather" (CW 1:136).

In summary, we can say that the volume celebrates activity but questions its ability to achieve an ideal state in which all men's basic needs can grow in harmony. Most of Morris's characters seek peace, love, and simple, natural pleasures as much as they seek glory. Morris expresses doubt that peace or truth can be won by the sword. Its appeal is too negative

and its power too destructive. Activity, then, in its traditional sense of adventure is an inevitable movement toward death for the true seekers and toward self-indulgence for the insensitive majority.

To return to the three basic elements of adventure, we see the basis of Morris's reservations about the hero, the vision, and the society.

The hero, as Morris sees him, is an ordinary rather than a superior being. He is appealing in his failure. In his review of Browning's *Men and Women* for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, Morris especially praised "Childe Roland": "In my own heart I think I love this poem the best of all in these volumes" (*CW* 1:340). His interpretation shows his own desire for affirmative action in the face of defeat: "for the poet's real design was to show us a brave man doing his duty, making his way on to his point through all dreadful things. What do all these horrors matter to him? he must go on, they cannot stop him; he will be slain certainly, who knows by what unheard-of death; yet he can leave all this in God's hands, and go forward, for it will all come right at the end. And has not Robert Browning shewn us this right well?" (*CW* 1:339) Morris's disillusionment with heroic quest is also reflected, however, for he notes the isolation of the hero: "Do you not feel as you read, a strange sympathy for the lonely knight, so very, very lonely, not allowed even the fellowship of kindly memories[?]" (*CW* 1:339). The alienation of the hero he could never accept, and his most sympathetic characters are those whose human needs exclude them from ultimate glory. Like Malory, he prefers Launcelot, unsuccessful in the Grail quest, aware of love and loneliness, yet perseverant in the face of personal and cultural defeat. The anonymous song that concludes "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" praises this humanity in the hero:

Sing we therefore then
Launcelot's praise again,
For he wan crownès ten,
If he wan not twelve.

The ideal vision of the quest is placed in the distant forest and future only once, in "Sir Galahad." In all the other poems it is glimpsed through memory in the dream of past innocence. Here purity is associated less with goal than escape; yet its negative quality is imposed, not inherent. Paradise is lost because it was stultified. Nature, the romantic locus for the ideal, is often associated here with innocence, but it mirrors the plight of character more than it mends it. [The failure of action in these poems is not only its inability to achieve the good but its power to deprive it of growth.] Memory, elegiac language, and singing become a substitute for creative innocence. The narrator of "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire" does not elegeize a perfect love that could never be but the willful destruction of natural love that could have flourished. And Lady Alice, of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," when she hears the song of "Launcelot, and love and fate and death," is disturbed not by its theme of inevitabilities but by the ironic knowledge that her unsung knight died unnecessarily before love and fate were fulfilled. The principle of growth and fruition is essential to the unconscious realm of man and nature. Life by the sword—erratic, divisive, and abortive—denies natural process.

The society reflected in the poems clearly associates action with the values of medieval chivalry. Perhaps because they were the values of a few, their decay likewise meant that they were seized and distorted by an unholy elect whose violence gave them the quality of a mob. While the remaining true knights are frequently static, dreamy, or bound in prison, the nouveau knights are often depicted in turbulent phrases: grovelling Mellygraunce, the "setter of traps"; the "rascal" Sir Lambert, also a "filthy beast"; Sir Roger's "crafty" father; the "grim king" fuming at the council board and "blind with gnashing his teeth"; or "grinning" Godmar.

In his essay on utopias Lewis Mumford comments on the typical evolution of the city-society from ideal community to totalitarian regime: "a visible heaven on earth" easily moves toward "isolation, stratification, fixation, regimentation, standardization, militarization."³⁰ With means converted to