Writers on Morris seem inevitably to quote in some context his famous remark "If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry... he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all." This essay is no exception. But though it is much overquoted, it is a revealing statement, for Morris did not write his poetry in the belief that he was creating immortal artifacts of divine inspiration. "That talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense, I may tell you that flat... there is no such thing: it is a mere matter of craftsmanship." 1 Whereas the unquestionably great poets—Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, and Yeats, for instance—seem themselves to have been aware of their high place in literature before the world conceded it to them, the realistic and practical Morris seems to have realized, with no false humility, his own minority in the hierarchy. In nothing was he an innovator; his genius was not in creating new things or in expressing human truths in original imagery. Instead, he was a great adapter, one who could see the patterns inherent in all things, in the foliage and birdlife he transmuted into designs, in the great historical events of the past that he projected into the future. The typefaces he designed are derivative; the furniture made by the company was adapted from traditional designs. Tapestries, stained glass windows, epic poetry—all were traditional forms to be adapted, reinterpreted, and, if possible, revitalized. Morris was primarily a synthesizer, yet a synthesizer of genius, for what he brought together gained new integrity and force under his hands. Even if Morris had been a greater poet, it is by no means certain that his total impact upon the evolution of our civilization would have been greater. His regenerating influence has been a catalyst in many fields and, even now, his writings are attracting a new interest.

Morris's facility was extraordinary. May Morris, writing of the swiftness with which her father worked, quotes from a letter written in 1868: "To-day I took first piece of copy to printer. Yesterday I wrote thirty-three stanzas of Pygmalion. If you want my company (usually considered of no use to anybody but the owner) please say so. I believe I shall get on so fast with my work that I shall be able to idle" (III, 186.

1 Mackail, I, 186.
Morris wrote much of his poetry during the night, probably to occupy his restless mind while his household slept. All his life he seems to have regarded his writing as a relaxing diversion from his other varied and demanding activities. In the sense that it may have been an escape for him, it may be regarded as "escapist" literature. But it was not so much an escape for Morris as a working-out of an approach to life that he himself put into practice. Embodying as they do the thoughts of a man so committed to action, Morris's poems and tales would be anomalous indeed if they advocated simply the ignoring of problems. Yet this is the interpretation they have been given by a number of critics. That Morris in refusing to claim for his work the authority of divine revelation did not argue for its implicit message has probably contributed to a pervasive misunderstanding. But if Morris failed to act as interpreter for his own books, they speak for themselves. His writings do present a point of view, however vaguely and tentatively it may be realized in any given excerpt. This Weltanschauung may be summarized in a rather crude and simplistic manner as follows: History is cyclical, and we are undergoing the decline of the civilization of the north, an inevitable process that is a repetition of similar declines in previous civilizations or world epochs; individual man, in obedience to the inexorable workings of destiny, must accept his preordained role in the cosmic ritual, whether heroic or mundane, assimilating his life insofar as possible to the world of nature, eschewing Prometheanism and accepting the simple sensual pleasures of his short mortal life without seeking to prolong them past the appointed end of individual human happiness.

On the face of it this may seem an elaborate way to state what Morris himself expressed more simply when he remarked, "In Religion I am a pagan." The cyclical ontology that lies at the root of his philosophy is not the least of the pagan characteristics of his thinking—Mircea Eliade distinguishes between Christian and pagan religions in terms of concepts of continuous, as opposed to cyclical, time. But there are many kinds of paganism, and we need a more precise qualification. We might begin by noting that Morris's earth-religion, like that of the Romantics before him, is what Eliade calls a "cosmic" religion, that is, one in which natural objects are venerated as manifestations of the sacred: in religions of the cosmic type, which include "the overwhelming majority of religions known to history,... the religious life consists exactly in exalting the solidarity of man with life and nature." Thus the objections of Marx and Feuerbach to

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2Henderson, p. 87.
3Recorded by Sidney Cockerell. See Works, XXII, xxxii.
religion on the ground that it “estranges man from the earth, prevents him from becoming completely human,” are not valid except for later forms of religion, like Judeo-Christianity, in which “other-worldness” plays an important role. In actuality, then, the existence of a Morrisian religion does not of itself necessarily imply a lack of Marxist orthodoxy on his part.

Though Morris’s outlook was consistently primitivistic, his particular form of paganism is highly civilized, far indeed from a truly primitive way of thinking. Edwin A. Burtt in Man Seeks the Divine enumerates four basic characteristics of “civilized faiths” as opposed to primitive religion, and these are as pertinent to the Morrisian philosophy as they are to the great world religions Burtt goes on to discuss. The first is the acceptance of the principle of “universal moral responsibility.” Whereas primitive man is conscious of moral obligation only toward his own group, in “the higher civilized religions this situation is left behind. A universal moral order is envisaged, and a realization of moral obligation toward all men, simply because they are men, is born.”

Morris’s efforts toward social reform place him clearly on the side of the “civilized religions,” but even if this were not so, his writings continually reflect a concern for all mankind that transcends the insular interests of social or racial identifications. The Aryan fever of the nineteenth century profoundly influenced Morris, as we have seen, but when his northern poems and tales are read with attention to symbolic implications, we can also see that as his hero-figures become emblems for all mankind, so his Germanic tribes become prototypes for the community of man. Further, Morris’s alternation between classical and northern subjects in The Earthly Paradise as well as the change from the Greek world of Jason to the Scandinavian world of Sigurd illustrates an interest in the analogies between different civilizations. It is no coincidence that Morris should have “translated” (that is, composed redactions of) the major epics of four European civilizations: the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Volsunga Saga, and Beowulf.

Burtt’s second distinction between primitive and civilized religious thought is the difference in concept about the nature of the universe itself. While primitive man’s “implied cosmology is pluralistic,” the civilized religions “exhibit a vigorous trend toward monism in their picture of God and of the world”; “their commitment to a universal and impartial moral order naturally leads to the notion that the universe itself is a coherent system, embracing all events and

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rendering them intelligible in terms of uniform law." The sense of inexorable destiny that pervades *The Earthly Paradise*, *Jason*, and *Sigurd*, is basically monistic, however much may be made of individual gods and goddesses; the supernatural spirits of the last romances have become agents of that monistic destiny.

Burtt's third point of differentiation is the "material or quasi-material" concept of the human soul common to primitive thought as opposed to the more spiritual notion of the soul's nature found in civilized religions. To civilized man the human soul is the "capacity to grow toward the realization of a universal moral ideal, and to exemplify it with responsibility and understanding." Morris's most important message is that man must acquiesce in the cosmic plan—in other words, the individual must assimilate himself in thought and action to a plan which, however impersonal, is divine. It is through this capitulation of the individual will that harmony is realized on earth.

The last differentiation made by Burtt concerns man's search for happiness. To the primitive "there is nothing else in life to be seriously desired beyond the fulfillment of those cravings whose satisfaction is necessary if the conditions of physical existence and well-being are to be maintained from year to year and from generation to generation." But civilized man "commits himself to a more aspiring quest"; he is aware that "true happiness for man ... consists rather in a transformation of these desires" so that he may "find an integrated joy in devotion to the ideal." This is the "meaning of the religious emphasis on 'conversion' ... the 'new birth.'" With regard to Morris, this last point is the most interesting of all. Chapter 3 of this study, which deals with *The Earthly Paradise*, is concerned partly with the opposition of Venus and Diana representing, respectively, the principles of generation and asceticism. Superficially, it would appear that Morris is urging unrestrained licentiousness; however, it must be recalled that the wanderers' search for a regressive state of sensual gratification results in alienation from the fruitful world in which their aged years are spent and that the singer's quest to be reunited with his beloved is frustrated as he struggles to accept emotionally what he has realized intellectually—that the past cannot live again. Just as the hero must accept the role fate assigns him, the singer, like all men, must accept the conditions of mortal existence and learn that mere human happiness (symbolically apprehended as sexual love), no matter how precious, cannot be prolonged past its appointed time.

7 Ibid., pp. 102, 98, 102.
8 Ibid., p. 104.
In the mature romances, as we have noted in chapter 7, sexual love becomes a metaphor for the unity of man within himself, with humanity as a whole, and with the earth itself.

What is ironic about Morris's paganism is that it does not differ in practical application from the Christianity more or less subscribed to by such "establishment" poets as Tennyson and Browning. Morris was too civilized, in the best sense of the word, to become truly primitive, despite his contempt for the civilization he saw around him.

If, for the "idle singer" of The Earthly Paradise, we may read "Morris, the man" (and I believe it is obvious that we may), it can be inferred that Morris worked out in his narrative poems a personal philosophy that is echoed in the activities of his life. If we did not know of his explosive temper and the outbursts of frustration that have been so amply documented in the published biographical material, we might assume that he was by nature a model of effortless tranquillity and calm resignation. But the stormy and restless personality that emerges from the biographies tells us that Morris, however stoically he was finally able to face his unsatisfactory marital relationship and to deal with the social inequities and idiocies he saw on all sides, must have had to learn the hard way, like the wanderers and the idle singer, to reconcile himself to his own fate. Further, Morris's pioneering activities in the arts and in the socialist movement evince a quality of leadership that can, without sarcastic intent, be called heroic. Morris's compulsively hectic career demonstrates that he felt to some degree the call of destiny. His conception of himself as leading and educating both the leisured classes, by showing them what constituted tasteful decoration, and the working classes, by lecturing to them on art, aside from his active participation in political marches sometimes resulting in violent confrontations, suggests a latter-day culture hero educating and leading his people to a closer approximation of an ideal society, or golden age.

Morris, then, presents his view of the nature of the world in the symbolical poetic narratives and prose romances, and this Weltanschauung is apprehended ultimately in terms of personal experience. Further, lying just under the surface of the entire narration there is a tacit exhortation to the reader that he must similarly examine his personal apprehension of the world so that he may view human experience in this new way. What is implicit in the poetry becomes explicit in Morris's writings and lectures on art and socialism. These are overtly directed to the molding of new attitudes on the part of the hearing and reading audiences. In these respects Morris fits the description of the "Victorian sage" described by John Holloway in his
study of Carlyle, Disraeli, Eliot, Newman, Arnold, and Hardy. One point Holloway makes about these "sages" is that in each case their various "Life-Philosophies" must be gathered, not from any one discursive statement, but from the complete body of their work (the "intersubjective" approach of J. Hillis Miller). This, too, is true of Morris. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to get a sense of Morris's distinctive way of thinking from reading just one tale of *The Earthly Paradise*, for instance. And Holloway's observation that the prophetic insights of the sage come about, not through logic, but through mystical apprehension, is equally applicable to Morris. The fact that Morris's ideas do not actually make much sense has been demonstrated clearly in Graham Hough's *The Last Romantics*, and it is unnecessary to repeat the exercise here. But it is also a fact that the truth of myth has nothing to do with logic (as Hough finally points out in his discussion of *News from Nowhere*), and Morris's works should be seen as poetic revelations of mythic truth rather than strictly rational analyses. Yeats said as much in his essay "The Happiest of the Poets":

I am certain that he understood thoroughly, as all artists understand a little, that the important things, the things we must believe in or perish, are beyond argument. We can no more reason about them than can the pigeon, come but lately from the egg, about the hawk whose shadow makes it cower among the grass. His vision is true because it is poetical, because we are a little happier when we are looking at it; and he knew as Shelley knew, by an act of faith, that the economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like him, from the vision of the world made perfect that is buried under all minds.  

Morris was in fact no advocate of a rational approach. In one of his lectures on pattern designing, "Making the Best of It" (1879), he describes the effect a pattern ideally should have in terms equally applicable to the design of his narratives:

At the same time in all patterns which are meant to fill the eye and satisfy the mind, there should be a certain mystery. We should not be able to read the whole thing at once, nor desire to do so, nor be impelled by that desire to go on tracing line after line to find out how the pattern is made, and I think that the obvious presence of a geometrical order, if it be, as it should be, beautiful, tends towards this end, and prevents our feeling restless over a pattern. [XXII, 109]

Morris's anti-intellectualism is abundantly evident throughout his writings (particularly so in *News from Nowhere*), and figures impor-

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tantly in several tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. The scholar who de

ciphers the message of the riddling statue in “The Writing on the Image” and Bharam of “The Man Who Never Laughed Again,” who twice uses a key, first to unlock the gate leading to paradise and second to gain the forbidden room (a quintessential paradise within a paradise), recall the clever Oedipus, whose solving of riddles eventually leads to his downfall, and the learned Faustus, whose attempt to know the secrets of the universe ends in annihilation. In Morris’s view destiny is to be obeyed, not understood.

Of Holloway’s sages, Hardy is the closest to Morris in point of view. In both authors there is the same emphasis on the mysteries of destiny (Hardy’s famous coincidences), the same exhortation to man to assimilate himself to the processes of nature (Clym Yeobright’s tragedy has quite a lot to do with the fact that in his face “could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future,” that is, it showed the modern preoccupation with “mental concern,” which had replaced the “zest for existence” of earlier civilizations). Again and again in Hardy’s books, the Promethean characters (which include almost all of his protagonists) are chastised by the cruel twists of fate, “life’s little ironies,” for which his books are so well known. The great difference between Hardy and Morris is, of course, that while Hardy’s novels are just as symbolic in their way as Morris’s poems and romances, Hardy uses a realistic technique, at least on the surface, whereas Morris’s writing is much closer to what Northrop Frye calls the “mythical mode.”

As Frye so incisively points out, literary design that approaches the extreme of myth (as opposed to naturalism at the other extreme) “tends toward abstraction in character-drawing,” which is usually taken to be blameworthy by critics who habitually judge from a “low mimetic” standard, that is, from the standpoint of having accepted realism as the sine qua non of literature. Complaints about Morris’s shortcomings in characterization are irrelevant to any intelligent attempt to understand what is going on in his work. Paul Thompson’s comment, for example, that there is “never any real inner complexity” in the development of character in *The Earthly Paradise* is beside the point in an appreciation of this orchestration of mythical themes.

The “realistic,” unvarnished brutality that is the most salient feature of some of Morris’s early poems, notably “The Haystack in the Floods,” is probably the quality that has caused these poems commonly to be ranked as Morris’s most significant poetic achievements.

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12 *Work of William Morris*, p. 175.
But although he could always write with gusto of violence, the bloodier the better, Morris never had a fully developed gift for realism, that child of the nineteenth century. According to May Morris, her father found the "elaborate realism and character study" of the "modern play" to be "intolerable." She quotes Sydney Cockerell's recollections of Morris's remarks on the drama: "Disagreeable persons should not be introduced . . . , and heroines should always be pretty." According to Cockerell, Morris "did not take to" Tess of the D'Urbervilles, calling it "grim," though Hardy had sent it to him after Morris's complaint in a lecture that "no one ever described real life in England." Werner Jaeger's remark about Homer, that he did not "inhabit a rationalized world, full of the banal and the commonplace," applies as well to Morris. And banality can result from too much rationality, as we see in Ibsen's euhemeristic play based on the story of Sigurd, The Vikings at Helgeland (1858), in which, though supernatural elements are not entirely eliminated, the wonder and excitement of the traditional mythic events are totally flattened by the playwright's realistic approach.

Paradoxically, the most striking characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting, which influenced the young Morris so profoundly, was the painstaking realism nurtured by Ruskin's tutelage. But Morris was not able to train himself to paint in this fashion or to make truly realistic designs. All his designs, early and late, are stylized, even symbolic, representations of natural objects—birds, leaves, and flowers. This same stylization is what gradually takes over in his writing after the realistic Defence of Guenevere poems. (That social consciousness which is the second most significant aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism was the seed that fell on fertile ground. It remained with Morris until the end and, as we have seen, is evident in all his writings. But Morris would probably have developed a concern for society and a commitment to action without the Pre-Raphaelite movement. It is ironic that Rossetti, whose personal magnetism initially attracted Morris to the movement, was the least influenced, among all the Brotherhood, by either pictorial realism or social consciousness, either in his poetry or paintings. His unfinished painting, Found, and the poem "Jenny" are the most notable examples of his attempts in the direction of social consciousness; it is not by these that he is remembered.)

14 Watkinson observes that Pre-Raphaelite painting was revolutionary in that it invited comparison with life rather than fixed ideals, reflecting the nineteenth-century discovery that art and ornament were ultimately "derived from some actual observed fragment of the real world" (Pre-Raphaelite Art and Design, pp. 175–76).
Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *Found*. (Courtesy of the Delaware Art Museum Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Collection.)
As for psychological realism, Morris's abiding childlike faith in man's innate goodness did not predispose him to that fascination with the mixture of good and bad qualities in humans that makes the fiction of Henry James, for instance, the tortuous triumph that it is. To Morris, so much preoccupation with the psychological and moral subtleties of conflicting motives would have been morbid. It is not surprising that he found himself unable to finish his realistic modern novel concerned with conflicting loyalties. Morris's realism is that of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, in which, in the words of Ian Watt, "it is universals, classes or abstractions, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception, which are the true 'realities.'"¹⁵ This is not the realism of the novel, which is based on particularities and individualities. Morris was a pattern-maker in several senses—he saw the universal patterns underlying individual particularities.

The striking absence in Morris of any talent, early or late, for comedy or satire, is another signal that realism was never Morris's métier. Returning to our earlier comparison, we have only to remember Hardy's rustics bumbling in and out of his tragic plots (for instance, Christopher Cantle in The Return of the Native) to realize how differently these authors present their "messages." Morris's most nearly realistic published literary effort, News from Nowhere, is good-natured in tone but completely devoid of anything that could be regarded as humor. This is not to say that Morris the man did not have his lighthearted moments, though, to judge from the available biographical material, these moments were often as not keynoted by Dickensian comments such as Joe Gargery's "Wot larks!"—giving rise to the suspicion that fragile manifestations of the comic spirit may be fatally overborne by the reading of Dickens. He preferred clipping the hedge at Kelmscott Manor into the shape of a dragon to amuse his children to the caricaturing of his friends and enemies in print.¹⁶

Morris's habitual use of the mythic, romantic, and high mimetic modes (again, in Northrop Frye's terms) as opposed to the low mimetic or ironic modes typically used by his Victorian contemporaries is a manifestation of his atavism. For, as most theorists agree, the movement of Western literature since premedieval times has been away from the mythical and toward the realistic, specifically the ironic. (That is, away from romance and toward the novel. But this

¹⁶ May Morris's reminiscences about the dragon as well as an illustration of the hedge are included in Works, IV, xvii and facing.
tendency may be reversing itself with the current proliferation of science fiction and heroic fantasy. These, and the humble western romances, all descended from the pulp fiction of earlier decades, have more in common with the symbolic characterizations of Morris than with the superficially realistic heroes of Trollope and Dickens.\(^\text{17}\)

Because Morris’s method is anachronistic, it was not understood in his day and, I suggest, is little understood in our day when Morris’s fame, like that of his heroes, is a thing of the past.

Much of the current lack of understanding is attributable to the habit of explaining the work of the Pre-Raphaelities in particular and the Victorians in general in terms of a vaguely conceived Romantic inheritance. Since there is even now no general agreement on exactly what is meant by “Romanticism,” the term is of doubtful value in describing the attitudes or styles of poets who, most critics agree, were reacting in large measure against the literary postures of the second generation of Romantic poets. Such an ambitious project as attempting a definition of Romanticism, least of all detailing the philosophies of individual Romantic poets, is beyond the scope of this study. But there are some distinctions that may be made between the worlds depicted by these poets and by Morris.

The affinities between the Pre-Raphaelites and the Romantics are most obvious in the choice of subject matter, and it is true that the second generation of Romantic poets were fond of the “mythical mode” to which Morris was attracted. And, in the sense that the Victorians were, like the Romantics, attempting to create through their own efforts “a marvellous harmony of words which will integrate man, nature, and God,” Morris can be seen as an inheritor of the nineteenth-century dilemma of God’s disappearance, which was apprehended by the Romantics.\(^\text{18}\)

But the fundamental difference between Morris and the Romantics is in his reaction to the world of the nineteenth century. Whereas Coleridge, Wordsworth, and even Shelley withdrew from their early political activism and turned to poetry, Morris’s direction was just the reverse. Romantic poetry is sometimes called the “poetry of consolation,” a phrase that implies the hopelessness of real action, but Morris’s poems and tales can hardly be termed consoling (except for the comforting way in which good triumphs in the romances). They are, rather, calls to action. His preoccupation with mutability and mortality, so evident in his earlier work, is, in the final analysis, turned to the end of inculcating suitable attitudes for dealing with the terrible contradictions of


\(^{18}\)Miller, p. 14.
human life so that man can get on with the work at hand. In his seemingly most escapist work, *The Earthly Paradise*, he calls on his readers to set aside their yearnings for what cannot be and to deal forthrightly with both life and death, accepting the roles given them by destiny. And his own life exemplified his teachings—turning from a dead love, he immersed himself in work.

Another contrast between Morris’s outlook and that of the Romantics can be seen in the difference between the Byronic hero and the Morrisian hero. There are analogies, to be sure. The Byronic hero typically embodies a symbolic guilt that makes him emblematic of fallen mankind; yet he is never reconciled to the society of man and thus can never redeem it. In *Don Juan* the paradiasaical interludes in which Juan finds innocent bliss in physical love are extrasocietal and are inevitably destroyed by the intervention of a figure of autocracy (the husband or father), representing societal institutions. Further, Byron’s cynical view of society is shown in the symbolic figures he chooses to represent it—Haidée’s father is a pirate and Don Alfonso is a ridiculously jealous middle-aged cuckold. There is a bifurcation in the Byronic hero between the individual, which he never ceases to be, and the society to which he is related, and it is the tension between these aspects of Romantic heroism that constitutes the Byronic paradox.

But there is no such schism of identity in the Morrisian hero—here Morris’s mythical method is an effective aid to meaning. Because the hero is never individualized in any realistic sense, never (to quote Burne-Jones’s explanation of the expressionlessness of the subjects of his own paintings) degraded into “portraits which stand for nothing,” his personal identity never becomes an obstacle to his complete reconciliation to society. In other words, whereas the Romantic poets tend to present the individual as distinct or even alienated from society, suspended, as it were, in a purposeless cosmos (though there is much disagreement about the validity of this view of the Romantics), Morris’s primary concern is to show the essential relationship of the individual to the plan of destiny as it is manifested in terms of human society. This is not to say that nineteenth-century hero worship in general owes nothing to the Romantics; on the contrary, as Walter E. Houghton has pointed out, the Romantic concept of the superior individual was an indispensable factor in the development of this pervasive complex of attitudes. Mor...
both of whom influenced him profoundly. As Houghton notes, by the time of Victoria, the concept of the hero had become merged with the national wish for a savior; after Carlyle, the hero is conceived to be inextricably bound to society.

If it is true, as Robert Langbaum states, that the "romanticist sees the past as different from the present and uses the past to explore the full extent of the difference, the full extent in other words of his own modernity," then it is clear that Morris departs from the Romantics in his use of the past as a literary subject. For Morris does not use the past "to give meaning to an admittedly meaningless world." The cumulative message of Morris's reiterated emphasis on fate is that there is a meaning in human affairs and that it is the work of man to allow this meaning to be made manifest in his own life through the subordination of his individual will to destiny. The past is, in the Morrisian world, a paradigm of the present and the future, for history does repeat itself and can never be divorced from what is now. There is a superficial similarity and a basic difference between Morris's fascination with dead and dying civilizations and the more typically Romantic interest of Rossetti. "The Burden of Nineveh," one of Rossetti's most striking poems, expresses what Oswald Doughty calls "the apparently endless deceptions of humanity by Fate, the futility of human beliefs, the apparent meaninglessness of the Universe from a human standpoint."

Langbaum's distinction between the romantic and the classical sense of the past—"the romanticist does not see the present as the heir of the past and does not therefore look to the past for authority as an ethical model"—would identify Morris as a classicist rather than a romanticist. Insofar as any categories are useful for understanding, this one is just as appropriate, in some respects, as romanticism. For Morris's constant reiteration of the golden age theme, implying as it does the deterioration of man's state since that paradisaical time and the need for emulation of the values of the past, is very close to the golden age theme as used by Pope, especially in his *Pastorals*, and

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23 Langbaum, p. 12. My suggestion that Morris might be regarded as a classicist actually parallels, on a literary level, Peter Floud's more serious revisionist argument that "Morris must be regarded as the great classical designer of his age... while others searched for more novel and unorthodox solutions to the problems of design" ("William Morris as an Artist: A New View," p. 564). It would be unfair not to call attention to Morris's well-documented contempt for the art and literature of the eighteenth century, for which see May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, 630–31, and Lemire, pp. 68–70 ("The Gothic Revival [I]").
recalls the ancients versus moderns controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dryden freely used analogies between the present and the past as basic metaphors for his poetry, as in "Astraea Redux," wherein the accession of Charles II is seen as a renewal of the reign of Saturn when the Virgin, Justice, returns, and even in the satirical "Absalom and Achitophel," which is based upon a comparison approaching actual identification of Charles with David.

One could go on pointing out similarities in theme and outlook between Morris and poets of other ages and climes (Spenser was mentioned briefly earlier) simply because Morris worked in a tradition of great antiquity and popularity. The point is that Morris's poetry is in the main tradition of Western literature, which has typically been written in the belief that literature has something to do with life. For the divorce of art and life, which the aesthetes attempted to effect, is a modern phenomenon, one that is not germane to the study of Morris, who spent a large part of his life trying to reintroduce into Victorian society what to him was a natural and essential relationship. Morris's advice in "The Beauty of Life" (XXII, 77), "Have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful," may be contrasted with Gautier's pronouncement in his Preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835): "There is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and man's needs are ignoble and disgusting like his own poor and infirm nature. The most useful place in a house is the watercloset."24 Morris's lecture "Art and the Beauty of the Earth," delivered in 1881, is a call to revolution, that is, a reinstatement of the ancient integration of art and life:

But first, lest any of you doubt it, let me ask you what forms the great mass of the objects that fill our museums, setting aside positive pictures and sculpture? Is it not just the common household goods of past time? True it is that some people may look upon them simply as curiosities, but you and I have been taught most properly to look upon them as priceless treasures that can teach us all sorts of things, and yet, I repeat, they are for the most part common household goods, wrought by "common fellows," as people say now, without any cultivation, men who thought the sun went round the earth, and that Jerusalem was exactly in the middle of the world. [XXII, 162]

Morris's poetry and prose writings are consonant with his views on art and society. They are no more escapist than the Iliad and the Odyssey. Like the Homeric epics, they are neither topical nor overtly didactic, but educative in the sense of inculcating ideals of heroic

attitudes and behavior. As he said of himself, he was no "mere praiser of past times" (XXII, 163); his mission was to redeem the world. Like all the Victorians, Morris failed in his attempt to show the world a better way. Because their society could not learn from them, we, the inheritors of the world, struggle with the same problems the sages sought to solve. But Morris's failure does not invalidate his philosophy—he accepted his role as he saw it and threw himself heroically into the fray. The outcome belongs to destiny.