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Love is Enough: A Crisis in William Morris' Poetic Development

FREDERICK KIRCHHOFF

THE notion of William Morris' career as a gradual flowering into inevitable Marxism and the very different notion of Morris as a "happy craftsman" have equally obscured the actual shape of his literary development.¹ Granted, fully understanding Morris entails fully understanding his work in all three fields. But at this—still relatively innocent—stage in the criticism of his poetry, what is needed is not another brave attempt to synthesize his achievement as a whole, but a painstaking examination of his poetry *as* poetry and of his poetic development as a strictly literary phenomenon. It is not just oversimplification but plain misunderstanding to argue that art led Morris to socialism. His art and his socialism were alternative solutions to the same problem of bridging the gap between the actual world and that vision of an intense yet familiar happiness so characteristic of his work. Morris' particular version of this age-old problem has encouraged critics to draw parallels between him and Keats.² And, whatever the limitations of the comparison, it does suggest that, like Keats's, Morris' literary development should be seen as a process of experiment and self-correction. His *Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) is a series of variations on the theme of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; his political activism, a logical consequence of the questions Keats asked himself in *The Fall of Hyperion*. In the first, Morris' attempt to use art as a means of arresting the flux of time faces him—ultimately—with a melancholy awareness of the limitations of art. In the second, his recognition of the claims of society does not obliterate the poet's sense of a private vision. While it is true that Morris neither renounced art nor

¹I wish to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for making possible the Summer Seminar in connection with which this essay was completed, and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, director of the Seminar, for his criticism and encouragement.

²For example: Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1934), p. 120; George Ford, *Keats and the Victorians* (1944; rpt. London, 1962), p. 162; Elizabeth Strode, "The Crisis of *The Earthly Paradise*: Morris and Keats," *VP*, 13, Nos. 3 & 4 (1975), 71-81.

turned his back on the Party, it is also true that he came in time to face the inadequacy of both the aesthetic and the political solutions to the problem of being human. Thus, the high tragedy of *Sigurd the Volsung* (1877) reevaluates the aesthetic of his 1860's poetry, and the psychological realism of the last romances corrects the psychological naiveté of *News from Nowhere* (1890).

This movement of experiment and self-adjustment suggests that the pattern of Morris' literary career is a dialectic, in which the prose romances stand as a final synthesis of his commitments to art and to the cause of "fellowship," with his acceptance of the potentially tragic limitations of both. If this paradigm is valid, then the early 1870's and the early 1890's, when (respectively) the aesthetic and the political solutions confront their antitheses, are the two crucial periods in Morris' development. This essay is concerned with the earlier and more purely literary of these two periods—specifically, with the most clearly "transitional" of Morris' longer poems.

Love is Enough, which Morris began shortly after his return from Iceland in the fall of 1871, marks a crisis in his development as a poet. Its narrative subject—Pharamond's all-for-love desertion of his kingdom and search for the dream-maiden Azalais—could be straight out of *The Earthly Paradise*. But Morris' complex, at times self-contradictory, treatment of this subject expresses a new phase in his thinking. The protagonists of the twenty-four tales within the Wanderers' frame-story either succeed or fail in their quests for happiness; Pharamond both succeeds *and* fails. Significantly, the polarities of the earlier poem are reversed: the Wanderers' quest leads them from plague-stricken Norway to a succession of false paradises in the warm South; Pharamond's takes him from an unspecified middle latitude to a northern country geologically akin to Iceland. While the later poem expresses itself in a mood and literary style far removed from the boisterous realism of the *Icelandic Journals* (1871, 1873), it is nevertheless very much a response to Morris' formative confrontation with the North. What Iceland taught Morris was an essentially tragic view of human experience. As rendered in his *Journals*, the Icelandic landscape becomes the symbolic expression of both a material order ultimately indifferent to human fate, the recognition of which frees man once and for all from the protean vestiges of natural religion, and the Icelanders themselves, the living representatives of a greatness that does not lie in evading the potential tragedy of life but in looking at it squarely and accepting the consequences. Thus, without necessarily denigrating the quest for an Earthly Paradise, Iceland offered Morris the image of a higher nobility than the Wanderers' refined disillusionment.

Love is Enough embodies the poet's struggle to revise an earlier aesthetic—not by rejecting the materials of his earlier poetry, but by attempting to recast them to new significance. The poem attempts to fuse a quest for the ideal with an affirmation of the earthly and to combine a

dramatic reliance on poetic justice (through which happy endings are not only possible but likely) with a ruthless philosophical materialism. As in the case of the Romantic quest-narratives with which it has most in common, *Alastor* and *Endymion*, the result is a poem uniquely difficult to evaluate. E. P. Thompson, who sees *Love is Enough* as a regression in Morris' development as a socialist, dismisses it as "the lowest ebb of Morris's creative life."³ May Morris, on the other hand, seems to have liked it best of her father's poetry. "No glimpse of the inner life of Morris," she argues, "was ever vouchsafed even to his closest friends—*secretum meum mihi*. It was a subject on which he never spoke except in *Love is Enough*."⁴ Seizing on her hints, later critics have tended to see the poem as an expression of Morris' disillusionment with his marriage.⁵ But May's interpretation is not the daughter's oblique acknowledgment of her father's unhappy love-life. Instead, she is referring to what she considers his "belief in the life of the spirit" and "the mysteries that lie beyond the life of man" (I, 442). As this paper will argue, her reading is far from satisfactory.

Thompson, even in damning the poem, takes us closer to the grounds for its significance:

"Love" is not presented in the poem as a human relationship, but as a languorous yearning, a saturation of the senses, a weakening of the will, in short, as the attraction of the unconscious. Indeed, towards the end of the narrative the longing for death and the yearning for "Love" become almost indistinguishable. . . . The superficial subject may be "Love," but the underlying theme is the desire for unconsciousness and death. (p. 153)

Thompson fails to recognize that this confrontation with "the desire for unconsciousness and death" is not an evasion of the lessons of Iceland, but a necessary stage in Morris' response to the North. Pharamond's melancholia corresponds to the sickness of heart Morris records again and again in the *Icelandic Journals*—his "nausea" in facing up to the implications of the barren, "awful" landscape: "a piece of turf under your feet, and the sky overhead, that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves."⁶ *Love is Enough* brings the unspecified death wish of *The Earthly Paradise* into the open. Thus Morris is able at once to reevaluate the earlier poem and to advance to a higher level of self-knowledge. Although it does not follow that *Love is Enough* is a more successful poem than the best narratives of *The Earthly Paradise* or even *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), neither is it in

³William Morris: *Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955; rev. & rpt. New York, 1977), p. 152.

⁴William Morris: *Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford, 1936), I, 441.

⁵This, for example, is Thompson's view.

⁶*The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (1910-15; rpt. New York, 1966), VIII, 108; hereafter cited in the text.

any pejorative sense a "regression." Pharamond is the hero of a romance who is almost but not quite the hero of a tragedy. His indecision reflects Morris' own inability to sort out just what he must discard from the past from what he wishes to continue holding onto with all his might. The narrative of his quest is Morris' effort at weighing the alternatives.

Moreover, even to speak, as Thompson does, of "Love" in the singular ignores the multiple meanings of the term the poem offers us. To begin with, Love is both a state of Pharamond's consciousness and an independent character in the poem. The central event in *Love is Enough* is a masque celebrating the nuptials of an unnamed Emperor and Empress; they, the Mayor, who acts as a master of ceremonies, and the peasant couple Giles and Joan, who have come to see the whole affair, offer three concentric frames of commentary—noble, bourgeois, and rustic—on the story "Of Pharamond the Freed." The masque itself contains three elements: (1) a sequence of lyric poems designated "The Music"; (2) six scenes narrating in sequence Pharamond's discontent with his kingship, his decision to search for the maiden who has been revealed to him in a group of related dreams or dream-visions, the final stages in his quest, his meeting with Azalais, and his presumably temporary return to his former kingdom; and (3) the figure of "Love," who acts both as an external interpreter of the action and as a controlling force within the action.

The allegorical Love appears seven times. He speaks the prologue to each scene of the masque and the epilogue to the completed drama. Thus he mediates between the two elements of the poem—the masque and its audience—and, by extension, between the reader and the masque. (Morris is making the point that it is Love which connects the elements of the poem and is therefore responsible for its unity as a work of art and—by extension—that it is the common experience of Love which constitutes the reader's relationship to the poem as a whole.) But Love is also an actor in the masque: immediately prior to the appearance of Azalais, Love, who has previously stood before the curtain for his speeches, literally steps into the action and holds a dialogue with Pharamond. This confrontation, not Pharamond's union with Azalais, is the turning point in his quest. The physical setting is that of his former dreams. Now Love awakens him to the "real" scene. Significantly, Pharamond's confrontation with the power behind his own sexuality takes place in a landscape influenced by Morris' first Icelandic expedition. The poem seems to be arguing that this awakening is possible because Pharamond's quest for love has become that very quest for oblivion that Thompson dismisses as a "desire for unconsciousness and death." Certainly Pharamond himself does not regard this apparent dead end as a defeat—"Cruel wert thou, O Love, yet have thou and I conquered" (IX, 49). In regarding the defeat of the Imagination as a spiritual victory, Pharamond reveals his kinship with the protagonist of *Alastor*. He has given

up power and human ties to follow a vision that has finally led him into an empty and alien landscape. Nevertheless, like Shelley's Poet, he refuses to renounce his vision. What was for the Wanderers of *The Earthly Paradise* a willful persistence in unfounded hope is sharpened into an issue of moral self-determination.

But unlike the Poet of *Alastor*, Pharamond is rewarded for his persistence with the fulfillment of his vision. Keats achieved a similar victory for Endymion by melting the ideal Cynthia and the earthly Indian Maid into one and the same figure. Morris' strategy, on the other hand, hinges on Pharamond's recognition of the essential dualism of his own desire: it is not the imagination alone nor the sexual drive alone but "thou and I" together who have "conquered." The teasing problem in *Alastor* is the ambiguous identity of Eros. Is it an expression of the protagonist's Imaginative passion for "all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture"? Or is it only one more manifestation of Nature, working in this instance through the Poet's own repressed sexuality? Morris eliminates this ambiguity by restating it as an essential and unavoidable dualism. As a consequence, Pharamond is not trapped into asking the unanswerable questions—and hence into the dubious self-consciousness—of Shelley's quester Poet. He need not puzzle over the meaning of Love; he need simply accept it as inevitable. Insofar as his quest for Azalais is in part a function of the "natural" erotic, his drive towards "freed" life is also and equally a drive towards participation in the cycle of reproduction and death. Pharamond's response to this fact may be profound melancholy, but at least it is intellectually consistent. And it is precisely his acceptance of the ambivalence of his own desire that distinguishes him from the heroes of *The Earthly Paradise*.

This—or something close to it—seems to have been Morris' intention in the poem. The strategy is bold, but it is not entirely successful, both because it tends to reduce the stature of the lover-hero by emphasizing his passivity and responsiveness, and because the presence of the allegorical figure "Love" raises more difficulties than it solves. Insofar as Morris' allegory is a mode of psychological analysis, it enables him to clarify the terms of Pharamond's self-confrontation. But Love is bigger than Pharamond's individual sexuality. Moreover, Love's double role as participant in and commentator on the action suggests that Pharamond is the victim of duplicity. The Love who determines his quest and ultimately intervenes to unite him with Azalais is also a figure detached from his fate, using the story of Pharamond as an exemplum of his own power. And to the extent that Pharamond is such an example, the heroism of his individual quest is diminished.

But these are not the only problems. What, after all, is the connection between Pharamond's confrontation with Love and his subsequent meeting with Azalais? Pharamond recognizes that his quest for ideal love is based on

biological necessity, and as a consequence "Biological Necessity" (in capital letters) rewards him with the girl of his dreams. "Love," insofar as he effects the dénouement of Pharamond's quest, implies a providential order in the universe in some sense responsible for the affairs of mankind. Since this notion is at odds with Morris' philosophical materialism, Morris must find a means of using the allegorical figure while at the same time disavowing its implications.

Accordingly, Love offers himself in many guises. He appears—sequentially—"crowned as a king," "clad as an image-maker," "clad as a maker of Pictured Cloths," "with a cup of bitter drink and his hands bloody," "clad as a pilgrim," and finally "holding a crown and palm-branch." These transformations parallel the stages in Pharamond's quest, but whether they reflect any sympathy between Love and his victim, Morris is careful to keep uncertain. Thus, when the bloody-handed Love protests "how the tears well up / From my grieved heart my blinded eyes to grieve" (IX, 48), the gesture may be merely emblematic. Moreover, when Love appears "holding a crown and palm-branch" to speak the epilogue to Pharamond's story, he calls into question even the significance of these triumphal symbols themselves:

—Reward of what?—Life springing fresh again.—
 Life of delight?—I say it not—Of pain?
 It may be—Pain eternal?—Who may tell?
 Yet pain of Heaven, beloved, and not of Hell.
 —What sign, what sign, ye cry, that so it is?
 The sign of Earth, its sorrow and its bliss,
 Waxing and waning, steadfastness and change;
 Too full of life that I should think it strange
 Though death hang over it; too sure to die
 But I must deem its resurrection nigh. (IX, 77)

It is the cyclic nature of earth itself which guarantees the coming round of delight after pain—and, as surely, of pain after delight. But it is far from clear just how this interpretation harmonizes with Love's argument that it is Pharamond's total obedience that brings about his union with Azalais. Instead of affirming his particular justice to the individual Pharamond, Love merely offers the reader a barrage of general promises. He speaks of "the many mansions of my house" where his followers may expect "A wedding-garment, and a glorious seat / Within my household." And he looks forward to their fighting beneath his banner "when the hosts are met / On Armageddon's plain" (IX, 78-79). Morris is not Christianizing his poem. He is merely following a medieval precedent in secularizing the imagery of the New Testament. But even if Morris does not mean for us to take them seriously, Love's pseudo-apocalyptic are an evasion of his responsibility for the present state of things.

Nor is this the only evasion by Morris' allegorical figure. "Clad as a maker of Pictured Cloths," Love carefully distinguishes his "true" dreams from mere illusions:

—Those tales of empty striving, and lost days
 Folk tell of sometimes—never lit my fire
 Such ruin as this; but Pride and Vain-desire,
 My counterfeit and foes, have done the deed. (IX, 38)

Similarly, what the poet takes for Love—and wrestles with, Jacob-fashion—turns out to be “a Shadow of the Night” (IX, 47). These distinctions may be meant to clarify the nature of “real” Love, but they succeed only in reminding the reader of just how easy it is to be misled. Thus, while the poem is structured as what appears to be a cause-and-effect sequence of vision, trial, and reward, Morris offers no surer explanation for Pharamond’s union with Azalais than the proposition that liberated (“freed”) Eros must needs participate in the earthly cycles of pleasure and pain. (Hence, May Morris’ view that *Love is Enough* affirms her father’s “belief in the life of the spirit” ignores the genuinely problematic nature of the poem.)

By evading full responsibility for his treatment of Pharamond, Love is able to act like a representative of providence while questioning the notion of an order in Nature particularly favorable to individual heroes. Aside from its intellectual shortcomings, this strategy has the further disadvantage—as previously suggested—of reducing the stature of the hero. Morris attempts to correct this reduction by his curious treatment of the final scene of the masque, in which Pharamond returns to his kingdom. Philip Henderson draws a parallel with Morris’ private life. Pharamond, he tells us, finds his dream mistress “only to lose her again at once. He has become, in effect, another idle singer of an empty day, returning to his kingdom at last to find his throne usurped and his people disaffected—much as Morris had returned from Iceland to find Rossetti in his place.”⁷ True, the two returns are parallel—and the analogy suggests that Pharamond, like Morris, will return to the North. But Henderson’s verb “lose” is misleading. Pharamond leaves Azalais intentionally—not just to get back his kingdom, but for motives more complex. “Something hard to understand,” Love tells us, “Dulls the crowned work to which I set my hand” (IX, 64).

Pharamond justifies his return as a “gift” to his foster-father Master Oliver, the companion of his quest for Azalais. But Love recognizes the hunger of Pharamond’s Imagination at work: “our one desire / Fulfilled at last, what next shall feed the fire?” (IX, 64). He goes on to summarize a collection of possible motives:

Well, Pharamond fulfilled of love must turn
 Unto the folk that still he deemed would yearn
 To see his face, and hear his voice once more;
 And he was mindful of the days passed o’er,
 And fain had linked them to these days of love;
 And he perchance was fain the world to move
 While love looked on; and he perchance was fain
 Some pleasure of the strife of old to gain. (IX, 65)

⁷ William Morris: *His Life, Work and Friends* (New York, 1967), p. 128.

The notion of a link or connection is important. Pharamond is attempting not to go back to the past, but to forge a bond between the past and present—between public and private desire, the material world of kingship and the imaginative world of Love. This connection is an element in the archetypal quest. The hero returns to his society in order to integrate with it whatever power he has gained in the world outside his society.⁸ Moreover, the gesture is not merely a sign of his duty to his society. It is also an integration of the hero's own past—conceived both as his own earlier experience and as his participation in the collective spirit of his society—with his achieved present. Further, Pharamond's return, interpreted as an active gesture towards integration, enables Morris to present his hero as the master of his own fate. For once, Love is not the guiding force behind his behavior.

Significantly, however, this gesture of independence is a practical—if not a spiritual—failure. Pharamond is able to assert his individuality only by deserting the woman he loves. Moreover, instead of the desired integration, he returns to discover that he is no longer capable of participating in the political and military life of his kingdom. A reversal has taken place. The dream world of Azalais and her northern valley has become the norm for reality, against which the usurper Theobald's retinue is at best a "pageant," at worst "shadows" (IX, 73). King Theobald and Honorius, the Councillor who is the power behind his throne, are offered as alternatives to Pharamond's new-found life of "freed" Eros. Both he rejects: Theobald, because the most powerful king is limited by the mundane nature of his power—"wert thou the crown of all rulers, / No field shouldst thou ripen, free no frost-bound river" (IX, 73); Honorius, the more efficient ruler, for the dehumanization implicit in all political dealings—

—Thou lovest not mercy, yet shalt thou be merciful;
Thou joy'st not in justice, yet shall thy doom be;
No deep hell thou darest, nor dream'st of high heaven;
No gleam of love leads thee; no gift men may give thee;
For no kiss, for no comfort the lone way thou wearest,
A blind will without life, lest thou faint ere the end come. (IX, 74)

Pharamond's first decision to leave his kingdom in search of his dream maiden may be judged wanton egoism or a weak-spirited capitulation to his own hitherto repressed sexuality. His second decision to leave is a reasoned moral choice. He has achieved the end of his quest and has been transformed by it past the recognition of his former self. The masque ends with Pharamond contemplating his return to Azalais.

To call Pharamond "another idle singer of an empty day" is simply to pay careless attention to the action of the poem. Nevertheless, the final scene

⁸This pattern is clearly expressed in romances like Morris' *Roots of the Mountains* and *The Well at the World's End*; it is implicit in the didactics of his utopian dream vision in *News from Nowhere*.

of the narrative cannot be described as a triumphant vindication of Eros. Morris deliberately refrains from reuniting the lovers. "Love were enough," murmurs Pharamond, "if thy lips were not lacking." The last glimpse of the hero is of a man cut off from both political power and erotic consummation. Whether or not he returns to Azalais, Pharamond's failure to integrate the two elements of his personality is potentially tragic. The "love" that is "enough" is seen in the closing lines of the masque as a form of compensation for a higher but impossible synthesis. Unlike the Wanderers, Pharamond achieves the goal of his quest. But his very success eliminates the need for a mediating aesthetic—like the story-telling of *The Earthly Paradise*. What had seemed the Wanderers' substitute for ultimate achievement turns out to be the very means of saving them from the alienation of Pharamond.

This alienation is not merely the product of Pharamond's final indecisiveness. It is also a function of the elaborate distancing inherent in the structure of the poem. Not only are we the readers placed at several removes from the events of the masque; the onlookers themselves are never allowed to forget that Pharamond and Azalais are characters in a play "Wrought long ago for some dead poet's glory" (IX, 12). Instead of empathizing with the dramatis personae, both the Emperor and Empress and Giles and Joan experience impulses to identify with the actors who play the parts of Pharamond and Azalais. Moreover, both the Emperor and Empress and Giles and Joan appear capable of an adjustment to life denied to Pharamond. The imperial couple are, after all, both rulers *and* lovers. The peasants' pastoral felicity is undisturbed by the memory of past sacrifices.

On the other hand, both alternative states have limitations. The very conventionality of the peasants, who speak in the language and metrics of Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd,"⁹ suggests that their low-key happiness has all the liabilities implicit in its literary genre. And the royal stereotype of the Emperor and Empress, while allowing them a voice of passionate intensity, is equally limiting. Thus, while they may reward the actor and actress with rich gifts, they cannot step out of the formal boundaries of the ruler-subject relationship. (Giles and Joan, on the other hand, can invite the actors home for a few days of pastoral merry-making.) Jessie Kocmanová points out that "the surroundings of the fulfilled love of Pharamond and Azalais are not those of the great king, but transfer us to the simple world of Giles and Joan, the peasants."¹⁰ This is true. But, significantly, Morris' revisions of the poem eliminated much of the material emphasizing the "peasant" element of Pharamond's betrothal. And, more to the point, the poem does not end with his return to Azalais, but with the hero unable to integrate with and therefore alienated from both worlds.

⁹Thompson calls them "sentimentalized," but they are better described as deliberately conventional.

¹⁰*The Poetic Maturing of William Morris* (New York, 1970), p. 129.

Pharamond, because he attempts to be at once Emperor and peasant—to take on the responsibilities of a just king without sacrificing his “freed” Eros—is a larger figure than any of the onlookers of the drama. The Wanderers, whose story-telling softens the acuteness of a similar dilemma, are not tragic figures. Pharamond, who faces it, very nearly is. And for this reason *Love is Enough* anticipates Morris’ strongest expression of tragic fate, in *Sigurd the Volsung*. But neither Pharamond’s alienation nor Sigurd’s doom is a final statement of the poet’s vision. It is precisely because *Love is Enough* makes explicit and therefore untenable the death wish of his earlier poetry that it points the way to the profounder writing of his final decades. From Pharamond it is an easy transition to the narrator of *News from Nowhere*, also in search of erotic fulfillment in a pastoral world integrated with the political life that makes it possible. The heroes of the last prose romances undertake versions of the same quest,¹¹ and Pharamond’s alienation—his “desire for unconsciousness and death”—is a stage in the development of these later figures. It is a stage which must be rejected, but it is a stage without which the final integration of the hero with his society and the integration of the hero’s social world with the natural world defining both its province and boundaries are not possible.

The stage is crucial. No wonder Morris, who prided himself on the effortlessness of his verse-making, had trouble completing *Love is Enough*. And May Morris’ account of “the curious detached sort of way” he later spoke of the poem comes as no surprise: “Talking of early English poetry with a friend one day, he said: ‘You know, I wrote an alliterative poem myself once on a time’—almost as though it had been written by someone else, written on another planet” (IX, xxxi). “A fantastic little book,” Morris himself called it in a letter to Andreas Scheu.¹² This is not the distance of disavowal. May Morris may have been wrong in her interpretation, but not in her sense that *Love is Enough* takes us closest to the pain and heroic self-awareness of her father’s most crucial years.

¹¹ Indeed, this quest is their central concern, and the pattern of two women representing successive stages of the hero’s erotic development suggests just why Pharamond may find it difficult to go back to Azalais.

¹² *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, ed. Philip Henderson (New York, 1950), p. 186.