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William Morris and the Poetry of Escape

By OSCAR MAURER, JR.

I

THE publication of The Earthly Paradise in 1868–1870 first brought into sharp focus a problem with which English criticism in the decades following was to be seriously concerned. Is the poet justified in a frank refusal to treat contemporary themes and to criticize contemporary values? Should the poet attempt—directly or by implication—to present his solutions for contemporary social and religious difficulties? In short, is escapist poetry defensible? These are the questions which inspired the most significant themes in the critical reception of The Earthly Paradise.1 Morris’s most popular work 2 was praised or censured in the reviews largely as the critics’ tastes led them to approve or disapprove of its “escapism.”

At one extreme, Pater’s enthusiastic support of the poetry of escape became identified with the doctrine of Art for Art’s Sake, thence through Wilde to the affected medievalism of the aesthetes and to a later decadence. At the other extreme, the apologists for their own day condemned Morris for his failure to reflect the life and thought of an era of scientific and material progress. In his later career Morris himself followed neither of these extremes. He found in socialism the only valid means for healing the dangerous breach between escapist art on the one hand and Philistinism on the other. It was this dilemma, of which his own major literary work was a striking symbol, that convinced him of the necessity for social reform. But he never could bring himself to admit that contemporary scenes and subjects are fitting material for poetry.

1 A check list of English and American reviews of The Life and Death of Jason and The Earthly Paradise is given below, pp. 273–276. Jason was originally intended by Morris for inclusion in The Earthly Paradise; its reception is therefore a legitimate part of this study.

2 After 1870 Morris was identified, on the title-pages of his own books and by the public at large, as author of The Earthly Paradise.
The question of the poet’s function as critic or interpreter of his own
time recurs throughout the history of Victorian literary criticism. Ar-
old had raised it in the preface to his Poems, 1853, to explain the omission of Empedocles:

... it has not been excluded in deference to the opinion which many
critics of the present day appear to entertain against subjects chosen from
distant times and countries: against the choice, in short, of any subjects but
modern ones.  

The true business of poets is not to praise their age, but to afford to the
men who live in it the highest pleasure which they are capable of feel-
ing.

If asked to afford this by means of subjects drawn from the age itself, they
ask what special fitness the present age has for supplying them; they are
told that it is an era of progress, an age commissioned to carry out the
great ideas of industrial development and social amelioration.

But Arnold was characteristically unimpressed by aims and ideals
which he was later to dismiss, in “Sweetness and Light,” as mere ma-
chinery. These are not the stuff of poetry. Poets need great actions:

... so far as the present age can supply such actions, they will gladly make
use of them; but an age wanting in moral grandeur can with difficulty
supply such, and an age of spiritual discomfort with difficulty be powerfully
and delightfully affected by them.

Toward the end of his life, Browning raised the same question in his
Parleyings. The poet who had dealt so largely with current questions
of faith, and whose most explicit opinion of the poet’s function had
been expressed, significantly enough, in “How It Strikes a Contempo-
rary,” naturally held the opposite view from Arnold’s. His lines are
very probably aimed at Morris, whose romantic treatment of Greek
myth in Jason and The Earthly Paradise was not wholly to Browning’s
liking. The poets have lost sight of the goal:

9 Ibid., p. xxviii.
10 Idem. See a reply by an apostle for the age in Fraser’s, Feb. 1854, pp. 140 ff.
11 See W. C. DeVane, Browning’s Parleyings (New Haven, 1927), pp. 133 ff.
12 Though Browning wrote an appreciative letter to Morris on reading the first volume of
The Earthly Paradise (see May Morris, William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist (Oxford,
1936), i, 641–642), his opinion changed when the later volumes appeared. In 1870 he
wrote to Isabella Blagden: “Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always—but a weariness to
Wherefore glozed
The poets—"Dream afresh old godlike shapes,
Recapture ancient fable that escapes,
Push back reality, reppeole earth
With vanished falseness, recognize no worth
In fact new-born unless 'tis rendered back
Pallid by fancy, as the western rack
Of fading cloud bequeaths the lake some gleam
Of its gone glory!"

Let things be—not seem,
I counsel rather,—do, and nowise dream!
Earth's young significance is all to learn.\(^8\)

The passage, with its buoyant assertion of faith in "some all-reconciling future," is Browning's answer to Morris's "Apology."\(^9\)

It is indeed the prefatory "Apology" in _The Earthly Paradise_ which is partly responsible for the critical examination of "escapism" that fills the reviews of the poem. The critics were faced with the necessity of commenting upon it. In the "Apology" and in the opening lines of the Prologue Morris proclaimed his intention to avoid the four problems most vitally important to his generation, problems which the interpreter of his age might normally be expected to attack. First and most immediate was the question of faith: the controversies of the decade,\(^1\) marked by excited acrimony and bewilderment, were to find no place here:

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
Or make quick-coming death a little thing . . .

Secondly, the problem of "social amelioration" which Arnold had recognized as a Philistine hope, the problem of the condition of England\(^2\) on which nearly every major figure of the period had spoken, would not be considered:

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?

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\(^9\) See also the "Epilogue" to _Pæchiarotto_, etc., 1876; here Browning answers the critics who demand sweetness, and in stanzas 3, 4, and 20 refers, I think, to _The Earthly Paradise_.

\(^1\) _The Origin of Species_ (1859); _Essays and Reviews_ (1860); Colenso's _The Pentateuch . . . Critically Examined_ (1862); Renan's _Vie de Jésus_ (1863); Huxley's "The Physical Basis of Life" in the _Fortnightly_ (1869).

The third aspect of contemporary life from which Morris promised escape was the aspect of industrialism which offended him most deeply—the increasing physical ugliness of England:

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town . . .

Finally The Earthly Paradise proposed to present characters untouched by the doubts and anxieties which the immediate and current questions mentioned above, had aroused. Poetry of doubt, speculation, and psychological analysis had increased in volume and reputation with the emergence of Browning's first important literary fame and with the publication of Arnold's New Poems in 1867. Morris rejected this tendency and the critics found in his rejection another criterion in judging the poetry of escape:

So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead . . .

In his idealized scene of the fourteenth century,

. . . in such times

Shall dwell the hollow puppets of my rhymes.

Faced with this manifesto of "escapism," the reviewers concentrated largely upon these four aspects in the relationship between poetry and contemporary life and thought. The critical reception of The Earthly Paradise thus deals with clear issues, and stands as a significant chapter in the history of Victorian criticism.

II

In welcoming The Earthly Paradise as an escape from contemporary problems of belief, John Morley was true to his positivistic rejection of metaphysical speculation, particularly that which leads to negative or doubtful conclusions. He reviewed the first volume of the poem in the Fortnightly, of which he had recently become editor:

At a time when lovers of poetry are overwearied with excess of pure subjective verse, some of it deep and admirable and sincere, much of .

---

3 *Dramatis Personae*, 1864, was the first of Browning's books that reached a second edition.

mere hollow echo and imitation, and most of it essentially sterile in its solutions, it is no small thing to possess such a poet as Mr. Morris. His mind seems to have travelled in paths remote from the turgid perplexities of a day of spiritual transition. Either the extraordinary directness and brightness of his temperament have made him unconscious of them, or else they have presented themselves to him for a space just long enough to reveal their own futility and flat unprofitableness, and then have vanished away, leaving him free to follow the lead of his own genius.

The contrast between “subjectivity” and “objectivity” in poetry is a recurrent motif in reviews of Morris’s work; it nearly always refers to Morris’s refusal to deal with religious or philosophical matters. Morley continues:

We nowhere see in his work the enfeebling influences of the little doubtfuls, and little believings, and little wonderings, whose thin wail sounds in a conventional manner through so much of our current writing, whether in prose or verse, weakening life and distorting art. Mr. Morris’s central quality is a vigorous and healthy objectivity; a vision and a fancy ever penetrated by the colour and light and movement of external things, just as they stir and penetrate the painter.

Morley’s attitude toward “escapism” in poetry and art was, I think, affected by his interest in rationalism, by his anti-theological convictions. It was thus possible for him to review Pater’s Renaissance with approval, in spite of the apparent contradiction which the “Conclusion” offers to the Comtist conception of progress:

Here is Mr. Pater courageously saying that the love of art for art’s sake has most of the true wisdom that makes life full. The fact that such a saying is possible in the mouth of an able and shrewd-witted man of wide culture and knowledge, and that a serious writer should thus raise aesthetic interest to the throne lately filled by religion, only shows how void the old theologies have become.

To Morley, Morris’s work represented the liberation of art from theology; he traced this liberation to Oxford:

6 Furtively, 1 June 1868, p. 713.
6 Idem.
7 “Mr. Pater’s Essays,” Furtively, xix (1873), p. 471.
8 The American Catholic World, from the opposite point of view, made the same observation: “... some of his writings may seem to have a pagan tendency, and others may lead us to fear that the writer is in his heart a disciple of Comte and the positive philosophy—the philosophy which would eliminate theology altogether as a branch of science.” (“The Poetry of William Morris,” Catholic World, Oct. 1870, p. 98.) Cf. the opinion of a later rationalist critic on Morris and Rossetti: “It was indeed a memorable triumph for
The Newmanite generation at Oxford was followed by a generation who were formed on Mr. Mill's Logic and Grote's Greece. The aesthetic spirits were no longer able to find rest in a system associated with theology. Then Mr. Ruskin came, and the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and Mr. Swinburne, and Mr. Morris, and lastly a critic like Mr. Pater, all with faces averted from theology, most of them indeed blessed with a simple and happy unconsciousness of the very existence of the conventional gods. Many of them are as indifferent to the conventional aims and phrases of politics and philanthropy as they are to things called heavenly.  

Thus Morley welcomes the phenomenon of escape in art. There is no need to fear that the group which he finds represented by Morris and Pater will gain too large a following, "to the detriment of energetic social action in the country." But by avoiding useless theological speculation, by concentrating on art as an end in itself, they may help to re-establish the value of art and letters as a vital force. It is the paradox of the Utilitarians. No element of human activity may be neglected; and Morley, anxiously eclectic, hoped perhaps to show that rationalism need not be Philistine. Hence his acceptance of the "Conclusion;" such ideas, in their proper place, will fill a social need in the full development of man:

Only on condition of this spacious and manifold energizing in diverse directions, can we hope in our time for that directly effective social action which some of us think calculated to give a higher quality to the moments as they pass than art and song, just because it is not "simply for those moments' sake."

Morley rightly recognized Walter Pater as the critic who represented the tendency toward "escapism" also found in Morris's work. It was in rationalism, so often despised as a process of sterile negation, that by dissolving away the dead theological accretions of romanticism it should have rewindowed English literature with this wonderful treasure of imaginative power and joy." See A. W. Benn, The History of English Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century (London, 1906), ii, 291-292.

0 Fortnightly, xix (1873), p. 476.

1 ibid., p. 477. Cf. also Morley on Doré's illustrations for Tennyson's Elaine: "Morality is not the aim and goal of fine art, any more than it is the aim or measure of cobbling or of the art of physic. Art has for its end the Beautiful, and the Beautiful only. Morality, so far from being of the essence of it, has nothing to do with it at all." ("Causeries," Fortnightly, 1 Jan. 1867, p. 101.) Perhaps, however, there is a censure of Morris implied in Morley's review of The Ring and the Book: Browning, he remarks, is free from the sterility of thought which results from "unmanly reluctance to carry the faculty of poetic vision over the whole field." Browning is "careful not to omit realities ... merely for being unsightly to the too fastidious eye, or jarring to the ear, or too bitterly perplexing to faith or understanding." ("The Ring and the Book," Fortnightly, March 1869, p. 341.)
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a review of *The Earthly Paradise* ² that Pater first published the famous paragraphs afterwards printed as the “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. The manifesto of the idea of Art for Art’s Sake ³ serves here as a justification for Pater’s praise of poetry which makes no attempt to deal with religious or philosophical ideas. In Morris’s poetry Pater finds a double departure from what he elsewhere calls “a tarnished actual present.” ⁴

This poetry is neither a reproduction of Greek or mediaeval life or poetry, nor a disguised reflex of modern sentiment. The atmosphere on which its effect depends belongs to no actual form of life or simple form of poetry. Greek poetry, mediaeval or modern poetry, projects above the realities of its time a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or “earthly paradise.” It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. . . . The secret of the enjoyment of it is that inversion of homesickness known to some, that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies, no poetry even, if it be merely simple and spontaneous. ⁵

As Mlle. Rosenblatt remarks, the idea of Art for Art’s Sake does not necessarily demand an escape from the present and its problems; as a theory it was to serve in the defence of photographic realism. ⁶ But Pater brought the modified Cyrenaicism ⁷ of his theory of art to bear on precisely this element—escape from contemporary problems of belief—in Morris’s poems:

The modern world is in possession of truths; what but a passing smile can it have for a kind of poetry which, assuming artistic beauty of form to be


³ Arthur Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse* (London, 1904), p. 64. Cf. Wilde’s remark on the Renaissance to Yeats in 1887: “It is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written.” See W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (New York, 1927), p. 161.

⁴ In the Postscript to *Appreciations; Works* (London, 1910), v, 253.

⁵ Westminster, Oct. 1868, pp. 300–301. (My italics.)


⁷ See H. H. Young, *The Writings of Walter Pater* (Bryn Mawr, 1933), where the sensationalist theory is derived from Hume. Cf. also Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 186 ff., on the sources of the theory which Pater here develops in support of escapist poetry.
an end in itself, passes by those truths and the living interests which are connected with them, to spend a thousand cares in telling once more these pagan fables, as if it had to choose between a more and less beautiful shadow? It is a strange transition from the earthly paradise to the sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy. But let us accept the challenge; let us see what modern philosophy, when it is sincere, really does say about human life and the truth we can attain in it, and the relation of this to the desire of beauty.⁸

The best known passage in Pater’s work, which sets forth the ideal of exquisite passions, quickened, multiplied consciousness, “the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake,” is the answer to this question. Morris’s work was thus early identified with doctrines with which, as we shall see, he was to disagree in theory and in practice. It was significant that Pater attached the name “aesthetic poetry” to the new type which he recognized in the work of Morris: for Morris the poet and Morris the decorative artist were to be hailed as prophet by the Aesthetic School ⁹ which carried Pater’s theories to their notorious extremes of absurdity and decadence.

Henry James had greeted Jason with the enthusiasm of youth, on its appearance in 1867:

To the jaded intellects of the present moment, distracted with the strife of creeds and the conflict of theories, it opens a glimpse into a world where they will be called upon neither to choose, to criticise, nor to believe, but simply to feel, to look, and to listen.¹

His praise of The Earthly Paradise is similarly directed toward the health and objectivity of the work.² So too the Spectator, in a review of Part III, remarks upon this aspect of The Earthly Paradise:

It is Mr. Morris’s happy faculty to cast utterly aside the complex questionings that vex our modern poetry. He carries us away to the days when men lived their life without overmuch thinking about it. . . . Mr. Morris has given us an effectual antidote for the over-wrought self-consciousness of this generation.³

⁸ Westminster, Oct. 1868, p. 309. Pater’s essay was mentioned in the Spectator (17 Oct. 1868, p. 1228) as “a most fantastic rhapsody, a transcendent hymn in praise of realism, if it has any meaning at all, which we are inclined to doubt.”


² Nation, 9 July 1868, pp. 33–34.

³ Spectator, 12 March 1870, p. 332.
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The New York Times indicates with considerable accuracy a reflection of English opinion on this matter:

We owe Mr. Morris too much gratitude for giving us a poem that we can enjoy without feeling that we ought to probe it for problems and morals, to attempt to find fault with him. We have grown somewhat weary of the modern metaphysical bards, who would set philosophy to music, and think no poem worthy of the name which does not propound a spiritual conundrum in every line, and unsettle a creed in every stanza.  

An impartial review by the Pall Mall Gazette, which was then, according to Mr. Mackail, “the great arbiter of cultured opinion,” thus sums up:

Accepting as he does the part of a teller of tales, whose one task is to deal with delightful subjects in a delightful manner, Mr. Morris shuts himself out from some of the most fertile fields of poetry. He forswears speculation and reflection, refrains from touching, whether to solve or to restate, the questions nearest the hearts of his contemporaries, the moral and social problems with which so much modern poetry has occupied itself. . . . He thus recalls poetry to the sphere of true fine art proper, in which it has simply, along with music, painting, and the rest, to add to the sum of human happiness in the contemplation of enjoyable things.  

Criticism which thus accepted Morris’s escape from the problems of belief is complemented by the reception of his escape from the problems raised by political, social and industrial phenomena of the day. This is one traditional function of romantic poetry, a value which, judging by the reviews of Morris’s work, had been neglected in the decades which preceded the publication of The Earthly Paradise. The Pall Mall, finding in Part III some increased prominence given to passion and emotion (the result of Morris’s first-hand treatment of saga in “The Lovers of Grudrun”), regarded the first volume of The Earthly Paradise as particularly successful in escape:

Every reader almost was glad to retire from the stress and the cares of his ugly workaday English life and be entertained, for no matter how long,

* J. W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris (London, 1899), i, 190. (My references are to the edition of 1922.)
* Pall Mall, 11 June 1868, p. 2204.
* Further favorable references to Morris’s escape from contemporary religious problems will be found in the following articles: New Monthly Magazine, Sept. 1871, pp. 280 ff.; New Englander, Oct. 1871, pp. 557 ff.; Fortnightly, xix (1873), pp. 147–148, a review of Love is Enough by Sidney Colvin.
with that succession of gracious pictures and pleasant incidents of a remote
romantic world.\textsuperscript{8}

In a long and enthusiastic review of Part IV, a critic in the popular weekly \textit{John Bull} found the chief merit of the poem in its "escapism":

At any period in the world's history \textit{The Earthly Paradise} would have challenged attention, but as a product of the artificial society, the conventionality and the utilitarianism of the nineteenth century it is, indeed, surprising. And this contrast to the current literature and the current feeling of the day is perhaps its greatest charm. . . . We breathe a fresher air; we seem to shake ourselves free from the noise and turmoil of the restless driving life, and the fierce intellectual struggles of the present day, as he tells us in strains most musical his quaint old-world stories.\textsuperscript{9}

In the same vein is a general article on Morris's work, written by Thomas Bayne and published in \textit{St. James's Magazine} in January 1878. Morris was not a man born out of his due time:

... on the contrary, there is a sense in which he is one of those men this age particularly wants. Is it not the case that the world—all that roar of machinery and that bustle about wealth—is too much with us? . . . It is not necessary that Mr. William Morris, or, indeed, any single man whatsoever, should supply a full and adequate antidote to prevalent feverishness; but he does a distinct and notable service when he provides one possible means of escape.\textsuperscript{1}

When \textit{Sigurd} appeared in 1876, the review in the \textit{Athenaeum} could thus speak of Morris's retreat from the surroundings of his age as perhaps the most conspicuous and familiar characteristic of his work:

There is no affectation in such antiquarianism as we get here. . . . Mischance has thrown Mr. Morris among railways, telegraphs, newspapers, and much "smoke." He cannot help being surrounded by such foolish comforts as these; but how he hates them he has told us in the "Earthly Paradise." His body is in Queen Square, but his soul is in Ultima Thule. . . . He consents to breathe the smoke with us, but it is in the atmosphere of the Golden Past that he lives.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Pall Mall Budget}, 11 Dec. 1869, pp. 26–27.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{John Bull}, 31 Dec. 1870, p. 901.


\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Athenaeum}, 9 Dec. 1876, pp. 753–754. See also "Contemporary Portraits—William Morris," \textit{University Magazine}, Nov. 1878, p. 584: "No doubt poetry is in more or less of opposition to the average life of the present day; but when the poet comes who is its exact polar opposite, by the law of contraries he is bound to be welcomed. To all those who feel themselves out of tune with the times, he is the natural friend and companion." Cf. \textit{Southern Magazine}, April 1873, pp. 491 ff., a review of \textit{Love Is Enough} by W. H. Browne.
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The Earthly Paradise was received with approval because it furnished escape of another and more purely literary sort. The treatment of contemporary religious, moral, and social problems had come to be associated with the poetry of psychological analysis, and hence with the obscurity of Browning. In Morris’s work the critics found relief from the difficulties which the British public had experienced in reading “Caliban” and “Mr. Sludge.” The Ring and the Book appeared in parts between November and February, 1868–1869, during the time which elapsed between the publications of the second and third volumes of The Earthly Paradise. Browning was reaching his first wide contemporary popularity, and readers were puzzled by his style and method.8 Morris’s freedom from obscurity and over-subtlety was welcomed by the Saturday Review:

In these days, when the poetry most in vogue is such as it is one man’s business to write and another’s to interpret, it is refreshing to the spirit to meet with a modern poem of the Chaucerian type. If there is ground for the suspicion that not half of those who praise the subtleties of our contemporary poets are at pains to penetrate them, still less is it likely that such will put themselves about to study the explanations and elucidations which, although the tribute is surely a questionable compliment, admiring critics vie with each other in offering at their shrine.4

The Browning Society was not to be established for some years, but its function was already being exercised. Such poetry and such criticism were not for the practical man:

At any rate there is a fairer chance for poetry to be read and appreciated and taken back into favor by a busy material age, if its scope is distinct and direct, its style clear and pellucid, and its manner something like that of the old rhapsodists, minnesingers, and tale-tellers who in divers climes and ages have won such deserved popularity. So seems Mr. Morris to have thought.5

There is a disarmingly frank Philistinism in much of this praise of the poetry which does not require the reader to exert his mind; Morris’s work seems occasionally to be regarded as a source of the kind of pleasure usually obtained in literature of a more ephemeral sort. Thus the

8 Cf. The Ring and the Book, i, 1379–1385, where Browning comments on his increase in popularity. See also the Sat. Rev. on Browning’s obscurity (26 Dec. 1868, p. 833): “It is nearly as hard to get through Paracelsus as to get through Dr. Salmon’s Analytical Conics. Both of those excellent works are in the highest degree repaying; but we speak merely of the difficulty.”
4 Sat. Rev., 30 May 1868, p. 730.
5 Idem.
Spectator, in a review of the first volume of The Earthly Paradise, remarks:

Mr. Morris has revived the delightful art of dreaming the old dreamy stories in verse, so that they soothe and charm the ear and fancy without making any of the severe intellectual demands of most of our modern poets on the constructive thought and imagination of the reader. There is nothing more delightful than to escape from the problem-haunted poetry of the day into the rippling narrative of Mr. Morris's fresh and vivid fancy.6

Thus too the jauntily unintellectual barbarian attitude represented by Vanity Fair shows Morris's poem accepted for reasons not entirely complimentary to the poet:

Thank heaven, we are out of the fog at lastl The days are gone when the more incomprehensible an author's writings the more poetical they were thought to be. The gentlemen of the nebulous school, those children of the mist, with their dark sayings, hidden wisdom, and strange distortions of language, have given place to a more intelligible race of beings. . . . Mr. Morris is as clear a writer as need be, and yet few would deny him a considerable share of true poetical fancy.7

But more discriminating criticism shows a genuine relief at the appearance of poetry free from self-analysis and "subjectivity." Charles Eliot Norton had reviewed Jason with just such relief, writing in the Nation in August 1867:

It is a great merit of his work that, in this period of self-consciousness, of morbid introversion, of exaggeration of the interest of individual feeling, he has told his story, with but very slight exception, objectively with simple regard to its own development.8

Morris's treatment of the classical and medieval and northern sources was untouched by allegory,9 by the moral symbolism of Tennyson's

6 Spectator, 20 June 1868, p. 737.
7 Vanity Fair, 12 Feb. 1870, p. 96. Cf. the Westminster (April 1871, p. 581): "Mr. Morris's popularity has, however, something remarkable about it. He is, we have noticed, appreciated by those who as a rule do not care to read any poetry. To our personal knowledge, political economists and scientific men to whom Shelley is a mystery and Tennyson a vexation of spirit, read the 'Earthly Paradise' with admiration."
8 Nation, 22 August 1867, p. 146.
9 Cf. May Morris, op. cit., i, 430, for Morris's opinion of allegory and symbolism. Some one had asked him about the underlying meanings of his work: "I told him I meant what I said when writing . . . Wordsworth's primrose by the river's brim is quite good enough for me in itself; what on earth more did the man want it to be?" See also Morris's letter to the Spectator denying allegorical intention in The Wood Beyond the World (20 July 1895, p. 81).
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Greek and Arthurian poems, and by the scientific symbolism which Max Müller had made popular. This straightforwardness was also welcomed as an escape from contemporary preoccupations. Blackwood's thus reviewed the first volume of the poem:

Mr. Morris was born to be a teller of the tales of old, and he has not despised his vocation. . . . To him a story of the olden time is dear for its own sake; the task he chooses is to set it forth in all the grace and beauty which are its rightful dowry, not to use it as a vehicle for subtle analysis of motive, or as an introduction to philosophical reflections. . . . He has dared to be himself. He has not sought to put off, or conceal, his love for the objective, in deference to a presumed love for the subjective on the part of his audience.¹

Referring to the scientific study of folklore,² the Saturday Review praised Morris's fancy,

a fancy that does not escape into the favorite bypath of modern days, by regarding the mythic heroes and heroines as the impersonations of natural phenomena, or explaining them away upon the "bow-wow" principle.³

In these various ways Morris's generation accepted his "escapism" as a virtue; and the motives which caused men to accept it as such lead, as we have seen, in widely divergent directions: to Morley's interest in the religion of Humanity, to Pater's concern with the worship of Art, to the Philistines' desire of avoiding intellectual exertion.

III

In the small unfavorable portion of the critical response to The Earthly Paradise, Morris's "escapism" is again the criterion. The opinion which Arnold had pronounced "completely false" fifteen years before, that poets must interpret their age, was revived in the reviews of Morris's poem, and provoked a small critical controversy. Again, contemporary orthodoxy felt itself challenged by the poet's desire of es-

¹ Blackwood's, July 1869, p. 56.
cape to show that Morris had not succeeded in his aim, that contemporary conflicts and currents of thought had affected his work.

It was not only the defenders of Victorian civilization who objected to Morris's "escapism." Alfred Austin published a series of critical articles entitled "The Poetry of the Period" in Temple Bar during 1869 which are remarkable for bitterness and discontent with contemporary life. The keynote is struck in the first essay of the series, on Tennyson: "As far as poetry is concerned, we and our day are not great, but little." 4 In August 1869 Austin devoted an article to Arnold and Morris. "We know all—or we think we do—but all we can effect with our knowledge is to sigh under the burden of it. The age is sick with a surfeit of analysis, and Mr. Arnold is sick with it." 6 But even in retreat from this pettiness and self-consciousness there is no hope for poetry:

[Morris], like Mr. Arnold, has taken the measure of the age . . . but, unlike Mr. Arnold, he has cut himself off from all its active influences, compounded of disgust, sanguineness, impatience, and despondency, and has surrendered himself wholly to the retrospective tendency of his time, which, when taken by itself, is the most pathetic and poetical proclivity of which the time is capable. 6

To escape is necessary; Morris has made good his escape:

The realities of the latter half of the nineteenth century suggest nothing to him save the averting of his gaze. They are crooked; who shall set them straight? For his part, he will not even try. . . . He sings only for those who, like himself, have given up the age, its boasted spirit, its vaunted progress, its infinite vulgar nothings, and have taken refuge in the sleepy region. 7

But the conclusion is a sterile one. Austin finds himself in the blind alley of the defeatist. His period will be known to posterity as "the age of Railways, the age of Destructive Criticism, or the age of Penny Papers." 8

Mr. Morris has given the go-by to his age, and he has done wisely. But in doing so not only has he not produced great poetry—he has evaded the very conditions on which alone the production of great poetry is possible. Even in co-operation with an age—as the present one, for instance—it may

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4 Temple Bar, May 1869, p. 191.
6 Ibid., August 1869, p. 39.
6 Ibid., p. 46.
7 Ibid., p. 47.
8 Ibid., May 1869, p. 193: "Can anybody in his senses imagine posterity speaking of our age as the age of Tennyson? Posterity will be too kind to do anything so sardonic."
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be impossible to develope it; but without that co-operation all hope of such is bootless and vain. . . . [Morris] is not a great poet—at most and at best the wisely unresisting victim of a rude irreversible current; the serene martyr of a mean and melancholy time.⁰

One of the few reviews of The Earthly Paradise which was, on the whole, unfavorable in tone, appeared in the Edinburgh Review after the fourth part of the poem had been published:

In all this there is not much in harmony with the thought and feelings, perhaps not even with the ethics, of our own day; and, as we are compelled in some degree to measure humanity by our own standard, we may fairly say that such works as these possess no great human interest.¹

It was the Quarterly, however, that took the position of apologist for its own age. In an adverse review of Swinburne's Songs Before Sunrise, Rossetti's Poems (1870), and The Earthly Paradise, entitled "The Latest Development of Literary Poetry," the Quarterly traced to Keats the poets' tendency to withdraw from questions of the day, and blamed Morris particularly for this defect:

It is true that the picturesqueness of life that marked the period of Chaucer has almost entirely disappeared; it is true also that other arts like those of journalism and novel-writing have done much to supersede poetry in the representation of national manners; yet, after all deductions, enough remains of passion in politics, and individuality in character, to give opportunities to the poet who will seize them. That the opportunities have not been seized argues, we think, less the emptiness of the day than the incapacity of the poets.²

Again, in an article on "The Present State of English Poetry" in the following year the Quarterly repeated the charge:

We cannot, like the Elizabethan poets, "warble a native woodnote wild" in an age which is already over-civilized; and when Mr. Tennyson says that he "sings but as the linnet sings," it is plain that he deceives himself. If poetry is to live, we must have a poetry reflecting our own life and thought. The question then naturally arises, Do the materials for such poetry exist?

⁰ Ibid., August 1869, p. 51. See Morris's letter to his publisher on this article (Mackail, Life, i, 208): "In another sixty years or so, when it won't matter three skips of a louse (as it don't matter much more now), I suppose we shall quietly fall into our places."

¹ Edinburgh, Jan. 1871, pp. 251-252. The Academy in its "Literary Notes" (1 Feb. 1871) mentioned this article as "characteristic of Philistine reviewing."

² Quarterly, Jan. 1872, p. 42; on Swinburne's reply, see C. K. Hyder, Swinburne's Literary Career and Fame (Durham, 1933), pp. 156 ff.
Mr. Morris unhesitatingly answers there are none; we live in an empty
day. Why should we turn in preference to the legends of the Round
Table, or the dreams of an Earthly Paradise? Themes of public interest are
certainly not wanting.

Here Morris is regarded as a member of a group. In Buchanan's attack
on "The Fleshly School of Poetry" Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris had
been ridiculed as "the Mutual Admiration School;" the Quarterly
thus connects "escapism" with the Pre-Raphaelite convention:

Other writers, failing any longer to find in modern society the images of
romance, have turned back to the forms of the past, and have reduced
poetry to such mere furniture and costume, as picturesque sonnets à la
Dante, or stage "properties" after the Early English. Truly to those who
look on life and poetry with these eyes, the present must indeed be "an
empty day."

To this article the Academy, which had been cordial in its support of
the poets in question, replied in a vein of ironic acquiescence in the
Philistinism of the Quarterly:

The Quarterly Review, in an article on "Modern English Poetry" in the
current number, renews its polemic against a certain artistic school on the
ground that its members systematically refuse to give expression to the
main aspects of contemporary life. The main current of intellectual
energy runs now to science and politics and history and prose-fiction. Poets
themselves are a "survival"; and it is the law of survivals to dwindle
and become extinct; while there are any left they might be allowed to feed
in peace upon their natural food, the transformed emotions which arise
from a vanished, decaying past.

Another clear and recurrent theme in the critical reception of The

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9 Ibid., p. 21.
10 "Thomas Maitland" [Robert Buchanan], "The Fleshly School of Poetry," Contemporary, Oct. 1871, p. 335: "Rozencreanz, Gueldenstern, and Osric [Swinburne, Morris, and Rossetti], finding it impossible to risk an individual bid for the leading business, have arranged all to play leading business together, and mutually to praise, extol, and imitate each other; and although by these measures they have fairly earned for themselves the title of the Mutual Admiration School, they have in a great measure succeeded in their object—to the general stupefaction of a British audience."
11 Quarterly, July 1873, p. 21.
Earthly Paradise was suggested by Morris's avowed purpose of escaping from the present. The note of melancholy, the sense of the shortness of life which quickens and intensifies the desire of beauty, are of course the most immediately striking characteristics of Morris's poem, emphasized by his narrative technique as well as by the interpolated lyrics. Thus though Morris did not consider the problems raised by the alarming new conceptions of the physical basis of life, by agnosticism and rationalism—all of which were being agitated at the moment when his poem appeared—his work seemed to show signs of the despair which belonged to his generation. This was made particularly clear to contemporary criticism through Morris's avowed allegiance to Chaucer. In the New Monthly Magazine an article on "Geoffrey Chaucer and William Morris" is typical:

No poet can altogether escape from his own age; and Mr. Morris has not escaped the sorrowful perplexities of this time by leaving out all consideration of, or allusion to, those problems that produce them; for their result remains, in an irrepressible note of sadness, through his entire writings. 8

The historian Henry Hewlett, writing in the Contemporary Review, regarded Jason as untouched by doubt and fear; but he continues:

The appearance of "The Earthly Paradise" at once dispelled the hope that the school in which Homer and Chaucer are masters had found a permanent representative in Mr. Morris. It was but too plain that "the strange disease of modern thought" [sic] had infected him like his fellows, that his unconscious serenity had been displaced by the brooding pain of self-consciousness. Instead of the healthy cheerfulness, the manly decisive tone of thought which the ancient masters might communicate to a faithful disciple, we find here the morbid melancholy sentiment, the fluctuating chaos of ideas that belongs to the modern sceptic. 9

A later review by the poet Philip Bourke Marston, a friend of Rossetti, recalls Swinburne's contemptuous lines on Clough 1 as the poet of doubt:

It is curious to observe in narrative poetry how the writings even of Mr. Morris, who at first sight may seem to be raising once more the banner of

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8 New Monthly, Sept. 1871, p. 282.
1 See Swinburne's Works (Bonchurch Edition), xv, 283: Clough is "... the weary and wearisome laureate of Oxonicules and Bostonicules whose message to his generation may be summed up as follows:
We've got no faith, and we don't know what to do:
To think one can't believe a creed because it isn't true!"
objective art, are suffused with the influence of a personal mood. Not only through the chants of the Wanderers in *The Earthly Paradise*, but through the animated tales themselves, runs the sad wail of a minor key, the burden of which is the transience of human joy, strength, and glory—one more echo of that mental unrest which, discomforted by current faiths and unreconciled to scepticism, complains and doubts, and aspires while it desponds.²

Thus Blackwood’s attempts to answer the question of Morris’s melancholy, in comparing him with Chaucer:

Is it that no man escapes the influence of his century? that while as an artist Mr. Morris is not of our time, as a man he feels its perplexities; as a singer, the anxious brows of us his audience reflect a portion of their gloom upon him?³

And the same magazine suggests, in a review of Part III of *The Earthly Paradise*, that Morris’s treatment of female character may be influenced by contemporary fashions:

Rhodope must have been brought into this world somewhere in the eighteenth-twenties, we should say, at the very earliest, and questions herself about herself as much as one of Miss Brontë’s young ladies, or any of their free-spoken successors. She is more modest a great deal, but she is not more contented.⁴

The orthodox journals recognized in Morris’s paganism the effects of contemporary infidelity, and censured it as such.⁵ Criticism of a less doctrinaire sort also perceived that, in this respect, Morris had failed to escape; perhaps he had only surrendered intimate contact with his audience, as the *Examiner* suggested in a review of the first volume of *The Earthly Paradise*:

Paganism is gone, and faith in it has so perished utterly, that we cannot, with whole heart or mind, enter into its hopes and fears. . . . In the mere narrative of mortal toil and strife, our assent and curiosity go with the modern poet as with the modern historian . . . but in all that aspires to the higher and deeper stirrings of the human soul, all that would weave around us an ideal heaven and hell, with its beliefs and terrors, its heroism in suffering, its absolute faith in the omnipresence and omnipotence of gods, sympathetically moved by passions like our own,—the best effort of the nineteenth-century poet is doomed to a shadowy success at best, too near akin to failure.⁶

³ *Blackwood’s*, July 1869, p. 72.
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We have seen that the freedom of Morris's work from allegory and symbolism had been welcomed. But pure narrative treatment of myth and legend also laid him open to the charge of sterile paganism. The London Quarterly Review expressed what was perhaps an extreme opinion on this matter:

In the stories of monsters, maidens, heroes, gods, we have here no sense of concealed symbolic meaning; no hint at the truths of which these are dim and distorted traditions; no shadowing of the internal spirit, which alone can have given to them the power they still wield, and always have wielded, over the hearts of those that hear them.¹

This refusal to deal directly with one important value in the material he treated, connected Morris's work with the freethought of his day:

Mr. Morris is a strange spectacle. He is a man living in the nineteenth century, able to free himself—so far, of course, we mean, as these books go—from all Christian influences and ideas, yet who does not enter into the spirit of the ancient myths, and who thus practically gives a result of absolutely religionless work. As a consequence, the characters, as he presents them to our gaze, belong after all rather to the nineteenth century than to the old-world days.²

More sympathetically, in a review which helped to increase the sale of Part III,³ Sidney Colvin summed up the question of modern characteristics in Morris, and judged him "modern by his acute human consciousness and by his mood of mournful however kindly helplessness—ancient by his simplicity, directness, fecundity—individual both in his modernism and his antiquity."¹

Thus the criterion of "escapism" in the critical reception of The Earthly Paradise indicates in cross-section what the men of Morris's generation demanded of poetry. Those who desired guidance and reassurance were disappointed; the Academy's critic, G. A. Simcox, observed:

The help that the narrator of The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon promises is help for the guidance of thoughts that may serve to fill

¹ London Quarterly Review (not to be confused with John Murray's famous Quarterly), Jan. 1869, p. 508.
² Idem.
and cheer a few inactive years; the help that the prologue refuses is help to overcome the difficulties and perplexities of active life in the work-a-day world.\(^2\)

Those who demanded social criticism, religious speculation, and psychological analysis were disappointed. But those who wished to deliver poetry from the beliefs and attitudes and conventions of the immediate time welcomed Morris’s work, in so far as he appeared to have succeeded in such a deliverance. The latter group formed, as we have seen, a considerable majority.

IV

Morris was to dissociate himself, however, from the school with which the critics of The Earthly Paradise identified him. Such an identification was logical enough: if a poet withdrew from the treatment of current problems, he must assume artistic beauty of form to be an end in itself, and recall poetry to the sphere of fine art proper. Morris had identified himself with the movement, in his review of Rossetti’s Poems (1870); in the book, said Morris, “no thought is allowed to overshadow that beauty of art which compels a real poet to speak in verse and not in prose.”\(^3\)

It was also natural that as a decorative artist Morris should have been regarded as the prime mover in the fashionable aestheticism which gave notoriety to the idea of Art for Art’s Sake during the seventies and eighties.\(^4\) His designs and dyes shared to some extent in the ridicule provoked by the movement.\(^5\) But it was as a poet of escape that Morris was praised by Wilde, when the apostle of aestheticism carried his characteristically extreme form of “escapism” to America. Wilde’s first lecture in America, delivered in New York in January 1882 and repeated several times thereafter, was entitled “The English Renaissance of Art”; the following dicta were included in it:

Art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: rather, by so doing, it more completely realises that which we desire. . . . Into the secure and sacred house of Beauty the true artist will admit nothing

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\(^2\) Academy, 12 Feb. 1870, p. 121.
\(^3\) Ibid., 14 May 1870, p. 200.
\(^4\) W. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 58.
\(^5\) See a cartoon in Punch, 14 June 1879, p. 274, entitled “Art Embroidery, 1879;” and a review of Patience in the Academy, 30 April 1881, p. 327: “The pleasure of the eye is assured by a parade of damsels, first in the hues of Morris.”
that is harsh or disturbing, nothing that gives pain, nothing that is debatable, nothing about which men argue.⁶

Wilde used the knights and ladies of Burne-Jones and The Earthly Paradise of Morris as dominant examples of "this exquisite spirit of artistic choice." It is indeed negative praise: the author of Sigurd could not have found it flattering.

As early as 1872 an anonymous writer in Fraser's had attempted to separate Morris from the movement. In an article on "Novelties in Poetry and Criticism" the writer comments on a new style in writing about art; he refers, I think, to the essays which Pater had been publishing from time to time since 1867, to be collected in Studies in the History of the Renaissance in 1873. This new manner has spread to such an extent that it may be regarded as the mark of a separate aesthetic school, whose championship of Art as an end in itself has already been exerted in many directions. . . . Now we have aesthetic chairs which nobody can sit in, aesthetic wall-patterns which fly in one's face.⁷

Though the writer must have known of Morris's activity in the decorative arts, he remarks later that "Mr. Morris, though for the time being associated with the so-called latest school, stands in reality quite alone."⁸ There was, indeed, less and less reason to regard Morris as a member of a literary group. Though he remained in close association with Burne-Jones, his friendship with Rossetti was finally broken in 1875, and he had never, after leaving Oxford, been an intimate friend of Swinburne.

When Sigurd appeared in 1876, criticism recognized in the poem a departure from the "escapism" which Morris had come to represent in poetry. Edmund Gosse remarked upon this in the Academy:

In the Story of Sigurd, however, for the first time, Mr. Morris is no longer "the idle singer of an empty day," but the interpreter of high desires and ancient heroic hopes as fresh as the dawn of the world and as momentous.⁹

The Spectator noticed the same change, but was disappointed; Morris was not doing what was expected of him:

⁷ Fraser's, May 1872, pp. 595-596.
⁸ Ibid., p. 596.
⁹ Academy, 9 Dec. 1876, p. 557. Cf. the London Quarterly (April 1877, p. 211) on Sigurd: "It is a book in which Mr. Morris no longer occupies the station of an 'idle singer,' however sweet and perfect, but takes up the stern position of a poet concerned with the affairs of man's life and destinies."
The great beauty of Mr. Morris's poetry has always been, in our opinion, that it transported those who read it into a land of dreamful ease, where . . . we might fancy all toil and care and sin at an end. We cannot find in the whole poem [Sigurd] one of the delicious pieces of mournful harmony of which we had so many in the *Earthly Paradise* and *Love is Enough*.

Within a year after the publication of *Sigurd* Morris began the series of lectures on the arts which showed how far his sympathies lay from the "escapism" of the aesthetic school.

His first lecture, delivered at the Trades' Guild of Learning, London, in December 1877, set forth his opinion that cloistered and antisozial aestheticism is inevitably sterile:

Art has such sympathy with cheerful freedom, open-heartedness, and reality, so much she sickens under selfishness and luxury, that she will not live thus isolated and exclusive.

In a lecture given at Birmingham in 1879 Morris developed the same idea further: "I cannot forget that, in my mind, it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion." These lectures were being delivered (and published in pamphlet form) during the years when the aesthetic movement was reaching its height. Thus *Hopes and Fears for Art*, in which Morris had reprinted both the lectures from which I have quoted, appeared in 1882 as an attack on the ideas which Wilde was even then carrying across the Atlantic. Reviewing *Hopes and Fears for Art* in the *Fortnightly*, Edith Simcox pointed this out:

"Art for art's sake," art as a refined and subtle pleasure for the favoured few . . . are the objects of his [Morris's] confirmed distrust and disbelief . . . He distrusts—and surely no one has a better right—the sincerity and earnestness of the so-called "artistic movement" mainly associated with his name, because of the share which fashion has had in its success as well as in its fall-

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1 *Spectator*, 3 Feb. 1877, p. 150.


3 *Works*, xxii, 6. On its appearance in pamphlet form, this lecture was noticed favorably in the *Academy* (23 Feb. 1878) and the *Sat. Rev.* (2 March, 1878).

4 *Works*, xxii, 47.
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ings short of success. A social clique may bring blue plates and grey papers into vogue, just as an inconspicuous youth may be quizzed into celebrity by a comic paper, but the vogue will be as short-lived in the one case as in the other, unless the mass of householders attain to a sincere and spontaneous preference for harmony, beauty, and—we might add—elbow-room. ⁵

In a lecture delivered at Dublin in 1886 on "The Aims of Art" Morris, now a declared Socialist, expressed his own opinion of the aesthetic movement:

The world is everywhere growing uglier and more commonplace, in spite of the conscious and very strenuous efforts of a small group of people towards the revival of art, which are so obviously out of joint with the tendency of the age that, while the uncultivated have not even heard of them, the mass of the cultivated look upon them as a joke, and even that they are now beginning to get tired of. ⁶

The development of Morris's opinions toward a social view of art led him to turn away from the poetry of escape and to disown, to some extent, his own earlier work. Thus his censure of Swinburne's poetry, "founded on literature and not on nature," implies a condemnation of The Earthly Paradise which Morris makes no attempt to avoid:

In these days the issue between art, that is, the godlike part of man, and mere bestiality, is so momentous, and the surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful, that nothing can take serious hold of people, or should do so, but that which is rooted deepest in reality and is quite at first hand: there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man of deep feeling, because of its innate strength and vision.

In all this I may be quite wrong and the lack may be in myself: I only state my opinion, I don't defend it; still less do I my own poetry. ⁷

William Sharp, the friend and biographer of Rossetti, records another remark of Morris's in the same vein which refers directly to The Earthly Paradise:

"The best thing about it," he said once, "is its name. Some day or other that will inspire others when every line of the blessed thing is forgotten. That's what we're all working for." I have heard, though at the moment I cannot recall whether from a trustworthy source, that he once pooh-poohed

⁵ Fortnightly, i June 1882, pp. 775-776.
⁶ Works, xxiii, 86.
⁷ Quoted by Mackail, Life, ii, 80.
the ideal beauty of *The Earthly Paradise*, and said that there was “more real ideal” in *News from Nowhere*.

Again, in his Dublin lecture on “The Aims of Art,” Morris turns away from “escapism” in words which reject Pater’s “inversion of homesickness” and the poetry which had inspired the phrase:

> The old art is no longer fertile, no longer yields us anything save elegantly poetical regrets; being barren, it has but to die, and the matter of moment now is, as to how it shall die, whether with hope or without it.

But Morris never changed his mind about the fitness of contemporary scenes and subjects for painting and poetry. Realism seemed to him to involve compromise with a civilization which he hated; though he granted some validity to it in theory, he thought the practice impossible. In his account of art under the utopian conditions of *News from Nowhere* Morris replied to the critics of the poetry of escape. Clara, one of the young ladies in Morris’s England of the future, has inquired about the selection of subjects from Grimm and other ancient myths for the murals in one of the community halls: “How is it that though we are so interested with our life for the most part, yet when people take to writing poems or painting pictures they seldom deal with our modern life, or if they do, take good care to make their poems and pictures unlike that life?” Hammond, the interpreter of the new society, replies:

> It always was so, and I suppose it always will be. . . . It is true that in the nineteenth century, when there was so little art and so much talk about it, there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so; for, if there was any pretence of it, the author always took care (as Clara hinted just now) to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealise, and in some way or another make it strange; so that, for all the verisimilitude there was, he might just as well have dealt with the times of the Pharaohs.

More specifically in an address on the English Pre-Raphaelites delivered at Birmingham in 1891 Morris dealt with this subject. Rossetti and Burne-Jones had not attempted to represent the scenes of ordinary modern life:

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9 *Works*, xxiii, 92.
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One has often heard that brought against the "Romantic" artists as a shortcoming. Now, quite plainly, I must say that I think it is a shortcoming. But is the shortcoming due to the individual artist, or is it due to the public at large? for my part I think the latter. When an artist has really a very keen sense of beauty, I venture to think that he can not literally represent an event that takes place in modern life. He must add something or another to qualify or soften the ugliness or sordidness of the surroundings of life in our generation. That is not only the case with pictures, if you please: it is the case also in literature.²

Morris uses Hardy's rustics as an example of this modification in contemporary treatment; he concludes with an apology for his own work. The artist or writer may deal with modern subjects if he wishes:

... on the other hand, I don't think he has a right, under the circumstances and considering the evasions he is absolutely bound to make, to lay any blame on his brother artist who turns back again to the life of past times; or who, shall we rather say, since his imagination must have some garb or another, naturally takes the raiment of some period in which the surroundings of life were not ugly but beautiful.³

There is no essential paradox here. Granted that the artist must deal powerfully with the life of his own day, and that "escapism" is "retrospective and pessimistic" if society is so constituted that the artist can play no organic part in it, if contemporary values are contemptible, then the social structure must be altered.⁴ But faute de mieux the artist may turn for themes, background, inspiration to an epoch (for Morris this meant, of course, the Middle Ages) in which he feels spiritually at home.⁵ Always personally consistent with this belief, Morris wrote, during the last years of his life, the series of long prose romances which are obviously untouched, in plot and atmosphere, by nineteenth-century England. As Bernard Shaw says:

This was a startling relapse into literary pre-Raphaelism; and the Socialist movement as such took no interest in it. ... But he needed a refuge from

² May Morris, William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist (Oxford, 1936), 1, 304.
³ Ibid., i, 305. Cf., however, Morris's direct treatment of modern themes in Chants for Socialists (1884-5) and The Pilgrims of Hope (1885-6).
⁴ This is of course the Marxian view; it is most authoritatively stated by G. V. Plekhanov (with particular reference to the theory of Art for Art's Sake) in Art and Society (translated by Alfred Goldstein), New York, 1937.
⁵ Morris's innate and instinctive medievalism is discussed by Mackail, Life, i, 10-13; the fullest treatment of the problem will be found in E. C. Küster, Mittelalter und Antike bei William Morris, Berlin, 1928. Both critics suggest that Morris's medievalism was by no means negative and escapist, but a positive and personally valid ideal.
reality; and there was a limit to the number of times he could read the novels of Dumas père, his usual way of escape when his Socialist duties involved some specially grimy job in the police court or at the meetings of the League. I have used the Morris stories in that way myself, and found them perfectly effective.  

The public which persisted in considering Morris as primarily the poet of The Earthly Paradise naturally objected to the apparent contradiction between the poetry of escape and the socialistic activities of the poet. The bourgeois reaction to Morris's appearance at the Thames Police Court in September 1885 illustrates this. The Spectator referred to Morris as "the author of the Earthly Paradise and the author of the daisy-pattern wall paper," and commented in an editorial which shows some of the complacency that Morris was facing:

England is no longer a distressed nation. . . . Whatever may still be wanting to her perfect well-being, she is already the freest and most enlightened country of the globe. Surely, then, it might be thought, this is a time when the poet should again take to the pipe of peace. . . . Mr. William Morris, however, thinks that a war-cry is still needed, and that it is the office of the poet to supply it. . . . Mr. Morris accordingly suspends—if he has not finally abandoned—his devotion to mediaeval romance, and seeks an earthly paradise in an impossible future, instead of again finding it in a legendary past which his genius made real.  

To the Saturday Review H. D. Traill contributed a topical poem, "The Poet in the Police-Court," which also insisted that Morris should return to escapist poetry; he had been created by the gods

To rhyme of old-world legend and Greek myth,
Not to run Quixote-tilts at Adam Smith. . . .

Were it not better that ye bore him hence,
Muses, to that fair land where once he dwelt,
And with those waters at whose brink he knelt
(Ere faction's poison drugged the poet-sense)
Bathed the unhappy eyes too prone to melt
And see, through tears, men's woes as man's offence?

Take him from things he knoweth not the hang of,
Relume his fancy and snuff out his "views,"

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7 Spectator, 26 Sept. 1885, p. 1256.
8 Ibid., 10 Oct. 1885, p. 1335.
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And in the real Paradise he sang of
Bid him forget the shadow he pursues.⁹

Thus Morris's best known work had set him in a category from which—despite his admission of the unsoundness or at best irrelevance of escapist poetry—the Philistines would not willingly release him. And his participation in an active and unpopular movement for social amelioration was even harder to forgive.

In short, Morris's literary fame was due largely to the welcome which his "escapism" received from his generation. The majority of his critics praised this quality in *The Earthly Paradise*, both as an actual escape from contemporary social and religious difficulties and as a literary escape from the analytical and problem-haunted poetry of the day. With aestheticism, the most conspicuous escapist movement of the century, Morris's social conscience later forbade him to sympathize, just as his artistic conscience and his innate medievalism forbade him to treat contemporary themes. But his most famous work obviously fulfilled a demand. Its popularity with the public was a chapter in the history of romanticism; its reception by the critics was one more proof of the latent Victorian dissatisfaction. Morris would not compromise. When evasion became impossible for him, he left his generation behind.

**ENGLISH AND AMERICAN REVIEWS OF *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) AND OF *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870)**

*The Academy*
12 February 1870, pp. 121–122 (by G. A. Simcox)
15 December 1870, pp. 57–58 (by Sidney Colvin)

*The American Literary Gazette*
15 June 1868, p. 98

*Appleton's Journal*
22 June 1872, pp. 673–677 (by R. H. Stoddard)

*The Athenaeum*
15 June 1867, pp. 779–780
30 May 1868, pp. 753–754

Cf. the *Literary World* (Boston) in a review of *The House of the Wolfings* (30 March 1889, p. 105): "[Morris] has been cited to appear before judge and jury, in company with less liberal socialists. Yet to him art remains an enchanted land, where the light is soft and strange and no harsh note mars the music. He comforts his fellow-men by charming their careworn minds; for he comprehends the need of change of scene for their thoughts."
25 December 1869, pp. 868–869
17 December 1870, pp. 795–797

The Atlantic Monthly
August 1868, p. 255 (by T. W. Higginson)
June 1870, pp. 750–752 (by J. J. Piatt)

Blackwood’s Magazine
July 1869, pp. 56–73
May 1870, pp. 644–647

The Catholic World (New York)
October 1870, pp. 89–98

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