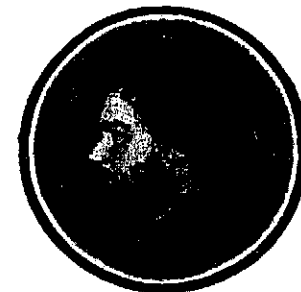


# Victorian Poetry

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William E. Fredeman  
Special Editor

West Virginia  
University

historical immortality—Peter's life is neither so memorable nor so great; he cannot match the heroism or the treachery of either. Yet the song Alice hears reevaluates Launcelot's courage and failure: he was

*Right valliant to move,  
But for his sad love  
The high God above  
Stinted his praise.*

(ll. 728-731)

Although Launcelot failed to achieve the grail and destroyed Camelot and its ideals because of his illicit love for Guenevere, "*he wan crownes ten, / If he wan not twelve*" (ll. 738-739); these singers are men, and they praise Launcelot for having attempted to experience fulfillment, despite his overreaching of human limitations.

The song concludes on a "historical" note:

*Omnes homines benedicite!  
This last fitte ye may see,  
All men pray for me,  
Who made this history  
Cunningly and fairly.*

(ll. 744-748)

The balladeer's self-praise and historical awareness legendize the poem, as the narrative frame of "The Haystack" did. The minstrel sings of a legendary medieval past which, juxtaposed with Sir Peter's story, places the reader with regard to Peter in the same position as the balladeer with regard to Launcelot. This distancing, this making-past, however, recalls ironies constantly recurring through many layers of time, and the structure of the poem paradoxically removes distance through legend, implicating the reader's life in its ironies of courage and failure. Yet, in a final irony, Morris *has* immortalized Peter and Alice's story, as they wished: the poem itself becomes the history they hoped for. Yet again, they are but creatures of the poet's invention, and are not truly "historical" at all; the poem undercuts the concept of "history" at all levels.

In his Froissart poems, then, Morris legendizes tales of human desire for fulfillment, courage, and heroism, and of ultimate and ironic failure. In each of the three poems, violence and death displace and destroy frail human desires for sexual and interpersonal fulfillment. Morris intensifies his ironic reminders of human failure by juxtaposing defeat with courage and heroism, however small and insufficient, in the face of conflicting loyalties and entrapping circumstance. The medieval setting of the Hundred Years' War personalizes courage for the industrialized and depersonalized nineteenth century; combat between individual men over individual women reveals clearly the dynamics of success and failure. Rather than escape his time, Morris creates moral tales for his time in medieval dress.

## The Earthly Paradise: Lost

CAROLE G. SILVER

**T**HE ATTITUDE of critics toward *The Earthly Paradise* is a record of changing literary tastes. The poem of 1868-70 which made William Morris a famous poet in his own era has been largely ignored in ours, and Morris' half-serious comment that "the title is the best part of it and will have a meaning for men when the rest is forgotten"<sup>1</sup> has been sadly prophetic. Paul Thompson speaks for the majority of contemporary scholars in suggesting that "*The Earthly Paradise* is an excellent way of passing a train journey, but it is not always easy at the end of the journey to remember what was in it."<sup>2</sup> The poem has been censured for pallor, diffuseness, and dullness or dismissed as the empty song of an idle singer. It has been attacked for representing an escapist tendency in Morris, who, unable to confront either his marital crisis or the problems of his era, turned his back on the world and retreated into the simplistic retelling of worn-out legends.<sup>3</sup>

One of the reasons for the eclipse of a poem once considered Morris' major work is the change in literary taste and critical theory in the past century. Our era no longer enjoys long, romantic verse-narratives, nor does it consider pathos, sweetness, and passion the vital tones in poetry. Diffuseness and occasional monotony, considered minor flaws by Morris' contemporaries, are cardinal sins to modern formalist critics, and lack of social and ethical relevance are anathema to critics of the neo-humanist and social schools. Readers of today favor brief, intense, and highly concentrated poetic experiences; they prefer irony, paradox, and tension to lucid and harmonious verse-narrative. Equipped to handle complexities of image or symbol, they are unable to deal with transparent surfaces and simple effects.

The other reason for the neglect of *The Earthly Paradise* is a lack of awareness of the poem's purpose, theme, and structure and, equally important, of its central role in its creator's life and thought. *The Earthly Paradise* reveals Morris' brilliance in using preexistent materials, as well as his

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Noyes, *William Morris* (London, 1908), p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> *The Work of William Morris* (London, 1967), p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> See E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955), pp. 144-162; Henderson, pp. 87-92; and Jack Lindsay, *William Morris, Writer* (London, 1961), pp. 12-15.

way of reshaping them—symbolically or mythically—to emphasize his themes. It demonstrates his architectonic power, for it is structured with a complex and impressive design in mind. Most important, its themes are Morris' basic and abiding concerns, ones essential to the understanding of his total body of work; the seeds of the volumes to follow are found in the rich soil of *The Earthly Paradise*.

Even Morris' use of romance as a genre in which to work has been misunderstood. His choice of the form stemmed naturally from his belief that Keats, Tennyson, and Browning had refined the brief lyric to the point of exhaustion, as well as from his passion for the medieval world and the literary forms it utilized. Working within the conventions of the romance, Morris deliberately emphasized action and plot. Dedicated to lucidity and narrative speed, he pared his diction and simplified his metrics for the sake of clarity. He deliberately reduced his characters, stripping them of all but essential traits, creating types rather than individuals. He wanted his audience to concentrate not on single lines or individual passages, but on large overall units and memorable cumulative effects. The genre Morris chose allowed him to stress patterns and motives which he believed were timeless and universal. His use of the romance manner freed him from artistic restraints, permitting him to present strong passions which, in the context of ordinary Victorian life, would have seemed inappropriate, and allowing him to explore realms of consciousness which might otherwise have been closed to him. Most significantly, the mythic and folkloric matter of romance symbolized what he considered the constant elements within the human spirit: man's endless quests for immortal life or love, his conquest by or rescue from the fate that threatens him, his love encounters with benign or malign beings of another order, the journey from womb to tomb that constitutes man's life.

Thus Morris' central themes in *The Earthly Paradise* are those which he had announced in the *Defence of Guenevere* volume of 1858. His song, like the melody heard by Lady Alice de la Barde in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," is the eternal song "of love and fate and death" (*CW*, I, 60); its strains, interwoven in varied ways, shape and vitalize *The Earthly Paradise*. Morris' preoccupation with them is indicated even by the title he selected, for it suggests the search for lost perfection, a terrestrial realm where the golden age survives untouched by fate or death and, more important, the internal realm of thought and feeling that provides a paradise within. However, Morris' use of the concepts of perfect lands and perfect lives is tinged with irony. His first and discarded version of "The Wanderers' Prologue," which begins the poem, pointedly titled "The Fools' Paradise" (III, xiii), almost sermonizes on these points. Its characters, pirates led by their captain's fantasy of a deathless land, find only false paradises. One seemingly idyllic land is populated by invisible inhabitants who decapitate several of the pirates; another is the home of

Stone Age savages who ambush the party; a third, a paradise in all externals, is inhabited by the dead, frozen into the postures of life. Even the captain's dreams of Eden become nightmares: in one, he arrives at an earthly paradise to discover that it is a land of the unhappy dead; in another, he finds a deathless land whose inhabitants yearn only for release from life. Gradually he realizes that he and his men have "sinned Adam's sin / To make us Gods who are but men / To find a heaven and dwell therein" (XXIV, 110) and, more important, have wasted their lives in a foolish quest.

While the earlier version of the prologue exposes the futility of the search, the published prologue probes its tragedy. Probably inspired by a passage from one of his favorite books, Paul Henri Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*, Morris visualizes the Wanderers' voyage as an unrecorded Norse exploration of the New World:

Had the sea-kings and their hardy followers been aware that beyond the regions of vines and forests there lay another, abounding in gold and silver and costly commodities, we should probably have seen at the present day a Norman dynasty reigning in Mexico. It is, in fact, obvious that the merest accident might in that age have led some enterprising adventurer a few degrees further south, and given rise to a series of events resulting in the final conquest of the tropical regions of America by the seafaring Scandinavians.<sup>4</sup>

Following Mallet's hypothesis, Morris has his Wanderers embark for "the landless waters of the west" (III, 13) in search of a world without old age or death. Although they are given a powerful motive for flight—the Black Death has invaded Norway—they are also given an attractive alternative to it, for they meet the fleet of Edward III of England and the King invites them to join his crusade against France.<sup>5</sup> Rejecting the chance of action, love, and glory in the known world, they choose to seek another, symbolized by the Tree of the Hesperides emblazoned on their sail.

Their quest becomes "a tale of woe. . . of folly, and of wasted life" (III, 6) as they go from one false paradise to another. Knowing of Leif Erikson's voyages, they steer south of Vineland and are carried by Mallet's "accident" (a tempest) to the southern tip of North America. They reach a "flowery shore," but cannot penetrate the "dragon-guarded woods" (III, 30) beyond it. Travelling north, they find a shrine surrounded by the bones of sacrificial victims and filled with the mummies of kings, while at the summit of the mountain they discover dead slaves embalmed to look alive and an aged king

<sup>4</sup>Trans. Bishop Thomas Percy (London, 1847), p. 267.

<sup>5</sup>Through this incident Morris dates the Wanderers' expedition as commencing in 1359, for in that year Edward III accompanied by the Black Prince and Sir John Chandos, whom the Wanderers see, gathered his fleet for an invasion of France. The tales later told by the expedition's survivors were all extant during the fourteenth century.

who dies of fear at their approach.<sup>6</sup> They are told by a group of Aztecs that the paradise they seek is eastward and seaward, ironically in the home which they have left. Another Mexican tribe they encounter tells them of a godlike people beyond the mountains, but they turn out to be a brutal race of savage cannibals. Returning to the center of tribal civilization, the Wanderers live contentedly for almost thirty years, until they are again struck by their foolish desire. Tricked into voyaging to a remote island, fooled by a stranger who assures them that it is the abode of eternal and immortal youth, they find themselves in a gorgeously decorated hell, where they are kept as captive gods. In the confusion of war they manage to escape, finally reaching a peaceful Western Isle—the legendary island of Atlantis—where, old and disillusioned, they may wait for death.

Thus Morris begins *The Earthly Paradise* by demonstrating that the search for a terrestrial Eden is a tragic waste of life. The Wanderers have sacrificed rightful action and human love only to learn that the lands east of the sun and west of the moon, the Avallons and Asgards of which they dream, cannot be found within the world of men. "Too fair for those / Who needs must die" (VI, 9), they elude those who seek them.

Accepting the failure of their quest, Morris' Wanderers join the Greek Elders of Atlantis in telling of the heroes of the Greek and medieval worlds who have found the earthly paradise and of the many who have not. The narrators' bitter past and melancholy mood are reflected in the way in which they tell their tales. Living amid memory and regret, dead to the ardent hopes and fears of their lost youth, they "sing of names remembered / Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead, / Or long time take their memory quite away" (III, 1). The narrative tones they share, reflections of their age, fatigue, and nostalgia, contribute to the tonal unity of the total work, as well as to the presentation of its major themes.<sup>7</sup> For the tales they tell are not only of

<sup>6</sup>For details about South American geography, culture, and customs Morris seems to have used such works as Alexander Von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America*, trans. Thomasina Ross, 3 vols. (London, 1852), and William H. Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Peru*, 2 vols. (New York, 1847). Von Humboldt provides the description of the mummies of rulers dried in sacred caves in I, 121-123, and Prescott is the source of the account of murdered royal servants embalmed to look alive in I, 61.

<sup>7</sup>Morris' Norse Wanderers are differentiated from each other, though they share a common melancholy, and each is characterized to suit or explain the tales he tells. Laurence, the Swabian Priest, narrates moral tales from the medieval Latin and English chronicles he has read, making them exempla upon greed, vanity, and lust. Nicholas, a dead Wanderer whose tales survive him, is made a Breton, who thus would know such French romances as "Ogier the Dane." Rolf, the Norseman who leads the party, has spent his childhood in Byzantium, where his father served in the imperial Varangian Guards and is thus cognizant of tales from *The Arabian Nights*. While Morris' Greek narrators are not individualized, they are less bitter and tragic than the Wanderers in their choice of narratives. They tell tales in the elegiac mode, in the tone of old men who have renounced the hopes and fears of youth.

the search for an external golden age, but of the quest for the paradise within, an experience or state of mind that will bring joy and fulfillment. Although Graham Hough suggests that Morris (and his narrators) seek paradise in art,<sup>8</sup> the book itself and its author's comments on it do not support this thesis. At best, art can be a temporary catharsis for the suffering caused by life; it may serve as a balm for the despairing, but not as a cure for their woes.

Instead, Morris seeks a nostrum in the experience of romantic love, only to conclude that love too fails to make a heaven of earth. The subject of twenty of the twenty-four tales that comprise the work is erotic love,<sup>9</sup> achieved or failed, triumphant over or destroyed by fate, saving men from destruction or condemning them to death. It is on these patterns rather than the physical quest for a terrestrial Eden that *The Earthly Paradise* is really centered. Morris underscored his themes for May and Jenny, the daughters he adored, in a poem dated December 25, 1870, which he inscribed in their copy of the book. His poem tells them that *The Earthly Paradise* is to teach them to turn their "eyes toward very Love. . . / And all the pain it bringeth meet / As nothing strange amid the sweet" (XXIV, 343). It reminds his daughters that:

Those that struggled sore, and failed  
Had one thing left them that availed  
When all things else were naught—  
E'en Love. (XXIV, 343)

and explains ironically that since happy fulfilled lives leave no records, his stories have been heavy with "trouble" and "woe" (XXIV, 343).

Even without this explicit statement of purpose, Morris' point is clear. Personal laments on the demise of love, the cruelty of fate and her companion, change, and the wish for death that results from the failure of passion dominate the poems on the months which head each pair of tales. The opening and end-links between tales portray the varied responses of the listeners to these concepts. Within the tales themselves, Morris creates worlds where the central duty is faith to passion and the punishment for failure is the death of the body or soul. He delineates characters whose triumphs stem from love's success and whose destructions arise from its failure. The total structure of the poem, the thematic images used throughout it, and the complex relationship among the tales—pairings and triplings of parallel or

<sup>8</sup>*The Last Romantics* (London, 1947), p. 123.

<sup>9</sup>Although the four remaining tales do not deal with erotic love, they do illuminate other major themes in the work. "The Golden Apples" is an account of the successful quest of Hercules for the terrestrial paradise of the Hesperides, serving as an ironic contrast to the failure of the Wanderers. "The Writing on the Image," "The Proud King," and "The Son of Croesus" are centered on man's inability to overcome his fate; the two latter tales also suggest varieties of non-erotic love, namely *caritas* and friendship, respectively.

opposite situations and characters—are all shaped to illuminate Morris' conceptions of love, fate, and death.

Creating structural and thematic parallelism, Morris traces both the birth, growth, and death of the natural year and the course of human love. Although the pattern is incomplete, perhaps because he abandoned several stories originally planned for inclusion as too personally revealing, Morris' year of love moves from accounts of the birth of passion, through tales of its fruition and decline, to the tragedies of winter and the death of love.<sup>10</sup> The ten tales he places in the Spring and Summer sections are lighter in tone and more joyous in content than those for Fall and Winter; yet they foreshadow the darkening world portrayed in the final sections.

Images of color and its absence, and of places and landscapes, illuminate contrasting aspects of Morris' central themes. Morris plays images of color, connoting life and love, against images of greyness, indicating despair or death. The "sympathetic landscape"<sup>11</sup>—as Walter Pater called Morris' use of natural settings to reflect the emotional states of the characters who inhabit them—reflects passions, joyfulness, or despair. Terrestrial paradises without decay or death, marked by the presence of single trees which bear both fruit and flower, are the symbols for perfect love. These, along with the haunts of earthly love, walled gardens and enclosed and sheltered valleys, are in contrast to the realms of love gone wrong. The silence and stillness of grey underworlds, barren wastelands, blighted gardens, and the desolation of ruined palaces reflect the failure of passion and the death of the heart.

The tales themselves parallel or reverse each other as they interweave the themes of love, fate, and death in multiple patterns. The successful quest for love which ends in the union of mortal and immortal in a perfect realm beyond the world is the subject of three tales: "Ogier the Dane," "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," and "Cupid and Psyche." Morris' treatment in these three tales of the search for the anima—the soul in the form of a woman—is counterbalanced by three others: "The Watching of the Falcon," "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," and "The Hill of Venus," which deal with the failure of the quest for self or the discovery that a paradise of love is hell disguised. The love triangle in which two men are involved with the same fated and fatal woman is explored in "The Lovers of Gudrun" and "Bellerophon at Argos"; two other tales, "The Land East of the

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, the two tales for March, "Atalanta's Race" and "The Man Born to be King," in which love is miraculously born in time to save men doomed to death; the tales for September, "The Death of Paris" and "The Land East of the Sun," which illustrate the ambivalence of passion; and the stark love tragedies of November, January, and February, "The Lovers of Gudrun," "The Ring Given to Venus," and "The Hill of Venus."

<sup>11</sup>"Aesthetic Poetry," in *Sketches and Reviews* (New York, 1919), p. 8.

Sun" and "Ogier the Dane," reverse the triangle of passion as they compare the love of two women for a single man. The kindly fate which brings love out of anticipated death is explored in "Atalanta's Race" and "The Man Born to be King," while its thematic opposite, the malevolent fate that brings destructive passion and death-in-life, is examined in "The Death of Paris" and "The Watching of the Falcon."

Even archetypal characters gain impact as they are paired and repeated. The restless, discontented male unable to commit himself to love, like Bharam in "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," is echoed in the discontented, restless central figure in "The Story of Rhodope," a woman who cannot love or be attained. Woman as the pure anima, the preserver of man whose love brings life, is manifested in the Alcestis of "The Love of Alcestis," and in the Cecily of "The Man Born to be King," while woman as the dark anima, the fatal force who drives men to doom, is shown in the immortals of "The Watching of the Falcon" and "The Death of Paris," as well as in the mortal figures of Sthenoboea in "Bellerophon at Argos" and of Gudrun in the tale which bears her name. Sometimes the benign and malign animas are figured in a single woman, as in the Lady of the Land, but they are more often shown as alter-egos, as with Sthenoboea and Philonoe, the twin sisters of the two tales of Bellerophon. Sthenoboea symbolizes the selfish, egocentric passion that seeks to victimize its object, Philonoe the altruistic spirit that yearns to give and to preserve. The pure anima, as manifested in "Pygmalion and the Image," is a statue of Galatea which when humanized becomes benign and full of love. Its mirror image is seen in "The Ring Given to Venus," where the statue of the goddess comes to life as a demonic force. Many tales are dominated by the figure of Venus herself, but she is either *Generatrix* or *Petulantia*, never both. In "Atalanta's Race," "Pygmalion and the Image," and "Acontius and Cydippe," Venus is the mother of life, the benevolent power of love and delight. In "Cupid and Psyche," "The Ring Given to Venus," and "The Hill of Venus," she is the cruel force who brings barren lust and the threat of death.

Ten tales of *The Earthly Paradise* are dominated by the *Venus Generatrix*, the pure anima, and the fairy maiden or the human virgin in her benign aspect. "Atalanta's Race," "The Man Born to Be King," "The Doom of King Acrisius," "Cupid and Psyche," "Pygmalion and the Image," "Ogier the Dane," "The Land East of the Sun," "Acontius and Cydippe," "The Fostering of Aslaug," and "Bellerophon in Lycia" demonstrate love's triumph over fate and death. Their subject is the perfect love of mortal and immortal or the blissful hour of human love achieved; their pattern is of the successful journey or the passing of the test; their controlling image is of the sheltered valley or the flowering garden of delights. Yet even these tales of "happy" love are undercut by veiled fears of change or of the threat of death, for Morris clearly indicates that perfect love is neither of nor for the earth. Three

of his tales, "Ogier the Dane," "Cupid and Psyche," and "The Land East of the Sun," treat the successful quest for a terrestrial Eden and the triumphant escape from earth. The lovers in each case are chosen by immortals, but must undergo substantial trials before they may be deified by love. Ogier the Dane, borne off to Avallon by Morgan La Fay, experiences both the perfect love of an immortal and the flawed and earthly love of the Queen of France. When he must finally choose, he selects rightly, rejecting the mutable and destructive earthly queen for the eternal, constant love of the fairy maiden.

In Morris' rendition of "Cupid and Psyche," a version derived from Apuleius' *Golden Ass*,<sup>12</sup> Psyche is depicted as the suffering anima in search of the love that will make her whole. Painting what Apuleius merely sketches, adding motivations and justifications for Psyche's behavior, Morris emphasizes her marriage of death, her fall (through a failure in patience and trust), and the pain and difficulty of her journey to redemption. When Psyche breaks the prohibition that forbids her to see and know the nature of her love, she almost dooms herself to the loss of paradise. Only through a complex process of painful maturation can she regain it. Despite her despair and wish for death, she must accomplish four tasks of increasing difficulty; in the process, she becomes a female hero, performing memorable deeds. She must order nature and her own chaotic self in the sorting of the seeds; she must calm the forces of destruction in the gathering of the golden fleeces from the Sun-Rams; she must acquire freedom and strength in seeking and containing the deadly waters of the Styx. Only after her last labor, a journey to the underworld and a confrontation with death itself, is she ready to abandon her old self and life. After near failure and a deathlike sleep, she is redeemed by Love and prepared for divinity. Yet Morris stops short of painting the bliss of the apotheosis of Psyche; mortals, after all, cannot know divine and perfect love. Instead, his Psyche enters immortality, thinking of the change and death on earth and feeling "godlike pity . . . / For her old self, for sons of men that die" (IV, 73).<sup>13</sup>

"The Land East of the Sun," a later, darker draft of "The Palace East of the Sun," one of Morris' earliest written *Earthly Paradise* tales, is developed as a mirror image of Psyche's quest. Like Psyche, John, the lover, betrays his love and must suffer greatly for his fall. After gaining the woman who is his soul, he chooses to leave her terrestrial paradise and return to an imperfect earth. Though warned by his fairy bride "of lovers who outlived the love / That once they deemed the world would move" (V, 46), he breaks his vow and summons her to him because he fears temptation by his brother's wife. Through his failure in patience and trust, he dooms himself, his fairy wife,

and her entire land to death-in-life. Only after an arduous quest and purification by suffering does he regain his perfect lady and her land. Yet again, a tale of "happy" love, of "how twain grew one and came to bliss" (V, 120) is undercut by its narrator's comment on the chances of such ideal passion: "Woe's me! an idle dream it is!" (V, 120).

Thus Morris warns that to come to bliss is almost an impossibility. For all, except rare mortals loved by beings of another order and carried to a realm beyond the ordinary world, fulfilled passion is imperfect, changed by fate and time, threatened by mortality. For most mortals, trapped in their selfhood, the momentary blending of two souls into one is the highest human bliss. Such figures as Perseus and Andromeda in "The Doom of King Acrisius," Admetus and Alcestis in "The Love of Alcestis," and Acontius and Cydippe in the tale of the same name, can forget in perfect moments of human passion that love may change and that they themselves must die. Even this love is rare and Morris reminds us of the shortness of the perfect moment when he interrupts a tale of joy to comment:

Love while ye may; if twain grow into one  
 'Tis for a little while; the time goes by,  
 No hatred 'twixt the pair of friends doth lie,  
 No troubles break their hearts—and yet, and yet—  
 How could it be? we strove not to forget;  
 Rather in vain to that old time we clung,  
 Its hopes and wishes round our hearts we hung,  
 We played old parts, we used old names—in vain,  
 We go our ways, and twain once more are twain;  
 Let pass: at latest when we come to die  
 Thus shall the fashion of the world go by. (III, 229-230)

In a fallen world, "all love fails to see / Desire grow into perfect joy" (VI, 295), for, like the earthly gardens and verdant valleys in which it blossoms, human love is perishable. Most mortals are doomed to "snatch at love with eager hands, / And gather death that grows thereby" (V, 153). Something in the universe forbids the lasting union of two mortal souls; and "all has sworn / That those shall ever be forlorn / Who strive to bring this thing to pass" (V, 154). Ultimately, even the joyful face of love, presented in Morris' ten "happy" tales, is faintly stained with tears.

In analyzing the reasons for the imperfection of earthly passion, Morris does not indicate that its greatest enemy is death. All lives must fade "to twilight and dark night at last" (III, 51), and, as the Wanderers note with resignation, all tales must end in the same way:

He died, and in his place was set his son;  
 He died, and in a few days every one  
 Went on their way as though he had not been. (III, 239)

Though, like King Admetus, mortals may protest that the gods are cruel to destroy the only creature who knows and fears his end, they know their protest is in vain. For the most part, Morris' characters look to no afterlife of

<sup>12</sup>For an account of the sources of the individual tales, see Mackail, I, 204-206.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. "Pygmalion and the Image" (IV, 207).

reward and punishment and do not expect the heavenly reunion of lovers. Even Laurence, the Wanderer who is a Swabian priest and thus the spokesman for the occasional Christian views in the poem, sees death primarily as a gift of God, who uses it to end the pains of life and burning love. Less a terror than an end to woe, death is desired by many lovers; the yearnings to be cut off before fate can destroy their bliss are echoed throughout the tales. Those who outlive passion, like Medusa or the Florentine in "The Lady of the Land," welcome death as a kindness. It is to be preferred to death-in-life, the demise of the heart that results from passion's failure. Bellerophon's cry: "Life or death, / But never death in life for me" (VI, 238) is an accurate reflection of the attitude of his creator.

The variety of death which Morris makes a major theme in *The Earthly Paradise* is the condition of emotional paralysis which results in a dead soul in a living body. It is caused more by malevolent fate than by individual flaws or failures, and fate, imaged as a massive net which traps and drags men down to doom, is the worst foe of earthly love. Its agencies are time and change, and only terrestrial paradises are safe from their effects. Only in an Eden may love "still be happiness / Unmixed with change" (V, 45). The fallen world is doomed to:

great pain,  
And death of days that shall not be again;  
And yearning life within us, and desire  
That changes hearts as fire will quench the fire. (VI, 200-201)

Time and change, Morris notes bitterly, "are the engines of the Gods, lest we / Through constant love, Gods too should come to be" (VI, 201). Since fate decrees the unnatural changes that ruin life and love, all man can ask is to be spared the pains of change until the pains of death come with them:

O Death in life, O sure pursuer, Change,  
Be kind, be kind, and touch me not, till strange  
Changed too, thy face shows, when thy fellow Death  
Delays no more to freeze my faltering breath! (VI, 277)

Morris' cry is seldom heeded; therefore those who suffer from the signs of living-death are legion. The motif, announced in the first volume through the figures of Medusa and the Lady of the Land, is almost obsessively repeated in the later volumes. Death-in-life is the malady of the King in "The Watching of the Falcon," Oenone in "The Death of Paris," John, his bride, and her entire land in "The Land East of the Sun," of Cydippe doomed to maidenhood, of Rhodope, of Gudrun and her lovers, of Laurence in "The Ring Given to Venus," and of Walter in "The Hill of Venus." All, because of passion's pain, lose their hopes and fears, the signs of normal human life. All are spellbound, frozen into inaction, incapable even of suicide though they yearn for death. All show that they are ruined by their changeless eyes and

faces, Morris' recurrent symbols for "the soul wherein all hope is dead" (V, 162).

In "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," Morris' most detailed study of the symptoms and results of living-death, Bharam, the central figure, is transported to an earthly paradise of perfect love. When, in a variation on the Bluebeard motif, he violates the sanctity of the closed room, he loses his immortal bride and is expelled from Eden. His fate is prefigured in the unchanging despair of the six mysterious men he waits upon and buries as well as in the changeless eyes and visage of his friend, Firuz, another who has failed the test. When Bharam falls, he too enters death-in-life:

And now no more he moaned, his eyes were dry;  
Shut in his body's bonds, his soul would wait,  
The utmost term of all its misery,  
Nor hope for any ease, nor pray to die. (V, 204)

His "dreamy eyes distraught" and "changeless face drawn with . . . hidden pain" (V, 204) gain him the name he will bear until death frees him: "THE MAN WHO NE'ER SHALL LAUGH AGAIN" (V, 204).

Paradoxically, in the ten dark tales of *The Earthly Paradise* the very changelessness that has been the hallmark of the terrestrial Eden and the perfect love found only in it, becomes the symbol of a hell on earth. The images of unchanging perfection in the "happy" tales find their ironic counterparts in the images of staring, sightless eyes and faces rigid with despair, as well as in descriptions of the dead embalmed to look alive. All are nightmare images of dead souls, travesties of life, as life devoid of love becomes a mimicry of death. Dominating the dark tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, legends of "bitter loves and clouded lives" (XVII, xvi), they help reveal what May Morris called the introspective side of her father's mind, exposing a mood he would seldom allow to surface in his mature works. Beginning in the tales of Summer with "The Love of Alcestis," "The Lady of The Land," and "The Watching of the Falcon," and moving to the tales of Fall and Winter, "The Death of Paris," "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," "The Ring Given to Venus," and "The Hill of Venus," Morris paints a darkened world of lust and change and death. His eye is on the canker rather than the rose. Even in the few among these tales which do not end in death, the memorable figures are those destroyed by passion, the frustrated and rejected, the questers who have failed. All the tales suggest the grimace of the Witch in the excluded tale of "Orpheus"<sup>14</sup> who laughs sardonically at the idea of a relationship in which "each loves each in sweet and equal wise"

<sup>14</sup>Jessie Kocmanova, in "The Poetic Maturing of William Morris," *Brno Studies in English*, 5 (1964), 37, suggests that the story was excluded not, as Morris said, because it was too long, but rather because of its revelation of his personal unhappiness and failing marriage.

(XXIV, 245). Instead, love is revealed as a cruel trick of the indifferent gods; mortals are allowed a bit of "sullied bliss" (VI, 279) before fate brings them pain. The way of the world is that

Oftenest the well-beloved  
 Shall pay the kiss back with a blow,  
 Shall smile to see the hot tears flow,  
 Shall answer with scarce-hidden scorn  
 The bitter words by anguish torn  
 From such a heart, as fain would rest  
 Silent until death brings the best. (V, 145)

The correlatives to destructive earthly passion are the barren wasteland or the ruined palace, powerful images which first appear in "The Lady of the Land" and gain in impact in the tales that follow. The Lady, both goddess and monster—benign and malign anima in one—lives in a land that parallels her death-in-life. Her realm, silent but for the howl of beasts, is a wasteland; her palace contains the glories of the ancient world, but like her past love, they are shattered relics. Medusa in "The Doom of King Acrisius" is another monster-goddess whose land reflects her emotional paralysis. Her barren passion is symbolized by her treeless realm of grey cliffs and a steely sea; the landscape without color, growth, or life mirrors her sterile soul.

The image of the wasteland is intensified in the tales of Fall and Winter. Laurence, the protagonist of "The Ring Given to Venus," meets his demon-mistress on a ruined shore where the sea "sucks the pasture's blood" (VI, 163), as she has sucked his potency and life. Bharam in "The Man Who Never Laughed Again," Walter in "The Hill of Venus," and Bellerophon in "Bellerophon in Lycia" return to earthly worlds deformed to wastelands. If, like Bellerophon and Laurence, they ultimately gain rewards, their suffering far exceeds their joy. For the most part, their failures in the quest for love leave Morris' characters in barren hells, still yearning for the Edens they have sought and lost. Internally, they suffer the void left by the death of passion, the state in which they

Find nought real except ourselves, and find  
 All care for all things scattered to the wind,  
 Scarce in our hearts the very pain alive,  
 Compelled to breathe indeed, compelled to strive,  
 Compelled to yearn, yet not allowed to hope. (V, 205)

Morris' anguish over the emotional void left by the demise of passion was intensified, if not caused, by what he considered his personal "failure,"<sup>15</sup> his alienation from his wife Jane during the years of her involvement with his friend, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His own pain adds another dimension to four tales written or revised in 1869 and 1870, the years in which his marital crisis reached its peak. In "Bellerophon at Argos," "The Lovers of Gudrun," "The

<sup>15</sup>See Morris' letter to Aglaia Coronio as quoted in *Letters*, p. 50.

Ring Given to Venus," and "The Hill of Venus," Morris presents his grimmest vision of fate and death triumphant over love. His intricate analysis of emotional death, the prominence he gives the feelings and dilemmas of two husbands who learn they are unloved, and the dominant roles played by fatal women—projections of the dark anima—contribute to the power of these fictions. While the four tales do not supplant art with biography or go beyond the limits of Morris' design, they are marked by an intensity that others of the stories lack.<sup>16</sup>

The alienation from the self and the world as well as the wish for death that rejection by a loved one brings is explored in two tales, "Bellerophon at Argos" and "The Lovers of Gudrun." In these treatments of the tragic loves of two men involved with the same woman, unlike those (such as "Ogier the Dane" and "The Land East of the Sun") which deal with two women who compete for the same man, the participant who loses is a center of concern. The two tales are mirror images: both husbands, developed from minor figures in Morris' sources, are treated with great sympathy, though one is ultimately innocent and the other guilty. Both wives, though destructive, are victims who suffer death-in-life, though one is painted as corrupt and the other as beyond judgment.

Proetus, King of Argos, is painted in Morris' own image, as a lover of life who is not "made for heaven or hell, / But simply for the earth" (VI, 102). His admiration of Bellerophon, the superior man, is not destroyed even when Sthenoboea, his cold and egocentric queen, swears falsely that Bellerophon has raped her. Alienated from the wife he knows does not love him, unable to condemn but forced to punish his friend, Proetus responds less with anger than with sorrow. He refuses to kill Bellerophon not because—as in Morris' source—the hero is a suppliant, but because he still cares for him. Sending Bellerophon to Lycia to be executed by Sthenoboea's father, Proetus still can hope the gods will save his friend. Yet though he can forgive with magnanimity, Proetus himself is weary of his life and yearns for death. Proetus becomes a figure who is dead-alive, a spellbound victim lacking even the will to gain release through suicide.

On the other hand, Bodli, the rejected husband in "The Lovers of Gudrun," is not an entirely innocent victim. In the *Laxdale Sage*, he is merely one of Gudrun's string of men, a minor figure who kills Kiartan, his friend, as much in retaliation for an insult as for Gudrun's love. In Morris' version of the tale, he is the most fully realized and sympathetic character, the tool of his mad passion, tormented by his separation from a cold and passive wife.

<sup>16</sup>Morris' dedication of *The Earthly Paradise* to his wife is somewhat ironic. In a work written by a man "late made wise in love" (VI, 332), as an attempt to exorcise the ghosts which surround his empty life, many of the female figures, particularly the remote, cool, and passively rejecting fatal women, are reminiscent of Jane Morris.



Like Proetus, Bodli feels himself the lesser man forced to destroy the friend superior to him; like Proetus, he desires his own annihilation. But Bodli is fated to act, and in killing Kiartan, he dooms himself and Gudrun to living-death. Morris centers this tale of "the seed and fruit of bitter love" (V, 250) on Bodli. Again, softening the brutalities of his source and developing and explaining motivations absent from it, Morris makes Bodli half-believe that Gudrun is deserted by her lover, Kiartan. Yet the glimmerings of recognition come to Bodli on the night he weds Gudrun; realizing he has merely won possession of a body, knowing now that Gudrun does not love him, Bodli begins to yearn for death. When Kiartan returns, Bodli becomes a soul in whom all hope and fear are dead. Incapable of action, spellbound with despair, he hopes Kiartan will slay him. Ironically, Bodli becomes Kiartan's murderer, and his plea to the corpse of his dead rival reveals the tragic nature of his plight:

O friend, O friend, when thee I meet in bliss,  
Will thou not give my love Gudrun to me,  
Since now indeed thine eyes made clear can see  
That I of all the world must love her most? (V, 381)

Bodli loses more than his friend, for his cry to his half-mad wife after the murder to "speak one word to me / Before my bitter shame and misery / Crushes my heart to death" (V, 383) is never answered. We and Bodli never know whether the hand Gudrun then stretches out holds pity or rejection. Bodli's final torment is to live marked by a changeless face—unforgiving of himself, not knowing if his wife forgives him, until he is hunted down and killed. Gudrun, on the other hand, remains, as Jack Lindsay notes (p. 16), "a dead figure of female power, conceived in passive terms." Yet the very deficiencies of Morris' portrait are thematically effective. Gudrun, like Sthenoboea, is painted less as a living woman than as a powerful force which destroys all who desire her.<sup>17</sup> Cold and passive in their relations with their husbands, ambivalent and egocentric in their passions for their lovers, Gudrun and Sthenoboea are, like Jane Morris, types of fatal beauty who personify the destructive aspects of earthly love. They are fated to be fatal, causing love even when they do not share it, causing destruction even when they do not intend it, and suffering the pains of bitter passions in their own souls.

All Morris' fatal women resemble the demonic Venus whom Morris draws most fully in "The Ring Given to Venus" and "The Hill of Venus," tales so haunted and tormented that his daughter felt obliged to comment on them. She notes that "both are stories of wild, barren passion and are built up in an

<sup>17</sup>The similarities between the two figures are clearly indicated by their final statements; Cf. Sthenoboea's "I have loved one man alone, / And unto him the worst deed have I done / Of all the ill deeds I have done on earth" (VI, 130), and Gudrun's "I did the worst to him I loved the most" (V, 395).

atmosphere of such an unquenchable melancholy that if my Father had written little else of note. . . you would say, here is an inward-looking being with scarcely a hope in his life, cursed with a sense of the futilities of the world" (AWS, I, 433). These visions of the dark goddess are foreshadowed in the earlier sections of *The Earthly Paradise* by her cruelty in "Cupid and Psyche" and by the Venus-Circe tapestries described in detail in "The Watching of the Falcon." Deriving his figure from the *Venus Petulantia* of ancient philosophy, the evil force who destroys men in search of pleasure, from the *Venus Verticordia*, whom Morris, like Rossetti, saw as the turner of hearts to lust, and from the demon of the Christian Middle Ages, Morris creates a figure still more deadly than her prototypes. Devoid of heart and soul, she is incapable of truly loving. To those ensnared by her, she brings contact without communication and desire without fulfillment. Though utterly alluring in her eternal beauty, she is sterile, creating nothing and destroying all external values. The escape from mortal love she seems to offer is to hell disguised as paradise.

In "The Ring Given to Venus," Morris reveals the grotesque nature of the goddess through his hero's nightmare and the "Triumph of Love" which he must witness. In Laurence's waking dream, a synecdoche for his entanglement with Venus, the images of love which have adorned the "happy" tales of *The Earthly Paradise* are ironically reversed. The wine that has flowed for past lovers becomes poison; the garland that has crowned the golden head of the beloved rests upon a skull; the lute's sound is the tolling of a funeral bell; and the "golden door" (VI, 163), the entrance to a lover's paradise, now leads to hell. The perversity of the love that the dark Venus brings is depicted in the strange procession in which she, Cupid, and Satan participate along with groups of lovers who illustrate the stages of romantic passion and the fates of those controlled by it. In an image reflecting in microcosm the progression of the total *Earthly Paradise*, Morris symbolizes the first group of happy lovers by a maiden who drops "a fresh red rose," and the last group—the sufferers of passion's bitter pain—by a woman who casts down a "black-bound wreath / Of bitter herbs long come to death" (VI, 167). Though the tale ends with Laurence's release from Venus (through the offices of a tormented priest who gives his life to gain it), Morris implies that Laurence has been partially destroyed. His involvement with the demon-mistress has been a nightmare he will never quite forget.

In "The Hill of Venus," Morris' version of the Tannhäuser legend, another hero finds a love that blights and kills. Unlike Swinburne's protagonist in "Laus Veneris," Morris' Walter is not tormented by the conflict between God and Venus; God barely enters the tale. Instead, Walter escapes from a loveless world to seek the goddess "born to give peace to souls that strive" (VI, 290). Yet even in a terrestrial Eden, surrounded by the

famous lovers of the Greek and medieval worlds, he cannot find peace. His cry of exaltation upon finding his beloved in the sheltered valley of the Venusberg: "For this, for this, / God made the world, that I might feel thy kiss!" (VI, 294) yields to the silence of his living-death. When, unable to accept or to be reconciled to the external world, he chooses to return to Venus, he knows his love clings to "the false heart of an evil thing" (VI, 321). Alive in body, but with a soul that knows "no ignorance, no wonder, and no hope" (VI, 323), he never sees the flowering staff, a symbol of God's mercy, which ironically contrasts with his dead soul.

In placing "The Hill of Venus" last among the tales and in closing *The Earthly Paradise* with an epilogue that indicates the coming demise of the aged Wanderers, as well as with a farewell to the book itself, Morris stresses the finalities of life. That the year of nature will be reborn in Spring is seen as contrast to but not as consolation for the sad reality of human mutability. Morris' final mood is elegiac; the lament for the inevitable passing of all human life and love is coupled with the poignant recognition that all searches for the golden age are futile. Not yet ready to embrace the stoic ethic of the North or to insist that men—through fellowship—must build their Eden on the ordinary earth, Morris stands within a personal wilderness. He knows that, in a world condemned to vanity and mutability, romantic love is not enough, but he has not yet recovered from its pains.

In all, the final impression of *The Earthly Paradise* is of the vanity of human desires. The vision of the beginning of the book, of a world beyond this world in which charmed lovers conquer trials and gain true union, is slowly cancelled by the contrasting vision of the tales of Fall and Winter. The reader is left with their view of reality: that perfect love can be, at best, an idle dream. *The Earthly Paradise* ironically persuades one that the quest for love must always end in failure, that all chance of gaining Eden has been lost.

## The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer

BARBARA J. BONO



WILLIAM MORRIS' lifelong reforming aesthetic endeavors trace those mazy ways crisscrossing the landscape where art and life mingle, for he passionately believed, as he said in "The Aims of Art," "art is and must be, either in its abundance or its barrenness, in its sincerity or its hollowness, the expression of the society amongst which it exists" (*CW*, XXIII, 84). For this convinced socialist, change in the institutional framework of man's life, most basically a check upon the mindless and inhuman pace of industrialization and a recognition of the basic fellowship of man, had to precede any sure and sound establishment of a true art, an "Art of the People."<sup>1</sup> Short of this social revolution Morris felt that even the most accomplished artistic achievements of individual genius lacked solid foundation; looking about the contemporary artistic scene he once commented that, "now such small scraps of it as are left are the result of individual and wasteful struggle, are retrospective and pessimistic" (XXIII, 89-90). Faithful to his own assessment of those areas in contemporary society where aesthetic and widely relevant social concerns met and merged, Morris concentrated his greatest energies in the fields of book production and design of household goods, thus hoping to supply through modified industrial means an exemplary pattern for a daily life enlivened by art, based not on the dilettantism of an elite, but rather on the vigorous creative participation and

<sup>1</sup>Morris' theory of the relation between art and society is trenchantly outlined in a lecture bearing this title (*CW*, XXII, 28-50). For his comments on how socialist beliefs colored every phase of his activity, see his essay, "How I Became a Socialist" (XXIII, 277-281), where on the first page he asserts, "Now this view of Socialism which I hold to-day, and hope to die holding, is what I began with; I had no transitional period, unless you may call such a brief period of political radicalism during which I saw my ideal clear enough, but had no hope of any realization of it."