The Crisis of
The Earthly Paradise: Morris and Keats

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It would appear from the self-confessed escapism of The Earthly Paradise, that Morris has abandoned the struggle to make the best of life, as manifested in the early romances and Jason, the latter itself a diversion originally intended for The Earthly Paradise which assumed a wider importance. Nevertheless, it is a necessary stage in the development of Morris' thought, leading him on to the fortitude of the Icelandic Sagas. This desperate and hopeless sinking into sensation—desperate in its clutching of the opiate of illusion, and hopeless in the face of the inevitability of death and the shattering of illusion—must needs result in a complete despair verging on the existential, in a new perspective of life discovered, or in the prostration produced by any debauchery, whether physical or intellectual. The first two of these products may be discerned in The Earthly Paradise. The third is in neither Morris' character nor means, for had it been so, there would have been no socialist ideals, no tapestry weaving, no interest in translating the pragmatic ideas of the Sagas. Nor indeed, would there have been any other indications of the Morris energy and honesty, obvious in the preceding works.

What is, however, evident in The Earthly Paradise is a more intelligible and informed realization of the Absurdity of existence, which not only deepens the tone of the escapist tales but also informs Morris' later perception of his own role in lessening the Absurdity of the universe, pointing the way to his Socialism. This result is, nevertheless, apparent only at the end of the book. For all the indifferentism of the opening stanzas, the work is deeply disturbed. Its preoccupation with death, the irony of the Mariners' useless search for immortality, which ends in premature ageing, and the troubled emotions evident in every page, lead only gradually to a more balanced view. The old men's terror of earthly destruction is slowly lessened in the year the book covers and can be soothed solely by the parallel of Nature, dying in Winter, but with its annual promise of regeneration in Spring.
The crisis of the book occurs in the months of September, October, and November. By now Morris has obviously put death into its proportion with life, and become resigned. The dreaminess of “Ogier the Dane,” as opposed to the mundane nature of Morris’ preceding resignation, implies a change of object. At this stage in the book, it is clear that the months have not simply shown the progress of the seasons, or illustrated their influence on the mind of the Mariner, although it is true that they have emerged from “the winter of their discontent” to the resignation of Summer. More important, the months have also marked stages in the development of the author’s thought, from the early escapism to the examination of fate as answers to the crushing consciousness of death. These are experiments. The crisis of the work begins in “September” with “the Death of Paris,” and reaches its climax in “October” with “The Man Who Never Laughed Again.”

The introductory verses of “September” betray the participation of the author in the narrative. Stanza four to six indicate that the Mariner, sitting comfortably beneath the trees, are willing to forget their worries. Their sorrow is sweet, and soothed by September softness, they have no fear of death or old longings. Stanza three, which refers to the author, bears a different stamp. It is disturbed, and expresses loss, appreciation of decay, desire, awakening consciousness, and disillusion:

Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again
That thou beheldest once with careless eyes!
Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries
To dream again the dream that made him glad
When in his arms his longing love he had.  

(CW, V, 1)

Continuing in the mood of the poem, “The Death of Paris” is also an indication of the passing of the old William Morris, Pre-Raphaelite. The demise of Paris signifies the end of the sensual, unthinking Pre-Raphaelite world. The death is the death of the fantastic, and Morris moves on to the dream vision of reality and knowledge. Paris is the handsomest of mortal men, chosen to judge the contention of beauty between three goddesses. For reward he chose not greatness or power, but love, and so he is the universal symbol of the lover. Cheerful and sensual in Morris’ story, Paris is definitely not cerebral.

Morris, dissatisfied with his time, turned for comfort to the things Paris symbolizes, which may be described as the Pre-Raphaelitism of his work. As has been seen, he became uneasy in this emotionally heightened and idealized world. After portraying its banishment from his mind in “The Death of Paris,” Morris goes on to transcend its thoughtlessness and sensuousness, and to consider life in a more intellectual way. The same process may be observed in Keats’s “Sleep and Poetry.” Keats, as fond as anyone of the actual and the romantic, nevertheless discovered that “strength alone though of the Muse born / Is like a fallen angel” (II. 241-242). Like Morris, Keats finds that to love nature, romance, and the moment is insufficient for an understanding of life:

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts.  

(II. 122-125)

“The Death of Paris,” then, is to Morris what “Sleep and Poetry” was to Keats. The story itself deals with the refusal of Paris’ rejected lover, the nymph Oenone, to repair the wound caused by Philoctetes’ poisoned arrow. Unlike Tennyson’s ethereal treatment of the subject, Morris tells the tale firmly and decidedly, as one who is rejecting something he once held dear. He explains Paris’ desire for life: “And life was love, and love too strong that he / Should catch at death to save his misery” (V, 8), a desire so strong that he will swear false love for it.

Morris deals with Paris’ physical pain, studying the latter’s coma of agony, dreams, and lusk, and examines the play of emotions between deserted Oenone—cold with the knowledge given by sorrow—and the dying desperate Paris. Paris dies in accordance with his animal nature, resigned but without any vision beyond the corporeal. And the world continues:

Yet the sky
Changed not above his cast-back golden head
And merry was the world though he was dead.  

(V, 21)

For all this unrelenting, factual description there is a certain amount of bitterness in the reaction to the tale’s revelation: “Since e’en so God makes equal Eld and Youth / Tormenting Youth with lies, and Eld with Truth” (V, 22). Yet although Morris claims that man’s life-span is too short to bear its torments, he gives a last acknowledgment to the comfort given by that which Paris symbolized:

How time and a tale a long, past we shall hear,
And make a melody of grief, and give
Joy to the world.  

(V, 22)

Nevertheless, he is on the point of rejecting this unthinking attitude to the world.

The theme of the dream vision illustrates his change of tone. It is not the translation into romantic realms typical of the Early Romances, but an explanation of bewilderment clearing into knowledge. Thus the Mariner is confused, for they cannot enter these new realms of perception:

Lay tale in tale, as dream within a dream,
Untold now the beginning, and the end
Not to be heard.  

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Lay tale in tale, as dream within a dream,
Untold now the beginning, and the end
Not to be heard. (V, 22)
Following this pattern, the next story is "a dream, with strange gleams of light." "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" deals with transcendental regions, love lost and regained, and world-weariness. The narrator is troubled by the weitschmerz. His black eyes are "overwise," and he is "weary of the strife / Within him between dreams and life." Like the typical Byronic hero, he is alienated from his surroundings, feeling himself "as in a cage / Shown to the gaping world,"⁴ and thus betrays all the characteristics of a man at odds with himself, his society and the universe. The "Absurd Condition," although a phrase not in use until Camus' Le Mythe de Sisyphe (1942), is here perfectly described by Morris. The grieved heart suddenly breaks and shows

The shrinking soul that deep abyss
                Of days to come all bare of bliss.

And suddenly he needs must cope
With that in-rushing of despair
Long held aback, till all things there
Seemed grown his foes, his prison-wall.² (V, 72)

What others call "reality" is a dream to the narrator, either in its lack of value as a universal, like "The dead men's dreams that move men there," or in its confusion of injustice and inconsistency, expressed as "this troubled dream / That men call life." Because he is removed from corporeal reality, the narrator's movements are mechanical:

will seems
To move the body but by dreams
Of ancienst life and energy. (V, 74)

Despite these drawbacks, Gregory's knowledge of "hidden truth" allows him to progress from this world of pain to the land of love, where he hears a story and discovers the existence of the supernatural. His mental state is consequently that of one

Who through a marvellous land hath gone
In sleep, and knowing nought thereof
To tell, yet knows strange things did move
About his sightless journeying,
So felt he; and yet seemed to bring,
Now and again, some things anigh
Unto the waving boundary
"Twixt sight and blindness, that awhile
Our troubled waking will beguile
When happy dreams have just gone by.

¹Cf. Lord Byron, Childe Harold, iii, st. 113 ff.
²In reference to the concept of religious "Absurdity," Kierkegaard first took up the term in 1842 in Concluding Unscientific Postscript. It is open to conjecture, therefore, whether Morris was in contact with these ideas.

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And left us without remedy
Within the unyielding hands of life. (V, 84)

This sensation goes deeper than the mere manifestation of depression. It betrays a fundamental concern with existence which will eventually be expressed in The Earthly Paradise in philosophical terms. In the same way there are many layers to the story. The subject of Gregory's narration shares Gregory's characteristics—may even be himself—and as Gregory is elevated into the story world by his dream, so John, his protagonist, is elevated into a world of higher reality by his Love. Being frail, he loses her, and is condemned to search for her land East of the Sun and West of the Moon to find her, in the same way that Gregory tries to elevate himself from the actual. Again, actuality seems unreal and angst controls his soul. That John/Gregory's plight is meant to symbolize a universal problem can be seen in its similarity to the miserable wanderings of the Old English poet:

but then the lordless man
Wakes again, and sees instead the tawny waves,
The seabirds bathing, spreading their feathers
While snow and frost fell, mixed with hail,
Then is the wounded heart heavy with
Sorrow after departed loved ones.³

He cast himself upon the ground,
And in the cold snow writhed and wailed,
While over him the sea-mew sailed,
Not silent, and the wind wailed too,
As though his bitter grief they knew,
And mocked him. (V, 90)

It seems that in Morris, as in "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer," the ordeal is preparing him for his reward in the land of higher reality, expiating his sins and opening his mind. As with Morris' hero:

Well-nigh it came into his head,
That he by ghosts of men was borne
From out his wasted Life forlorn
O'er a strange sea to some strange place
Of unknown punishment or grace. (V, 92)

So with the Seafarer:

the solitary flier cries
Irresistibly incites the heart on the whale's way
Over the ocean's expanse, for I would rather be there
With the joys of the Lord than in this dead life
Transitory on land.⁴

Indeed to voyage for “the joys of the Lord” makes life on the land seem transitory and dead, and the contradiction makes the hero unsure in which world he is existing:

East of the Sun, West of the Moon!
Seemed unto him a heaven-sent boon,
Yet made the merry world around
A dreary cage, a narrow round
Of dreamlike pain, a hollow place,
Filled with a blind and dying race. (V, 93)

Morris’ sympathy with a state of mind, beginning with the Saxon poet and continuing to Camus, disperses any criticism of narrowness of vision in The Earthly Paradise. Indeed, he goes on to describe the reaching, in this strange state of half-awareness, of what Keats terms “the goal of consciousness,” and he excels himself in mystic perception.

The hero realizes that he has found his goal by watching the moon set as the sun rises. There is great symbolism in this account, for the dawning of light is reflected both in the world and in his mind. Yet he remains in the unearthly void between the two states of day and night, fully belonging to neither. This apocalyptic state indicates his forthcoming release, which occurs after a purifying storm of which he is the sole survivor. One is reminded of Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner,” again a voyager condemned to seek forgiveness, who experiences extra-terrestrial activity:

A strange waif in the tide of life,
With nought he seemed to be at strife,
To nothing earthly to belong. (V, 96)

The culmination of Morris’ tale arrives when the hero passes through the door of death to enter his Love’s sorrowing land. This land is brought back to life on their meeting, and transformed into their heaven.

It is obvious, then, that the subject matter of “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon” forms a fitting beginning to Morris’ essay into metaphysical thought. The hero’s welschmerz, removal from actuality, perceptions of extra-terrestrial reality, and purgation and achievement of that reality all signify Morris’ own dissatisfactions with mundane existence, and his perceptions beyond it. These may be observed more fully in the stories for the following month, “October,” and especially in the great crisis of The Earthly Paradise, the Persian tale of “The Man Who Never Laughed Again.” The verses to “October” have a Keatsian “half in love with easeful death” flavor, although Morris ends them with the cry, “how can I have enough of Life and Love?”

“The Story of Acontius and Cydippe,” the first tale, bears out this antithesis, for it illustrates the last breath of the sensual in The Earthly

Paradise. Acknowledging that love is a little oasis in the desert of life, it nevertheless stresses that void. Love is blind to higher things:

Fate some huge net round both did throw
To stay their feet and dim their sight
Till they were clutched by endless night. (V, 131)

To Morris it retards the true perspective of life as a hollow tragedy ended by inevitable death; and although the tale has a happy ending, Morris comments that love is own punishment, for it takes all joy and importance from the world save in the loved one’s presence.

If “Acontius and Cydippe” hints at a lack of relish for the sensual, “The Man Who Never Laughed Again” illustrates perhaps Morris’ only entry into the realms of the intellect. Acontius and Cydippe are too mad for love; Bharam is too mad for knowledge. The story opens with a colloquy between two men; the one a rich man on his way to a banquet, the other, one who, having fallen in the world, is starving. They argue, the poor man being able to appreciate the good things in life—considering that “day[s] of ease and revelry, . . . make it harder yet . . . to die”—although he has suffered and learned the usual lessons of sudden poverty:

“For even as with gifts I bought,
So knowledge buys disease, power loneliness.
And love the hate of what we used to bless—
Ah, I am wise, and wiser soon will grow,
And know the most that wise dead men can know.” (V, 161)

The fed man, Firuz, is dis-satisfied with existence, but offers Bharam life at least. Together they go through a thick wood to Firuz’ palace. There they meet several men ostensibly dying of misery. Bharam’s duty is to care for them until they die, when he will inherit their wealth. When the last of them, Firuz, comes to die, he tells Bharam that their misery stems from a journey through a mysterious door in the forest, and counsels him not to enter it. Bharam returns to the palace consumed with curiosity. His former experiences have influenced him against the world, and he is therefore not unwilling to risk leaving it. The unknown fate, he feels, would be preferable to returning to his former life, surrounded by people, selfish although sharing his mortality. However, he stifles his curiosity, and suppresses his solipsism:

“And yet indeed if I must live alone,
If fellowship be but an empty dream,
Is there not left a world that is mine own?
Am I not real if all else doth but seem?
Yes, rather, with what wealth the world doth teem,
When we are once content from us to cast
The dreadful future and remorseful past.” (V, 176)
Bharam then re-enters the world, but his solipsist view does not let him enjoy it for long. He loses interest in people and pleasure, becoming, like Firuz, removed from actuality. Others pass by his eyes like “empty shadows,” and “The world was narrowed to his heart at last.” Desperate, he returns to the palace, locates the door and passes through it. He finds himself in a strange land, marries its princess and lives happily. The princess is forced to go on a journey and, like Firuz, forbids him a particular room. This he enters, finds a cup and a strange tablet presaging knowledge and, possessed by a desire for knowledge, drains the cup.

Nor knew he how real life from dreams to part,
All seemed to him a picture made by art,
Except the overwhelming strong desire
To know the end, that set his heart afire. (V, 197)

Immediately, everything vanishes, and he is transported, desolate of heart, to the door he first entered. He has rejected love for knowledge, and now stands miserably “face to face with the void of life.” As the palace is by now ruined, he moves into the city to await death, and to be known as “the man who never laughed.”

The story is quoted in detail because all its symbolism clearly indicates a man’s realization of the Absurdity of life, undoubtedly Morris’ own. Bharam’s first journey through the unthinking darkness of the wood is to the palace of thought where “A doubtful breeze quickens his soul.” His indecision at Firuz’s death indicates a pull between the desire to understand the world’s limitations, and the desire to renounce loneliness, taking the world’s joys for what they are worth. The latter state of mind wins, but not for long, and Bharam enters into the chambers of thought. Love is a temporary haven, but when he begins to examine it—the cup of disillusionment is symbolically placed in the bridal chamber—it shatters, and he is returned to lonely gloom.

Tennyson details much the same process in “The Palace of Art.” He builds a palace of beautiful fantasies and sensations for his soul, but ultimately realizes their hollowness:

She threw her royal robes away.
“Make me a cottage in the vale,” she said,
“Where I may mourn and pray.” (ll. 290-292)

Yet Tennyson does not experience the full horror of the existentialist void, for he does not utterly reject the pleasures of the world, but intends to retain them for moderate use and to keep his sanity:

“Yet pull not down my palace towers, that are
So lightly, beautifully built.
Perchance I may return with others there,
When I have purged my guilt.” (ll. 293-296)

A more valuable comparison in its conclusions, then, lies in Keats’s great essay into knowledge in “The Fall of Hyperion,” which forms the high point of his philosophy.

The influence of Keats on Morris’ early works has already become obvious. Morris, indeed, once went so far as to name Keats one of his masters. Not only does Morris resemble Keats in their shared earlier “common faith of love and beauty” and in points of style; he also shares with him his ultimate analysis of the world’s miseries, as can be seen by a comparison of “The Man Who Never Laughed Again” and “The Fall of Hyperion.” The resemblance of the two works is striking. Both poets are in a beautiful land, akin to Keats’s “chamber of maiden thought.” They both come upon the cup of knowledge, and drinking from it, “unwilling life is rapt away.” Both struggle and swoon; they awake in similar circumstances. Keats sees “An old sanctuary with roof august”; “The superannuations of sunk realms”; “Nature’s rocks toiled hard in waves and winds”; “faulture of decrepit things.” Morris sees a grey cliff, tree boles, decay and tangled waste, sharp thin grass, and the low mounds of his forerunners. Keats’s “black gates / . . . shut against the sunrise evermore” (i, 85-86) are echoed in Morris’ “fearful gate. . . shut fast against him.” The barren and august nature of the realm reflects the loneliness of knowledge and its lack of mundane comfort.

Both Keats and Morris are now in the stark realms of Platonic perception. This is obvious in Morris, for Bharam drank the cup in search of it:

“Who knows but in that chamber I may find
The clue unto this tangled, weary maze.
And vision clear, whereas I now am blind.” (V, 196)

The cup itself indicates that

“Dull is the labouring world, nor holdeth such
As think and yet are happy; then be bold,
And things untimely of thine eyes behold!” (V, 200)

The tablet by Bharam’s cup also points out that he cannot refuse to drink; he would never cease to yearn after the experience of travelling into the world of the forms. Once awakened he cannot go back; his “old life is done.”

That Keats’s cup of knowledge is of the same type is certain because Keats goes on to describe the knowledge that Morris’ Bharam has died for. Keats manages to climb the stair into the temple where

5J. M. Mackail (I, 206) quotes a letter written by Morris in 1869 to Charles Cowden Clarke, shortly after the publication of The Earthly Paradise, Morris’ debt to Keats is also self-evident in such lines as “Deep in the hollow of a shaded vale” in “Cupid and Psyche” which echoes Keats’s reference to Endymion, “Deep in the shady sadness of a vale” (“Fall of Hyperion,” i, 294).
“All else who find a haven in the world, Where they may thoughtlessly sleep away their days, If by chance into this fam’d scene they come, Rot on the pavement where thou rotted’st half.” (I, 150-154)

Bharam is one of these, possessing the preoccupation with death, and the misery of the knowledge that he only exists, obvious in The Earthly Paradise. Keats enquires of Moneta, the giver of counsel, “What am I that I should so be saved from death?” and has the reply:

“None can usurp this height,” returned that shade, “But those to whom the miseries of the world Are misery, and will not let them rest.” (I, 147-149)

Morris also contains these characteristics, but there his similarity of vision with Keats ends, for the response to this situation may take one of three forms. The first is the existential despair without its philosophy, as exemplified by Bharam. Its best description in Victorian times is in Heinrich Heine’s gloomy poem “Morphine”:

Gute ist der schlaf
Der todvist besser,
Friedlich, das beste
Wene nie geboren sein.6

The second is Keats’s own reaction. His ultimate vision is intellectual: the perception of an order beyond the Absurd universe, beyond “the lilly and the snow” of death. Tennyson, too, finds a similar answer in his poem “The Ancient Sage.”

No intellectual, Morris takes the third course in his later work, prescribing stoicism and fortitude in the face of actual troubles, accepting the loneliness of the universe. Thus it is easy to explain Morris’ interest in the stark Icelandic Sagas, and this interest leads on to his ultimate answer of Socialism. In the same way as the Icelandic culture was inevitably lightened by the hope provided by Christianity, Morris’ course was uplifted by the current hope of his age, not Christianity, which was then being challenged, but Socialism. Moneta accurately describes the Morris type thus, as those

“Who love their fellows even to the death; Who feel the giant agony of the world And more, like slaves to poor humanity, Labour for mortal good.” (I, 156-159)

“They are no dreamers weak; They seek no wonder but the human face; No music but a happy-noted voice— They come not here, they have no thought to come.” (I, 162-165)

6Sleep is good
Death better
But of course the best
Would be never to have been born at all.

“Here” in this context refers to Platonic realms. “They” (the reformers) “have no thought to come” because they live to improve the actual, not to indulge in speculation upon the Platonic realities. Morris, in his later work, never returns to this metaphysical temple. Only in The Earthly Paradise is he “Dreamer of Dreams born out of my due time.” Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?”

The malaise of The Earthly Paradise, and the themes of people reaching redemption after ordeal—forgiven by Christ as in “The Hollow Land” or exalted by love, as in “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon”—are explained in “The Fall of Hyperion” in similar terms.

“Only the dreamer venoms all his days, Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve. Therefore, that happiness be somewhat shar’d, Such things as thou art are admitted oft Into like gardens thou didst pass erewhile, And suffer’d in these temples; for that cause Thou standest safe beneath this statue’s knees.” (I, 175-181)

This world view, then, may be seen in the findings of almost any poet of merit, from the “ubi sunt” of “The Wanderer” to The Waste Land of Eliot. Platonic metaphysics can inform an Anglo-Saxon and a twentieth-century poet, but the reaction of the poet depends on his personality. Morris’ reaction may be traced in his middle and later work. It merely remains to detail the nature of these findings, and the despair they evoke in those who cannot cope with them, as explained by Morris in The Earthly Paradise:

Ah these, with life so done with now, might deem That better is it resting in a dream, Yea, even a dream, than with outstretched hand, And wild eyes, face to face with life to stand, Nor more the master now of anything, Though striving of all things to be the king— Than waking in a hard taskmaster’s grasp Because we strove the unsullied joy to clasp— Than just to find our hearts the world, as we Still thought we were, and ever longed to be, To find nought real except ourselves, and find All care for all things scattered to the wind, Scare in our hearts the very pain alive. Compelled to breathe indeed, compelled to strive Compelled to fear, yet not allowed to hope. (V, 205)

For those people who are able (like Keats) to cope with it, the experience is a revelation of transcendental importance:

Then saw I a wan face, Not pin’d by human sorrows, but bright-blanch’d By an immortal sickness which kills not; It works a constant change, which happy death Can put no end to; deathwards progressing To no death was that visage; it has pass’d The lilly and the snow; and beyond these I must not think now, though I saw that face. (I, 256-263)