

*STUDIES IN
THE LATE ROMANCES
OF WILLIAM MORRIS*



BLUE CALHOUN JOHN HOLLOW
NORMAN KELVIN CHARLOTTE OBERG
and CAROLE SILVER

With an Introduction by
FREDERICK KIRCHHOFF

\$5.00 THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY

POPC(5)910PR (MORRIS) #35
105343

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

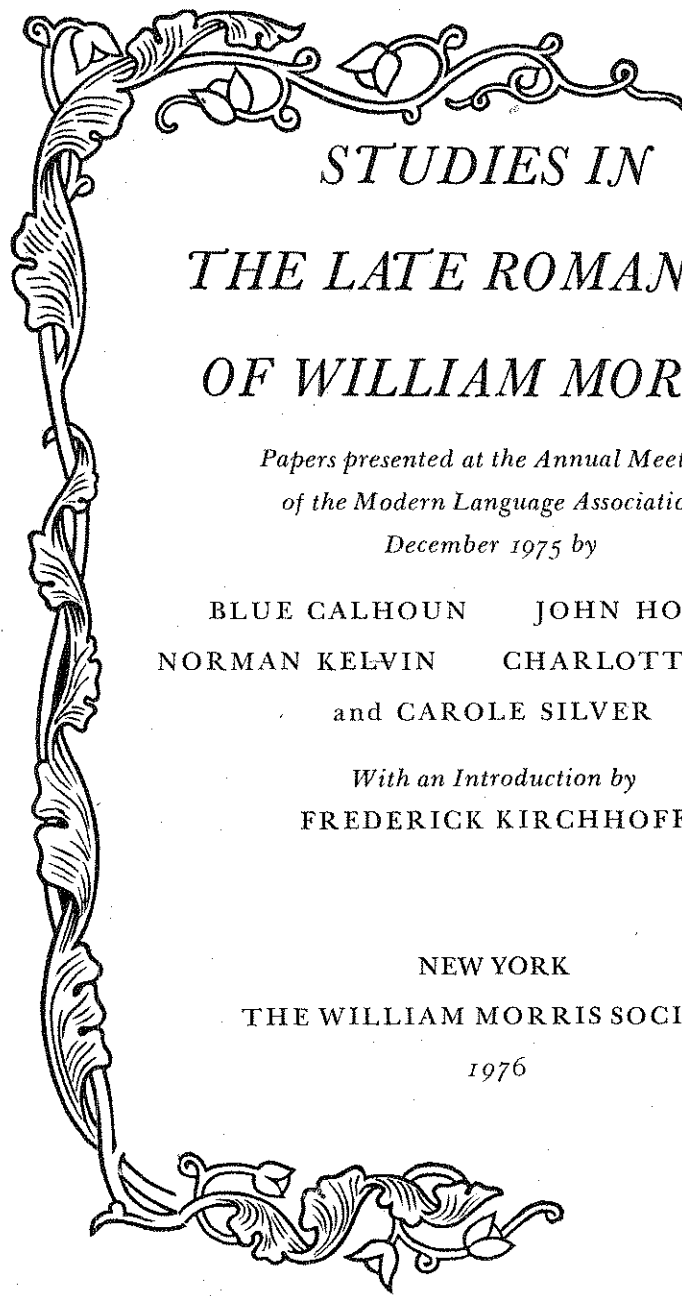
The essays contained in this volume are based on papers written for two seminars which were held at the convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, December 1975. Frederick Kirchhoff organized the seminar entitled "William Morris: the Prose Romances" at which the papers by Blue Calhoun, John Hollow, Norman Kelvin and Carole Silver were presented. Charlotte Oberg's contribution was written for the seminar on "Fantasy Motifs." It is based on a chapter in her forthcoming book, A Pagan Prophet: William Morris, to be published by the University Press of Virginia.

Carole Silver and Joseph Dunlap prepared the papers for publication. Mr. S. A. Russell, president of Oriole Editions, kindly took charge of design and production. Scholastic and Manuscript Typing Service made the text camera ready.

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The decoration on the title page appears in the Kelmscott Press edition of The Sundering Flood at the beginning of Chapter XXIII.

The cut on the cover and on page [7] was designed by A. J. Gaskin as an illustration for Chapter XVI, Book III, of the Kelmscott Press edition of The Well at the World's End, but it was not used. (Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library.)



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*Papers presented at the Annual Meeting
of the Modern Language Association
December 1975 by*

BLUE CALHOUN JOHN HOLLOW
NORMAN KELVIN CHARLOTTE OBERG
and CAROLE SILVER

With an Introduction by
FREDERICK KIRCHHOFF

NEW YORK
THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY

1976

Introduction

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of William Morris

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THE WILLIAM MORRIS SOCIETY
420 Riverside Drive, 12G
New York, N.Y. 10025

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Therefore day after day betimes in
the morning they bore the said book
to the altar and read therein,
till they had learned much wisdom.

ERRATA

Page 59, line 6: Read Mirkwood for Markwood.

" 119, lines 11 & 13: Read Pater for Peter.

" 124, lines 26 & 28/29: Read Sun-beam for Sun-Beam.

" 124, line 29: Read Folk-might for Folk-Might.

" 127, line 24: Read barbarians for bararians.

⁶Mary Lascelles, "Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy," in Pastoral and Romance: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Eleanor Terry Lincoln (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 125.

DELIBERATE HAPPINESS: THE LATE PROSE
ROMANCES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

John Hollow

Yeats' essay on Morris ("The Happiest of Poets") has two fine images, the one which calls him a poet of the time when the Cross shall blossom with roses, and the other which is a recollection of Morris holding a glass of claret to the light and asking, "Why do people say it is prosaic to get inspiration out of wine? Is it not the sunlight and the sap in the leaves? Are not grapes made by sunlight and the sap?"

Both pictures enliven Yeats' conclusion that "the early Christians were of the kin of the Wilderness and the Dry Tree, and they saw an unearthly paradise, but he [Morris] was of the kin of the Well and of the Green Tree and he saw an Earthly Paradise." But Yeats' essay is so governed by his contrast of Rossetti and Morris, of those who pray in "the shadow of the Green Tree," of those who yearn for another world and those who love this, that he ignores the important difference between an unchanging earthly paradise and this changing earth, a distinction which makes Morris something other than "the happiest of the poets." It is as true of Morris as it is of Keats, that this "love of the world" is a chosen attitude, a "deliberate happiness" ("Ego Dominus Tuus").

In The Well at the World's End, for example, the Dry Tree does not in fact blossom into the Green Tree. Or to put it another way, if Yeats is correct and the contrast is between desiring unearthly or earthly paradises, then it is difficult to see how the Queen of the Dry Tree can also

be the Lady of Abundance. Or to put it yet a third way, it is not easy to understand why the Lady of Abundance fails and Ursula succeeds. The Lady certainly does not seem to prefer the idea of heaven to the reality of this earth.

There is such a contrast in the book (and Yeats makes much of this scene in his review of this romance¹). A monk says to Ralph:

"Now Lord, I can see by thy face that thou art set on beholding the fashion of this world, and most like it will give thee rue."

Then came a word into Ralph's mouth, and he said [punning nicely on the word "fashion"]: "Wilt thou tell me, father, whose work was the world's fashion?"

The monk reddened, but answered nought, and Ralph spake again: "Forsooth, did the craftsman of it fumble over his work?"

(18:35-36)

But the contrast here is between the priests and Ralph, not between the Lady and Ralph or Ursula.

Late in the story, when the Champion of the Dry Tree becomes a wild-man, and Roger the Rope-walker a hermit, because neither of them can enjoy life without the Lady of Abundance, then the contrast is between those who reject the world and Ralph who still loves it, even though (as the monk warned) it has given him rue. But that is not a contrast between those who seek an unearthly paradise and those who seek an earthly one. As H. G. Wells lamented, "Ever and again the tale is certainly shot and enriched with allegory. But as we try to follow these glittering strands, they spread, twist, vanish, one after the other, in the texture of some purely decorative incident."²

Without denying Wells' point, which is a good one, and always remembering Morris' outraged denial of allegorical purpose, still it does seem that Ralph has two very similar sets of adventures. He leaves home to seek his fortune, loves one lady whom he is unable to protect from death, loves another lady whom he is able to protect, drinks of the Well and returns home to inherit his father's kingdom. He is that fortunate favorite son of folklore, that Joseph who will thrive even if sold into Egypt. And that does seem to be the point: Ralph and Ursula are lucky; the Lady of Abundance is not.

Part of the difficulty in interpreting The Well at the World's End is that there are so many clues. The Lady of Abundance is said to be a witch, a fairy, a goddess, something other than a child of Adam. She is called, in a speech Harold Bloom takes to be the center of the romance, the kind of woman who distracts men from great deeds.³ And her origins are obscure, her life is simply a history of one aroused lust after another, and she does not seem to move men to any great deeds. But to Ralph, who learns to judge her for herself, she is not the belle dame sans merci that pale kings, princes too, say she is. She says and means "I love thee true," and Ralph awakes on the cold hill's side only after she dies. She becomes for Ralph, in his life with Ursula, the opposite possibility, the tragic potential, the unhappy end of love and beauty. His love for Ursula and his appreciation of their good fortune is intensified by the constant reminders of the Lady's ill fortunes. He almost loses Ursula to the bear just as he did lose the Lady in a similar scene; and at the end of the story his parents welcome Ursula in a way that the Lady's in-laws did not welcome her.

This awareness of the dual possibilities of life, happy and unhappy, is what the book is about. As Ralph returns from the Well he finds that everything has changed in the towns and among the peoples he visited before. He helps to bring about some of the change, but most of it happens without his assistance; the tyrants of Utterbol and the Burg of the Four Friths, for example, have already fallen before he arrives. The one sure and certain thing about human life is that it changes, and that is what the inscription at the Well says: "Drink of me, if ye deem that ye be strong enough in desire to bear length of days" (19:81). If, in other words, ye can stand up under the heavy load of a life which may be more full of sorrow than of joy. Ralph reaches the Well because after the death of the Lady Abundance he does not loiter on the cold hill's side; his love of the world, of deeds, other maidens, and the life of man, is such that he is strong enough to drink from the fountain of youth.

The Dry Tree, then, does not blossom into the Green because dead trees like dead hopes, dead loves, and dead men are as much a part of this life as is the renewal of spring, love, and life. The sign of the road to the Well of longer life is a sword crossed with a green bough, the symbols of war and peace, man and the earth, death as well as life.

II

On the other hand, Yeats is certainly correct when he insists that Morris never sought an un-earthly paradise. In A Dream of John Ball, for example, the medieval priest thinks he believes in heaven; but, as the dreamer tries to tell him, his hope of immortality is really based upon the

continuing life of mankind on this earth.

"What sayest thou, scholar?" John Ball asks, lifting the corner of a sheet from the face of a dead man, "feelest thou sorrow of heart when thou lookest on this, either for the man himself, or for thyself and the time when thou shalt be as he is?"

"How can I sorrow for that which I cannot so much as think of?" replies the dreamer; "while I am alive I cannot think that I shall die, or believe in death at all, although I know well that I shall die--I can but think of myself as living in some new way."

"Yea, forsooth," says John Ball, "that is what the Church meaneth by death, and even that I look for." But the new life in the world-to-come promised by the Church is not what the dreamer has in mind. "Though I die and end," he explains, "yet mankind yet liveth, [and] there I end not, since I am a man."

Moreover, the dreamer goes on to claim, John Ball himself must share some such belief, for "with a few pennies paid, and a few masses sung, thou mightst have had a good place on this earth and in that heaven"; whereas John Ball is "ready to die in grief and torment rather than be unfaithful to the Fellowship, yea rather than fail to work thine utmost for it" (16:264-266). Which is to say, not only is John Ball no Bishop Blougram, but he is more ready to work for the good of his fellow men in this world than to save his soul in the next.

The medieval priest is unable to see the distinction between the ends of fellowship and of salvation, but if willingness to be martyred is

a test of true belief, then what John Ball most truly believes is in the universal brotherhood of men on this earth, "the sons of one man and one mother, begotten of the earth" (16:235). Thus his banner pictures, not the fellowship of angels and of men, but "a man and a woman half-clad in skins of beasts seen against a background of green trees" (16:227).

And so, although John Ball does not realize it, the point of his sermon is that men act for the future of mankind, not so that they may earn heaven. "Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane" (16:230).

In the future, the dreamer promises the priest, John Ball will be remembered as one who dreamed of equality (16:285), just as Ball's followers remember our first parents as proof of our brotherhood and equality. John Ball will be, as he promised that his men would be, "though men call you dead, a part and parcel of the living wisdom of all things, very stones of the pillars that uphold the joyful earth" (16:230).

Similarly, in that amalgamation of Caesar's Commentaries, Tacitus, Icelandic saga, and Beowulf called The House of the Wolfings (who may be, in fact, those "Sons of the Wolf" with whom Beowulf's father had a feud), although Thiodolf seems to expect to wend his way to Godhome when he dies, the immortality most real to him is the continued life of his tribe:

I am Thiodolf the Mighty: but as wise as
I may be
No story of that grave-night mine eyes can
ever see,
But rather the tale of the Wolfings through
the coming days of earth,
And the young men in their triumph and the
maidens in their mirth;
And morn's promise every evening, and each
day the promised morn,
And I amidst it ever reborn and yet reborn.

"This tale I know," he continues:

who have seen it, who have felt the joy
and pain,
Each fleeing, each pursuing, like the links
of the draw-well's chain:
But that deedless tide of the grave-mound,
and dayless nightless day,
E'en as I strive to see it, its image wanes
away.

"What say'st thou of the grave-mound?" he
concludes:

shall I be there at all
When they lift the Horn of Remembrance, and
the shout goes down the hall,
And they drink the Mighty War-duke and
Thiodolf the Old?
Nay rather; there where the youngling that
longeth to be bold
Sits gazing through the hall-reek and sees
across the board
A vision of the reaping of the harvest of
the sword,
There shall Thiodolf be sitting
(14:109)

So, although the old man sings of Thiodolf's arrival at Godhome, The House of the Wolfings concludes with the body of Thiodolf enthroned at the feast of his tribe: "There then they fell to feasting, hallowing the high-tide of their return with victory in their hands: and the dead corpses of Thiodolf and Otter, clad in precious glistening raiment, looked down on them from the High-seat, and the kindreds worshipped them and were glad; and they drank the Cup to them before any others, were they Gods or men" (14:206). The spirit of Thiodolf may be wending the way to the God's feast, but the book ends (as does Beowulf) with the raising of the hero's grave-mound, the place "called Thiodolf's Howe for many generations of men." A legend grows up, in fact, that Thiodolf is not dead but only sleeping, and that he will wake at the hour of the Goths' greatest need (14:207). In other words, the Wolfings are no more able to picture Thiodolf in Godhome than he was able to imagine himself there.

Thiodolf may be in Valhalla, as John Ball may be in heaven, but in this life neither of them could act to win such unearthly paradises. Thiodolf's only choice is whether to live for himself or to die for his people. It is not the choice of Achilles (long life or fame), nor is his need that of Beowulf (who of all the Geats was the "most yearning of fame"): when Thiodolf refuses to wear the dwarf-wrought hauberk, he chooses not so much the immortality of fame as the immortality of fellowship. If Thiodolf lives on, it is as a part of the life of his people.

In The Roots of the Mountains, when the Warriors of the Wolf recapture their tribal hall, they find several of their heroes, including "he who bore a name great from of old, Folkwolf" (which is what the Wolfings call Thiodolf),

hanging from the roof-beam, "dusty, befouled, with sightless eyes and grinning mouths, in the dimmed sunlight of the Hall" (15:356). Or so much for the immortality of fame.

Face-of-god certainly seeks no such fame; his single aim is the present and future good of his people. In fact, his lady only accepts him after he demonstrates that he is capable of putting the welfare of the tribe ahead of the welfare of any individual. He has to acknowledge, as befits the ruler of an agricultural rather than a warrior society, that he prefers the quiet of peace to the fame of war. He is willing to fight, and knows that he will often have to, but his role is to establish a society less cruel than the tyranny of the Dusky Men. He and his lady plight troth on the ring of the Earth-god (as opposed, one assumes, to any God in the sky), but the tribe is the real God in the book, and that is why the hero is called Face-of-god.

It is as Old Hammond says in News from Nowhere, when the "assured belief in heaven and hell . . . has gone," men turn to the "religion of humanity," by which he means that men should "love their kind" and "believe in the continuous life of the world of men, and as it were, add every day of that common life to the little stock of days which our own mere individual experience wins for us" (16:132). Judging from The House of the Wolfings and The Roots of the Mountains, in both of which the individuals learn to lose themselves in the future of the tribe, men had a similar religion of humanity in the days before heaven or hell seemed assured. Christianity desires an unearthly paradise, but Morris' heroes possess the future through anticipation.

III

The future they anticipate is not, however, an earthly paradise. In The Earthly Paradise itself, the Wanderers of the frame tale discover that an earthly paradise would lack change and that human life without the intensifying threat of death would no longer be human life. In The Glittering Plain, when the hero, whose name is Hallblithe because he is only blithe in the hall of his ancestors, visits the earthly paradise known as the Glittering Plain, he finds neither life nor love there sufficiently in earnest--all that glitters is not gold.

The maidens are lovely, but somewhat light-headed; the king smiles and smiles, but is a villain; the place is called "the Land of Living Men," but it is really only "the Acre of the Undying."

Then stirred Hallblithe's heart within him and he said: "O Eagle of the Sea, thou hast thy youth again: what then wilt thou do with it? Wilt thou not weary for the moonlit main, and the washing of waves and the dashing of spray, and thy fellows all glistening with the brine? Where now shall be the alien shores before thee, and the landing for fame, and departure for the gain of goods? Wilt thou forget the ship's black side, and the dripping of the windward oars, as the squall falleth on when the sun hath arisen, and the sail tuggeth hard on the sheet, and the ship lieth over and the lads shout against the whistle of the wind? Has the spear fallen from thy hand, and hast thou buried the sword of thy fathers in the grave from which thy body has escaped? . . . Whose thrall art thou now, thou lifter of the spoil, thou scarer of the freeborn? The bidding of what lord or King wilt thou do, O Chieftain, that thou mayst eat thy meat in the

morning and lie soft in thy bed in the evening?" . . .

But the Sea-eagle laughed from a countenance kind with joy, and said: ". . . And as to what thou sayest concerning the days gone past and our joys upon the tumbling sea, true it is that those days were good and lovely; but they are dead and gone like the lads who sat on the thwart beside us, and the maidens who took our hands in the hall to lead us to the chamber. Other days have come in their stead, and other friends shall cherish us. What then? Shall we wound the living to pleasure the dead, who cannot heed it? Shall we curse the Yuletide, and cast foul water on the Holy Hearth of the winter feast, because the summer once was fair and the days flit and the times change? Now let us be glad! For life liveth."

Therewith he turned about to his damsel and kissed her on the mouth. But Hallblithe's face was grown sad and stern, and he spake slowly and heavily: "So is it, shipmate, that whereas thou sayest that the days flit, for thee they shall flit no more; and the day may come for thee when thou shalt be weary, and know it, and long for the lost which thou hast forgotten." (14:256-258)

As Hallblithe says, he seeks no dream, "but rather the end of dreams" (14:273). He leaves the Glittering Plain for the hall of his ancestors, and on the way home he not only rescues his lady, but walks under a raised strip of turf called the "earth-yoke" with his former enemies, now become his brothers, with whom he shares this life, its changes, and death.

So extreme, in fact, are the differences between earthly paradises and this earth that the

Guest cannot remain in the improved model of this earth which is the world of News from Nowhere. "One thing seems strange to me," says Dick, late in that story, "that I must needs trouble myself about the winter and its scantiness, in the midst of the summer abundance. If it hadn't happened to me before, I should have thought it was your doing, Guest; that you had thrown a kind of evil charm over me" (16:207). Dick hastens to assure Guest that he is only joking, but that restlessness in the improved future is, according to Ellen, the reason Guest cannot remain: "No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you" (16:210). He must return to the present, to do what he can to bring about that day, and to take what comfort he may in the possibility that Old Hammond may be his grandson.

Lack of change, however, is also something of a problem for the people of the future. Clara, for example, is always a little restless, though it is to be hoped that she is settling down. The more serious temptation, as Ellen realizes, is the attractiveness of change itself. "Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid" (16:194). In fact, Ellen is so tolerant of the Praiser of Past Times because he keeps alive the contrast of the present with the past, which contrast is necessary lest the present, for all of its changing seasons and changing jobs, seem to lack change enough.

The most important thing the people of the future know about the past is that it was a "life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate--'nature,' as people used to call it--as one thing, and mankind as another" (16:179). In the future, Ellen leads Guest to the old house and, laying "her shapely sun-browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it," cries out: "O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it--as this has done" (16:201-202). The people of the future are so aware of being part of the earth that they have no need of paradises either unearthly or earthly; such dreams make men and women seem separate from the earth.

IV

As Face-of-god plights troth on the ring of the Earth-god, as Hallblithe walks under the earth-yoke, and as Ellen thinks Kelmscott Manor as natural a growth of the earth as any tree, so the three romances of the alliterated Ws celebrate the interconnection of men, women, and this changing earth. In The Well at the World's End, as I have said, the lovers learn to live even though life is as changeable as the seasons. In The Wood Beyond the World the lovers help a city to bloom at the edge of the wilderness, and in The Water of the Wondrous Isles Birdalone embodies no less than the life urge itself.

Golden Walter has to decide whether to believe the Dwarf, who says the Mistress is a god, or the Maid, who says the Mistress only holds them captive. Walter's wife has been unfaithful, and so he has reason enough to believe that

the beautiful but wanton Mistress does rule all. Fortunately, he is neither so cynical nor so blind as to be unable to see the truth of the Maid.

The lovers' restraint in allowing the Maid to remain a maid proves the power of the lascivious Mistress more apparent than real; she is a fit goddess for Dwarfs and Bears, but not for civilized men and women. Walter's similar foresight in choosing the garments of war necessary to protect peace proves him a fit king for the world beyond the wilderness. His city, the medieval city, is not a blot on the landscape, but a well-organized natural growth. And as Walter's ancestors were medieval traders, not nineteenth-century businessmen, so he has the virtues of foresight and restraint necessary to help his corner of the world blossom as did the Maid's faded garlands.

In The Water of the Wondrous Isles, Birdalone, who wanders naked through the world, seeming like Venus almost to make the grass grow and the flowers bloom, visits the islands of Increase Unsought, the Young and the Old, the Queens, the Kings, and of Nothing. Upon her return, she finds that the Isle of Nothing has become a pastoral scene (of Increase Sought), the Isle of Kings a place of maidens yearning for men, the Isle of Queens a place of men yearning for maidens, the Isle of the Young and Old a place where the old do die and the young grow older, and the Isle of Increase Unsought a wasteland. All of these changes are the result of Birdalone's passage across the water between the wondrous isles in the sense that her fine and naked body arouses the lust for life in all who behold her. She is change itself moving through a stagnant world.

At the same time, however, she also causes as much pain as pleasure. She moves several men to hopeless passion, and most of them are not the better for it; she brings about the rescue of three maidens, but she causes the death of one's knight and steals the affection of another's; in fact, she flees from her friends because she can no longer endure being the cause of as much pain as joy. It is only at the end of the book that she is reconciled to the double possibilities of her beauty, which duality is also the earth's and is well represented by the Green and the Rocky Eyots which do not change.

Morris seems to have borrowed the captive maiden and the witch from folk tales to embody a vision of a beauty as irresistible as change, of the hounds of spring straining at winter's traces. The effects of Birdalone's passage through the world are perhaps not as disastrous as those of Swinburne's Atalanta, but they very nearly are. And no one has ever called Swinburne the happiest of the poets.

V

C. S. Lewis said the center of Morris was not the contrast between an unearthly and an earthly paradise, but a "tension" between "the passion for immortality" and "the feeling that such desire is not wholly innocent, that the world of mortality is more than enough for our allegiance."⁴ Perhaps even closer to the truth is the suggestion that this tension is just one of the tensions, albeit an important one, in a poet whose lines are full of pairs such as "joy and sorrow," "pleasure and pain," "hopes and fears," and "life and death." If Morris' prose romances have anything in common, it is this overwhelming

awareness of contrasts, of change from one state to another, as the defining characteristic of both the life of mankind and the way of the world. The change and the contrasts may be subject to pattern, as in the seasons of the year, but for Morris contrast is the most real part of the pattern.

Tennyson has something of the same sense that the desire for immortality is not innocent, as in, for example, "The Lotus-Eaters." And Swinburne has something of the same sense of contrasts, especially between pleasure and pain. But one has to turn to Keats for the real sense of the tension between joy's grape and the palate fine. Like Keats, Morris seems to love the earth and the life of man, but, also like Keats, the affirmation of life follows from a contemplation of the earthly paradise on the side of an urn. Human life, even with its changes, is preferable to that cold pastoral. If such a contrast is not all we would like to know on earth, it is all we know and (perforce) all we need to know.

Ohio University

¹ William Morris: The Critical Heritage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 415-417. Yeats' review originally appeared in Bookman (November, 1896). "The Happiest of the Poets" is in Ideas of Good and Evil (London: Bullen, 1903). It originally appeared in the Fortnightly Review (March, 1903).

² William Morris: The Critical Heritage, p. 411. Wells' review appeared originally in the Saturday Review (October, 1896).

³ Yeats (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 296.

⁴ "William Morris," Rehabilitations and Other Essays (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

THE EROTIC IN NEWS FROM NOWHERE AND
THE WELL AT THE WORLD'S END

Norman Kelvin