

# Victorian Footprints



*William Morris*  
1834-1896

*So now, amidst our days of strife,  
With many a maverick glad we play,  
When once we see the light of life  
Gleam through the tangle of to-day.*

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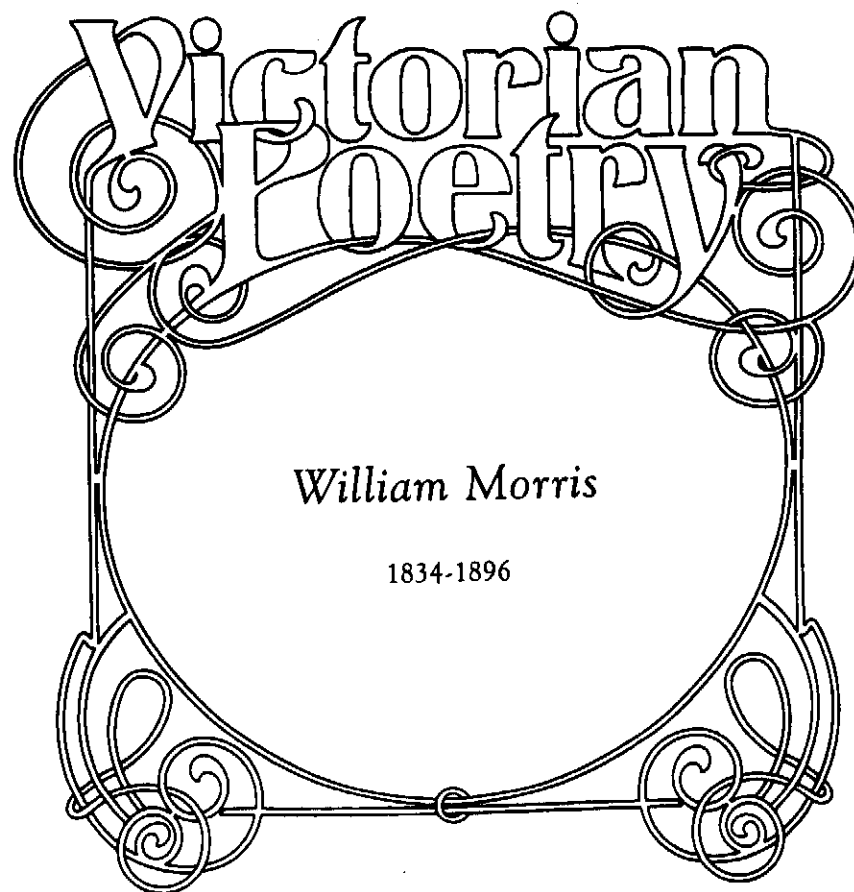
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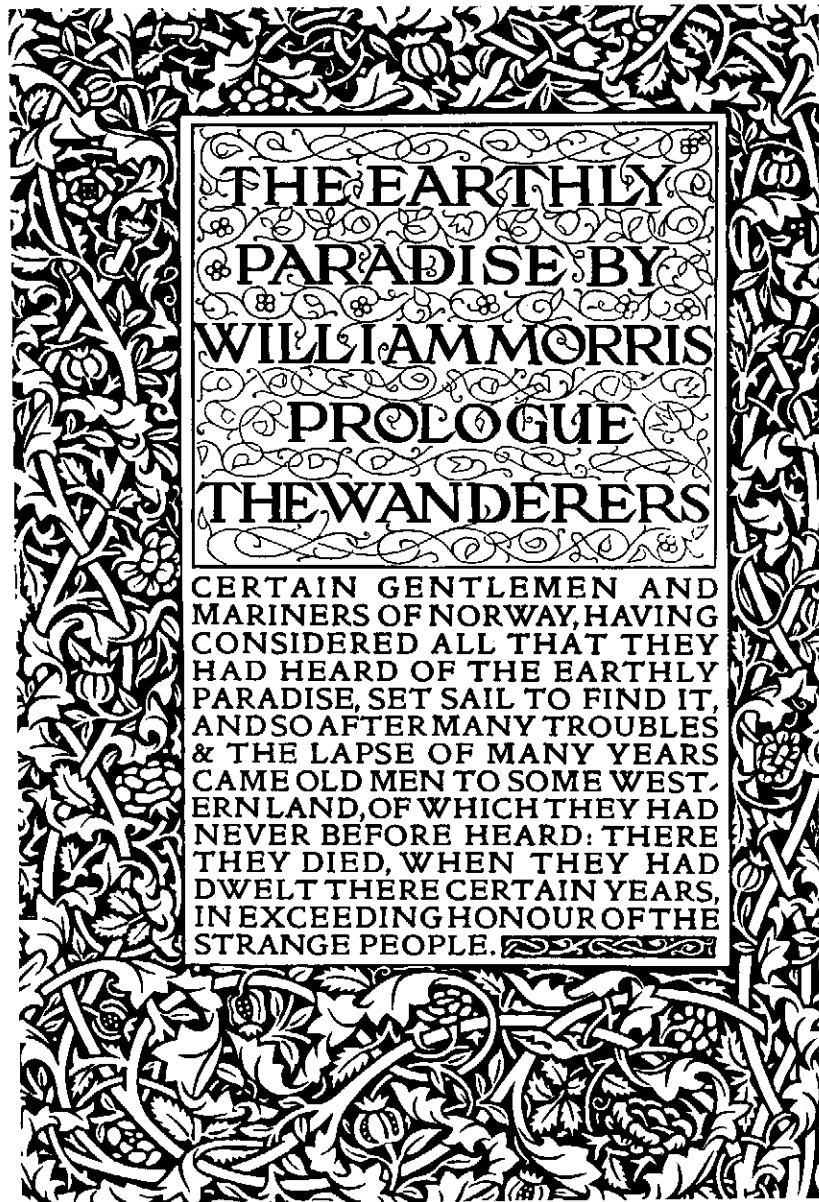


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## “The highest poetry” : Epic Narrative in *The Earthly Paradise* and *Idylls of the King*

AMANDA HODGSON

1

THE “IDLE SINGER” WHO INTRODUCES *THE EARTHLY PARADISE* USES the first stanzas of the poem to identify not the delights in store for its readers but the numerous ways in which they are about to be disappointed. Those who respond to the song of this singer will be receptive only to dreams—such delusive dreams as are allowed access to human consciousness by the “ivory gate” (3.1)<sup>1</sup> which according to Virgil was the route for false visions. Pointedly leaving its readers to their own interpretative devices, the text specifically resists the generic identification which its form makes most likely: a narrative poem in twenty-four books looks like an epic, but the opening line—“Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing” (3.1) overtly refuses the Miltonic agenda. Yet despite the narrator’s (disingenuous) assertion that the poem cannot live up to the expectations of readers who are looking for epic scope and importance, it is as a Victorian epic (or rather, as a Victorian attempt at epic) that I wish to read *The Earthly Paradise*.

The Victorians’ insistence on the primacy of narrative art, their crucial awareness of the shaping power of the past, of tradition and inheritance, and their sense of themselves as the representatives of a powerful and imperial nation—all these aspects of Victorian culture indicated the epic form as one peculiarly appropriate for writers and readers of the period. Arnold’s call for elevated and serious poetry, appealing to the timeless and primary feelings of humankind in the manner of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, was clearly a demand for epic. An even more unequivocal request came from Gladstone in his review of the 1859 installment of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Gladstone begged the poet to revise the demeaning description of his work as “idylls” and reach for true epic grandeur: “Lofty example in comprehensive forms is, without doubt, one of the great standing needs of our race. To this want it has been from the first one main purpose of the highest poetry to answer.”<sup>2</sup> Gladstone finds that the Arthurian material is fully stocked with the qualities necessary for modern epic: “It is national: it

is Christian. It is also human in the largest and deepest sense; and, therefore, though highly national, it is universal" (p. 468). In his definition of epic as a form which concentrates on the general rather than the particular, Gladstone anticipates Bakhtin's description of epic as concerned with national tradition, not individual experience; and perhaps Gladstone's persistent use of terms such as "lofty" and "transcendent" when discussing epic style is not so very far removed from Bakhtin's analysis of the monologic voice, unquestioned and unparodied, which he sees as essential to epic discourse.<sup>3</sup>

This particular view of the nature of epic, shared as it seems to be by a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics, offers a formal model against which to test the idiosyncrasies of *The Earthly Paradise* and other mid-Victorian long poems. The model defines epic as the genre of authority in which a single confident voice presents actions and heroes about whose status there can be no doubt. With narrative authority goes narrative control: epic is also a genre in which the coherence and the linear progression of the plot are crucial. As Arnold declared in his deeply unfavorable comparison of modern with classical poetry, epic (and tragedy) rely on construction, on a subordination of the parts to the whole, and on the satisfaction of the reader or audience's anticipation of the inevitable ending:

Stroke upon stroke, the drama proceeded: the light deepened upon the group; more and more it revealed itself to the riveted gaze of the spectator: until at last, when the final words were spoken, it stood before him in broad sunlight, a model of immortal beauty.

In a recent study of epic, David Quint has drawn attention to this linearity and to its connection with power and authority: "The formal completion of the epic plot speaks for the completeness of its vision of history: telling a full story, epic claims to possess *the full story*."<sup>5</sup> According to this definition of an epic, its monologic narrative voice and the linear completeness of its plot combine to reinforce the societal values of the community to which it is addressed. Bakhtin relates this aspect of epic to "an absolute bonding of ideological meaning to language," in which diversity and heteroglossia are resisted by "a unitary, canonic language . . . a national myth bolstered by a yet-unshaken unity" (pp. 369-370). Epic takes mythical characters and events out of the unlocated past and into history: the success of the epic hero, in Virgil especially, involves the foundation of the city, so that where the myth ends, history begins, but without the myth there would be no history. Thus epic has a very particular relationship with its audience: it is essentially public poetry, combining length and substance with a cohesive function within the group to which the story is related. J. B. Hainsworth has remarked that epic contains "ideas that [stand] at the center of its audience's view of themselves and the world."<sup>6</sup> The title of David Quint's

book, *Epic and Empire*, indicates the equation he makes between epic and the validation of political authority; epic of this kind, according to Quint, imposes

"To the victors belongs epic, with its linear teleology. . . . The victors experience history as a coherent, end-directed story told by their own power." Epic, then, represents a combination of history and myth, in which mythical characters and actions are perceived to have an historical relationship with the group which generates and consumes the narrative.

Arnold and Gladstone were calling for epic poetry at a time when, under the influence of developments in historical, biological, and theological scholarship, certain dominant cultural values were undergoing a forced re-evaluation. Established notions of progress and authority were subjected to subversive critique— notions which, I have suggested, may be seen as characteristically mediated by the epic form. Viewed from this perspective, Arnold's and Gladstone's desire for epic appears to be a search for ideological reassurance. But did mid-Victorian "epic" poems give the critics what they seemed to want? It may or may not have been in conscious response to Gladstone's review, but when in 1869 Tennyson republished the original idylls alongside some new Arthurian stories, they were framed by accounts of the birth and death of Arthur which elaborate on his status as epic hero. Yet neither *Idylls of the King*, nor its exact contemporary *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), conforms fully to Gladstone's idea of what "the highest poetry" should be.<sup>8</sup>

## 2

That the opening line of *The Earthly Paradise* should be deceptive is typical of the poem as a whole, in which the narrative strategy is persistently both to claim and to undermine authority. The twenty-four tales themselves, taken individually, generally appear to conform to epic requirements: told by a confident extra-diegetic narrator, each demonstrates a high degree of monologic control. Bakhtin points out that verse is intrinsically more monologic than prose, less open to subversive divergence from the chosen language register,<sup>9</sup> and this seems strongly borne out by the way the *Earthly Paradise* tales proceed in smooth adherence to verse forms and rhyme schemes—so smoothly as sometimes to threaten the reader with the soporific effect hinted at in the poem's introduction. Critics of Morris' writing have sometimes regretted that the dislocated, transgressive verse styles so prevalent in the poems of *The Defence of Guenevere* give way in *The Earthly Paradise* to something much more bland and conventional.<sup>10</sup> Morris' own comment—"they are all too long and flabby—damn it!" (*Letters*, 1:100)—has been taken as confirmation of this view. But the effect on the reader of each specific tale is controlled by the extraordinarily elaborate framing device, by which means the impression of monologism is radically undermined. Each tale is framed by an introduction and conclusion explaining the circum-

stances in which, and sometimes the narrator by whom, it is told. Each pair of tales is introduced by a three-stanza lyric describing the change in the seasons: if read sequentially, these lyrics reveal a shadowy narrative of their own in apposition to the narratives of the main tales. And each time a new tale begins, or part of the frame is exposed, the reader must adjust to a new verse form, to a new voice. The organizing principle of *The Earthly Paradise* is profoundly dialogic—its very structure refuses epic singleness and certainty.

The sense of insecurity generated by the multiple verse forms and voices in the poem is compounded by those occasions when there is a blurring of the distinction between one voice and another. Several times a narrative melts into the frame at the end: concluding "Bellerophon in Lycia," for example, the narrator slips from a description of the achieved joy of the hero to a personal comment on the transitory nature of human happiness:

My heart faints now, my lips that tell the tale  
Falter to think that such a life should fail;  
That use, and long days dropping one by one,  
As the wan water frets away the stone,  
Should change desires of men. (6.277)

The story itself has a happy ending, but the narrator is unwilling to let such a conclusion stand alone; he denies the import of his own story even as he finishes it. Similarly at the end of "Ogier the Dane" the narrator suggests the limits of his authority over the tale—there are things about which he has to confess "How I know not" (4.254). Such introductions of a self-conscious I-narrator thus suggest the possibility of narrative fallibility, bias, untrustworthiness.

This effect is most strongly marked in "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," in which the external framing of the story is complemented by a yet more complex framing within it. The narrator, relying on a pre-existing story as his authority, tells of Gregory who dreams that someone tells him a story, which is the substance of the tale. A hundred pages later, the reader suddenly encounters an I-narrator—but which one? Given the multiplicity of narrators in this part of the poem—the dream-narrator, Gregory, the original source for the story, the Wanderer and the poet—the reader might be forgiven for confusion about which one is speaking at any particular time. This dislocation of response also occurs in the middle of the same tale, when the hero is suddenly said to be visiting a place which "to-day, / Men call St. Albans" (5.94). Which "to-day"? The "today" of Gregory's dream informant, or Gregory himself, or of the Wanderer, or of the poet and his audience? It is difficult, if not impossible, to be sure. In any case, the fact that we have had to pause in our reception of the story to wonder about it means that the security of the apparently authoritative narration has been fragmented and, thus, problematized.

I have written elsewhere of the way Morris' earlier poetry and prose is characterized by incoherence of location, chronology, and plot development.<sup>11</sup>

In apparent contrast, *The Earthly Paradise* presents a series of narratives which, by their length and smooth conformity to verse-patterns, continually lull their readers into accepting the presence of a single, authoritative voice. However, by subtle dislocations of this response, and by the eventual reappearance of the framing narratives—and the longer they are delayed, the more easily we have been induced to forget all about them, the more disconcerting is their recurrence—the poem continually withdraws the security each individual tale seems to offer. Moreover, the authority of the whole text is placed in doubt by the use of yet more frames. Around the Wanderers and their narratives are placed the introductory and closing statements of the poet, commenting (as we have seen, generally unfavorably) on the merits of the text; and interspersed between each pair of poems is the sequence of lyric interludes which may, or may not, share an I-narrator with the main frame. This framing has a curiously double effect. On the one hand, it reminds the reader that a tale must be told by someone—thus making the whole poem-sequence subject to the bias and incompetence of a particular narrator, just as are the individual tales themselves. On the other hand, however, it refuses to give the narrator a personal, chronological, or temporal identity.<sup>12</sup>

All narrators and listeners in *The Earthly Paradise* are exiles. The Greeks and the Wanderers are far from their original countries and cultures; the I-narrator of the frame is completely disembodied; and the reader, while being drawn into the poem, is also forced into unfamiliar time and space, firstly by having to move imaginatively into the past, and then by being pushed even further into the unknown and indefinable: "A nameless city in a distant sea" (3.3). The whole sequence contains a critical tension between tale and telling: the tales are established and ancient, well-known and authoritative, but the telling is partial, inefficient, and both performed and received by the lost, by wanderers without established cultural or historical status.

Like *The Earthly Paradise*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* relies on a pre-existing story, but it draws attention to this fact much less frequently. There is a frame, or rather in 1869 there was half a frame: the opening, sycophantic address to the memory of the Prince Consort, attempting to set the poem which follows into a relationship with contemporary concerns. After this, however, the I-narrator disappears, and so does almost all reference to the source of the story. (There is one acknowledgement of a debt to Malory, "he that tells the tale," in *Pelleas and Etarre* [l. 482].)<sup>13</sup> However, within each idyll the external narrator persistently hands over the story-telling function to an intradiegetic narrator—or, indeed, to several. In other words, *Idylls of the King* is as uncertain as *The Earthly Paradise* about the authoritative status of the story it tells. Developing the moral concern about truth and falsehood which was the subject of the 1859 *Idylls*, the 1869 installment focuses intently on the uncertain nature of truth and the partial authority of the tales we tell in order to establish

it. This is particularly clear in "The Coming of Arthur," where King Leodegran, having heard three different and mutually incompatible versions of Arthur's origin, puts his trust not in what anyone has said to him but in a dream. While the king may be convinced by this subjective method, the reader is allowed no such security, since the narrative voice of the poem makes no comment one way or the other about whether any of the statements about Arthur are "true." While there is a degree of monologic unity and authority in *Idylls of the King*, created by the regular blank-verse and by the presence of a single implied narrator, this formal coherence has to struggle to control the numerous voices which seek to tell their own stories and assert their own interpretations of events.<sup>14</sup> As in *The Earthly Paradise*, the complex relation between tale and telling is at the center of the poem.

Neither of these long poems, then, demonstrates an unequivocal epic authority. A similar ambivalence can be detected with regard to the linearity which has been identified as another component of epic. In *The Earthly Paradise* this ambivalence once again opens up tensions between the individual tales and the sequence as a whole. Each tale has a linear plot, a plot explained to the reader before the story begins by means of a prose "argument" prefixed to the tale, and each thus moves towards a preordained end and satisfies the reader's desire for completeness and pattern, just as Arnold had suggested that epic should. The sequence as a whole, however, is not linear but cyclical, since the framing narratives and the lyrical interludes follow the process of the seasons from one spring to another. And while we know the "end" attained by the heroes and heroines of the individual tales, we do not know what happens to the Wanderers. Indeed the I-narrator, marking again the distinction between tale and teller, ostentatiously refuses to inform us:

Meseems  
Whate'er the tale may know of what befell  
Their lives henceforth I would not have it tell. (6.327)

The narrator, aware of the inevitable conclusion of all stories—knowing that "each tale's ending needs must be the same: / And we men call it Death" (6.327)—abandons the story of the Wanderers before it finishes. In other words, the narrator refuses to mitigate the fact of mortality by the illusion of completion and fulfilment implied by narrative art.

*The Earthly Paradise* explores the implications of two meanings of the word "end," which can indicate both a last moment, and a goal which may be striven for and reached. The resulting ambiguity is obvious in many of the individual tales. Heroes and heroines attain the end which is the required conclusion of their story, and sometimes they earn the satisfaction of the quest accomplished or the desire fulfilled; but all too often the narrative finishes with a reminder that their pleasure may be temporary.

Pygmalion's beloved statue, when endowed with life by Venus, cannot embrace her lover without remembering that she is now subject to mortality: "I love thee so, I think upon the end" (4.207). Sometimes a tale is told in such a way that the expected happy ending gives place to a sad one: "The Love of Alcestis" finishes with a bitter pun, when "Alcestis' end" (4.124) in one sense, to save her husband's life, is achieved only at the cost of her own "end" in the other sense, her death. Again narrative completion is in tension with mortality. It is appropriate, then, that *The Earthly Paradise* itself does not end, in the sense of arriving at an artistically satisfying conclusion. The sequence of tales just stops—there is no reason why the Wanderers and their hosts should not begin the cycle all over again. Similarly, the final framing poem returns to the opening description of the "idle singer," stressing the cyclical nature of the construction of the work. "Ends" in *The Earthly Paradise* are not usually goals to be reached, epic conclusions of a linear narrative; in fact the narrative strategies of the poem go to considerable lengths to evade ends altogether, or if they cannot do so, to wrap them in irony, cynicism, or apprehension.

The very title of *Idylls of the King* (as Gladstone recognized in his review) denies epic linearity. The 1869 installment does provide a beginning and an end, poems on the coming and passing (though noticeably not the birth and death) of the hero. But like *The Earthly Paradise*, the work as a whole presents linearity in continual conflict with circularity. In Morris' poem the linear progression of individual tales is subverted by the cyclical framework of the overall construction of the text. In Tennyson's, the linear movement of the whole, from the arrival and early success of Arthur, through the decay of the chivalric society to his defeat, is in tension with the way each idyll pulls away from linear narrative by a persistent use of flashback and other time-shifts, and by a tendency to prioritize static picture (idyll) in preference to story. It is typical that when the earlier "Morte d'Arthur" was revised to become the last of the *Idylls*, the finality indicated by its title gave way to the suggestion of an incomplete action, the "Passing" of the king—an avoidance of the "end" very reminiscent of certain effects in *The Earthly Paradise*. Moreover, exactly as in *The Earthly Paradise*, linear progress in *Idylls of the King* is always undermined by the cycle of the seasons which gives the poem its structure. Arthur's marriage in spring and defeat at the winter solstice, and the shadowy promise of his return, emphasize the concept of repetition, which is also stressed in the last line of the poem as it draws attention to the sunrise and the beginning of a new year. This concept sits uneasily with the idea of epic completion; indeed the final image of Arthur carried upon a boat to a dimly discerned city is an image of continuing movement towards an uncertain goal, not of achievement. Once again, it is impossible to be sure of the status of the "end."

As always, Lewis Carroll was precisely attuned to the preoccupations

of his period when he had his King of Hearts advise a reluctant narrator to "begin at the beginning . . . and go on till you come to the end: then stop."<sup>15</sup> Poetry of the mid-century persistently fails to come up with such linear completeness; compulsively taking heroic narrative for its subject, it then refuses to provide the "end" (in both senses) that the reader, and the hero, are expecting. Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" is typical: after the long immersion in the painful progress of Roland's quest, the reader is avidly expecting some kind of achievement, or at least a noble death, but is forced to abandon the hero at the penultimate moment.<sup>16</sup> In both the major poems of the late 1860s that we have been examining, two strong and contradictory tendencies can be identified: a reaching for epic length, authority, and linearity, versus an obsession with circularity, fragmentation, and dialogic subversion of epic certainty.

## 3

What was the importance of a critique of epic to Victorian society in the 1860s? I have suggested that traditional epics define the culture in which they exist by reference to an inherited narrative of the past; epic stories are those which tell us who we are. For this reason, as we have seen, they must be authoritative and conclusive. There are a number of ways in which epic poetry, so defined, might have a problematic relationship with mid-Victorian society. The one upon which I wish to concentrate here is connected with the efforts of scholarship in the eighteen-sixties to redefine the nature of myth, and to unpick that knitting together of history and myth which is a prerequisite for epic. The anthropologist Edward Tylor saw that one of the important intellectual activities of his period was the process of clarifying "the confusion between History and Mythology, which is only now being partly cleared up."<sup>17</sup> Tylor had studied the ancient societies of Mexico, and had wrestled with the problem of the degree to which any historical veracity might be assigned to ancient traditions. If, for example, the legendary Quetzalcoatl was, as seemed likely, a purely mythic figure, did that mean that his people also had had only a mythic existence? Victorian researchers into the early history of humankind were repeatedly confronted by the need to define what constituted historical evidence and what were the indicators of myth.

Arguments persisted between students of mythology (usually those with a philological background) who contended that the stories of the fall of Troy, for example, were simply mythical, and those who wished to assign a core of historical fact to such tales. In his *Prolegomena to Ancient History* John Mahaffy struggles with this problem—and incidentally recognizes its connection with the idea of the status of epic: if mythical explanations proved "that every great national epic of the Aryan family has merely a

mythological import . . . do they make all inquiry into the historical basis of these epics idle?"<sup>18</sup> This debate was all the more crucial because it was not just a difference of opinion between scholars. One of the most potent mid-Victorian cultural controversies centered on attempts to make the interpretation of biblical texts subject to scientifically objective criteria. Those who advocated the new methods of criticism, notably the contributors to the notorious *Essays and Reviews*, often grounded their discussions on the relation of myth to history. Baden-Powell's article "On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity" asserts that it is illogical to claim that the gospel narratives are historically true and then refuse to apply to them "the strict principles of criticism, as they would be applied to any other historical narrative." Those who were not prepared to apply such principles had to accept the alternative view, that the whole gospel account must have "a more or less mythical interpretation."<sup>19</sup> Myth or history: not both. For a culture that had at the heart of its self-image an account of the development of civilization that combined the two—that read its mythical accounts of the activities of the deity as historical events—this was dangerous talk. When he called, in the same volume, for a radical historicization of biblical criticism, Benjamin Jowett knew that he was trespassing, not only on areas of belief but also on the basis of the social coherence of his society: when erroneous readings of biblical texts are established in the minds of English readers "it becomes almost a political question how far we can venture to disturb them."<sup>20</sup>

Both *Idylls of the King* and *The Earthly Paradise* address the question of the relation between myth and history. In "The Coming of Arthur" King Leodegran is faced with the problem of authenticating Arthur's status. His first witness, Sir Bedivere, gives a naturalistic account of Arthur's birth, relying on what he believes to be historical fact. The second witness, Bellicent, suggests that Arthur may have a supernatural origin. She cannot prove this: she has asked Merlin "if these things were truth" (l. 397) and received by way of confirmation only mystical riddles. Yet remembering Arthur's coronation and the effect of the king on his knights, who became "dazed, as one who wakes / Half-blinded at the coming of a light" (ll. 264-265), Bellicent trusts in the potency of the myth because of its effect on subjective experience. The statements of Bedivere and Bellicent thus typify two differing methods of ascertaining "truth," in fact precisely the alternative ways of approaching the gospels defined by Baden-Powell in *Essays and Reviews*. Leodegran, as we have seen, opts for a reliance on dream-experience—perhaps a way of evading the dilemma which the conflicting accounts impose.

The other important examination of the nature of myth in *Idylls of the King* comes in *The Holy Grail* (which like "The Coming of Arthur" was a new addition to the series in 1869). In this poem Arthur's knights are extravagantly moved by a mystical vision of the Grail and swear to seek it—an oath which has disastrous consequences for almost all of them and be-

gins the (literal and metaphorical) fragmentation of Camelot. They do so in the absence of the king, who would, he says, have prevented them from committing themselves to a quest for something most of them had not seen. When they return, most have still not discovered the Grail. Those who have come close to it find that their experience renders them unfit to perform their chivalric duties. Galahad, who came closest of all, has been snatched away from earth altogether. What the knights have tried to do is to turn a mythical object into a physical one that can be sought and seized: by redefining the vision as the object of their quest, they have tried to impose on the myth an historical action. The result has been disastrous.

In *The Earthly Paradise*, the Wanderers similarly find that myth and history cannot be superimposed on each other. They leave their homelands inspired by mythical accounts of the existence of a Land of eternal youth, a land where history (time) is suspended. Their trust in ancient "lore" (3.7) and in "Tales" (3.8) becomes so strong that they determine, like the Grail knights, to turn faith into action, myth into history. Early in their quest they are offered an opportunity to make a different choice, to identify themselves with the historical process by joining forces with King Edward III, but they prefer to follow their vision. What they discover, of course, is that the vision cannot be realized.

In this context the differences between the two versions of the Prologue to *The Earthly Paradise* are particularly instructive. In the first version, which was rejected before publication, the Wanderers, while not succeeding in their quest, do enter a world of mythical adventure, discovering a number of magical lands and sinister enchantments. In the second version the Wanderers' adventures take place among strange and sometimes savage people, but the societies they visit are distanced from them geographically and by their earlier stage of historical development, not by any supernatural qualities. In fact some of these communities are reminiscent of the very primitive cultures which were the focus of anthropological research during the 1860s, and in the study of which the problem of distinguishing myth from history was so central.<sup>21</sup> The Wanderers in the second Prologue are seeking a way to make time give place to timeless and unchanging perfection, but find that time is inexorable. Seeking myth, they find only history.

The Wanderers' fantasy of a land of eternal life is like Arthur's city Camelot, ultimately incompatible with human change and mortality. In many of the individual tales of *The Earthly Paradise* heroes similarly discover that the land of delight—Avallon, the Venusberg—is unsatisfactory, or even a place of horror, because it denies them the possibility of heroic action in society, the chance to be part of history. This explains the tone of the opening stanzas of the sequence. If the Earthly Paradise is a dangerous delusion, the poem which is also *The Earthly Paradise* can only be inadequate too.<sup>22</sup> Both Morris' poem and Tennyson's, then,

address themselves to a society in which epic certainty is all the more desirable because it is unattainable; epic monologic and linear control fractures like Camelot every time it comes up against that knowledge of history and of change which was so crucial an aspect of mid-Victorian culture.

There is a difference, however, between the approach of *Idylls of the King* to this dilemma, and that of *The Earthly Paradise*. The Grail knights fail because they take the false for the true, trying to base historical action on myth. The Wanderers fail because they try to separate the false from the true, thinking they know which is which. Rolf explains that he had heard so many tales that he could not distinguish between legend and reality, but that his mentor, Nicholas, could:

all of one kind seemed to be  
The Vineland voyage o'er the unknown sea  
And Swegdir's search for Godhome  
.....  
But Nicholas o'er many books had pored  
.....  
And idle tales from true report he knew. (3.12-13)

*Idylls of the King* describes the collapse of a myth, the failure of an ideal. *The Earthly Paradise* demonstrates the folly of taking myth for reality, but in its study of the relation between the tale and the teller it suggests that there may be value in retaining knowledge of the myth so long as it is recognized as myth and not misread as history. Hence the stress, increasing as the poem proceeds, on the act of story-telling and its role in the community. The framing narratives around each pair of tales relate them to the progress of the seasons, and especially to the appropriate work and the particular ceremonies which each season demands. Thus placing the tale-telling in its cultural context, they also define its audience. At the beginning of the sequence the tales are told in a closed community consisting of the Wanderers and their aged contemporaries, the Elders of the host society. As the poem progresses, however, the tale-telling attracts a wider audience which includes the young people of the island. The final framing narrative places as much emphasis on the reactions of these young people as it does on those of the old, demonstrating that the habit of telling these stories has created a community into which the Wanderers have become integrated. And this community is one which, by embracing and handing on a common cultural inheritance, creates a unity between the past and the present.

It is continually stressed that the stories of *The Earthly Paradise* are not new, not invented. Several of the narrators begin by explaining where, from whom, or from which book they received their tale. These stories from the past, however, are by the patterning of the text involved with the everyday processes of time, growth, and change. This unification of past and present, of the timelessness of art and temporal existence, is prefigured

when the tale-telling project is first suggested. The Elder describes the arrival of the Wanderers as being to him and his friends like the discovery of an old book, an "ancient chronicle" (3.79) from the lands from which they are exiled. Such a book would be revered, even worshipped by the people; they would venerate it as they might venerate "good rulers' children" (3.80). In other words, the repository of narratives of the past is to be compared to the hope of renewal in the future represented by children; a hope summed up in the description of the Wanderers as a "living chronicle" (3.80). In this paradoxical description the static nature of art from the past—myth, perhaps—is identified with human life and mortality—history, if you will. The act of telling tales, by definition, subjects the pre-existing narrative to the necessarily temporal process of narration, a process particularly evident in the case of a text published serially over a number of years. By stressing the act of telling and listening as much as the narrative itself, *The Earthly Paradise* goes some way to validate itself as an epic: although fragmented and lacking authority, it is still capable of performing its function, of forging a cohesive community from the wanderers and exiles to whom it is told. And since the unlocated reader is the only person to receive both narrative and frame, and therefore to see the whole pattern, the reader too is implicated in the listening community; in fact the reader is specifically addressed in one of the framing sections not as "reader" but as "listener" (3.81).

*Idylls of the King* lacks this sense of an audience. Formally addressed only to a dead Prince and a grieving Queen, it makes almost no overt reference either to the tradition from which the story is drawn or to the community which is receiving it. Story-telling in the *Idylls* does not confer a sense of unity between past and present, or myth and history, on those who listen: neither Bellicent nor Bedivere convinces Leodegran. It is tempting to suggest that *Idylls of the King* is an epic about the impossibility of epic, or at least of the kind of authoritative and reassuring epic text which mid-nineteenth-century critics like Gladstone and Arnold desired. *The Earthly Paradise*, on the other hand, while fully aware of the difficulty of attaining epic certainty in the modern world, finally asserts the communal value even of fragmented and inauthentic stories. The narrator's eventual role-model is not Virgil, writer of nationalistic epic, but Chaucer, whose pilgrims never do reach the end of their pilgrimage.

### Notes

I gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the British Academy.

- 1 All references to *The Earthly Paradise* are taken from *The Collected Works of William Morris*. Volume and page numbers are given in the text.
- 2 W. E. Gladstone, review of poems by Tennyson, *Quarterly Review* 106 (1859): 465.

- 3 Bakhtin's comments on epic may be found in his essays "Epic and Novel" and "Discourse in the Novel," in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981).
- 4 Matthew Arnold, Preface to the first edition of *Poems* (1853), in R. H. Super, ed., *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1960), 1:6.
- 5 David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 33-34.
- 6 J. B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), p. 150.7 Quint, p. 9. Other books which discuss this aspect of epic include C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952) and Paul Merchant, *The Epic* (London: Methuen, 1971). My approach draws on the analysis of the relation between genre and ideology undertaken by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- 8 Other mid-Victorian poems which relate to the possibility of epic include Morris' *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876); Tennyson's mock-epic *The Princess* (1847); Elizabeth Barrett Browning's woman's epic *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Robert Browning's comprehensive rejection of epic criteria, *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69).
- 9 See "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 298.
- 10 The contemporary critical reaction to *The Earthly Paradise* is discussed in Delbert R. Gardner, *An "Idle Singer" and His Audience* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). The view of the poem as inferior to Morris' earlier poetry is taken by Peter Faulkner in the introduction to his edition of Morris' *Early Romances in Prose and Verse* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973); Isobel Armstrong, in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993) writes perceptively of the *Guenevere* poems but allows *The Earthly Paradise* only a few sentences. Among those who take the poem more seriously is Florence S. Boos, who in "Victorian Response to *Earthly Paradise Tales*," *JWMS* 5 (1983-84): 16-29 sees the phrase "idle singer" as ironic.
- 11 In Amanda Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987).
- 12 Isolde Karen Herbert, "A Strange Diagonal': Ideology and Enclosure in the Framing Sections of *The Princess* and *The Earthly Paradise*," *VP* 29 (1991): 145-159, reads the frame of Morris' poem as producing an opening-up of the narration to diverse voices and a reduction of the distance between the reader and the poem. Her point that "the story-telling situation itself is the unrecognized goal of the quest" (p. 152) is similar to my own conclusion.
- 13 All references to *Idylls of the King* are taken from Christopher Ricks, ed., 3 vols., *The Poems of Tennyson* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989). Line numbers are given in the text.
- 14 I should like to thank my former graduate student, Russell Crofts, for helping me to think about dialogism in *Idylls of the King*.
- 15 Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 158.
- 16 Other heroic poems which similarly abandon their hero before the conclusion of the

action include Tennyson's "Sir Galahad" and "Ulysses," and Morris' "The Eve of Crecey" and "The Judgment of God." Alternatively, the end may be reached too late, as in Christina Rossetti's "The Prince's Progress."

- 17 Edward Burnet Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (London, 1865), p. 2.
- 18 John P. Mahaffy, *Prolegomena to Ancient History* (London, 1871), pp. 48-49. See also, for example, Edward A. Freeman, "The Mythological and Romantic Elements in Early English History," *Fortnightly Review* 4 (1866): 641-668, and "Stray Thoughts on Comparative Mythology," *Fortnightly Review*, ns 8 (1870): 536-548; George W. Cox, *The Mythology of the Aryan Nations*, 2 vols. (London, 1870). Victorian critics who discuss this dilemma usually point out their debt to Grote's *History of Greece* (1846-56) but are more reticent about the obvious relevance of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (English translation 1846).
- 19 R. S. S. Baden-Powell, "On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity," in *Essays and Reviews*, 7th ed. (London, 1861), p. 111.
- 20 Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Essays and Reviews*, p. 379.
- 21 A similar point is made by Frederick Kirchoff in "The Aesthetic Discipline of *The Earthly Paradise*," *VP* 18 (1980): 229-240. He describes the difference between the two Prologues as defining a shift in the generic basis of the poem from fantasy to realism. See also Jeffrey Skoblow's discussion of the lack of historical orientation in the first Prologue (*Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, Art* [Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993], p. 115). Florence Saunders Boos examines the evolution and structure of the whole poem in *The Design of William Morris' The Earthly Paradise* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).
- 22 Kirchoff calls this point "a critical truism" (p. 233). Like him, I think it is still worth making.

## Laxdaela Saga and "The Lovers of Gudrun": Morris' Poetic Vision

LINDA JULIAN

THE LOVERS OF GUDRUN," MORRIS' RETELLING OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE *Laxdaela saga*, contributed significantly in several ways to Morris' development as a writer. First, it was Morris' initial attempt to create an original, interpretive work—rather than a translation—from an Icelandic work. Second, Morris sensed his own artistic development in this poem, as his letters show (*Letters*, 1:82, 98, 100), a development which led to a different style in later poetry and prose. Finally, the process of creating "Gudrun" and the satisfaction he felt from its success no doubt gave him the incentive to attempt the same kind of re-creation of the *Volsunga saga*, resulting in *Sigurd the Volsung* and *The Fall of the Niblungs*.<sup>1</sup>

Morris' recognition of the relative merits of the poems in Part Three of *The Earthly Paradise* shows clearly in a letter to Swinburne in December 1869: "I am delighted to have pleased you with the Gudrun; for the rest I am rather painfully conscious myself that the book would have done me more credit if there had been nothing in it but the Gudrun, though I don't think the others quite the worst things I have done—yet they are all too long and flabby—damn it!" (*Letters*, 1:100).<sup>2</sup> Another letter, written about the same time, also reveals Morris' deep sense of the greatness of "Gudrun." He wrote to Charles Eliot Norton that "Gudrun I feel sure is the best thing I have done" (*Letters*, 1:98). An even earlier letter to Norton, written when he had finished "Gudrun," records Morris' feeling that "the story . . . I think on the whole the most important thing I have written; the deeper I got into the old tale the more interested I found myself, and now it is finished, I feel somewhat used up, and rather cold to subjects with less of life and nature in them" (Kelvin 1:82). At the time, Rossetti, too, considered "Gudrun" Morris' finest poem,<sup>3</sup> and he wrote to Norton in 1870 that "the 'Gudrun' is surely on the whole one of the finest poems in the English language" (Faulkner, p. 195).

Not everyone, however, shared Morris' and Rossetti's opinion. John Buchan commented that "the figures are scarcely human; they have not even the illusions of three dimensions which painting gives; they are flat, like the details in a tapestry."<sup>4</sup> An unsigned review in the *New Englander* for October 1871 observed that "Gudrun," like many of the other tales, was too pictorial (Faulkner, p. 176). Two twentieth-century critics who disparage