

The Argument of *The Earthly Paradise*

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Stories that tell of men's aspiration for more than material life can give them, their struggles for the future welfare of their race, their unselfish love, their unrequited service . . . are the subjects for the best art; in such subjects there is hope surely, yet the aspect of them is likely to be sorrowful enough: defeat the seed of victory, and death the seed of life.

"Some Hints on Pattern-Designing" (1881)

OF ALL WILLIAM Morris' major narratives, *The Earthly Paradise* has suffered the greatest misunderstanding and neglect. Until recently it has generally been discussed as a repetitious series of loosely arranged tales, preoccupied with success and failure in love, which expresses no coherent philosophical or ethical stance.¹ The tales and their auditors, however, undergo a clear progression, from relatively simplistic interpretations of success and failure to conscious espousal of a much deeper

¹In a 1975 article entitled "*The Earthly Paradise: Lost*" (*VP*, 13, nos. 3 & 4 [1975], 27-42), Carole Silver reads *The Earthly Paradise* as a poem of gradually deeper insight into the sources of failure and loss. Blue Calhoun's *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris: The Earthly Paradise* (Univ. of Georgia Press, 1975) gives a careful reading of the expression of pastoral motifs in a cycle which presents "the overt theme of eternal recurrence" (p. 118) and defines the idle singer as the bearer of the "social and personal coherence" (p. 119) of the poem. Charlotte H. Oberg's *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris* (The Univ. Press of Virginia, 1978) is less concerned with the issue of development, and devotes chapters to "The Role of the Hero," and "The Female Principle." In her view, the poem is an expression of near-unbroken failure: "Like the wanderers, the idle singer fails to attain his goal. Like them, he must accept Eld and Death—he must resign himself to the human condition" (p. 70).

Like Carole Silver, Frederick Kirchoff (*William Morris* [Boston, 1979]) traces a seasonal progression, but one which proceeds from "the relative simplicity of the earliest stories to the heightened awareness of the summer tales, in which the very ripeness of his vision calls out for its antithesis" (p. 67), to the later tales, in which "the higher marriage of poet-lover with the object of his imaginative desire is only possible through that double recognition of the barrenness of nature and the inadequacy of the imagination towards which *The Earthly Paradise* will move rapidly in its final section" (p. 74). He credits the Wanderers with a heroic achievement and compares their quest with Morris' own art, "a gesture equivalent to the artist's creative daring" (p. 60). As narrators, however, he finds the Wanderers simply supernumary: they are "strategies for detaching Morris from responsibility for his poetry" and "betray a fundamental uncertainty in Morris' attitude towards his own work" (p. 61).

This essay argues that the three levels of narrative in the poem are effectively interrelated, and that the two outer frames both temper and channel the ultimate response to the inner tales. If one takes into account the auditors' and singer's responses, the earlier tales are not so "simple," nor the later ones so bleak. Stoicism (if this analogy is appropriate) is something deeper than "recognition of the barrenness of nature and the inadequacy of the imagination."

and more sustained ethic of self-sacrificial love; in fact, this ethic is loosely analogous to views advocated by the ancient stoics. This thematic progression is reflected both in the content of the tales and in the changing attitudes of their narrative personae: the ironically self-identified "idle singer" who recites the Apology, Epilogue, and lyrics of the outer frame; the "Wanderers," who in the Prologue try to describe the gradually emerging insights of their flight from death; and finally, the larger group of twenty-four Elders and now-aged Wanderers, who evaluate their lives and prepare for death as they respond to each other's tales.

I. The Frame of the Poem

The "Wanderers" are fourteenth-century Europeans who have fled the Bubonic Plague and travelled in search of a world of perfection and immortal life. They are shipwrecked and washed ashore in the Adriatic Sea and are welcomed by a second group of hospitable "city-fathers," who are descended from ancient Greeks. The two groups agree to exchange tales they have learned from their ancestors: the city-fathers tell twelve medieval-classical tales, and the Wanderers, twelve tales derived from folklore and travel narratives of medieval England, Germany, Brittany, Scandinavia, and Persia. "Classical" and medieval tales are paired and identified with specified months of the year. This involved intermixture of cultures, seasons, and narrators allows for contrasts and parallels in near-unlimited permutation.

Elsewhere I have argued that the singer's apology and lyrics are a complex defense of the need for narrative art, and "The Wanderers' Prologue" an attempt to vindicate human effort.² These interpretations are confirmed by the Wanderers' evolving responses as the cycle of tales progresses. Their reflections in the narrative passages which link the tales convey a growing sense that stoic resignation is a precondition of truly heroic effort: "defeat the seed of victory, and death the seed of life."

A careful analysis of the Wanderers' responses would require some account of the many tales they bear. Such a fuller discussion of *The Earthly Paradise* would also have to evaluate in greater detail the interdependence of its lyrical frame, inner frame, and arrangement of the tales. Each of three levels of narration traces a near-parallel emotional progress, from unresolved anxiety to historical contemplation, identification, and acceptance. The outermost lyrical sequences take place in the present and

²See F. Boos, "Victorian Response to *Earthly Paradise* Tales," *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 5, no. 4 (1983-84), 16-29, and "The Evolution of 'The Wanderers' Prologue,'" *PLL*, 20 (1984), 397-417.

the immediate past; the inner narrators relate their tales in the recent past; and the tales themselves derive from still more personal and collective history. The outer frame is personal, almost Morris' confessional voice; the inner narrators are aged members of a carefully reconstructed cosmopolitan society.

The shadow-audience of the poem is also multi-leveled. The singer addresses himself, his Victorian audience, and those within his poem, and he mingles these fictive realms when he admonishes the latter to praise Chaucer. The Wanderers and Elders address each other, and they and their youthful auditors provide antiphonal responses of youth and age. This imbrication of audience-within-audience extends outward to include the reader; the latter is enjoined to grant sympathy, receive consolation, and return with the singer to the outer world. The singer vindicates the Wanderers' claim to remembrance, and they in turn commemorate their protagonists. By implication, the reader is expected to recognize the singer's emotional significance and feel impelled to identify with and rework each cycle in its turn.

Each of the three levels also reflects or includes aspects of the others. The Wanderers' narrative effort and final cultural synthesis is itself an exemplary tale of labor rewarded, and the interconnecting passages describe a lone lover who might be the lyric singer. The tales narrated by figures introduced by the singer celebrate artists, musicians, and storytellers, and the singer himself experiences shifting emotions as the seasons progress. At times, late in the cycle, the voice of the singer breaks urgently into both interconnective passages and the tales themselves.

II. The Thematic Progression of the Cycle

What, then, does this echeloned chorus of Wanderers, hosts, and auditors gain from twenty-five tales, twenty-four days of social gatherings, and many reflections on present, past, and transmitted myths? The progression of their moods is irregular but often provides a kind of antiphonal response to the thematic development of the tales. The Wanderers undergo a gradual healing process, which eventually enables them to face the death they had once hoped to outrun.³ Ironically, as more of the later tales present themes of frustration and loss, their aged auditors are able to identify more deeply with their protagonists and, as a result, come to achieve a greater self-awareness and tranquility. By late autumn the

³Morris' narrator carefully differentiates the Wanderers from the more tranquil Elders at first, but later speaks of the healing effect of time on both. Where Morris makes no distinction, I use the term "Wanderers" to refer to all twenty-four narrators.

Wanderers' responses have virtually merged with the content of the narratives they hear, and the burden of the argument in the poem shifts progressively toward the emotions of the tales themselves.

The first stage of the audience's response occurs as they hear the spring tales for March and April: "Atalanta's Race," "The Man Born to be King," "The Doom of King Acrisius," and "The Proud King." These earlier tales tend to emphasize attempts to avoid the arbitrary prescriptions of law, oracle, royal ukase, or parental decree. Youthful physical love and desire are nominally successful epiphenomena of a brutal world of sudden death, unjust hatred, and despotic force. Morris describes the first classical tale, "Atalanta's Race," as follows:

Atalanta, daughter of King Schœneus, not willing to lose her virgin's estate, made it a law to all suitors that they should run a race with her in the public place, and if they failed to overcome her should die unrevenged; and thus many brave men perished. At last came Melanion, the son of Amphidamas, who, outrunning her with the help of Venus, gained the virgin and wedded her. (III, 85)⁴

The tone of the story is more anxious than celebratory, however, and this first classical tale sets a pattern for interpretation of the Wanderers' early vision of an ideal past: it is no golden age, and its values are capricious and cruel, but simple emotions of forgiveness, reconciliation, sexual desire, and contempt for worldly ambition do at times prevail.

The tale which follows, "The Man Born to be King," is essentially a myth of the attainment of manhood, in which tyranny is (partially) thwarted, merit triumphs over pride, and youthful ardor leads to royal marriage; as in "Atalanta," the magic charm that blunts death and villainy is healthy sexual desire. The classical tale for April, "The Doom of King Acrisius," unfolds into two separate subtales of love and deliverance: the first might be called "Danaë and Jove," by analogy with "Cupid and Psyche," the classical tale for May, and the second presents another triumph of vigorous youth over an aging king.

In their response to these moralistic tales, the auditors feel dissatisfaction and melancholy. They meditate on *vanitas vanitatum*, and grieve for their past selves:

 silently awhile
They mused on these things, masking with a smile
The vain regrets that in their hearts arose,
 . . . their elder hosts
Falling to talk, yet noted well the ghosts
Of old desires within their wasted eyes,
Till one by one the fresh-stirred memories,
So bitter-sweet, flickered and died away. (III, 168)

⁴Citations are from May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London, 1910-15), by volume and page number.

Strikingly, they seem to prefer tales in which the protagonists are unhappy. In keeping with this mood, even the happy conclusion of "Atalanta's Race" seems burdensome:

Yea, on their hearts a weight had seemed to fall,
As unto the scarce-hoped felicity
The tale grew round—the end of life so nigh,
The aim so little, and the joy so vain. (III, 105)

By contrast the tales of evil monarchs do inspire some pride in the freer customs of their homelands, and the first tale of active heroism (in April, of Perseus in "The Doom of King Acrisius"), arouses a desire to accomplish what they can before the night. In general, however, they take little comfort from the more facile unreality of the March and April tales, in which evil monarchs are chastised and young love rewarded. They do begin to experience more fellow-feeling with the Elders, as both perhaps observe that an idealized past was no less bleak than their exhausted present. As the season shifts, several motifs of the spring tales also become less prominent, especially the near-magical release of entrapped female sexuality and the myth of the low-born or disinherited royal hero.

In May and June, the Wanderers are stirred to self-examination by the narratives of failure ("The Writing on the Image," "The Lady of the Land") and bittersweet spirituality ("Cupid and Psyche," "The Love of Alcestis"). "Cupid and Psyche" is the only *Earthly Paradise* tale in which a mortal assumes divinity, but Psyche's transformation is not achieved without struggle. The account of her apotheosis is brief, almost a coda or afterthought, and its descriptions obliquely recall the inadequacy of earth:

And in those old hearts did the story move
Remembrance of the mighty deeds of love,
And with these thoughts did hopes of life arise,
Till tears unseen were in their ancient eyes,
And in their yearning hearts unspoken prayers,
And idle seemed the world with all its cares. (IV, 74)

The old men identify most directly with the sailor of "The Lady of the Land," the sole *Earthly Paradise* protagonist who fails in the confrontation with a monster. The younger auditors glibly judge the sailor's cowardice ("A little thing the man had had to do" [IV, 142]), but the older hearers are more aware of their limitations:

Remembering well how fear in days gone by
Had dealt with them and poisoned wretchedly
Good days, good deeds and longings for all good. (IV, 142)

They accept "The Lady of the Land" as a miniature emblem of their own disappointments.

Some new elements of their experience also emerge in late spring. Descriptions of the surrounding landscape gradually become more restful,

the feasts more ceremonial, as the old compare their responses with those of the young and become interested in the latter's love-making and plans for adventure. The old see themselves once again as men well-acquainted with human nature and respect the motives of their efforts, if not their result.

By now, of course, the meetings themselves have a history. The Wanderers and the Elders have become intimate friends, and their lives seem enduring by comparison with the change of seasons. The first sign of some communal inspiration occurs in June, when they are drawn to sympathize with Alcestis, across obvious barriers of rank, sex, and time:

And scarce their own lives seemed to touch them more
Than that dead Queen's beside Boëbis' shore;
Bitter and sweet so mingled in them both,
Their lives and that old tale, they had been loth
Perchance, to have them told another way. (IV, 125)

Gradually, the Wanderers' invocations of submerged grief become more detached than in the early spring, and their resolutions to accept what remains more self-evident. They now regret the brevity of life more than its failures; they would try again if they could. Although failures abound in the tales of May and June, the tales have begun to shift thematically from reproof of arrogance, false curiosity, and the like, to a need for erotic devotion, the theme of "Cupid and Psyche" and "The Love of Alcestis," and an intense preoccupation of Morris' poetry during this period.

By late summer, desire on a human scale has gradually become more a part of the nature of things, and less governed by extrinsic and malevolent forces. Character, more than supernatural machinery, has begun to determine fate, and such character has at least some loose analogy with justice. For example, the August tale, "Pygmalion and the Image," is more cheerful and more psychologically plausible than the earlier "Atalanta's Race"—no failed early suitors, no competitive chase, and no sudden reversal of character. Sexual union with an immortal being does not destroy the protagonist of the August tale of "Ogier the Dane" as it had in the July "The Watching of the Falcon," but it does provide a sort of equable, Elysian happiness after more than one life of struggle.

Generalizations about the women of the spring and summer tales are difficult. "Good" women in *The Earthly Paradise* seek rhapsodic heterosexual union, and invariably achieve their aim. Indeed, they are somewhat more aggressively sexual than one would expect from their conventional mien and Victorian context. Occasionally, supernatural variants appear: Morgan le Fay in "Ogier" is content that her mortal partner love others, and the fairy lady in "The Watching of the Falcon" is a sincerely affectionate but harmful variant of Keats's "Lamia."

Fewer and fewer tales confer mythical immortality on the protagonists as the year progresses. Later classical tales present more earthbound

conclusions, as in July's tale, "The Son of Croesus" and August's "Pygmalion," and supernatural realms in the medieval tales are simply states of suspension beyond human time and geography. The latter also provide still another vehicle for interpretation of the protagonists' experiences as mental states. The middle frame also reinforces this secularization of reality: after "Ogier," the Wanderers explicitly deny any hope of immortal life or love:

to those old hearts nigh in reach of rest,
Not much to be desired now it seemed. (IV, 254)

Yet, since a little life at least was left,
They were not yet of every joy bereft,
For long ago was past the agony,
Midst which they found that they indeed must die. (IV, 255)

They have come to accept the finality of their lives.

By now their process of grief has entered its final stage of acceptance and tempered affirmation. They have begun to formulate a code of values which reflects Morris' nascent tenet that love—not curiosity, nor desire for power, longevity, or even descendants—should motivate one's central choices (cf. "Love Is Enough"). Male protagonists predictably find this love to some extent in loyal male friendship but seldom in parental affection. Its most compelling form is assumed to be sudden, heterosexual response to an ideal female form. Once the protagonist has determined the identity of his beloved, he should seek her with all his strength, even at the risk that he will lose his life.

So universally acknowledged is this benign compulsion that even the forces of nature connive with it. Love should be quite openly sexual, but even for men the desire for more than one partner (as in "The Watching of the Falcon") leads to destruction; only Ogier the Dane is allowed several lovers, in mutually dichotomous lifetimes. Predictable bars to such unions are female rejection and male fear, but persistent, wholehearted, and generous love usually earns an appropriate response. Early critics who praised *The Earthly Paradise* for lack of moralism seem to have assumed that these standard Victorian postulates were universal truths, or else they ignored the prominence and consistency of their assumption in the poem.

In autumn, the Wanderers listen to the harrowing tales of "The Death of Paris" (September) and "The Story of Rhodope" (November), and the Elders to "The Man Who Never Laughed Again" (October) and "The Lovers of Gudrun" (November). The happiness of "The Land East of the Sun" (September) is heavily circumscribed by an abrupt disclaimer in its outer frame, and the protagonists' anxieties in "Acontius and Cydippe" (October) belie the straightforwardness of their final union. In their descriptions of emotional and physical privation, these are definitely the

bleakest *Earthly Paradise* tales. They also elaborate the central doctrine of the work, that intense erotic frustration and emotional isolation can, paradoxically, deepen self-acceptance and sympathetic love.

Significantly, the Wanderers achieve a more direct identification with the protagonists of these anguished tales. After "The Story of Rhodope," they feel sympathetic nostalgia:

So slowly did the tale's sweet sorrow blend
With their own quenched desires
.....
That in these latter days indeed, were grown
Nought but a tale, for others to bemoan,
Who had not learned with sorrow's self to deal. (V, 248)

And not coincidentally, acceptance of their own past grief deepens their ability to feel for the sufferings of others:

The heavy grief that once their heads did bow,
Had wrought so much for them, that they might sit
Amid some pleasure at the thought of it;
.....
At least not hardened quite so much, but they
Might hear of love and longing worn away
'Twi' birth and death of others, wondering.
Belike, amid their pity what strange thing
Made the mere truth of what poor souls did bear
—In vain or not in vain—so sweet to hear,
So healing to the tangled woes of earth,
At least for a short while. (V, 396)

Throughout the autumn tales, in what seems a reflection in *The Earthly Paradise* of the isolation Morris himself experienced in this period, fidelity to love in despair of any reward becomes a major test of virtue and mark of experience. Failure in love, once an outer sign of a moral deficiency, becomes a virtual condition for nobility. Paris dies forgotten by Helen, to whom he has remained faithful. Bharam of "The Man Who Never Laughed" seems innocent of any moral failing, unlike his earlier counterpart in "The Watching of the Falcon," but suffers a similarly wretched fate. The virtuous father in "The Story of Rhodope" loses his beloved daughter, and the ever-faithful Bodli in "The Lovers of Gudrun" never wins Gudrun's love and dies in misery.

Parents and male lovers, then, seem born to a stony path of psychological endurance. Those who occasion their pain are also unhappy and even rejected at times in turn by those whom they desire; however, they seem less driven by a need to rationalize their actions. Helen, Oenone, Rhodope, and Gudrun survive their tales, and the succubus of "The Man Who Never Laughed" inhabits a deathless realm. In Morris' variant of Victorian morality, women are *more* readily forgiven than men because *less* is expected of them: the implicit condescension of a kindly parent. Helen, Oenone, Rhodope, and Gudrun are impressive for their dark passions, but

they lack the moral sophistication of a Paris or a Bodli, and at the end of their experience, they have evolved, learned, or progressed very little. Morris has discarded the pattern of the self-sacrificing good woman but has in these tales no actively heroic alternative to offer.

The substance of the autumn tales, then, is quite bleak: human emotional maturity is tested by suffering, and the deepest suffering is, for men, the chagrin of heterosexual rejection. Yet the heroic sufferer must will loyalty to an original vision of sensuous, innocent love, no matter how counterfactual this vision becomes. The Christian Paul once remarked of *agape* that "love seeketh not its own"; there is something grim in Morris' belief that *eros* cannot find its own.

The Victorians abhorred few emotional states more than "unmanly" ambivalence. Morris' autumn tales (whose appearance did not elicit the uniform critical praise lavished on Volume I) suggest that such irresolution and resignation are inevitable parts of the formation of identity. For example, Paris' shifting mental states *are* his struggle, and the sudden conclusion that his death is less significant to him than was his original love, a kind of epiphany of renunciation. In these tales, Morris responded to the erotic discontents of Victorian civilization with a lonely Cyrenic theme of unrequited generosity and love.

At the end of the autumn tales, the Wanderers have relived their own past failures and come to see that suffering in lost causes—or worse, unrecognized causes—is a form of heroism. Their trust in the emotional values and traditions of their past is modified by an increasing power to abstract and mythologize. They begin to forgive the limitations of their past fortitude and reach toward the future. Their vast narrative itself has become a kind of journey, a struggle for a new form of immortality. In some sense it no longer even matters whether they have been successful in love: accepted and rejected lovers have all participated in the same uncategorizable experience: devotion to an ideal. After a lifetime of struggle, the Wanderers have come to embody the ethical, aesthetic, historical, and literary meaning of their search. Their younger auditors will need a similar life history before they can frame a comparable awareness of their own.

What then is left for the tales of December, January, and February: "The Golden Apples," "Bellerophon at Argos," "Bellerophon in Lycia," "The Fostering of Aslaug," "The Ring Given to Venus," and "The Hill of Venus"? Three of their protagonists, Bellerophon, Laurence, and Walter, are the most psychologically and morally complex in the cycle, and in each case, their labor and endurance do achieve some good result. In all but one instance (that of Hercules), this success overcomes a pattern of sorrow, humiliation, or evil.

The Bellerophon sequence forms the best classical tale in *The Earthly Paradise*. It conflates several familiar Morrisian motifs, from monsters to trances, and in an advance over "The Life and Death of Jason" and "The

Doom of King Acrisius," it successfully conjoins romantic and heroic plots. The first narrative culminates in the grimly horrible suicide of Queen Sthenoboea and Bellerophon's banishment, the second in his victory over several powerful enemies, vindication from past false charges, and royal marriage to Philonoe. The fall and rise are effectively paralleled, and nothing seems hurried or irrelevant. "Bellerophon in Lycia" is in fact an effective and hopeful conclusion to the classical tales. It combines careful plotting and elaborate detail with the psychological resonance and magical evocation of Morris' later romances. Bellerophon's Argosian fate is reversed in Lycia; after his former disgrace and exile, he now achieves successive heroic triumphs, love, and kingship. Bellerophon's final task is the unmasking of the monstrous Chimera as a creature not of darkness but illusion, its weapon the dread it inspired.

After this fundamental confrontation, Bellerophon becomes one of the few *Earthly Paradise* heroes both to achieve an earthly paradise and to know he has achieved it. Moreover he accepts his triumph for what it is—transient in time, eternal in quality. He knows his love for Philonoe will be subject to inevitable change, but their shared meditation on the transience of love—a kind of Morrisian test of sincerity—does not eclipse their joy:

And even as a man new made a god,
When first he sets his foot upon the sod
Of Paradise, and like a living flame
Joy wraps him round, he felt, as now she came,
Clear won at last, the thing of all the earth
That made his fleeting life a little worth. (VI, 277)

In January's medieval tale, "The Ring Given to Venus," a myth of male sexual maturation which parallels Psyche's struggle in "Cupid and Psyche," the figure of Venus is fundamentally benign. The last medieval tale, "The Hill of Venus," is more ambivalent: its hero Walter affirms a complex loyalty to Venus, even though her capricious coldness convinces him that

"now God doth endure,
And this my love, that never more shall bring
Delight to me or help me anything." (VI, 319)

In an audience with the Pope, Walter stubbornly defends this immoral loyalty:

"Man hates it and God scorns, and I, e'en I—
—How shall I hate my love and scorn my love?
.....
More hate than man's hate in my soul doth move;
Greater my scorn than scorn of God above—
And yet I love on." (VI, 319)

After Walter's return to Venus' cave, the Pope's staff blossoms in approval of his love. The Pope bestows a private blessing, unknown to the anguished Walter, who remains suspended between triumph and frustration, the first secular martyr of a religion of sexual tolerance and generosity.

Perhaps more than coincidentally, the presentation of women also shifts later in the cycle. The earliest heroines had been gentle, timid, and somewhat distant, and the heroines of late summer and autumn passionate but capricious. In the final tales, Philonoë and Aslaug are direct, eager, and energetic. Philonoë declares her love for Bellerophon at their first meeting and resourcefully assists her love at each stage of his Lycian adventures. To Ragnar's proposal, Aslaug responds forthrightly: "May it be so, fair man, that thou / Art even no less happy now / Than I am" (VI, 48). The ideal of the intelligently loving heroine attracted Morris' imagination the rest of his life. This new modification of the conventional Victorian female stereotypes of coyness and withdrawal encouraged Morris to attempt more psychologically sophisticated characterizations than did most of his contemporaries, among other things, to create his best analysis of an evil woman, in "Bellerophon at Argos." Sthenoboea attempts to kill Bellerophon because she is attracted to him; she is not an amoral succubus, and she is not excused. With surprising identification the aged auditors sympathize with Sthenoboea's fate and attempt to subsume it to the now-familiar pattern of shared, inevitable loss:

while yet more like it was
That with the old tale o'er their souls did pass
Shades of their own dead hopes, and buried pain
By measured words drawn from its grave again,
Though no more deemed a strange unheard-of thing
Made but for them. (VI, 134)

The final message of these tales, then, would seem an appeal to unillusioned effort in the service of a love which becomes more and more widely defined as the poem draws to a close. Faithful love under stress is its own moral victory. It justifies and gives universality to life, even if it remains unreciprocated, and no striking actions are performed. Heroic love can be created within the self, without the aid or favor of fate; in fact its creation is a moral imperative.

III. The Final Affirmation of the Poem

The twenty-five tale cycle has thus evolved some rather complex conceptions of morality. The fatalism and derivative moral prescriptions of the early tales have gradually faded, with their ethical calculus in which rewards of joy or suffering are allotted according to rather simplistic evaluations of moral worth. By autumn, Morris' narrators have begun to progress, from cramped renunciation to a more flexible ethic of suffering in which "good" protagonists are not granted immortality, or even release from pain, but simply a hope that their dislocation and sorrow will bring some greater awareness and understanding. This double-edged message, that all suffering will bring some joy and all joy some sorrow, seems to offer more comfort to Morris than the cheerfully moralistic but judgmental world

of the early tales. The later tales are also less preoccupied with reproof of error than with the cyclical reappearance and transforming presence of various forms of love, which the poet suggests is history's deepest characteristic pattern—its “inscape,” as it were. Compare Morris' wallpaper designs of the 1860s and early 70s: for every lattice-work or rectangular confinement, there is a path of escape; for every escape, a new confinement (lest this seem strained, compare further Morris' historical reflections in the epigraph from an 1881 lecture on pattern design). Morris is less concerned, for the time being at least, with attacking tyranny or greed, and more interested in presenting models of tolerance.

What of the Wanderers at the end of the poem? As their narratives form clear emotional patterns, they feel deeper identification and union with the young of both sexes. At the end of the cycle, in January and February of the new year, the interconnective passages dwell less on the responses of the Wanderers and Elders and more on those of the young, who are innocently eager to reenact their own forms of the Wanderers' failed search. The latter live quietly with their self-knowledge and their memories:

But the old men learned in earth's bitter lore,
Were glad to leave untouched the too rich store
Of hapless memories, if it might be done;
And wandered forth into the noonday sun,
To watch the blossoms budding on the wall,
.....
And see the lithe forms; making out of these
No tangled story. (VI, 326)

Their final achievement is a tempered acceptance of the death they had fled:

Howe'er it came
To those, whose bitter hope hath made this book,
With other eyes, I think, they needs must look
On its real face, than when so long ago
They thought that every good thing would be won,
If they might win a refuge from it. (VI, 327)

At year's end, they feel as well-settled in their new land as men thus carefully prepared for death can be. Several remember that their ancestors spoke Greek and seem to feel that their refuge in Greece has offered a return to what is in some sense their more spiritual and fundamental place of origin.

Through all this, each group—Wanderers, Elders, and auditors—remains relatively anonymous and undifferentiated: individual members of the groups do not engage in disputes with each other, undertake new projects, or suffer ill health (say, from the rigors of the Wanderers' shipwreck). Did none of the Wanderers yearn for families of past years or desire to form new ones? Did any form or maintain especially deep contacts with others or with one or more of the Elders? Did any write poems or songs after the year ended or seek new political activities? The frame is silent.

Such featureless qualities suggest rather strongly that the Wanderers may be simply the mask of old age used by a young poet to express hypothetical ambivalence and detachment toward his own unassuageable romanticism. Compare, for example, Tennyson's "Tithonus" or "Ulysses," Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*, or Browning's skillful ventriloquism of wry and cranky sages. Ultimately the tales, elderly narrators, auditors, and lyric singer of the months are representative voices of a single poetic consciousness in which the Wanderers express suffering, understood in tranquility, in communal narrative form. Their meditations also project and reflect a process of cultural memory of the sort which Morris is beginning to hope will preserve human understanding for a future time.⁵

Both the elderly narrators and the lyric singer are grateful at the completion of the cycle of twenty-four tales. The singer of the Apology and Epilogue has emulated his mentor, Chaucer, and has deepened bonds of friendship between himself and his friends. His escapist desire to regain the past has in fact extended and deepened his awareness of reality. He offers his work as a gift to the future and as celebration of the ethic of unillusioned love. This celebration is subdued, but such self-deprecation is a familiar trait of the great-souled Morrisian hero, who has ironically characterized himself as "the idle singer of an empty day."

Within the poem, the elderly narrators reflect this belief in the restorative power of historical understanding. As the year progresses, they feel a growing sense of self-worth and move toward a closer rapport with their audience. Through their dignified acceptance of the interrelation of loss and happiness, they clarify for themselves and each other the transient and partial nature of both. The tales themselves also memorialize their protagonists' deeds and emotions and serve as miniature emblems for emulation by the narrators, the singer, and us.

The tripartite view of the past is neither antiquarian nor historical, but in some utopian sense, communitarian. Singer, narrators, and protagonists unite to extend the representation of a common cultural consciousness, and,

⁵Morris found an early source for this hope in his rather idiosyncratic reading of Carlyle. Morris shared Carlyle's belief that "the whole Past . . . is the possession of the Present; the Past had always something true, and is a precious possession" ("The Hero as Divinity," *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Works, V [London, 1897], 41) and found sympathetic Carlyle's fascination with the unrecorded emotional struggles of obscure persons, whom the writer (re)creates in historical imagination. Morris would also have agreed with Carlyle that history, not philosophy, is the central expression of human experience. The narrator of *The Earthly Paradise* is not so sure that "the body of all truth dies; and yet in all, I say, there is a soul which . . . in new and ever-nobler embodiment lives immortal . . .," (*Ibid.*, 62), but would make this so if he could.

Immense political contrasts remain. Carlyle's "heroes" find fierce, usually private satisfaction in "work" and rule. Morris' mythical Wanderers undertake more arduous labors than Carlyle's protagonists, but find collective solace in a kinship with the Greek Elders and their descendants.

so far as they are able, lessen their isolation, commemorate each other, and retrace some intense patterns of human emotion. All sense their limitations and strive at every level to deepen a sense of community through their elaborate polyphony of language and poetic form.

The three cycles of restoration in *The Earthly Paradise* do not run simultaneously but seriatim. The Wanderers' initial depression and lethargy are reflected in the external calm of the early tales; later, when the Wanderers have become more reflective and detached, the subjects of their tales shift to emotional failure and estrangement. The outer singer's sense of loss, which breaks into his July lyric and continues until near the end of the cycle, is more acute and personal than anything the Wanderers express. It reaches its greatest intensity in November, December, and January, when the Wanderers have reached an accommodation with their fate. Nor does the singer's angst correspond with the period of the most harrowing tales, which extend unevenly from May to November. The Wanderers and protagonists of the tales experience their fluctuating emotions and mixed fates, but the singer's sense of loss seems uniform and unrelieved, and his final expression of hope, in the last month of the narrative cycle, is the most tenuous and qualified resolution of the poem.

These contrasts create a certain verisimilitude and interest within the poem; the effect is of a song about the cyclical nature of fate itself, sung in rounds, or antiphonal responses to a series of choruses. Such an intricately patterned sequence of viewpoints also imposes its own form of rigidity. Morris never again undertook a poetic work of so many interrelated parts but instead turned to shorter tales, or to separate book-length narratives without a connective scheme.

Morris' use of myth and folk tales was also guided by his conviction that their process of transmission sifts and heightens emotions in an intrinsically valuable way. In some sense, both Morris and his inner narrators are good historical materialists: aware that most records have been obliterated, they believe that tales and fragments which do survive help recreate a social or communal history of human emotion. The narrators also hope for solace in a pattern of generational cycles in which sorrow alternates with joy: the tragic love of Sigurd and Brynhild, for example, yields the birth of Aslaug, whose marriage eventually brings the ascendancy, and later destruction, of her people.

In such cyclical views, the particulars of one's fortune and external achievements become less significant than moral constancy and character. Nature venerates nobility but seldom grants it success, or even recognition, in a single lifetime. Life is a tenuous narrative frame in which some balance of contentment and sorrow may reflect the equilibrium of human experience.

IV. Stoic Resemblances

One may of course disagree at some unarguable level with Morris' implicit historicism, or wish it sharpened, and demand a more systematic resolution to the questions he poses. But in fact this utopian historicism is appropriate to the design and purpose of *The Earthly Paradise*. Morris was a religious agnostic who saw at this point no compelling hope of social progress and envisioned no ultimate triumph of good. But he did not, despite his interest in Icelandic myth and the tragic elements of several of his poems, accept some sort of Nordic fatalism. His was a kind of Zoroastrian, or perhaps in part Stoic, world in which forces of good or evil never attain complete dominance. Within such a cyclical configuration of opposites, he wished to praise personal love as a principal source of goodness and beauty whose autonomous perfection confers an ability to act in a universe poised between life and death. Wrong might return forever to the throne, but individual heroic lives discredit it, and even depose it from time to time.

When Pater spoke of "the pagan spirit" of *The Earthly Paradise*, he had just completed a comparative study of ancient and "modern philosophy" and seems to have had in mind a sense of life's brevity which he found most acute in the latter.⁶ Unlike Pater, Morris maintained a lifelong indifference to systematic philosophy, but the "pagan spirit" of *The Earthly Paradise* nonetheless exhibits affinities with ancient Stoic beliefs. Like Morris' singer, the Stoics ascribed a cyclical nature to fate, characterized reality as a series of universes generated in succession, and believed that the essence of time is change:

[The Stoics] believe that nature is a fire endowed with skill, proceeding to generate things, and is a fire-like and artistic spirit. And the soul is a perceptive nature, the spirit which is born in us. Therefore, it is a body and endures after death, although it is destructible. But the soul of the whole world is indestructible, of which the souls in living beings are parts.

(Diogenes Laertius)⁷

Most of the Stoics assert that motion itself is the essence of time.

(Aetius, p. 89)

The metaphor of nature as a poetic fire might well have pleased Morris, and he would have recognized the concept of an indestructible soul of the world. According to Theodoretus, Chrysippus the Stoic maintained that "fate is an ordered, continuous, eternal motion" (p. 101). Within such processes,

⁶"Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review* (October, 1868), 300-312. For a discussion of Pater's readings in philosophy, aesthetics, and science from 1860-68, see Billie Andrew Inman, "The Intellectual Context of Walter Pater's 'Conclusion,'" *PSt* 4, (1981), 12-30.

⁷J. von Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* (Leipzig, 1904-24), trans. in Jason L. Saunders, *Greek and Roman Philosophy After Aristotle* (New York, 1966), p. 98. Subsequent references to the Stoics will be from Saunders' translation and will be cited by page number.

humans are not responsible for their individual fates, but they are for their own actions, which should reflect an acceptance of nature and will to act within it:

Living virtuously is equivalent to living in accordance with experience of the actual course of nature. . . . And this is why the end may be defined as life in accordance with nature, or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe. . . . And this very thing constitutes the virtue of the happy man. (p. 112)

Such an understanding grants happiness by freeing the spirit from the compulsion of nature, a desideratum the Wanderers gained through their tales and reflections. So also the doctrine according to which "Happiness is added [to life] when 'middle' actions take on some kind of steadiness and particular consistency" (p. 129).

Compare also the following with Morris' intense preoccupation with the kinship of all human beings:

The mere fact of their common humanity requires that one man should feel another man akin to him. Moreover, nature inspires us with the desire to benefit as many people as we can, and especially by imparting information and the principles of wisdom. . . . Men of exceptional gifts and capacity for service . . . feel a natural impulse to be the protectors of the human race.
(Cicero, p. 126)

This conception of virtue as a semi-invariant process of teaching and protecting seems consistent with the heroic ideals and narrative impulses of the "ancient men" of *The Earthly Paradise*. "Nor yet will the Wise Man live in solitude," according to Diogenes Laertius, "for he is naturally made for society and action" (p. 132). "Friendship," similarly, "exists only between the wise and good, by reason of their likeness to one another. And by friendship they mean a common use of all that has to do with life" (p. 132).

Much of Stoic doctrine was transmitted by its epigones and opponents, and the parallels suggested here are tentative, not systematic. Nevertheless, the principal one—a common belief in a progressive and recurrent natural order in which agents achieve goodness by identification with their fellows—seems clear and undercuts strongly the conventional wisdom that Morris expresses no sustained ethical or ideological point of view in *The Earthly Paradise*.

In particular, the tempered meliorism of *The Earthly Paradise* also provided Morris, at this point in his life, with an acceptable alternative to the more Christian and conventional optimism expressed in the work of his contemporaries Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins, and to the alienated grief of Arnold's poetry. No Christian resurrection was possible, but for Morris natural birth and growth provided a series of recurring small resurrections, renewals, and recommencements. For Morris at this stage of his life, acceptance of these processes is not only an intrinsic good in itself; it is the only plausible morality.

Some mildly left-Hegelian qualities in this view may have influenced his later reception of Marx, but it is not—at least not primarily—an evolutionary or progressive doctrine. Later cycles of history may not progress beyond earlier ones, and there is little assumption that future men and women will excel those of the past, as will the “crowning race” of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. Morris’ belief at this stage that suffering unlocks a compensatory perception or goodness in nature is only a kind of regulative ideal, adumbrated in his earlier poetry but not fully developed until the later sections of *The Earthly Paradise*. Later, more socialist views of history impelled him to act as well as hope.

These tales of the past also testify to a kind of collective capacity for renewed emotion: the emotions of youth, memory of age, and vicarious experiences of the narrators soothe, complement, and intensify each other. We will all be young, and old, and narrators, and the telling of tales redeems this cycle: no one ever achieves an earthly paradise, but our efforts may bind us together, enlarge our identity, and ensure mutual understanding. The society of Wanderers, Elders, and Youths is the nearest approach to fellowship, respectful sympathy, and shared emotion which fate offers “Midmost the beating of the steely sea” (III, 2). Beings which so value and understand their own history have not lived without a purpose.

V. Conclusion

The elaborate, contrapuntal structure of the argument of *The Earthly Paradise* merits more detailed study and appreciation. The Victorian public simply resisted its social and psychological implications. They were diverted by what seemed to them the astonishing facility of the poem and were unwilling to consider its subtle evolution in tone. The very expansiveness of the scheme permitted Morris to write some of his best work: one could easily excerpt several hundred passages for separate shorter lyrics and briefer narratives of the sort Morris later published in *Poems By the Way*. The level of quality in *The Earthly Paradise* remains quite high, even after one brackets its monthly lyrics, apology, and *envoi*. Indeed, by the final three months of the series, Morris had developed the heroic tale into a highly refined and sophisticated mode of expression. Moreover the troubled spirituality in “The Hill of Venus” or “Ogier the Dane,” the nostalgic melancholy of “Cupid and Psyche,” the fierce tragedy of “The Lovers of Gudrun,” the stark contrast of greed and innocence in “The Fostering of Aslaug,” and the blend of realism and psychological allegory in “Bellerophon at Argos” and “Bellerophon in Lycia” can all stand alone. Morris has been criticized for failure to individuate, but the most intensely realized characters in *The Earthly Paradise* (Gudrun, Walter, Bellerophon) successfully fuse individual and type.

The alternations of confessions, description, and retrospection in the frame also enabled Morris to complete one of the fullest Victorian meditations on the creation of identity through frustrated love and sorrow. Morris offered this aspect of *The Earthly Paradise* as a kind of mode for self-creation without bitterness and estrangement from others. His praise of love and sorrow in *The Earthly Paradise* is more consciously sexual than Tennyson's grief in *In Memoriam*, more concrete than that of Rossetti's *The House of Life*, and more self-consciously metaphysical than that of Meredith's *Modern Love*. More than they, Morris tried quite seriously to suggest how we should respond to the *néant*.

Essential to this attempt is an evolving interpretation of fate as nature which enabled him to avert a final resolution which inclined toward simplism or despair. Writing *The Earthly Paradise* helped Morris reconcile for a time the bitter divergence of imagination from reality. The sense of good and evil in precarious suspension in the frame also reflects the wider dynamic of restless discomfort and passionate attachment which underlay Morris' life of fierce and visionary activity. Above all, its singer learned that sustained courage and love require a continuing sense of loss as well as an acute sense of beauty.