

## Book Review

*The Earthly Paradise*, by William Morris, ed. Florence Boos. 2 vols. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. xxxix + 687 pp. ; 779 + lxxv pp. Illustrated. \$325.00.

Florence Boos is to be commended not only for a monumental editorial effort that has led to successful achievement but for her perseverance over several years in a search for a publisher willing to risk the cost of publishing *The Earthly Paradise*. As she gracefully tells us, “My efforts to find a haven for this edition sometimes seemed to me almost as long as the Wanderers’ search for their Earthly Paradise.” And that Routledge, with its excellent resources for publicity, has agreed to be the publisher means there will be a fair test to determine whether there is an audience today for Morris’ epic—the longest narrative poem in the English language.

*The Earthly Paradise* was first published in three volumes between 1868 and 1870. Since Volume I consists of two Parts, there are four Parts altogether. Frankly indebted to *The Canterbury Tales*, one of Morris’ chief delights in literature, *The Earthly Paradise* tells the story of a group of Norsemen, fleeing the Black Death, who come upon a hitherto unknown island in the Adriatic peopled by descendants of the ancient Greeks. The wanderers and the inhabitants of the island agree to tell each other tales from their respective heritages, one from each side each month between March and December. Their conversation is the frame story, and outside the frame is the voice of the narrating persona, who declares himself “the idle singer of an empty day” and who also recites the “Apology,” the “Epilogue,” and a set of lyric poems that punctuate the tales, one such poem preceding the stories for each month. Thus there are frames within frames—the one produced by the narrating persona, the conversation between the Wanderers and the Elders of the island, and the voices that tell the individual tales.

A brief outline of what Boos has accomplished is in order. Volume I of her edition contains a forty-one page Introduction (to which I shall return), a copious number of appropriate illustrations, the text of the narrative epic from March through August, a collation of the manuscript (which is at the Huntington Library), and three editions published during Morris’ lifetime. (She has wisely chosen the Kelmscott Press edition of 1896 as her copytext.) And present throughout are footnotes explaining

terms and references Boos deems needful of elucidation. Volume II contains the tales from September through February, and again, illustrations, notes, and collation of the four witnesses.

It is a small irony of literary history that Walter Pater's unsigned review article of Morris' poetry, published in *The Westminster Review* for October 1868, on the occasion of the appearance of Volume I of *The Earthly Paradise*, is, in its several reincarnations, better known and more widely read than is any part of *The Earthly Paradise*. The final section of Pater's review article reappeared as the notorious "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (1873), and a revised form of the rest was published as "Aesthetic Poetry" in *Appreciations* (1889). It is worth noticing that very little of Pater's original review is devoted to *The Earthly Paradise*. When he does get round to it, after discussing *The Defence of Guenevere* and *The Life and Death of Jason*, he makes it the occasion for illustrating what he means by "aesthetic poetry." He writes: "We have become so used to austerity and concentration in some noble types of modern poetry, that it is easy to mistake the lengthiness of this new poem. Yet here mere mass is itself the first condition of an art which deals with broad atmospheric effects." Referring to specific tales, "Atalanta's Race," "The Man Born to be King," "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," "The Doom of King Acrisius," and the episode of Danae and the shower of gold, Pater continues: "[These tales] have in a pre-eminent degree what is characteristic of the whole book, the loveliness of things newly washed with fresh water; and this clarity and chasteness, mere qualities here of an exquisite art, remind one that the effectual preserver of all purity is perfect taste." Moreover, he adds: "One characteristic of the pagan spirit these new poems have which is on their surface—the continual suggestion . . . of the shortness of life; this is contrasted with the bloom of the world and gives new seduction to it; the sense of death and the desire for beauty . . . quickened by the sense of death." And in concluding his direct references to *The Earthly Paradise*, Pater calls it "a kind of poetry which assum[es] artistic beauty of form to be an end in itself."

Perhaps what is most important, in quoting Pater here, is the historical moment in which his essay was written. In its salient parts, the review article is nothing less than the Manifesto of the Aesthetic Movement in England. As the parts reappeared as the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* and "Aesthetic Poetry," they established a current in English literature that dominated the 1890s and continued into the early twentieth century, most notably by contributing to the interiority of the novels of Virginia Woolf, in which the revelation of the eternal moment echoes Pater's admonition that all we have in life is a series of discrete moments, each to be experienced fully and for its own sake. This is no place to trace the history

of the early Modern Movement, but if we accept that Pater's view of *The Earthly Paradise* has any validity at all, it follows that the movement he did so much to usher in with his review article of Morris' poetry was precisely the one that annihilated Morris' reputation as a poet to be taken seriously. The matter is too fraught with literary currents and counter-currents to be dismissed as a mere paradox, but I must pass over Morris' reputation during the twentieth century and announce that Florence Boos has, among other endeavors, undertaken with this edition of *The Earthly Paradise* to recuperate Morris' standing as a poet who endures and who speaks to the serious reader of poetry.

The first section of her introductory essay makes no apologies for placing Morris' poem among the best of its kind in its own era. Boos writes: "*The Earthly Paradise* is one of the great poems of an era which saw the emergence of many long poetic narratives of enduring resonance and linguistic beauty. Like Alfred Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*, Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, *The Earthly Paradise* expressed its author's considered response to contemporary social issues and poetic tastes." And Morris' response carried with it "a deep attachment to 'historicist' evocations of past legends, and an equally deep belief in the reenactment of 'popular' or recurrent emotional truths which he believed were embodied in them." And in another section of her many faceted Introduction, Boos quotes to good effect one of Morris' letters to Thomas Horsfall, a Manchester art patron, who had asked Morris what kind of art he should support:

I have studied the subject long enough to know that since the dawn of history mankind has invented no typical *new* stories. . . . You may be sure that as long as art exists people will consciously or unconsciously go on telling the same stories, though doubtless when art is real they will do it in their own way.

Then, in a particularly insightful and imaginative critical gesture, Boos alludes to Harold Bloom's by now commonplace "anxiety of influence" in order to make her own point about Morris:

Harold Bloom has postulated a well-known "anxiety of influence" as a basic motivation for poetic endeavor. One might also say that Morris's poetry resolved an *opposite* anxiety—of lack of influence, of temporal immurement and dissociation from his forebears and the deepest sources of forgotten human experience. Morris *assumed* a largely Romantic doctrine of artistic independence and originality . . . so that his conscious choices of past models often expressed a sense of shared "sending" rather than a simple fidelity to past de-

tails. . . . Morris . . . completely transformed earlier literary motifs again and again, but always in ways that embodied his belief that truly great anthems should be *varied*.

I have, in my quotations, only briefly suggested the rich and varied approaches to *The Earthly Paradise* Florence Boos has provided in her Introduction. Although divided into sections for the benefit of the newcomer to the poem—e.g., “Victorian Historicism and Morris’s Use of the Past” and “The Reception of *The Earthly Paradise*”—the material could be reworked into a continuous and major cultural reading of the poem.

But what now of the poem itself? Readers of Morris’ literary work today are, chiefly, students and teachers within the academy; and anthologists and publishers have, between them, limited what is easily available to two works only, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* and *News from Nowhere*. To focus now on *The Earthly Paradise* alone, the first question is, will it be possible to create an audience for this monumental work, exacting from the reader a dedication of time and attention that exceed what it would take to read *The Canterbury Tales* in their entirety? Further, what exactly can we expect from the change of taste which has liberated quantities of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature condemned to oblivion in the hey-day of high modernism, a movement that had no place for any of Morris’ works? The strict imagist rules for composition—no modifiers of nouns and verbs, the self-conscious impersonality, the necessity of irony—have been dropped. But the short lyric still prevails. The cadences and vocabulary of contemporary poetry strive more and more to create the voice of a poetic persona who keeps strictly to the idiom of contemporary speech. And if symbolism is no longer a requisite—this a boon to Morris—the presence of the unstated, often the unstable, remains the force and strength of contemporary poetry. Florence Boos’s undertaking, not only a labor of love, but of will and of supreme confidence in *The Earthly Paradise* as a work that will endure, is presented to us—again through the Introduction—with a keen awareness of our contemporary interests, and Boos demonstrates herself wholly in command of the vocabulary and concepts of post-modern literary theory, finding in them a support for every assertion she makes that *The Earthly Paradise* is an enduring poem. But the steady progression of Morris’ regular cadences in a poem of this length insists that we embrace a poetic value that has yet, even in the new and freer climate in which we read poetry and talk about it, to take hold. As for Morris’ archaisms, “doth” for “does,” “thine” for “yours,” etc., though in nowise burdensome in this poem, which in its own way does strive to give us the varied speech of the several speakers, they raise the question that has received head-on confrontation from important con-

temporary critics, notably Jerome McGann and Florence Boos herself: McGann, Boos, and others have argued that these alleged archaisms should be read as quotations from the literary language of a previous era. It is a beguiling and even convincing critical stance, but will the modern ear take pleasure in reading these quotations, even as the intellectual embrace of the critical theory that defends them creates the obligation to do so?

In thinking of the contemporary reader, another aspect of Morris' work raises questions about receptivity. This is what Boos rightly terms Morris' historicity. All she has told us about Morris' sense of continuity—of humankind's basic stories and their persistence through time—and of Morris' recognition that each generation tells the tales anew leaves unmeasured the precise difference between Morris' and modern writers' uses of the past. Though there is, as Boos points out, an explicit rejection of Victorian society in the very Prologue—"Forget six counties overhung with smoke, / Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke, / Forget the spreading of the hideous town: / Think, rather, of the pack-horse on the down, / And dream of London, small and white, and clean" —it is, despite the technically imperative mode, an invitation to rise above the experience of modern London and in fact to read the past as an immediately accessible aesthetic entity, indeed, to recognize the truth of Pater's characterization of Volume I.

If we take Pound and Eliot as both makers and leaders of the modern movement, we can see the contrast with Morris. Pound and Eliot are, arguably, more forcefully political than is Morris. They do not, as does Morris, invite the reader to see literary works of the past refashioned. They command the reader—if the reader wishes to read their poems—to learn and embrace the actual past literature in order to attempt their work. They are not interested in providing an image of a London renewed architecturally and environmentally. They want to witness in their poetry the fragmentation of early twentieth-century social and political culture, and use the literary tradition as a source of historical bits and pieces that they can integrate with each other and, foregrounding literature among all cultural productions, make their poems an emblem—a metonymic reconstitution of society into an organic whole. They offer not so much delight in fragments of tales retold as they do an aestheticization of the political. That their desire for a coherent organic society, for which their tradition-butressed poetry is a template, lent itself readily to totalitarian visions of political organization only emphasizes how piercingly political their effort was. Morris' invitation to pure pleasure in reading his tales is political, too, in that it implies an idealized, reconstituted landscape and architecture of the late middle ages as the lost Eden, but he refuses to make art an image that encourages an imposed social order, as Pound and Eliot, impe-

rial voices that they were, do. That we continue to regard the latter two as contemporary, despite their having lent themselves to the most anti-humanistic political theories of the twentieth century, speaks, to me, of the supreme power of aesthetic achievement. We continue to recognize the mood that shaped *The Wasteland* and the *Cantos* as our own, and recognize in them the agon of the human spirit, even as we abhor Eliot's and Pound's political implications and consequences.

However, if we have learned anything since the decline of the puritan absolutism of high modernism, it is that to take one's own age as a new standard of permanent values is the height of critical arrogance and ignorance, and signifies, too, the total lack of historical imagination. Who is to say that a taste for *The Earthly Paradise* may not reoccur? After all, Chaucer, Morris' "Master," has in *The Canterbury Tales* withstood through the centuries all efforts to proscribe and banish inherited texts on the grounds they do not fit some standard of the moment. But even as I say this, I feel uneasy. Our pleasure in Chaucer is the swift pace in which the lines of *The Canterbury Tales* move, the earthiness that has lost none of its force over the centuries, and, paradoxically, a non-selfconscious arrival at a moral "truth," at the end of a tale.

A revival of interest in *The Earthly Paradise* will have to depend on acknowledgment of qualities other than Chaucer's. Boos has wisely emphasized the works with which it was contemporary—those of Tennyson, Browning, and Barrett Browning. It is in whatever fresh view of them creates a space for *The Earthly Paradise* that its revival is most likely to occur. All one can say at present is that if reader curiosity does lead to a sympathetic rediscovery of *The Earthly Paradise*, Florence Boos's magnificent edition will do all that scholarship can accomplish to turn that curiosity into enthusiasm.

Norman Kelvin