The harmony of structure: The earthly paradise

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CHAPTER I

THE HARMONY OF STRUCTURE: THE EARTHLY PARADISE

In the following analysis of *The Earthly Paradise* I shall try to show first what was Morris's purpose throughout the composition of the work, and secondly, what was his actual achievement, with its significance for English poetry.

In bringing together in *The Earthly Paradise* stories and legends from various cultures and various periods, Morris did not set out to point the contrast between the classical, the medieval and the saga methods, which could have been done only by a strict preservation or reproduction of the methods of each type. He aimed rather at showing the contribution of each tradition to the common literary fund of Western Europe — especially of English literary tradition — as it crystallised towards the end of the Middle Ages, in the time of Chaucer, as he says explicitly himself, if not indeed — as internal evidence may perhaps lead us to conclude — during the century of Caxton and Malory, just after Chaucer's death. In the light of more discriminate modern examination of the Middle Ages, we may incline to think that the atmosphere which Morris evokes in *The Earthly Paradise* is that of the very end of the Middle Ages, just before Renaissance classicism was to make familiar a different, more scholarly attitude towards classical tradition, and to render less easy the acceptance of popular traditional forms and methods (cf. infra pp. 26-7). Morris was thus deliberately returning to the historical moment at which he considered the national cultural tradition had last existed in a pure form unspoilt by the "pride of pedantry"[9] which he judged guilty of divorcing culture from the mass of the nation. "It was the scholar's art as against the people's art that aroused his criticism."[10]

There have been a number of attempts by contemporary purists to show that Morris's conception of the various cultures and periods in which he was interested and in which he sought to interest his readers, was incorrect and invalid.[11]) But while it is useful to contrast Morris's conception of classical myth and northern saga with what more recent research has discovered in these fields, it is unhistorical to condemn Morris purely in the light of that research. Certainly the more scientific attitude towards Germanic and Scandinavian literature owes an incal-

culable debt to Morris himself, because Morris was the first great poet in England who threw the whole of his weight behind his enthusiasm for saga literature; while his translation of the *Odyssey* shows his clear recognition of the need to get as close as possible to the Greek epic itself without the impediment of "classicist" accretions. In other words, if it is to admitted that present-day interpretations of saga and epic are closer to the original in spirit than Augustan or Romantic interpretations, then William Morris must be recognised as one of the first writers to attempt such a realistic approach. His service in this respect to our comprehension of medieval life and even to medieval studies could hardly be exaggerated. Thus in order to assess his achievement historically we must compare it not with what present-day writers have done, but with what his contemporaries were doing. It is not my intention to carry out such a detailed comparison here, but rather by careful and detailed analysis of Morris's work, to lay a basis for such a comparison.

Robert Graves in his preface to *The Golden Fleece*[12] stresses the need for a historical novelist to make it clear "at what vantage-point of time he is standing", and himself adopts in this book the view-point of the second century B. C. In this same preface Mr. Graves criticises Morris's treatment of the same legend in the *Life and Death of Jason,* in which Morris adopts the "fantastic" 4th-century account which takes the Argo up a Russian river on her return journey. This leads Mr. Graves to condemn Morris as a "pre-Raphaelite romantic", who, "the more mysterious and even nonsensical he found a legend, the more poetic he considered it."[13] However, in this choice Morris was merely being extremely consistent in carrying out the plan he had conceived. The *Life and Death of Jason* was originally planned as part of *The Earthly Paradise,* and *The Earthly Paradise* is fairly definitely set in time — towards the end of the 14th century, in fact, and all the tales are told as they might well have been told in the circumstances he imagined. Precisely such a version of the Medea legend might conceivably have been told by the inhabitants of Morris's Atlantis, whom he imagined to have come originally from Greece; or equally well it might have been told by the 14th-century Scandinavian Wanderers. Even the orientation towards the North is consistent with Morris's plan of unifying the Mediterranean, the Asian and the Northern cycles of tales and myth. Although at a first glance, *The Earthly Paradise* might seem a haphazard collection of all kinds of tales and legends, it is in fact based on a historical conception of literature. While Morris's historical sense became stricter after he became a Marxist, it was even in this earlier work a fundamental characteristic, and represents in fact the first stage of Morris's lifelong attempt to sum up for his own day the cultural heritage of the past.

The Earthly Paradise consists of twenty-four tales of varying origin, of varying length and told in various metres, set in the framework of the tale of the

quest for happiness on earth, which ends with the recognition on the part of the Wanderers that old age has come and life is over for them, while happiness is no nearer than before. The tales are told in the comparative haven of the unknown land in the West, where they have been received in peace and friendship by the inhabitans, far-off descendants of the ancient Greeks. Two tales are told for every month, one by the Elders of the land, one by the Wanderers. For the sake of easy reference, we may indicate the different parts of the poem as follows: The Apology, the Prologue, the Link Narrative, the Link Lyrics, the Tales, the Envoi.

The "*Apology*" (Morris presents these six rhyme-royal stanzas without any title), has given us the most familiar of all Morris quotations, lines which have unfortunately only too often been taken uncritically as summing up all we need to know about William Morris: the refrain — "The idle singer of an empty day" — and the first lines of the fourth stanza — "Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time, Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?" But is the argument of the poem adequately grasped, if we identify Morris himself with this attitude?

In the first verse, the poet disclaims his authority to write of the full meaning of life — "Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing" — and in this and subsequent stanzas underlines the "idleness" of his poetry — "these idle verses". Yet we should beware of condemning Morris on these grounds as having deliberately turned to romantic poetry and dream,* as Thompson condemns him. This is to be regarded rather as a piece of severe self-criticism, on the part of a poet who was, as his subsequent poetry shows, at this period endeavouring to find adequate means of expression in English poetry for his thoughts as well as his dreams — those deeper thoughts which he was still trying to formulate in *Love is Enough* and *Sigurd the Volsung*. Yet even in disclaiming his power of "setting the crooked straight", Morris is implying that "escapist" poetry is not altogether adequate, and casts an almost ironic light on "us poor singers of an empty day." The fourth verse would seem to imply that there might conceivably be a "due time" even for the dreamer of dreams. This verse is indeed full of ambiguities, for we need not suppose that the poet is really content with the fact that his "murmuring rhyme Beats with light wing against the ivory gate" — and what, too, is this ivory gate? Surely the use of the expression means that the poet condemns those who stay in the sleepy region behind it, even though it is his own "not too importunate" tale that lulls them? The image in the fifth verse, of the wizard who showed at Christmas time through three windows the different seasons of the year, "While still, unheard, but in its wonted way, Piped the drear

*) Thompson represents the development between the *Guenevere* period and *The Earthly Paradise* as a deliberate turning to dream, expressing the "disillusion" of the poet (cf.p.143, 149, 150). But the earlier method, though forceful, could not express the completer view of life which Morris now tried for,

wind of that December day", is a clear enough indication that the poet is conscious of some direr reality beyond his tale.

In a sense, the "Apology" is a confession or rather accusation of failure — of the failure of English poetry in Morris's time. In spite of the fact that up to the date of *The Earthly Paradise* and beyond, Morris conceived his "warfare against the age" within the limited terms of contemporary bourgeois intellectual and family life, and the artistic and cultural standards demanded by the best form of this life, he, like most of those touched by Pre-Raphaelitism, was aware that "the age" would not be defeated by this type of warfare alone. Unlike his other early associates, however, Morris became increasingly conscious that to ignore the real problems of his time was simply to play with art. By the time he wrote the "Apology", he was well aware that his "murmuring rhyme" would do little to solve these problems; and after *The Earthly Paradise*, his further attempts at poetry were no longer in the form of re-telling old tales in that poetic manner which came easiest in the late sixties, but part of a struggle for further self-expression, which Morris was beginning to realise he could not achieve within the technical possibilities of contemporary poetry. Eventually, after his apprenticeship to prose as a lecturer in the ranks of Socialist propaganda, he found a creative medium in the remarkable prose of the late Romances.

In writing the "Apology", Morris was his own severest critic. Thompson has called it the Manifesto of a new kind of escapist romance. But this poem is no Manifesto — it is a poem, whose author asks pardon for building his "shadowy isle of bliss", conscious that he is ignoring the "beating of the steely sea". Morris is clear that to ignore the times and their need is to be but "a poor singer of an empty day". Within a few years he was himself most emphatically to answer his own question, "Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?" by taking up direct political action.

Throughout those years after *The Earthly Paradise*, during which Morris was seeking for a political and philosophical solution for the evils of his time, he was also to strive again and again for an artistic and literary solution for what he wanted to express about life. The "Apology" must be seen as a critical realisation that he has dealt with only a limited aspect of reality. The poet's justification for what he has written is to be sought in the Envoi, where Morris states specifically that his aim was to make "fresh flowers spring up from hoarded seed", in other words, to pass on the heritage of literature.[14]

The often-quoted lines which introduce the *Prologue* —

> Forget six counties overhung with smoke
> Forget the snorting steam and piston-stroke . . .
> And dream of London small and white and clean,
> The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green,

set very definately the point of time when the action takes place, at the end of the 14th century. We are to imagine that

> . . . nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
> Moves over bills of lading . . .

But the scene of *The Earthly Paradise* is not London, it is

> A nameless city in a distant sea,

whose inhabitants still preserve in their temples the Gods of the ancient Greek nations. This device enabled Morris to mingle the classical and the medieval, to tell the stories as they might have been told in the 14th century, "as they were in fact told then in Western Europe, but with the greater sweetness of tone and purity of line, the less mystic or fantastic turn, which might be expected from a purely Greek tradition."[15]

The calm and kindly inhabitants of the land are confronted with a band of Wanderers, whose Leader, to the enquiry of the Elder of the City, proceeds to tell their story.

May Morris has informed us that the writing of this *Prologue* gave Morris "more trouble than all the rest of the work."[16] She also publishes[17] the entire first version of the *Prologue*, which Morris later rejected and completely rewrote.

Edward Thompson has used this first version of the *Prologue* to substantiate his contention that Morris's poetry of *The Earthly Paradise* period is of much lower poetic value than the poems of the *Guenevere* volume, to which he compares the original *Prologue*. He claims that while the first *Prologue* is thin verse, "it is still verse which can carry action" and that the technical mastery of the finally chosen version is "at odds with real poetic achievement."[18] Further he claims that there is less realism and more of the picturesque in *The Earthly Paradise* in general, which he says "marks an important stage in the tendency . . . for the later romantics to confine both their themes and their vocabulary to certain limited fields of experience," and goes on to state that "the realism which was the very salt of Morris's youthful poetry is deliberately abandoned; and the tension between the closely imagined detail and the atmosphere of dream is broken. The laws of everyday experience no longer hold good, and we enter a land of the marvellous and strange, in which the poet may make and break his own laws . . . The land is a land of dream."[19] He sums up this standpoint as follows: "So much is generally recognised, although the distinction between the romantic medievalism of *The Defence of Guenevere*, where the intellect and experience of the reader is continually brought into play, and the dream-like 'romance' of *The Earthly Paradise*, where they are deliberately set aside, is not always understood."

Thompson is correct in stating that there is a difference in quality between the poetry of *Guenevere* and of *The Earthly Paradise*, but his condemnation of *The Earthly Paradise* as "a poetry of mood", "the poetry of despair", "romantic poetry which has entered the phase of decadence", poetry from which "the essential qualities of great art are absent"[20] is insufficiently substantiated, because — like most critics of *The Earthly Paradise* — he does not consider the poem as a whole, as a structure, and condemns it out of hand on the basis of a few "impressions" selected more or less at random.

We shall return later to a consideration of the standing of *The Earthly Paradise*. The poem as a whole is so obviously a carefully planned structure, that it is only by considering it from this point of view that we can fairly judge it. Only when we consider it as a deliberately, selectively planned edifice, can we see clearly why Morris rejected the first version of the *Prologue*, of which May Morris rightly remarks, "In spite of the swing of the rough verse this prologue is far below the quality of that ultimately published both in design and workmanship."[21] The rejection of the ballad stanza in favour of the narrative couplet is not a symptom of moving away from reality, but a move from the fragmentary, if vivid reality of the *Guenevere* poems to a more fully realised and complete interpretation of life. It is doubtless a matter of taste and temperament to prefer the *Guenevere* poems. Their poetic beauty is of a type which strikes us with a flash, and the impression of beauty probably does not increase with contemplation or re-reading. The beauty of *The Earthly Paradise* is more mature: it depends not on the striking nature of a few lines or images, on situations seen obliquely and incompletely, but rather on the relation of the part to the whole, the subordination of detail to entirety, the attempt to reach greater coherence and coordination. Browning grasped this very well when in a letter to Morris he compared *The Earthly Paradise* to a Handel suite.[22] This was what Morris intended and this is what we must look for.

Morris required in his *Prologue* to give a logical framework for his book, to give a setting of time and atmosphere. It is an essence of the ballad form that it concentrates on the immediate action and emotion without explaining, motivating or judging. For this purpose the ballad stanza is eminently suitable. It gives us vivid glimpses of reality, character, emotion. The often weird and magic charm of the ballad lies precisely in this tension between the extreme vividness of the glimpses of life in action, and the vagueness of cause and effect, of social orientation and conditioning. In this method lies the often-praised r e a l i s m of the ballad, but it must be remembered that it is a limited realism and not the only possible realism. Do we know w h y it was so important for Sir Patrick Spens to sail to Norway or for Douglas to ride into England? It is true, of course, that when we are reading the ballads, we do not care, we do not want to know why. But there is another kind of poetry which asks "Why?", which sets itself

a certain problem and tries to solve it. What this problem was in the case of *The Earthly Paradise* Morris has told us more explicitly in the body of his poem, and especially in the link narrative and in the link lyrics. The Envoi and the "Apology" are both too diffident and have tended to lead us astray. But we should beware when a poet speaks of himself as "The idle singer of an empty day." He may well be ironically underlining the philistine opinion of an indifferent public. Morris was conscious of the terrific gulf between the world of story he had been living in while writing his tales — the world of West European literary tradition — and the reality of Victorian England. Was it not trifling to turn from the "real world", whose claims he stresses in the link lyric for November, to the world of dream and fable? Yet he had wanted to express a certain truth in his book. "Of Heaven or Hell" he had no Miltonic power to sing, and in fact he had ceased or was ceasing to believe in a deity; what he had done in his book was to express the beauty of earth and to fight against the knowledge of death — as all the singers he levied contribution on had done. He was perhaps too diffident to claim this outspokenly as his purpose. Nevertheless his shy hope that his book may reach "the land of matters unforgot" (Envoi), must be taken as indicating his purpose to rescue the forgotten "hoarded seed" (Envoi) and to make something of significance of it "midmost the beating of the steely seas" ("Apology") for those "whose bitter hope hath made this book" (end of link narrative). If we examine the structure of the whole *Earthly Paradise* as Morris worked it out, I believe we shall reach a surer conclusion as to his purpose and achievement than by relying on the "Apology" alone.

The rejection of the original *Prologue* is the first piece of evidence regarding the nature of this purpose. The ballad narrative is lively, vivid, but the stanza form itself means that the transitions are too abrupt. Even the beginning is abrupt for a *Prologue* of some 640 stanzas —

> Oho! oho! whence come ye, Sirs,
> Drifted to usward in such guise...

And the narrative of the Wanderers, though full of incident, is lax and loquacious. The ballad stanza gives scope only for a limited kind of motivation, as when the Wanderers seek to avoid telling their tale:

> Ah, must we tell our tale again
> This once! and still we pray you, Sirs,
> Once only now! So had we fain
> Forget it for these last few years
>
> We walk above the ground...

Enjambement into the following stanza is necessary and even so the device is

clumsy. In the published *Prologue*, the epic method permits a more coherent account of the emotion which the Wanderers feel on looking back on their past life:

> Slowly as in pain,
> And with a hollow voice as from a tomb
> At first he tells the story of his doom,
> But as it grows, and once more hopes and fears,
> Both measureless, are ringing round his ears,
> His eyes grow bright, his seeming days decrease,
> For grief once told brings somewhat back of peace.
> (III, p.5)

The Wanderers in the rejected version embark on their quest almost accidentally, as the result of a chance dream. But in the final version, the journey is more profoundly motivated and the background and characters more adequately drawn. The most striking aspect of the *Prologue* as finally published is its sense of the historic determination of character and outlook. The leader, born in Byzantium, the son of a Norwegian warrior, partly brought up in Greece, later returned "to Norway, to my kin," and so knows both the Greek mythology and the "noble stories" of "Odin and his house of gold", the latter affecting him most after his return to Norway, the land "so scanty and so bare."

The story of the Wanderers in this final version, with its characterisation of those who later tell the tales of European medieval or saga provenance, gives a background of varied experience from which the single narratives can later naturally emerge. It has been pointed out that stories of immediate Celtic provenance are missing from *The Earthly Paradise*,[23] this being motivated perhaps by the early death of Nicholas (friend of Ralph the narrator of the *Prologue*), the Breton squire, whose learning had increased Ralph's longing to see "strange lands and things beyond belief."

It is true that only a few tales have specific Celtic "fairy" elements, such as *Ogier the Dane;* nevertheless, the whole conception of the Land beyond or in the distant sea, Atlantis or St. Brendan's Isle, is prominent in Celtic legend, and it is first mentioned in the *Prologue* in connection with Nicholas, who

> ... said moreover that an English knight
> Had had the Earthly Paradise in sight,
> And heard the songs of those that dwelt therein,
> But entered not, being hindered by his sin,
> (p.7)

which may refer to the Grail Legend and to Avalon. There can surely be no doubt that the exclusion of specifically Celtic legend was deliberate. For Morris, who did not know either Welsh or Gaelic, Celtic legend meant practically the Arthurian

legend. Whatever compulsion this had exercised over him and his friends in the *Guenevere* period, had now in Morris faded. He could scarcely have introduced the Grail legends without treating at least to some extent Christian themes in which he was no longer interested.[24] It was typical of Morris to prefer — and the preference began about this time — the legends of the North, of which he could have first-hand knowledge, though his mastery of Icelandic was never expert. Second-hand knowledge was something which Morris always rejected as insufficient. But of course the paramount reason for his reorientation towards the Northern tales was the part they played in his search for a real relationship between poetry and life.

As May Morris has pointed out, the two themes of *The Earthly Paradise* are the flight from the Black Death and the search for eternal happiness.[25]) But these themes of flight and search are treated by Morris in a human, earthly context, and so far as he felt it possible, Morris extends his tale to include as much of the world as he felt had contributed to the corpus of late medieval story-telling; the *Prologue,* in fact, in spite of its fairly definite setting in time, fixed by the meeting with Edward III in the Channel at the time of the Battle of Sluys (1340), carries us on through an indefinite length of years, to the time of the early explorations and discoveries. There is more than a hint of Mandeville and even of later centuries in the narrative of journeyings in the New World. Little attention has been devoted to the *Prologue* by critics, though it is worth considering it more closely.

The leader of the Wanderers, Rolf the Byzantine-educated Norwegian, and his friends Nicholas the Breton squire, and Laurence, the Swabian priest who knows the legends of Barbarossa, fired by Nicholas's tales and finally saddened by the pestilence which falls on the land, sit one September afternoon listening to the passing bell, and take their decision to put out to sea in a "fair long-ship". Because of the suspicion of the pestilence-ridden community, they must escape in secret and at night, and the atmosphere of their escape is expressed by Rolf, telling how he turned back

> . . . and saw the autumn moonlight fall
> Upon the new-built bastions of the wall
> Strange with black shadow and grey flood of light,
> And further off I saw the lead shine bright
> On tower and turret-roof against the sky . . .
>
> (p.11)

Along with Kirsten Erling, the heiress of the ship, who weds Nicholas, and with a company of about eighty men, they set out on the "Fighting Man", and purchase another ship in Bremen. On the way through the Channel they meet in with Edward III of England, a passage which Thompson — in the course of his

otherwise severe strictures on *The Earthly Paradise* — singles out for special praise, going so far as to say that Edward "is perhaps the only real character in the poem",[26] although as we shall see, this is a rather wilful exaggeration.

The passage where the Wanderers in their ships meet in with Edward's navy and converse with the king in the presence of the Black Prince and Chandos, is certainly very vivid, but its purpose is to give point to the last glimpse of Europe. Nicholas reminds the king, who has urged him to join him in his wars, that war and death at the hands of the French have been part of his life since childhood, when his nurse "on the winding road between the fields" was killed by a French arrow:

> I say, my Lord, that arrow-flight now seems
> The first thing rising clear from feeble dreams,
> And that was death; and the next thing was death,
> (p.19)

and all his life has been marked by encounters with death in war and plague.

The king lets them go with a safe-conduct, for

> the world is wide
> For you I say, for me a narrow space
> Betwixt the four walls of a fighting place.
> (p.20)

The Wanderers sail on to the ocean.

The artistic effect of this meeting is to stress the real world of power, statecraft and wealth which the Wanderers are leaving for a quest whose purpose is not even clear to themselves, but whose compulsion they cannot resist. While Edward Thompson is right in relating this quest to mid-Victorian romantic despair, he is surely wrong in condemning the "despair" of *The Earthly Paradise* as entirely subjective and escapist. Like his Wanderers, Morris was also seeking a solution and there is very much more in the poem than romantic self-indulgence.

In spite of the vividness of this particular picture, it is a misrepresentation of the *Prologue* to single out one episode and give it undue prominence, for the whole *Prologue* is a well-balanced and logical narrative, intended to provide an adequate setting for the tales, which will at once set the point of time, express the main theme, and have enough distinct life of its own to stand apart from the tales themselves. We may regret losing the one or two lovely lyrics contained in the original *Prologue*; but Morris is doubtless right in rejecting them and in weaving his final *Prologue* of so close a fabric — it is the technique of his decorative borders: the frame must never be so irregular or arresting as to draw attention from the picture or the page itself.

The *Prologue* now tells of the Wanderers' journey across the Atlantic to the shores of South America. The sea passages are in some ways reminiscent of *The*

Ancient Mariner, but though we can point to similarities of image or language, it is more a reminiscence of general impression than any more definite borrowing. Discussing Morris in relation to Keats, George Ford[27] speaks of this method of "borrowing", so characteristic of Morris. Morris apprehended in entirety, and made what he had learned his own, to be used as he needed it, without any self-conscious fear of "echoing" another poet. The beauty of some of these passages may surprise readers who have never thought of Morris as a poet of the sea.

When I saw
With measured steps the watch on towards me draw,
And in the moon the helmsman's peering face,
And 'twixt the cordage strained across my place
Beheld the white sail of the Fighting Man
Lead down the pathway of the moonlight wan . . .
Then would it seem an ill thing and a vain
To leave the hopeful world that we had known,
When all was o'er, hopeless to die alone
Within this changeless world of waters grey.

(p.24)

This is followed by a long passage describing the storm, whose beauty lies not in deliberate magic of words or expression, but in the clarity of the picture called up, a clarity not only of visual image, with which Morris is usually credited, but also of aural impression. The appropriateness of the language too is less easily to be appreciated on the printed page than when read aloud, and depends very much on the alliteration, which is no mere decoration but forms part of the verse, helping the onward sweep of the narrative by not being confined to a single line, but providing as it were a kind of enjambement. The passage beginning:

And from our rolling deck we looked about
Over the ridges of the dark grey seas
And saw the sun, setting in golden ease,
Smile out at last . . .
So onward did we sail,
But slowly, through the moonlit night and fair . . .

(p.25)

is a particularly complicated example of this use of stressed alliteration, suggesting most accurately the movement of the small, storm-tossed medieval craft. Such a concentrated pictorial effect which would simultaneously imply the passage of time and express the emotions of the protagonists would have been impossible in the ballad metre of the original *Prologue*.

There is also a greater deliberation and purposefulness in the development of the adventures the Wanderers undergo. There is a relation to the real experiences

of South American travellers in the alternation of the different levels of civilisation which they encounter, certainly reflected from Morris's wide, if at this period still desultory reading in history and ethnography. The finding of the shrine, the mountain-top exposed burial, the fraternisation with the forest tribes, the night attack by unknown enemies — all this has far greater depth than the unmotivated succession of adventures in the original *Prologue*. Disappointment follows disappointment, but still the Wanderers cannot forget the thought that is driving them on, and even when for a time they find peace among the primitive peoples, their obsession takes hold of them again when they see the far-off snowy peaks brought nearer by a strange sunset, which seems to belong to the land they seek. But each attempt leads to greater suffering and all end in failure, till at last they are accepted as gods by a city-dwelling, slave-owning people, whom they help in war — for their armour and weapons of steel are unknown in this land of copper and gold — and they live in prosperity, forgetting the passing of time until increasing age brings again the fear of death. A reflective passage which bridges the moment when the Wanderers become conscious of renewed longing, seems almost Wordsworthian in cadence[28]:

> Two gates unto the road of life there are,
> And to the happy youth both seem afar,
> Both seem afar; so far the past one seems,
> The gate of birth, made dim with many dreams,
> Bright with remembered hopes, beset with flowers;
> So far it seems he cannot count the hours
> That to this midway path have led him on...
> But when the downward journey is begun
> No more our feet may loiter; past our ears
> Shrieks the harsh wind scarce noted midst our fears,
> Till, ere we know it, our weak shrinking feet
> Have brought us to the end and all is done.
>
> (p.59-60)

This passage tells us much about the poet's intention, which would have been quite impossible within the terms of the first version of the *Prologue*; and also it allows us to see the inner seriousness of Morris's thought, which even in the course of writing *The Earthly Paradise* was driving him on to further explorations and discoveries of meaning and purpose in life.

The passage quoted also bridges the moment between apparent satisfaction and the discontent which blinds the Wanderers to the guile and deception that lead to their captivity. The persuasive agent of a more powerful people deceives them into setting out once again for the land of eternal youth, only to find to their horror, when they think they are about to receive the gift of youth, that they are surrounded by old men as well as young and that they are the victims of treachery designed to entrap the mysterious god-like strangers to sojourn in

the city. At length they escape from their living death by sea, and are cast up on the shores of a land whose people, descended from far-wandering Greeks, speak a language intelligible to them and receive them kindly. But the Wanderers, old and travel-worn and weary, can look forward now to nothing more than to end their days in peace among the Elders of the city, who welcome them for the tidings and tales they can bring of the land their ancestors knew.

The *Prologue* is followed by twenty-six lines of iambic couplets printed in double spacing, in which the poet again directly adresses the reader, speaking of his stories as of blossoms from a flowery land "Not plucked by me, not over-fresh or bright", which he now lays within this book to fade. He challenges the reader to mock him if he will, but no mockery will change his love of the land where these flowers once bloomed. There could be no clearer statement of Morris's intention to preserve and pass on as much of the story-telling tradition as he can. As the flowers in that land bloom at all seasons, so he will tell the tales month by month throughout the year.

In this way Morris motivates the monthly telling of the tales, the monthly progress of the link narrative, and relates it to himself, and thus to the link lyrics, of which there are twelve, one for each month. These lyrics are at once a personal comment on the year's passing, and, as Mackail pointed out, a personal autobiography.

The lyric for March begins vigorously with a strong line in trochaic rhythm: "Slayer of the winter, art thou here again?", but the vigour of the first stanza is not preserved throughout the following two, for at the outset Morris wants to strike the note of his whole poem, since it is "Death himself" who, "from the heart of sweet Forgetfulness, Bids us 'Rejoice, lest pleasureless ye die'." The conclusion however is not one of defeat, but of acceptance: "Stretch forth your open hands, and while ye live, Take all the gifts that Death and Life may give." And within the link narrative, although the season is that "When new-born March made fresh the hopeful air," the mood of the Wanderers is closer to "those days of later autumntide" which Morris describes in a very lovely passage that must be reminiscent of his journeyings between Red House and Queen Square in the years during which *The Earthly Paradise* was taking shape. The town-dweller delights in the golden haze over the city and the song of the wheeling rooks, which seem to deny the end of summer, then leaving the town, sees

> the withered scanty leaves fall down,
> The half-ploughed field, the flowerless garden-plot,
> The dark full stream by summer long forgot,
> The tangled hedges where, relaxed and dead,
> The twining plants their withered berries shed,
> And feels therewith the treachery of the sun,
> And knows the pleasant time is well-nigh done.
>
> (p.83)

This passage again underlines the ever-present cycle of new-springing life succeeded by death and decay.

The story-telling begins in March, according to old custom the beginning of the year. The chief priest of the Land begins his tale "of times long passed away, When men might cross a kingdom in a day, And kings remembered they should one day die, And all folk dwelt in great simplicity."

The story of *Atalanta's Race* is conceived in a mood much nearer to the Renaissance and Spenser than are the non-classical tales. The first stanza sets the highly-decorative note, very far both from the ballad mood and from the austere narrative style of the Prologue:

> Through thick Arcadian woods a hunter went,
> Following the beasts up, on a fresh spring day;
> But since his horn-tipped bow but seldom bent,
> Now at the noontide nought had happed to slay,
> Within a vale he called his hounds away
> Hearkening the echoes of his lone voice cling
> About the cliffs and through the beech-trees ring.
>
> (p.85)

But in spite of the decorative, almost aureate atmosphere, the narrative is swift, although there is little characterisation. A year or so later, Morris might have made more of the character of Atalanta, but in the present poem, one of the earliest written, the characters, though not shadowy, are rather conventional Renaissance types. Nevertheless, as Saintsbury so strongly — though in a different context — emphasised,[29] there is no suggestion of pastiche — Morris was simply writing in the manner he considered appropriate to the tale and to the teller, and writing it in his own way — not copying, but l i v i n g in the tradition he was for the moment following. And although this is one of the less strikingly original of the tales, it has memorable passages: the sun-gilded forest scenes, the temple of Venus on the shore with the tides that daily wash the marble feet of the statue, and the delicately-touched apparition of Venus herself, a Renaissance-like conception that reminds us of Mark Alexander Boyd's aureate "wife engendrit of the sea."* The almost abrupt ending of the poem solves the problem of rationalising Atalanta's character, which is scarcely touched on by Morris, by means of a swift transition from the moment of Milanion's victory to a paean of praise, the three stanzas of which conclude the poem:

> Shatter the trumpet, hew adown the posts!
> Upon the brazen altar break the sword —

*) Mark Alexander Boyd (1563-1601), "Sonet" ("Fra banc to banc, fra wod to wod, I rin.")

confirming the Renaissance impression with their strong reminiscence, atmospherical rather than literal, of Spenser's wedding hymns.

Later we shall come to the question of why Morris, in the concluding narratives of the last volume, returned to the classical (Bellerophon) and the Venus motifs, at a time when his new, compelling interest in the North had already led him, in *The Lovers of Gudrun,* to write a tale that almost burst the framework of *The Earthly Paradise.* Doubtless he felt bound for the sake of artistic completeness to conclude with tales in at least a similar, if not identical mode to the Atalanta and Perseus poems of the first volume. But the Venus of the later tales is a late medieval conception, closer to the Northern witch-wife than is the Renaissance goddess of Atalanta.[30]

The tale of Atalanta is in rhyme royal stanzas, regular without being monotonous, the lines rich and full with comparatively little enjambement, and told rather as a series of pictures than of events:

> And there he stood when all the sun was down,
> Nor had he moved, when the dim golden light . . .
> Had left the world to seeming hopeless night,
> Nor would he move the more when wan moonlight
> Streamed through the pillars for a little while,
> And lighted up the white Queen's changeless smile . . .
> (p.98)

This is a more deliberately decorative use of this form than is Chaucer's, but it is not the only use Morris can make of the stanza, as we shall see later.

The second tale, told while March "was a-dying through soft days and sweet", is narrated by a Wanderer, and is a fairy-tale, taken compositely as was Morris's manner from various sources, from the often-used *Gesta Romanorum,* from a 13th-century romance, which Morris elsewhere translated, from Grimm's fairy-tales; but the material is selected to serve the poet's purpose. Appropriately narrated in the romance iambic four-stress couplet, it is indeed such a tale

> As folk with us will tell in every vale
> About the yule-tide fire . . . .

A momentary homesickness overcomes the Wanderer as he recollects the winter nights at home. His story — unlike the story of the Wanderers themselves — will be "a tale of conquering destiny."

It is this tale, more than the Atalanta, which sets the true note of *The Earthly Paradise.* Comparatively long, it consists of approximately 2,000 lines of rapid octosyllabic couplets. The narrative, though it moves swiftly, is not purely on the external plane and there are considerable subtleties of effect. It is a fairy tale, but like all fairy tales, it has a moral. Morris typically points the moral,

not by means of true allegory or symbolism, which he rarely if ever used in his poetry,* but by deepening the realism both of the external surroundings, the human relationships, and the moral problems. The well-known tale of the King who sought by murder and trickery to rid himself of a base-born successor teaches the vanity of a life mis-spent in pursuing an unworthy aim. It begins in true fairy-tale style:

> A king there was in days of old
> Who ruled wide lands, nor lacked for gold . . .

and who spies one day at the feast a strange old man with gleaming eyes. Like a later character who appears in *The Earthly Paradise*,* the old man is star-gazer, who keeps sheep "Upon the thymy, wind-swept down", and he has come to forewarn the king that his successor will be of no royal blood. To convince the king, he promises to reveal secrets known only to the king himself, and in a close "Shaded with grey-leaved olive-trees", the secrets, which show the king's true character, are told — his guilt of the deaths of those who threatened his power. Caring nothing for the king's threats, the sage leaves, "With face turned toward his windy down", and the king returns thoughtfully to the hall.

Time passes, the king's wife is with child, and as in the well-known fairy tale, the king is hunting when he is benighted in the poor forest hut where a child is also about to be born. He dreams strange dreams, waking up with the words "Take! take!" and the second time "Give up! give up!" echoing in his ear, and in the third dream, the sage appears "with a mocking smile and grim." On waking the king finds the woodman mourning his dead wife, who is lying with a new-born son beside her. John Drinkwater has drawn attention[31] to the passage in which Morris describes the scene in the hovel, showing us extreme poverty "with tragic intensity whilst eliminating all the inessential ugliness" — "with precision almost fierce in its fidelity to truth, yet beautiful because concerned with the simple and essential only." But the king is unmoved by the tragedy, and he purchases the child. There is implied social comment on the woodman —

> The carle's rough face, at clink of gold,
> Lit up, though still did he behold
> The wasted body lying there . . .

and on the king's squire, who casts the money to the floor in front of the woodman,

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*) Apart from a few basic symbols which were of particular significance to Morris, cf. infra p. 42 footnote.

*) The enigmatical Gregory the Star-Gazer in *The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon.*

But turning smiled a grim hard smile
To see the carle his pieces count
Still weeping.

(III, p.118)

This "stark Samuel the squire" becomes the instrument of the king's attempt to escape fate, and drops the cradle into the stream. After the lapse of years the king is again hunting when he comes to a mill lower down the stream, described in a passage remarkable for its realisation of sound, its contrast of "the oily smooth millhead" with the noise of the mill, whose walls

Shook to the great wheel's measured clack,
And grumble of the gear within.

(p.122-3)

Michael, the foundling, is clearly characterised, fair-haired, grey-eyed and fearless, but the king's admiration changes to horror when he realises that this is the infant he had hoped was drowned. Again Samuel, with the knife adorned with the motto "Strike! for no dead man cometh back!" is called in to murder the lad, and leads him deep into the wood, where the murderer is hindered from making sure of his deed by the sudden sound of a bell in the midst of the forest. Returning alone to the palace, Samuel,

not so old in years as sin,
Died ere the winter, and within
The minster choir was laid asleep,
With carven saints his head to keep.

(p.137)

But Michael is saved by the monks beyond the forest, and for a third time is found and recognised by the king. The well-known fairy-tale convention of the substituted letter is used in the final section of the tale to great advantage, and the Princess Cicely and her maiden are drawn with delicacy and graceful humour in the fairy-tale garden of the Castle of the Rose. The happy ending, we see, comes not from magic but from the wit and courage of the hero and heroine. Just as the Princess Cicely is more credible than Tennyson's artificially Gothic "Princess", so Morris's countryside is more true to life than Tennyson's enamelled scenery. It is peopled by real harvesters, who rest from their labours beneath an ancient elm, and feast on

Slices of white cheese, specked with green,
And green-striped onions and ryebread,
And summer apples faintly red . . .

And even the king at the end realises the uselessness of striving against fate, and accepts his heir —

— For he is of an ancient name
That needeth not the clink of gold —
The ancientest the world doth hold —

in other words, the race of Adam; and the story ends with the twittering of the autumn thrush roused to song by the merry-making.

This tale, in spite of the dark moments and dream-forebodings, is fundamentally happy, and one of its moral lessons is the proper fairy-tale moral of self-reliance, while the only regret or melancholy is the king's recognition of his wasted life, which is however only lightly stressed.

But the melancholy comes back in the link narrative, where the audience, carried back by the tale to the days of their youth, find it hard to realise that they too are as old as the story-teller, who seems to them so like the old men they had gazed on in their young days "as on carven toys." The "fresh-stirred memories, So bitter-sweet" die away, and the scene ends as "the great moon rose upon the earth."

The April lyric continues the theme of change and regret, and if the second tale holds echoes of Coleridge, the second and third stanzas of the lyric have a hint both of Fitzgerald and of Rossetti:

When Summer brings the lily and the rose,
She brings us fear . . .

and even spring, the "life of all the year", makes the poet

Still long for that which never draweth nigh.
(p.169)

The succeeding tale, *The Doom of King Acrisius,* is the Perseus legend, told at length in about 3,500 lines of iambic five-stress couplets. The story of Danae, Perseus and Andromeda was one which, like those of Cupid and Psyche and of Pygmalion, haunted the imagination not only of Morris but also of his friend Burne-Jones. Yet none of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise* on these themes can be considered among the best, nor do they seem to express the essential Morris, however often they may have been taken as typical of his poetry. His treatment of them is broad, spacious, but somewhat flat — less striking and less immediately human than his fairy tales, his weird tales of magic, or his Northern tales. Surely it is these Greek tales that Thompson means by the narratives "which never mend their pace"[32] and perhaps of them that Morris himself was thinking when he wrote "they're too flabby, damn it!",[33] for it is precisely to them that these two criticisms can apply. The flabbiness and long-windedness of *The Doom of King Acrisius* derive mainly from the lack of characterisation; and this lack of characterisation appears in Morris's work where he has not t h o u g h t o u t a situation f r e s h l y for himself. It may seem strange that in the case

of a tale which played so large a part in the art plans of the two friends,* Morris should not have arrived at some conception of the story which casts new light on it, either from the viewpoint of setting or characterisation. Perhaps here it is the same psychological barrier operating which made him to the end of his life intolerant of any criticism whatever of Burne-Jones's art — an art, which though it grew more polished, can scarcely be said to have developed.[34]

In Morris's treatment of this particular tale, the most successful effects are not those of character — both Danae and Perseus remain much more wooden than Medea and Jason in his earlier published poem, while the gods and goddesses are quite without individuality — but effects of scenery, and especially, in the journeyings of Perseus, effects of space and swift change from the "desert icy hills" of Thule back to the lands of Africa. Yet these are all for Morris imaginary scenes and journeys, never seen by his own eye — he never travelled in Greece. Doubtless if Morris had known the lands of Greece as well as he knew and loved the North and West of Europe, his classical sources would have come to life as did his medieval and Scandinavian. In the case of the unfinished tale of Aristomenes, composed at the time of *The Earthly Paradise,* we are told on the authority of Mackail[37] that Morris felt the story was too historical to accommodate itself to vaguely romantic treatment, and that to deal with it properly he should first have to visit Greece. It is surely this absence of personal knowledge and experience of Eastern Europe and Asia which prevented Morris from infusing into his classical characters some of the vivid reality of his medieval Western and Northern Europeans.**

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*) The Danae and Perseus story, as part of the original scheme for the great illustrated *Earthly Paradise,* the "book of the age", haunts Burne-Jones's work throughout a period of many years. He painted a small picture of Danae in 1872 — Danae and the Brazen Tower — a larger in 1879, a Perseus and the Graiae in oils in 1882 and in 1888 a still larger Danae and the Brazen Tower, while other pictures from the Perseus tale include the Baleful Head, showing a "medieval" Perseus and Andromeda gazing at the head of Medusa reflected in a garden-well, the whole depicted as might be a manuscript illustration to the *Romaunt de la Rose.* Still other pictures from the series were unfinished at the painter's death. In *Sir Edward Burne-Jones,* a not very penetrating but painstakingly full "Record and Review" by Malcolm Bell[35], the author remarks: "All the story of Perseus, and that of Cupid and Psyche, are presented in the medieval manner in which Morris saw them. The Brazen Tower is in his spirit, translated into form and colour by the painter." However true this may be of Burne-Jones's treatment of the classical legends, and however true it may be in general of the way in which he dealt with Morris's medieval conception, it is not entirely true to say that this is Morris's method in the classical tales of *The Earthly Paradise.* The "medieval" treatment of classical theme is seen in Morris to perfection in *Scenes from the Fall of Troy.*[36] Perhaps in seeking to differentiate the tales told by the dwellers in the Western land from those told by the Wanderers from medieval Europe, he accentuated the classical content of the former tales and hence achieved the Renaissance atmosphere to which reference has already been made.

**) Another tale originally intended for *The Earthly Paradise* and written at this time, though published only posthumously[38] is the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, a finer poem than *The Doom of King Acrisius,* with firmer characterisation, deeper feeling, greater dramatic intensity, and varied with lovely songs. There does not seem to be any very definite explanation of why Morris omitted this from *The Earthly Paradise* and why he never

The link narrative as usual deals with the effect of the story on the listeners, and it is perhaps appropriate to the rather inconclusive atmosphere of the tale just finished that it leads the old men to think

> how all stories end with this,
> Whatever was the midway gain and bliss:
> "He died, and in his place was set his son;
> He died, and in a few days everyone
> Went on their way as though he had not been..."
> (p.239)

And this gives rise to one of the few mystical reflections in *The Earthly Paradise,* when the tale of the Greek gods leads the Wanderers to ask if some after life is not perhaps awaiting them. But this remains merely a musing, and in fact any kind of speculation on an after-life was by this time quite foreign to Morris's thought — perhaps the best expression of Morris's already materialist philosophic outlook is that quoted by Mackail as "the confession of his own faith" from a letter of consolation to a friend, written only a few years later than the *Earthly Paradise* period, in 1876: "Think that life is not empty nor made for nothing, and that the parts of it fit one into another in some way; and that the world goes on, beautiful and strange and dreadful and worshipful."[40] This, rather than the theme of inevitable death, is the underlying lesson of *The Earthly Paradise,* and this is the fundamental

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published it. He may have regretted the "romantic" treatment, and felt it would not provide the contrast with the medieval tales, which he was seeking. May Morris says of it simply that it was fair copied for the printers and finished up "before it was rejected by the author as too weighty for the general scheme of The Earthly Paradise."[39] Nevertheless it is only about 2,000 lines long, so that mere length could not have been the criterion. It would seem that the more static Perseus and some of the other tales were preferred, perhaps as providing a greaterl contrast to the vitality of the medieval and Norse tales. Perhaps, too, there were personal reasons for omitting it, with its plangent lament for lost love, perhaps too near to his own situation and too much an expression of the deep feeling only hinted at in the lyrics, for Morris to wish at that moment to publish it. It is possible that this is the meaning to be attached to the word "weighty".*) However this may be, the *Doom of King Acrisius* also contains some fine lines which may also have an autobiographical reference:

> Love while ye may; if twain grow into one
> 'Tis for a little while; the time goes by,
> No hatred 'twixt the pair of friends doth lie,
> No troubles break their hearts — and yet, and yet —
> How could it be? we strove not to forget;
> Rather in vain to that old time we clung,
> Its hopes and wishes round our hearts we hung;
> We played old parts, we used old names — in vain;
> We go our ways, and twain once more are twain.
> (III, p.229)

See also discussion on p. 36-8.

attitude of the mature Morris: "O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it... The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!"[41] As if to stress the greater importance of the earthly setting than any speculation on an after-life, the ending of this link passage especially stresses the contrasting beauties of life:

> With no harsh words their musing was undone,
> The garden birds sang down the setting sun,
> A rainy wind from 'twixt the trees arose
> And sang a mournful counterpart to those;
> And, ere the rain amidst the dark could fall,
> The minstrel's song was ringing through the hall.
>
> (p.239)

The following tale, told by a Wanderer, *The Proud King,* is also introduced by a link narrative describing the teller's journey on one occasion to England, where he heard the tale, a journey whose memory is still fresh, for he, clearer than all the memories of his years of wandering, can see "the little houses of an English town" in the fens, with high above the gables of a newly-built minster:

> Yea, I heard withal
> In the fresh morning air, the trowels fall
> Upon the stone, a thin noise far away;
> For high up wrought the masons on that day...
>
> (p.241)

— lines which are a particularly attractive realisation of an idea to which Morris often returned, in his imaginative works and in his lectures, and which he had already treated in the early prose *Story of an Unknown Church,* — the moment of creation of a beautiful building.

The tale of *The Proud King* is, like *The Doom of King Acrisius,* a story of the punishment of pride, but far more direct and human in treatment. Written like the *Atalanta* story in rhyme royal, it is Chaucerian rather than Spenserian in atmosphere and shows a great mastery of the stanza for narrative purpose and for delineating psychological development. Jovinian — unlike King Robert of Sicily in Longfellow's very wooden tale on the same theme — is a real character. Morris's characters are always most complete when he has a concrete conception of their economic background and political function. Jovinian the king is not proud simply because it is his "character"; his pride is the result of his whole life and circumstance. The thoughts of the proud king, counting up his wealth and power, are those of a monarch at a particular stage of increasing

feudal power, and it is the sense that this power is inevitably growing that causes his impious conclusion:

> My sire indeed was called a mighty king,
> Yet in regard of mine, a little thing
> His kingdom was; moreover his grandsire
> To him was but a prince of narrow lands,
> Whose father, though to things he did aspire
> Beyond most men, a great knight of his hands,
> Yet ruled some little town where now there stands
> The kennel of my dogs; then may not I
> Rise higher yet, nor like poor wretches die?
>
> (p.243)

This passage is a very accurate description of the stages in the consolidation of feudal power; and its effect is to strengthen the realism and typicality of the tale.

It is noteworthy that in this story of the miraculous punishing of the king's pride by supernatural means, Morris stresses throughout social and psychological realism and merely narrates the supernatural passages without authorial comment. It can already be seen that the "God" who arranges such punishment does not interest Morris — he is interested in the human aspect of the tale, and in the human motivation of his personages, in the moral and not the theological lesson — whereas Longfellow, in his version of the legend in *Tales of a Wayside Inn,* accepts the conventional religious attitude to the events related.[42]

Some striking features of Morris's realistic treatment of the story are, for example: the fact that the morning after his over-night thoughts of pride, Jovinian has forgotten his conclusion that he may well be immortal; the dramatic irony of various details, such as his fleeting thought, on plunging into the pool in the forest, that

> It seemed that moment worth his royal crown
> To hide there from the burning of the day —

when his bathe was in actual fact to cost him his crown; the echoing, in the thought of the forest ranger, sitting at ease before and after he is visited by the naked and desperate king, of that very contentment with life which Jovinian himself had felt just before his punishment; the moment when, naked and a beggar, Jovinian holds in his hand the coin given him by the counsellor who has spurned him — and sees on it by the red glare of the torch "the image of a King, himself."

The link narrative following this tale and concluding the first volume sums up the lesson of the three preceding stories, which have dealt with the punishing of kingly pride — and the Wanderers recall the attitude of their own people at

home to kingly pride and power. It is the attitude of those very Icelandic settlers whose literature was so soon to win Morris completely by its realistic and unfaltering attitude towards life. They remember

> . . . the fir-built Norway hall
> Filled with the bonders waiting for the fall
> Of the great roof whereto the torch is set;
> The laughing mouth, beneath the eyes still wet
> With more than sea-spray, as the well-loved land
> The freeman still looks back on, while his hand
> Clutches the tiller, and the eastern breeze
> Grows fresh and fresher: many things like these
> They talked about, till they seemed young again,
> Remembering what a glory and a gain
> Their fathers deemed the death of kings to be,
>
> (p.265)

In this passage we may see a foreshadowing of the coming transition in Morris from preoccupation with the medieval-Renaissance heritage of story to the saga. He is already beginning to feel that the stories of kings and gods will not be sufficient, that in the end the poet must come back to man himself and to man's real life.

The deliberate construction of *The Earthly Paradise* becomes even clearer in the second volume, where themes, treatment, metre and motifs are intricately interchanged and interwoven. The long, fully-treated, and "clear", daylight tale of *Cupid and Psyche,* in a loose and leisurely enjambed heroic couplet measure, is followed by the short, grim story of *The Writing on the Image,* in four-stress couplets, that again by the sad and inconclusive tale of Admetus and Alcestis, leading to the heavily decorated story of the loathly Lady of the Land, the tales of unavoidable, ironic fate culminating in the despair of *The Son of Croesus.* These two last-mentioned tales, both composed in a sluggishly moving rhyme royal, show respectively the vanity of love and the vanity of loyal friendship in a world where love turns to loathing and friendship to unwitting betrayal. The sharp and bitter version of *The Watching of the Falcon,* in four-stress couplets, is succeeded by the rather undramatic telling of the Pygmalion story. The volume concludes with the dream-like *Ogier the Dane,* which in spite of its difference of manner and method brings us back to the theme of Psyche, the immortalising of the loved one, though in the form of Celtic fairy legend instead of classical mythology.

The May lyric relates the tales which are to come in the volume to the poet's own experience. Waking early in the morning, he imagines that he sees the vanishing train of the masque of love, disappearing as the day dawns, while in the gathering light all that can be seen in the growing brightness are the two

shivering figures of Eld and Death, as they steal past among the trees. Yet the final effect of this lyric is not melancholy, pessimistic or languid — it offers us a sober assessment, a realisation and acceptance of transience, a new use and application of the traditional figures of the masque.

The Story of Cupid and Psyche is introduced by a link narrative full of the atmosphere of May, where in contrast to the weary elders, youths and maidens gather may-blossom and wander over the meadows. An elder reads from a book a tale "as lovely as the lovely May", blown like seed in the wind "to help the need Of barren isles."

The Psyche story was one of the first planned and one of those for which Burne-Jones's illustrations were very completely worked out, so we must regard it as part of the original and central conception of the book. Yet Morris was no sooner to have told these classical tales for *The Earthly Paradise* than he left them for ever, seeking immediately other themes and other media, certainly realising that the smooth, sunlit perfection which he was capable of achieving in them could not be developed further, that he must make a new departure. Nevertheless it would I think be a mistake to assume that Morris included the classical tales in *The Earthly Paradise* merely from habit or lack of energy to discard them. The idea that Morris was a careless artist in poetry has been overstressed. A study of the succession of the *Earthly Paradise* tales must lead to the conclusion that the contrasts are deliberate, and without the classical tales the whole scheme would lose its logic and effectiveness — nor would we see so clearly just in what lies the advantage of the "northern" or "medieval".

In this tale, and in the tale similar in mood and with a closely contrasted theme, the omitted *Orpheus and Eurydice,* the poet attains a greater narrative mastery than in the Atalanta or the Perseus tale. In a more swiftly moving heroic couplet than in the Perseus poem, the narrative also moves more swiftly, and — like the Orpheus tale — is embellished with inserted lyrics, the second of which, sung by the unseen voices to Psyche, "O pensive, tender maid, downcast and shy", returning to the theme of mortality, echoes the mood of the link lyric for May and gives the solution that only love permits man to forget death —

> Yes, ye are made immortal on the day
> Ye cease the dusty grains of time to weigh.
>
> (p.21-2)

Why did Morris include the Psyche story and omit *Orpheus and Eurydice? Orpheus* was first published in 1915 in the final volume of *Collected Works,* having been completed but rejected by Morris for *The Earthly Paradise as* "too weighty" (cf. supra p. 31n.). The tales published in the *Collected Works* as Part I and Part II, in Vols. III and IV respectively, were originally published in 1868

as one volume; but what had originally been planned as the second volume proved to be so lengthy that it was broken up into parts III and IV and issued separately in 1870. Mackail says that in the second volume, i.e. Part III of *The Earthly Paradise,* "only three belonged to the original scheme... To fill the remaining three places, two short Greek stories, *Acontius and Cydippe* and *The Death of Paris,* were brought up from his reserve stories and replaced the long and elaborate tales of Orpheus and Theseus, for which there was not room."[43] There was not room for the simple reason that Morris now had a new interest, and had written a much longer tale than any of the others, from Icelandic sources, which at the risk of destroying the fabric of *The Earthly Paradise,* he included in the Third Part — *The Lovers of Gudrun.*

Nor could considerations of length alone have made him reject *Orpheus,* for as published by May Morris it only comes to about forty pages, whereas *Psyche* takes up seventy pages and *Acontius and Cydippe* is only seven pages shorter than *Orpheus.* The operative word would seem to be May Morris's "weighty", for *Orpheus* is the tale of lost and hopeless love, of the singer who, "wrapped about in grief and strong intent" sought Eurydice in Hades. In *Psyche,* Morris depicts the grief and sorrow of the woman who seeks her lover; but he may have felt that his depiction of the grief and sorrow of the man who has lost his love was too personal, too outspoken. Certainly if Thompson and others are right in assuming that about this period Morris underwent the personal tragedy of losing or doubting the love of his wife[44] — or of finding her response inadequate — it is in Orpheus that he has expressed that loss:

> Until at last the pillars of the hall
> Mid a dim twilight did he now behold
> Grow slowly from the dark void; quenched and cold
> The fire was; great drops fell from on high
> Into the laver, and a strange wild cry
> Rang through the lone place — O Eurydice
> My love, my love!...
>
> (XXIV, p.250)

The whole poem is a dramatisation of the despair and longing of Orpheus, and the inserted lyric pieces are among the most exquisite Morris ever wrote.

In this sense, the tale is certainly more "weighty" than any others in *The Earthly Paradise* apart from the *Lovers of Gudrun.* On the other hand, if it is an expression of personal loss and pain, then in itself it refutes Thompson's supposition that the Morris of the *Earthly Paradise* period had suffered a decline in poetic power as a direct result of his disappointment and disillusionment with life and love.

While we may regret that the late publication of *Orpheus and Eurydice* has led to its neglect, Morris may well have felt that in its concentration on emotion

rather than on narrative the poem did not fit into his conception of contrasting tales. Only in the link lyrics of *The Earthly Paradise* do we hear the note of deep personal feeling which echoes through the whole of the *Orpheus* tale.

In comparison with the *Orpheus* tale the story of Psyche is less concentrated and Psyche is a far more passive heroine than Morris's later active and self-reliant maidens. It would seem that Morris was here very much under the original need to provide a series of incidents which could be illustrated. Yet there is a great deal of skilful composition — the three contrasted shrines of the goddesses; the hot midsummer cornfields that lead to the temple of Ceres, the green oak-grove of Juno, the pleasaunce of Venus; above all the description of Psyche's visit to the Netherworld:

> No wind blew there, there was no bird or tree
> Or beast, and dim grey flowers she did but see
> That never faded in that changeless place...
> For all but dreams of light that land did lack.
>
> (IV, p.64)

In the garden after the tale, the elders sit on in the dark, thinking of love, while the minstrels sing songs "in praise of May." The following story stands out in contrast. Told by Laurence the Swabian priest, the tale of *The Writing on the Image* is the first of the ballad-like gruesome tales which introduce a note from the Middle Ages that has so far been heard only faintly in the tale of *The Man Born to be King*. It is a tale, says Laurence, that

> ...made me shudder in the times gone by,
> When I believed in many a mystery
> I thought divine, that now I think, forsooth,
> Men's own fears made, to fill the place of truth
> Within their foolish hearts...

Appropriately for a story of medieval provenance (Morris may have taken it either from the *Gesta Romanorum* or directly from William of Malmesbury,[45] it is told in the rapid four-beat romance couplet, and plunges straight into the narrative of the mysterious image in the square of Rome, and the Scholar who sought to penetrate its secret. It has been suggested that some of the *Earthly Paradise* tales are perfunctory[46], but although this tale is short, it is not perfunctory. Its tense atmosphere, the ugliness of its subject — human greed — is a foil to the rich delineation o love in the Psyche tale, as well as a subtle repetition of the greed motif we have seen in Psyche's sisters. But the atmosphere of this tale is very different from that of Psyche, and in spite of its fantastic plot, it has a much closer relation to reality. Its method is that of picking out sharp realistic detail:

So when at midnight he did wake,
Pickaxe and shovel did he take,
And going to that now silent square,
He found the mark his knife made there,
And quietly with many a stroke
The pavement of the place he broke:
And so, the stones being set apart,
He 'gan to dig with beating heart,
And from the hole in haste he cast
The marl and gravel; till at last,
Full shoulder high, his arms were jarred,
For suddenly his spade struck hard
With clang against some metal thing . . .

(p.78)

Though the concrete, precise detail of this reminds us of the poetry of the *Defence of Guenevere,* the tense, fiercely concentrated narrative is far removed from the rather vaguely documented personal monologues of the earlier period, for it has the point and "attack" of a fable and uses the method of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale,* with an echo of its sick horror.

The story hastens swiftly to its conclusion, and yet Morris pauses long enough to give a characterisation of the Scholar, which goes rather beyond the conventional interpretation of this moral tale, and relates it to the Faustus or Tannhauser motif, for the Scholar is willing to try his fortune, whatever the venture may bring him. Although in the legend piously preserved by the Christian monks for pointing the moral of greed, no positive side of the Scholar's character has been suggested, Morris in his working out cannot but convey something of the nature of the Scholar's true quest:

Pondering how he could come to know
What all these marvellous matters meant,
About the hall the Scholar went,
Trembling, though nothing moved as yet;
And for awhile did he forget
The longings that had brought him there
In wondering at these marvels fair —

(p.82)

and to this or a similar theme — i.e., the forbidden fruits of knowledge and of pleasure — Morris returns again in the final tale of *The Earthly Paradise.* Nevertheless, here, according to his usual practice throughout *The Earthly Paradise,* he remains faithful to the letter of his source tale, and concludes it with the abrupt ending in death and silence —

And midst the marvels of that hall
This Scholar found the end of all —

leading to the discussion of the listeners after the tale:

> ... for awhile they talked
> Of other tales of treasure-seekers balked,
> And shame and loss for men insatiate stored,
> Nitocris' tomb, the Niblungs' fatal hoard,
> The serpent-guarded treasures of the dead...
>
> (p.85)

After the rather gloomy musing of the link narrative on "how by folly men have gained a name", there follows the very lovely and concrete June lyric, of which May Morris writes beautifully in her Introduction to this volume[47]: "The 'June' verses for 'The Earthly Paradise', written before we had made the acquaintance of our beloved Oxfordshire home (i.e.Kelmscott), seem indeed to embody the poet's vision of the far-off village he was soon to visit by the merest chance. The upper reaches of the Thames had always touched my father closely, and in the quiet music of these verses the very air of the valley where the Thames is young, comes floating with aromatic fragrance. Knee-deep grows the flowered grass in early June in those rich water-side meadows, and the perfume of the blossom seems indescribably mingled with the birds' song, with the soft fall of water over the weir, and the quivering of the warm air alive with butterflies and wandering sheaths of the elm-blossom — all one delicious entanglement of charm."

According to Mackail, these verses and the verses for August on Sinodun Hill recorded a summer holiday at Oxford in 1867 when the Morrises and the Burne-Joneses took part in "excursions on the river in golden summer weather, long remembered as the happiest in more lives than one."[48] Surely, in any case, "melancholy" is not the exact word for the mood of these verses:

> See, we have left our hopes and fears behind
> To give our very hearts up unto thee;*
> What better place than this then could we find
> By this sweet stream that knows not of the sea,
> That guesses not the city's misery,
> This little stream whose hamlets scarce have names,
> This far-off, lonely mother of the Thames?
>
> (p.87)

As May Morris suggests[49], this melancholy "that all the critics of the poems dwelt on," is not "a mere acceptance of the swift ending of earthly joys. It was surely the outward and visible sign of something deeper and graver at work in his nature... His sense of the continuity of human life, an idea which in

*) "thee" is of course "June".

all its majesty and weight finds full utterance in the later years of anxious work, is present through the writings of earlier days, though but dimly felt and often manifested only by the restlessness and dissatisfaction with the swift passing of beauty that has given rise, as suggested above, to the contemporary criticism on the philosophy of pleasure in his verse of this period. We, with our knowledge of the man as preacher and writer on problems that had not then begun to stir English middle-class life, at least can see how the sense of responsibility to the race of man, so insistent in the preaching of Morris's later life, was latent here, though rarely expressed, and showing itself principally in the unrest and melancholy that hang like gossamer over the golden land of the Earthly Paradise."

It is typical of Morris that even in the midst of the calm river scene —

> O June, O June, that we desired so,
> Wilt thou not make us happy on this day?

— he must still recall "the city's misery"; and it is indeed his sense of the existence of this misery which underlies the pensiveness, the feeling that this present experience is a "rare happy dream."

As if Morris were still lingering in thought on the banks of the Thames, the link narrative sets the Elders and Wanderers on the banks of a fair stream, feasting in the lime-trees' shade, and there are perhaps other echoes from the Thames excursions:

> . . . but when the water-hen
> Had got at last to think them harmless men,
> And they with rest and pleasure and old wine,
> Began to feel immortal and divine . . .

And though the story now to be told will be of "a glorious end", yet it will be sad, since

> on the end of glorious life it dwells,
> And striving through all things to reach the best
> Upon no midway happiness will rest.
>
> (p.88)

The story is *The Love of Alcestis,* told in easily-flowing iambic five-stress couplets. Admetus, "the wise Thessalian" is sitting by the grape harvest in complete contentment, when suddenly a stranger appears on the road seeking sanctuary. Admetus accepts him, though the stranger says he must be nameless. He is a handsome youth, and excels with the bow and at the lyre, yet the king has strange doubts about the newcomer whom he accepts as shepherd, for

Morns there were when he the man would meet,
His hair wreathed round with bay and blossoms sweet,
Gazing distraught into the brightening east,

or again he would strike a sudden chord on his lyre which would hush the mirth of the company to weeping, while

only he
Stood upright, looking forward steadily
With sparkling eyes as one who cannot weep,
Until the storm of music sank to sleep.

(p.92-3)

When Admetus returns dejected from a journey, he comes upon the herdsman by the river-side, singing a song contrasting the folly of short-lived human ambition with the beauty of the earth:

O dwellers on the lovely earth,
Why will ye break your rest and mirth
To weary us with fruitless prayers . . .

(p.95)

Having set the scene rather at length, and got the burdensome part of the plot, with the setting of Admetus' task, out of the way, Morris's imagination begins to work, and the story moves on a level of strange dreams and illusions, which the poet perhaps found necessary here to keep a mythological tale, with direct intervention of the gods, on a plane where he could connect it with human life. As in the later *Lady of the Land,* the passage in which his bride is kept from Admetus is told in a lush, morbid, perhaps decadent manner, not unrelated to the Poe-like morbidity of some of Morris's early work noted by Thompson, e.g. the prose *Lindenborg Pool.*[50] Coming to his bride, Admetus finds his way barred by a serpent:

A huge dull-gleaming dreadful coil that rolled
In changing circles on the pavement fair . . .

He slinks away in fear, and lies outside the door till morning. Morris, however, was not really at home with any kind of patho-psychological symbols and the incident remains simply an incident.* The breaking of the spell is treated rather

*) Both Thompson and Philip Henderson, editor of Morris's letters, have suggested Freudian interpretations either of such symbols or of the various dreams related by Morris and his intimates, and see in them evidence above all of sexual dissatisfaction and frustration. But the symbols would seem rather to be a relic of the literary Pre-Raphaelitism from which Morris — unlike Rossetti — freed himself when he found in Norse mythology a set of symbols that expressed for him the basic economic and social realities. He became ever more interested in illustrating those realities rather than in plumbing the depths of the sub-conscious. The dreams,

perfunctorily, though the final leavetaking of the disguised Apollo is clear and definite, and the return to every-day life, to the homeward-bound shepherd and the girl "singing for labour done and sweet content Of coming rest," reminds us that for Morris the sanity and meaning of life lay in the real world of work.

The next part of the tale shows Morris's skill in treating narrative lapse of time, images of violence being used to point the contrast of the peaceful passing of Admetus' happy reign, the laurel wreath of the victorious bard being set against the conqueror's diadem

> blest now
> By lying priests, soon, bent and bloody, hung
> Within the thorn by linnets well besung,
> Who think but little of the corpse beneath,
> Though ancient lands have trembled at his breath.*
> (p.115)

When at length death comes to Admetus, his only sorrow is that he must leave Alcestis. Morris's treatment of the scene between the two removes the suspicion of selfishness frou Admetus; though he still hopes that Apollo's promised help may save him, yet when he is told that only the voluntary self-sacrifice of one who loves him can avert death, he rejects this idea, and turns his face to the wall. But Alcestis cannot bear life without Admetus, and, without waking him, lies down to die herself, "and silence and deep rest Fell on that chamber." Admetus' old nurse finds him still alive; but Alcestis lies dead,

> And her fair soul, as scent of flowers unseen,
> Sweetened the turmoil of long centuries ...
> See I have told her tale, though I know not
> What men are dwelling now in that green spot ...
> (p.124)

The effect of the tale on the Wanderers is ambiguous, renewing their doubts and longings for immortality, yet at the same time soothing them with its beauty.

The ambiguous application of this and other classical tales suggests the reason why Morris turned with relief to medieval and later to saga tales. These were for him far easier to relate to contemporary moral problems. Perhaps the convention al "classical" education of Morris and his friends prevented any other than con-

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as well as the imagined visions, which Morris describes in the letters of the seventies and eighties[51], represent rather his uneasy social conscience than a pathological psychic state. For the development of Morris's use of image and symbol, see Chapter II, p. 128, 129, Chapter III, p. 175 and Chapter IV, esp. p. 188, 189, 192 and also infra, p. 57-8, p. 98 n.

*) Could some of the most evocative lines of T. S. Eliot owe something to this passage? Is there a verbal echo, as well as a crueller turn of the same thought, in "the bloody wood When Agamemnon cried aloud?"

ventional treatment of most of his classical sources.* While he endeavours to avoid as much as possible extensive treatment of the mythological motivation or of the "Augustan" type of gods and goddesses, which was the inherited conception of the classical outlook in upper-class Victorian England, he is content to report the tales rather than to search for some deeper moral fable.

The following story, *The Lady of the Land,* is a directly contrasting theme to that of the Alcestis legend — woman as the destroyer of man, not the preserver. It is a tale which seems to belong to the "hot bright days" of June which introduce it in the link narrative. It is told by a Wanderer, a tale which he has heard on his travels.

The story of *The Lady of the Land* is taken from Sir John Mandeville, which is sufficient to account for its having no more definite time, place or social background than that it happened to "some men of Italy" on a voyage of piracy "midst the Greek Islands."

This is certainly one of the weaker and less attractive tales — the Argument states its subject succinctly: "A certain man having landed on an island in the Greek sea, found there a beautiful damsel, whom he would fain have delivered from a strange and dreadful doom, but failing herein, he died soon afterwards." (p.127) The atmosphere is one of rather lush decadence, but although such an atmosphere has often been attributed to *The Earthly Paradise* as a whole, it in fact only appears occasionally in such tales as the present. In fact, the woodenness of some of the rhyme-royal stanzas and the lack of characterisation would appear to bear out the suggestion that Morris was not very interested in it. It is one of the few tales whose place and time remain too vague. In Morris, however mysterious and shadowy a background may be, we usually can refer it quite definitely to a particular time, region and nation. But this tale has no such background. The hero, who is simply a passive sufferer, comes from Florence, but the travellers are pirates rather than traders or merchants. The metre often seems to result in tautology: in contrast to other uses of the stanza in Morris, the lines are sluggish, and too often padded out with unnecessary words. A grammatical or stylistic curiosity of the tale bears out this sluggishness, for the sentence structure frequently describes s t a t e s rather than action, e. g. "But soon across my feet my lover lay . . ." instead of, say, "my lover fell."

Nevertheless the effects gained can at times be very powerful:

> Then weighing still the gem within his hand,
> He stumbled backward through the cypress wood,
> Thinking the while of some strange lovely land
> Where all his life should be most fair and good;

*) Although in his direct translations from the classics he endeavoured to get as far as possible from the conventional "classicist" approach.

Till on the valley's wall of hills he stood,
And slowly thence passed down unto the bay
Red with the death of that bewildering day.

(p.139)

The purpose of Morris in telling the tale is sufficiently clear. It is yet another defeat. The mariner is so horror-stricken by the transformation of the Lady into the hideous monster, that he flees back to the ship, falls into a raving fever and dies after three days. The conclusion shows us that the tale does hold a certain place in the whole structure of *The Earthly Paradise*, for it is the first appearance of a motif similar to that of the Venusberg tale which concludes the series, although in the present case the hero, because of lack of daring and lack of trust in his love, does not survive his ordeal and does not gain his end.

The effect of the tale on the listeners is to rouse the younger ones to condemnation of the hero's cowardice, while the older men remember

How fear in days gone by
Had dealt with them and poisoned wretchedly
Good days, good deeds and longings for all good.

(p.142)

The verses for June would appear to describe very completely an incident from Morris's personal life. After a fair and peaceful morning spent with his love, "Peace and content without us, love within", a sudden thunderstorm has come, which echoes a change in their relationship: "now thunder and wild rain Have wrapped the cowering world, and foolish sin And nameless pride have made us wise in vain". But while the sun will shine again, the poet does not know if he will ever experience again the love of his beloved: "Can we regain what we have lost meanwhile?"

At first sight this looks as if it might substantiate Thompson's idea, which has been expressed even more categorically in a Morris Society lecture by Jack Lindsay[52], of Morris's unhappy marriage. I would maintain that it at least suggests the very opposite. The best marriages are not necessarily those which are all "peace and content". The poem would seem to be an externalising of some development which threatens his married happiness — but it is made clear first of all that the happiness has undoubtedly existed, and also, from the last verse, that the poet longs for it to return and that he believes at least in the possibility of "love renewed". This would scarcely be likely, if indeed, as Thompson claims, Morris's marriage had been a "disappointment", or if Janey had been "inadequate."[53] We need not of course relate even a "personal" lyric too closely or literally to the poet's own experience. Nevertheless, for the freshness of impression and sincerity of emotion, the absence of cant and conventionality, these link lyrics as a whole could well be compared with Meredith's *Modern*

Love, while the three rhyme-royal stanza form which Morris has chosen for them achieves at times, as in the present lyric for July, the completeness and inevitability of a sonnet.

Against the background of the hot, dreaming July landscape, an Elder now relates the tale of the *Son of Croesus.* It is also told in the rhyme royal stanza, with considerable realistic detail, very little lush description — in contrast to *The Lady of the Land* — and a very concise and trenchant ending which reminds us — as does the whole atmosphere of threatening gloom — of the piling up of agony and deceit in such medieval collections as the *Gesta Romanorum,* from which Morris took so many of the *Earthly Paradise* tales. Morris appears to be repeating and repeating in endless variants the motifs of classical and medieval mythology — the dragon, love lost by fear and distrust, sudden death at the unwilling hand of a friend, heroic defiance of ineluctable fate — and seeking ever different methods of approach and treatment ranging from the broad, sunlit Renaissance atmosphere to the sharp, strictly circumstanced medieval moral tale; yet so far, these repetitions have not led to any conclusion. That is yet to come.

The theme of this tale is the fated slaying of Atys by Adrastus, unwittingly, and it stresses the unavoidability of certain actions, certain events. The theme of unwilling, fated treachery is emphasised, and the king Croesus' despairing forgiveness: "I will not slay the slayer of my bliss." The tale is told rather flatly, however: Morris's imagination is no longer fully aroused by these classical themes. Yet the thoughts of the Wanderers afterwards point to the application:

> Great names are few, and yet indeed, who knows
> What greater souls have fallen 'neath the stroke
> Of careless Fate? Purblind are most of folk,
> The happy are the masters of the earth
> Which ever gives small heed to hapless worth...
> ... yet there were some men there
> Who drank in silence to the memory
> Of those who failed on earth great men to be,
> Though better than the men who won the crown.
>
> (p.159)

The growing impression of the necessity of fate is stressed by the setting of the July link narrative: the hot and thundery atmosphere which ends not with a storm, but with a light wind that relieves the spirits of the old men and rouses them to call for a story. The following tale, *The Watching of the Falcon,* told by Laurence the Swabian, is said to be of Flemish origin, and appropriately to this Northern medieval provenance, it is told in the short four-stress iambic couplet. The story is taken from Mandeville's *The Castle of the Sperhawk,* and

as the Swabian says, it is a tale "of wilfulness and sin." With its rather rugged verse, fairy-tale situation, and tragic ballad atmosphere, it offers a complete contrast to the more static and descriptive poetry of the preceding three tales. It is one of the most compelling of the *Earthly Paradise* tales and one which expresses the central mood of tragic defiance of fate. We may point out that some of Browning's most evocative poetry is associated with a similar mood (e.g. "Childe Roland to the dark tower came") and that it is also the very keynote of some of the poetry of James Thomson, one of the most important poets of this period.[54] Thomson's pessimism was of course more absolute and uncompromising. But it was in the circumstances of their lives that Morris and Thomson most differed, not in what they demanded of life.

In stressing in this tale the compulsion which draws the king to his destruction, Morris is not turning away from everyday life. Throughout the strangeness of the tale, the emphasis is on tangible sensual objects and sensations; and it is not some impersonal Fate which rules the King so much as one of the inevitable weaknesses of humanity — the desire for present pleasure, whatever it may cost. Although the King's land is a happy and prosperous one, he is lured by the tale of the magic falcon in the faery castle which must be watched for seven days and seven nights, before the beautiful lady appears who will grant a mortal's wish.

The King endures the vigil and achieves his desire — the "lady bright" who grants him his wish to be her lover, if only for one night —

> death and misery
> But empty names were grown to be,
> As from that place his steps she drew,
> And dark the hall behind them grew...
>
> (p.176)

But after his return home, one disaster after another overwhelms him, till he has lost everything, and last the "fay lady" comes to summon him to death. And in course of time the land again prospers —

> a land it is
> Where men may dwell in rest and bliss
> If so they will — who yet will not,
> Because their hasty hearts are hot
> With foolish hate and longing vain,
> The sire and dam of grief and pain.
>
> (p.185)

The link lyric for August portrays Sinodun Hill, the very essence of central Southern English countryside, and stresses both "long lapse of time" and the

continuity of human life, while the personal emotion evoked is the sense that supreme happiness cannot be counted on to return:

> Ah, love! such happy days, such days as these,
> Must we still waste them, craving for the best,
> Like lovers o'er the painted images
> Of those who once their yearning hearts have blessed?
> (p.187)

The link narrative pursues the ripening of summer in a passage as richly detailed in description as many of Tennyson's:

> The tall wheat, coloured by the August fire
> Grew heavy-headed, dreading its decay,
> And blacker grew the elm-trees day by day...
> (p.188)

The following tale is that of *Pygmalion and the Image,* told in the rhyme-royal stanza. One might have supposed that this tale of the craftsman who devotes himself single-mindedly to his work would have been particularly suited to development by William Morris of all people. However, it is one of the least successful of all the tales in *The Earthly Paradise,* as it is one of the most static and least alive. The fault seems to be that thought, theme, character, method and metre are not welded together into a logical and inevitable whole, and the result is merely the too-familiar Victorian treatment of classical mythology, without any firm relation to life. Part of the difficulty would seem to be the lack of a definite basis in time or society, such as Morris nearly always sought. The vague Cyprian background is neither firmly set in time nor is it timeless as a myth or fairy tale. The character of Pygmalion is undeveloped, while the statue comes to life endowed with the conventional attitude of the nineteenth-century heroine. The whole structure of the poem, which consists of descriptions of states and attitudes rather than of action or development of feeling, strongly suggests that it was written for illustration. The point of the tale is not fully made — if it is intended to describe the complete felicity of granted desire, it does not do so, but deliberately avoids doing so; while if the aspect Morris was most interested in was Pygmalion and his craftsman's devotion to his task, even when inspiration is lacking, then the verse-form which Morris has chosen proves, in this particular tale, guilty of much of the tautology and looseness with which he has been charged:

> Yet note, that though, while looking on the sun,
> The craftsman o'er his work some morn of spring
> May chide his useless labour never done,
> For all his murmurs, with no other thing
> He soothes his heart and dulls thought's poisonous sting.
> (p.190)

These lines may serve as an example of laboured utterance. Nor are there in this tale any real compensations in the way of graphic scenic description, while neither Pygmalion nor his beloved nor the goddess have any depth of character. In general, we must admit that this tale deserves the strictures which have been placed on *The Earthly Paradise* as a whole; but three points must be emphasised in its justification. In the first place, the weaknesses were the weaknesses of English poetry at the time that Morris was writing. In the second place, Morris was well aware of these weaknesses and was trying to win free of them — especially by way of the Northern tradition. And thirdly, the tale does play a certain part in the structure of the whole poem, by providing a moment of contrast between the two emotionally intense tales of *The Watching of the Falcon* and *Ogier the Dane.* Its general atmosphere of sultry, half-willed longing is also in key with the full August mood of harvest, as the link narrative suggests:

> Such was the ending of his ancient rhyme,
> That seemed to fit that soft and golden time
> When men were happy, they could scarce tell why,
> Although they felt the rich year slipping by.
>
> (p.208)

The two sections of the link narrative here also present two unforgettable pictures of early and late August, the change of weather and mood within August itself.

The next tale, that of *Ogier the Dane,* is one of the key tales of *The Earthly Paradise.* Although told by Rolf, the leader of the Wanderers, it is attributed originally to Nicholas the Breton, who had died on their journeyings, and the tale is in fact of Celtic provenance, being based on an old French romance which Morris possessed in a copy of 1583[55]. Of Morris's handling of the romance in comparison with the original, May Morris remarks well: "He has seized on the essential quality of mystery in the tale, and presents it simplified, cleared of all historical lumber, till it would seem that the poet's instinct for getting at the heart of the matter he wanted had led him to reduce the story once more to its elements, eliminating its prolixity and not very entertaining sort of unreal reality."[56]

The Ogier legend combines elements of saga with elements of romance and pure fairy-tale. The opening situation is that familiar from the story of the Sleeping Beauty — the fatal fairy gifts — with the infant Ogier in place of the Princess. The tale is set in a Danish city, in some vague, early medieval period, and the newborn prince Ogier lies forgotten by his father, who is desolate at the death of the mother. Suddenly a sleep falls on all the watchers by the cradle:

> But now light footsteps coming up the stair
> Smote on the deadly stillness, and the sound
> Of silken dresses trailing o'er the ground...

and "six seeming ladies" pass into the room, each of whom grants a gift to the sleeping child: goodness and freedom from fear, heroic deeds, freedom from shame and defeat, courtesy, love of women; while the sixth promises herself. With this fairy-tale setting, Ogier's life begins.

Morris does not give us a detailed account of the first part of Ogier's life, but takes us at once to the moment at which he is at point of death, having lived his whole life without thought of the fairy gifts. It is the moment at which he has been shipwrecked on the lodestone rock and is alone, calmly awaiting death. The striking seascape makes us think of the type of scenery which was so to impress Morris in Iceland, though — published in 1868 — these lines were written before Morris had cast eyes on Iceland:

> The sun is setting in the west, the sky
> Is bright and clear and hard, and no clouds lie
> About the golden circle of the sun;
> But East, aloof from him, heavy and dun
> Steel-grey they pack,, with edges red as blood,
> And underneath them is the weltering flood
> Of some huge sea, whose trembling hills, as they
> Turn restless sides about, are black or grey
> Or green, or glittering with the golden flame;
> The wind has fallen now, but still the same
> The mighty army moves, as if to drown
> This lone bare rock, whose sheer scarped sides of brown
> Cast off the weight of waves in clouds of spray.
>
> (p.216)

Ogier is left the last his company and now "weak and worn and old", he waits for death. But instead, a bright light appears which leads him to the other shore of the island, where he sees a palace far off over the sea. As he seeks to reach it even over the tossing wreckage below the cliff, a fair boat is cast up at his feet, which bears him arooss the sea. All this time, Ogier still knows nothing of the fairy love promised him in his infancy. He imagines that now he must come face to face with God, but it is neither a heavenly nor a hellish sojourn that is awaiting him. Between sleeping and dreaming, living and dying, he wakes in fairyland, young once more. Yet amidst all the sights and joys of fairlyland, Ogier still longs for "his old world", until he is overcome with love for the fairy lady. A hundred years later, when France is in danger, Ogier returns to the world, clad in rich and ancient garments. He comes to the French queen and for the first time since his return to earth he begins once more to feel fully alive

> .... and once more knew
> The bitter pain of rent and ended love.
>
> (p.239)

Entering the palace, where he sees paintings of Charlemagne, who had ruled in his own time, he is once more in doubt as to whether he is dreaming or waking, and falls asleep in a garden. The love-struck Queen draws the magic ring from his finger, and his false youth suddenly falls away from him. Filled with dismay and pity, she returns the ring to his finger, and he becomes young once more.

In the midst of preparations for the campaign against France's enemies, Ogier hears from garden the exquisite lyric "In the white-flowered hawthorn brake" with its carpe diem motif and underlying melancholy, one of the frequently anthologised pieces of Morris which has done much to saddle him with his reputation for escapism. However, this song is not so much an expression of the mood of Ogier as a contrast to it. The theme of *Ogier the Dane* is that of the fated, fateful love of fairyland, which deprives its victim of memory of his life on earth, and for which he is willing to throw away all earthly happiness; whereas the lyric is in praise of the simple happiness of earth. At the moment when Ogier, who in his new life of action and success has forgotten his first life on earth, and also his fairy love, is lying in bed at the dawning of his wedding day — for he is to wed the Queen — he suddenly hears a voice cry "Ogier" — though he has forgotten his own name. The fairy voice recounts the former exploits of Ogier — and this is the first moment in the poem when we actually hear of them.

The poem of Ogier is in fact neither a heroic tale nor a romance, but a strange ballad-like rendering of the state of enchanted love, emphasised by the unresisting response of Ogier and the succession of dream situations up to the moment when Ogier, departing to the land of fairy, turns once more to look at the "rippling Seine":

> He turned, and gazed upon the city grey
> Smit by the gold of that sweet morn of May;
> He heard faint noises as of wakening folk
> As on their head his day of glory broke;
> He heard the changing rush of the swift stream
> Against the bridge-piers. All was grown a dream,
> His work was over, his reward was come,
> Why should he loiter longer from his home?
>
> (p.254)

And Ogier with his fairy love vanish into Avalon.

It is true that in a sense this tale turns from reality, since it treats of events which could never have happened. Nevertheless it deals with one of those fascinating legends of the fairy lover which appear again and again in folk lore and are simply rationalisations of the kind of love which in fact takes its victim as if bewitched into another world. If we compare Tennyson's handling of the passing of Arthur into Avalon on the barge with the three queens, as solemn and

respectable as a Victorian funeral, and then consider the atmosphere of, say, some of the Border Ballads, such as Thomas of Ercildoune, we see how much more of poetry and in fact of humanity there is in Morris's handling of this fairy material than in Tennyson's. Morris is concerned with adapting medieval romance not to bourgeois conceptions of kingly duty and dignity, but to the human situation in which he found himself, when his Christian faith had left him and he had not yet found an adequate new meaning for life. Morris throughout *The Earthly Paradise* is seeking to resolve the contradictions between the traditional themes of literature and the real world of men and women, recognising that these themes have become part of the world of literature because at some time they have been part of the real world of life.

The closing mood of the link narrative at the end of the Second Part of *The Earthly Paradise* is one of sadness, at the thought that such a tale as had once moved the Wanderers to set out on their quest, should now have lost the power to enchant them, that the changing years should even have changed the meaning of the tale —

> Changing its sweet to bitter, to despair
> The foolish hope that once had glittered there.
>
> (p.254)

Sitting there, in the midst of the first signs of autumn —

> ... the blackening woods, wherein the doves
> Sat silent now, forgetful of their loves —

they have lost the longings of their youth and are almost content, as

> ... midst some little mirth,
> They watched the dark night hide the gloomy earth.
>
> (p.255)

The Third Volume of *The Earthly Paradise,* published in 1869 with the imprint of 1870[57], is the longest of the four, and also the most important for Morris's development. It was written largely during 1869, the second year during which Morris was studying Icelandic and the Icelandic sagas, and the influence of saga literature is very strong in it. The period was one of very intensive work for Morris, because besides his considerable literary production, he was playing the most active part in building up the practical side of the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. It was also a period of personal emotion and trouble, for his wife was ill, and their relationship obviously passed through a period of strain — although the verdict of disillusionment and of resulting poetic impotence, favoured by Thompson and some other critics, as above noted, is in my opinion exaggerated, unjustifiable and, above all, unnecessary.

The opening lyric for September expressed something of a mood of longing, of sorrowful disenchantment, but at the same time it is a mood rather of sober acceptance than of despair or utter dejection. What, the poet asks, has the "pensive sweetness" of September brought him? The tales, the images, the "nameless, shamefast longings" can never be the same as they used to be, for he himself has changed, and knows more of life:

> Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain!
> Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
> And hope no more for things to come again
> That thou beholdest once with careless eyes!
> Like a new-wakened man thou art, who tries
> To dream again the dream that made him glad
> When in his arms his loving love he had.
>
> (V, p.1)

In the subsequent link narrative, the autumn landscape which is so vividly depicted is, according to May Morris[58], Morris's concentrated vision of the German countryside, with its terraced vineyards, round Bad Ems, where he stayed in August 1869 with his wife for the sake of her health:

> But 'twixt the tree-boles grey
> Above them did they see the terraced way,
> And over that the vine-stocks, row on row,
> Whose dusty leaves, well-thinned and yellowing now,
> But little hid the bright-bloomed vine-bunches . . .
>
> (p.2)

Once more Morris contrasts the atttitude of the Elders who wish to tell their tales,

> . . . to let the night
> Bury its own dead thoughts with wine and sleep,

and that of the young folk, who feel but cannot believe in the sadness of the tales, and yet desire

> not to break
> The spell that sorrow's image cast on them,
> As dreamlike she went past with fluttering hem.
>
> (p.3)

Morris at the age of thirty-five or six felt far more keenly the grief of approaching age than he did twelve or fifteen years later. What appeared to him at the time of *The Earthly Paradise* to be the inevitability of age, death and decay was the reflection of his questioning of the state and possible future of society. When

he became convinced of the truth of the socialist and Marxist interpretation of the world, he ceased to despair, and — until the last few years of his life, when his multifold activities revenged themselves in premature exhaustion — he ceased to talk of himself as old.

The first tale of the Third Part, *The Death of Paris,* well illustrates Morris's individual approach to classic myth. Written in the rhyme-royal stanza which Morris favoured for a number of the classical tales, it is another variation on the themes of love, life and death. We may compare it of course with Tennyson's *Oenone* (1833), when Morris's plastic verse and sharply realised characters stand out against the static plaintiveness of Tennyson. There is more of the warmth of humanity in Morris's handling, and the tale of Paris's last meeting with Oenone and its outcome is told dramatically and well. In mood it varies between a glowing Renaissance plangency and the almost ballad-like "wierd and shattering blast" that Paris blows before his death. The tale was written at Ems, and doubtless the hill-top scenery owes more to Morris's lonely wanderings there[59] than to the classical Greece which he never visited.

The debate between Paris and the Oenone he has betrayed for Helen has a poignant power which recalls such earlier English and Scottish poems in this stanza as *Troilus and Creseyde* or *The Testament of Creseid.* The emotion of agonised despair and loss is particularly forcefully expressed:

> With a dreadful sigh
> He raised his arm, and soul's and body's pain
> Tore at his heart with new-born agony
> As a thin quavering note, a ghost-like cry
> Rang from the long-unused lips of the horn,
> Spoiling the sweetness of the happy morn.
>
> (p.10)

The alternating antagonism and attraction of Paris and Oenone is vividly sketched:

> He opened hollow eyes and looked on her
> And stretched a trembling hand out; ah, who knows
> With what strange mingled look of hope and fear,
> Of hate and love, their eyes met!
>
> (p.14)

The culmination of Paris's agony comes in this confrontation with his earlier love at the moment when death calls him away from Helen:

> Yea, then were all things laid within the scale,
> Pleasure and lust, love and desire of fame,
> Kindness, and hope, and folly — all the tale
> Told in a moment, as across him came

That sudden flash, bright as the lightning-flame,
Showing the wanderer on the waste how he
Has gone astray mid dark and misery.

(p.20)

This tale, which is not so much a story as a dramatisation of a vivid moment of confrontation, rouses mingled and opposed feelings in the young and the old who hear it, and for the ancients,

... thoughts uncertain, hard to grasp,
did flit
'Twixt the beginning and the end of it —
And to their ancient eyes it well might seem
Lay tale in tale, as dream within a dream,
Untold now the beginning, and the end
Not to be heard by those whose feet should wend
Long ere that tide through the dim ways of death.

(p.22)

The whole atmosphere of the beginning of this Third Part is curiously "modern", anticipating many of the moods and preoccupations of Yeats and even Eliot, and allowing us to see a not always suspected relationship between Morris and the twenties of this century. It was not only Morris "the happy poet" who was a model for Yeats, but also the Morris of *The Lady of the Land, The Watching of the Falcon,* and the present tale. Morris of course eventually pointed to a way out of this Waste Land which was ignored by these later poets, when he turned to a wider audience and regained or reaffirmed his belief in life.

The next tale, told by a Wanderer, is even more like a dream, and yet,

... as in dreams
Of known things still we dream, whatever gleams
Of unknown light may make them strange ...

so here:

Our dreamland story holdeth such things dear
And such things loathed, as we do.

(p.23)

It is one of the most striking tales of the whole cycle and one in which we find concentrated that special evocative power of Morris which seems to bid moods known to the poetry of the past to come to life again before us.

The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon combines almost all those elements of past tale and fable which Morris at this moment most valued. He

used as source material for this tale Thorpe's *Yuletide stories*[60], a *lai* of Marie de France, and perhaps the *Arabian Nights.*[61] The fairy story the tale is based on is also familiar in Slav lands. (Morris combines the motifs of Swan Lake and The Fire-Bird.) The curious setting of this dream-like tale within a dream, dreamed by the mysterious Gregory the Star-Gazer, instead of producing an effect of remoteness from life, on the contrary intensifies the relation of the tale to reality. In fact, because "wondrous things together there are brought, strange to our waking world", the story must be told as a dream. Incidentally we may note that the dream convention was the traditional method which Morris — perhaps without realising his intention — selected as his way of solving a problem of which the late 19th century was becoming very conscious (though more so in prose, in the novel, than in poetry), namely the problem of the point of view from which the story is told, and the position of the author or narrator as intermediary.*

The Land East of the Sun is one of the longest tales, running almost to 100 pages or about 3,500 lines. Along with *The Lovers of Gudrun,* which fills 144 pages of the same volume, it swells this Third Part of *The Earthly Paradise* to much greater length than any of the others. Allied in some respects in provenance to the saga story, it also serves as an early introduction to the austerer northern theme, preparing us for what would otherwise be the startling strangeness of *Gudrun* in the midst of the lusher tales of the South and of antiquity. The North of *The Land East of the Sun* is however the later North of ballads and carols, not the fiercer, earlier world of the sagas.

It is noteworthy for the later development of Morris's social thought, that even at this early stage his imagination is most powerfully impelled when he is dealing with a hero whose background is in the people, the "folk". The Argument of the tale is terse and yet tells us all we need to know of the story, and of Morris's purpose: "This tale, which is set forth as a dream, tells of a churl's son who won a fair queen to his love, and afterwards lost her, and yet in the end was not deprived of her." (p.24) Like the best tales (so far) of *The Earthly Paradise,* it is told in the four-stress romance metre. The initial movement into the tale, or rather into the framework of the tale, is rapid. The period is "King Magnus' days", the place is Norway, and the dreamer-narrator is Gregory, known as the Star-Gazer, a small, black-eyed man, a stout and deft fighter, yet somewhat feared by the others for his knowledge of the stars. Gregory — in the simple manner of the sagas — is sent fishing with some

* This quest for the "point-of-view" to give greater depth to a fictive narration, is of course one of the central creative problems raised by the novelists of the second half of the 19th century from Meredith and Henry James to Conrad. It is an interesting comment on Morris's "modernity" that he felt the need to solve the same problem in poetic narration — *Love Is Enough* being the outstanding example of this type of experiment in his work.

other men in a cutter for supplies for the king's household, and coming to a little island, they pitch their tent there for the night. Gregory, unable to sleep, wanders down to the shore, and for the first time we see the cold moonlight which is used to such effect in the poem:

> Calm was the sea 'twixt wall and wall
> Of the green bight; the surf did fall
> With little noise upon the sand,
> Where 'neath the moon the smooth curved strand
> Shone white 'twixt dark sea, rocks, and turf.
>
> (p.25)

Gregory falls asleep and dreams that he wakes in King Magnus' great hall at Christmas-tide, when through the snow and howling wind a stranger stalks into the hall, giving the Christmas greeting of "Noel". Striding down the hall he stands in glittering raiment, and promises to tell them a tale. This dramatic moment of the stranger arriving in the hall is of course well known from romance, and in, for example, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* it is associated with Yule-tide. There is no doubt that Morris meant us to hear these undertones of romance literature in his poem. Yet there is still another shade of meaning:

> Then Gregory dreamed he turned his head
> Unto the stranger, and their eyes
> Met therewith, and a great surprise
> Shot through his heart, because indeed
> That strange man in the royal weed
> Seemed as his other self to be
> As he began this history.
>
> (p.27)

And in the further "Acts"of the tale — divided always by Gregory's waking and sleeping — it is Gregory himself who tells the story. The character of Gregory thus also signifies the poet himself, and his consciousness of his relationship to the matter he is narrating.

Though Rossetti used symbol more freely than Morris, they were both inclined to use symbol and allegory in a way which, for lack of a better word, we might call "Pre-Raphaelite". Especially in Morris, any symbol or allegory used is not psychological in the manner made familiar by Yeats and Eliot. Still less is it allegory in the manner of Spenser, with an exact attributable meaning. When a later critic of his prose romances tried to see allegory in *The Well at the World's End,* Morris protested that he would be ashamed not to make any intended allegory abundantly clear beyond doubt, as did the great masters of allegory such as Bunyan[62]. Morris's use of situation, ambiguity, hidden meaning is what we

might call evocative or affective half-allegory. Here, for example we have the confusion or confrontation of Gregory the Star-Gazer and the story-teller from afar in his glittering royal robe. This confusion is as little subject to exact analysis as is Rossetti's strange picture "How They Met Themselves" — and yet it gives us a hint of the poet's feelings and relationship towards the creatures of his imagination, which is as vivid as Rossetti's fleeting glimpse of the dilemma of human relationships.* Gregory the poet, story-teller and star-gazer, is at once the dreamer of his fable, without power to influence its development, and the kingly, authoritative teller of the tale who has willed it to happen as it does. At the same time, Gregory's presence, framing the tale, relates the whole dream-like action to reality, as Morris, even in his most unreal tales, is always trying to do.

The story, as told by the stranger, plunges into the world of the familiar folk-tale: the farmer who has three sons, two good, unimaginative workers, the third a "do-nought by the fireside", a mutterer of old rhymes, a good-for-nothing. The setting is one of real life — the sons are real farmers,

> Ready to drive the waggons forth,
> (Or pen the steep up from the north,)
> Or help the corn to garner in,
> Or from the rain the hay to win...
>
> (p.27)

The two sons are sent in turn to watch the meadow which has been trampled on over night, but both fall asleep, whereupon John, volunteers to go, though he is scorned by his father. Nevertheless he keeps watch:

> Then in the hawthorn brake he lay
> And watched night-long midst many a thought
> Of what might be, and yet saw nought
> As slowly the short night went by,
> Midst bittern's boom and fern-owl's cry;
> Then the moon sank, the stars grew pale,
> And the first dawn 'gan show the veil
> Which night had drawn from tree to tree;
> A light wind rose, and suddenly
> A thrush drew head from under wing,
> And through the cold dawn 'gan to sing...
>
> (p.32)

And in this half-way time between the light of the moon and the sun, which is

*) This is a drawing of two identical couples, man and woman, who have suddenly met and recognised each other, or themselves, in the midst of a dense forest. The shock has caused one of the women to faint, or perhaps to die. We are left to ask, is it because the lovers have recognised their identily, or their non-identity with the second couple?

the magic time throughout the poem, John, half-dreaming, half-waking, sees the seven white swans. Still half-dreaming, he watches them turn into beautiful maidens and falls in love at first sight with the seventh. Almost without willing it, he steals her plumage. But when she mourns alone after her sisters have flown away, she flees from him in terror. She pleads with him to return her plumage, he begs her not to leave him. Fearing that their love must mean his death, she offers him the choice, either to live happily in his own world, winning fame and success, throwing his love for her into "the waste of time", or else to give up life for love and spend his life's span with her in fairyland. Half-fearing, half-pitying him, she puts a gold ring with a dark green stone on his finger, but warns him it would be better for him to return it to her, so that they may be as before, "Sad, longing, loving, not accurst." He refuses to return the ring, and she again warns him not to cling to "that desire that resteth not." Again half-sleeping, half-waking, he finally awakes to find that they are together in amarvellous land.

Perhaps the complicated delineation of the awakening of love in John and the swan-maiden may seem to be rather long; yet Morris is obviously trying to solve the problem of describing the growth of a mutual love so strong and compelling as to survive all vicissitudes and bring the lovers together again in the end. Nevertheless their happiness is something which cannot be described, and at the moment when they come to the marvellous land, Gregory wakens from his dream, and

> sat up, stark awake,
> And gazing at the surf-line white,
> Sore yearning for some lost delight,
> Some pleasure gone, he knew not what;
> For all that dream was clean forgot.

He goes slowly back to the tent, lies down, and once more falls into a dream, but it is now as if he himself were the stranger who tells the tale, sitting by King Magnus, "clad in gold". Longing to tell the tale as he would have it, the Star-Gazer himself now becomes its author.

The breaking of the dream has the effect of finishing off the first act of the tale, and bridging the three years of happiness which John spends in the marvellous land. But even complete happiness cannot prevent the human being from longing for his own people; his fairy sweetheart perceives his sorrow, and warns him that the danger to their love is in his own land and in human life with its mixture of good and evil:

> To leave the ill, and take the good
> Were sweet indeed, but nowise life,
> Where all things ever are at strife.
>
> (p.52-53)

He must return to his own land and there await his fate, only going every day at nightfall to the place where they first met "Betwixt a hawthorn and an oak." He must never let a word of his longing for her slip past his lips.

Falling into a sleep he awakes, once more in his own country, and returns, scarcely knowing where he is, to the old familiar places. As if to mark the contrast between the unreal world of dream and the everyday world of reality, the homestead is described with vivid detail. John sees

> o'er well-tilled close and fence
> A little knot of roofs between
> Dark leaves, their ridges bright and green
> With spiky house-leek; and withal
> Man unto man did he hear call
> Afar amid the fields below . . .
>
> (p.57)

and with the horn summoning the workers in the fields to the midday meal in the hall, his memory returns, and he feels a strange shame at no longer belonging to these familiar things, described in loving detail:

> The shadows of the large grey leaves
> Lay grey upon the oaten sheaves
> By the garth wall as he passed by . . .
>
> (p.58)

Coming to the hall where all are now seated at meat, John blows the horn by the door to announce his coming, and pushes open the door —

> then like a sun
> New come to a dull world he stood,
> Gleaming with gold from shoes to hood,
> In the dusk doorway of the place
> Whence toward him now turned every face.
>
> (p.59)

His father and brethren do not know him and welcome him as a mighty lord. Left alone in the hall when the rest go to the afternoon's work, John flings over himself a masker's cloak, of dark blue cloth with embroidered sun, moon and stars, and sings one of the Christmas carols he remembers — a harking back to the coming of the stranger to King Magnus's Yule-tide feast in the introductory framework of the story. This carol is a haunting recapitulation of all the magic of the folk carols:

> Outlanders, whence come ye last?
> *The snow in the Street and the wind on the door.*
> Through what green seas and great have ye passed?
> *Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.*
>
> (p.64)

As he finishes, he sees his mother standing by, and knows she has recognised him. He can tell her little of what has happened to him, and she asks him if the newly rumoured Christian faith and its teaching about the eternal life are true. He, however, knows nothing of this. The intrusion of this motif at this point may be a symptom of how Morris at this time was gradually shedding all adhesion to Christianity or religious ideology of any kind. He is, however, as always, interested in fixing the historical point of his tale in time — the moment at which Christianity is first heard of in the lands of the sagas, but before it has affected the lives and beliefs of the people. Gregory's moment in time is later, when King Magnus is already holding "right merry cheer In honour of the Christmas-tide." Yet the Christmas carol sung by John after his dramatic return to the hall is an echo of the Christmas greeting of the stranger in Gregory's introductory dream. It is as if Morris were deliberately repeating again and again with variations of time and place and character, the various motifs which have most captured the imagination of the unknown composers of traditional poetry and song.

John is now greeted by all with respect when they return from the fields, but he has no time for wonder at the change in their attitude towards the man they formerly despised. He has already begun to think of whether he will see his love again soon:

> That very hour, he thought again —
> That very hour; woe worth the while,
> Why should his heart not feel her smile
> Now, now? — O weary time, O life,
> Consumed in endless, useless strife,
> To wash from out the hopeless clay
> Of heavy day and heavy day
> Some specks of golden love, to keep
> Our hearts from madness ere we sleep!
>
> (p.68)

John tells his folk that he is waiting for the outland people whose king's child he has wed to come for him. Meanwhile Thorgerd, his brother's wife, has fallen passionately in love with him, quite unnoticed by him at first, until at length he finds some rest in the thought of her love. Nevertheless, every night, unquestioned by his family, he goes to the secret tryst, where for months he sees nothing "Save endless waste of grey clouds draw O'er the white waste." This whole passage (p.72) expresses the misery and desolation of severed love, the agony of the "shrinking soul" that suddenly becomes aware of "that deep abyss Of days to come all bare of bliss." So John's hope dies and he is subject to the "in-rushing of despair." Wrapped up in his misery, he is no longer conscious of the world around him, and in spite of the ban, he cries out for his love to come.

But nothing happens, all is unchanged, and he cries out again in despair, contrasting the weeping of his love over the loss of "a pleasure somewhat sweet", which, he pretends, was all his love meant for her, and his own deep misery.

As he returns through the snow he sees waiting for him "A grey form in the dull grey night". But it is only Thorgerd, now herself bewildered and disappointed that he seems to expect another woman. As she challenges him to love her, he suddenly calls again on his beloved, and at once with horror realises he has disobeyed the ban.

Now as they sit at the Yule-tide feast, and John is expectant of some disaster, a far-off horn sounds, and the door is opened. Into the hall steps a whiteclad woman, who greets him and sits down with him to the feast. When they are alone at night, as he sleeps she draws her ring off his finger, for after his breaking of the ban she must bid him farewell. Hoping that even in his sleep he may hear the magic formula which alone can reunite them she utters it:

> My feet, lost Love, shall wander soon
> *East of the sun, west of the moon!*
> Tell not old tales of love so strong,
> That all the world with all its wrong
> And heedlessness was weak to part
> The loving heart from loving heart?
>
> (p.82)

And so she leaves the sleeping house, while the night wind, "as it did shake Window and door, served but to make The inner stillness yet more still." Her silent passing out of the hall stresses the fated character of this love, and yet it is told so directly and simply that there is nothing artificial about it. We recognise this as the inevitable love of the ballad world; the passage, with its subtle echoes of St. Agnes' Eve, adds a dramatic quality of design to the heady Keatsian reminiscence, and can lose nothing in comparison with Morris's poetry of the *Guenevere* period.

> Slowly, yet all void of doubt
> She raised the latchet of the door,
> And let the wind and moonlight pour
> Wild clamour and strange light therethrough.
> She paused not; the wild west wind blew
> Her hair straight out from her; her feet
> The bitter, beaten snow did meet
> And shrank not; slowly forth she passed
> Nor backward any look she cast,
> Nor gazed to right or left, but went
> With eyes on the far sky intent
> Into the howling, doubtful night,

Until at last her body white
And its black shadow on the snow
No more the drift-edged way did know.

(p.83

As she vanishes, the second act of the tale comes to an end, and Gregory awakens in the tent. Rising, he goes down to the shore and in the half light he busies himself in preparing the boat, and while the dawn draws near across the sea, he feels he is approaching

the wavering boundary
'Twixt sight and blindness, that awhile
Our troubled waking will beguile
When happy dreams have just gone by,
And left us without remedy
Within the unpitying hands of life,

(p.85)

until he sinks again into sleep on the sand. Now he seems to dream not of the telling of a tale, but of his own life "grown to be A new and marvellous history." So in the third act of the tale the teller himself becomes identified with his narrative:

Midst hope and fear and wretchedness,
And Love, that all things doth redress,
Adown the stream of fate he moved
As the carle's son, the well-beloved,
The fool of longing; in such wise
He dealt with his own miseries.

(p.85)

In other words, the poet becomes identified with his own creation and in it works out his own solution.

We return to the tale at the moment when John wakens to his loss. Unable to recall clearly what he has heard or seen in his sleep, he wanders off from his home over the downs to the harbour town, where he stays till the coming of spring allows him to set sail over the sea. As he wakes in the night on deck, the magic moment comes when the moon and the sun are in the sky together, and as the lightless moon passes over the mast, and the sun suddenly rises, he recalls the words half-heard through his dream — "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" — and driven by his longing, he travels all over the world, holding to the hope given him by these words, seeking

A land that no man findeth soon,
The grave of greedy love that cries
To all folk of its agonies:

The prison of untrustful love,
That thinketh a light word can move
The heart of kindness, deep and wise.

(p.92-3)

Unhappy and restless, yet driven by growing hope, the magic formula seems to make the "merry world" around him only "A dreary cage, a narrow round Of dreamlike pain, a hollow place, Filled with a blind and dying race."

He comes to England, and at St. Albans, where he tells his tale in the monastery, "A little dry old monk", with "small glittering eyes", bids him listen to some other tales he has written out "for sport of lords or kings", but though listening to the old chronicler helps John to imagine possible happy endings to his own tale, he is too much cut off from life by his sorrow to pay heed to what is going on around him. Nevertheless Morris, by introducing the old monkish chronicler as a concrete character both reminds us of the way in which such tales have been preserved, and also, even at the moment when John is most out of contact with the real world, emphasises the existence of that world. John is completely under the sway of his dream, "A strange waif in the tide of life." Returning home, where he finds his mother is dead, he is indifferent even to her empty chair, and his kinsmen no longer recognise him. He wanders on and on, still only half alive, grown old before his time. All places are the same to him in his wanderings over the earth. Even on shipboard, lost in a vast ocean, when all his shipmates are awaiting the coming of a tempest with fear, John remains indifferent to the danger, indeed a feeling of new hope stirs him when he sees again the setting sun and the "thin-curved moon" once more together in the sky. He is cast by the storm on a sandy shore, and wanders over the land till he comes upon a mellow scene of cottages and homesteads. Again the magic moment of sunset and moonrise intervenes, and for the third time he calls out the talisman. He comes to a mansion, through which he wanders till he finds his love sitting among her maidens. She cannot hear him until, recapitulating their story, and coming to the moment of their second parting, he repeats the magic formula. At that instant she recognises him. They live among their people, happy, "No more this side of death to part." But though the tale ends with the joining of the lovers, human happiness can never be complete:

Full soft I say
Their greetings were that happy day,
As though in pensive semblance clad;
For fear their faces over-glad
This certain thing should seem to hide,
That love can ne'er be satisfied.

(p.118)

So the tale ends, and Gregory wakes on the shore to disillusion after his dream:

> O'er Gregory's eyes the pain of morn
> Flashed suddenly, and all forlorn
> Of late-gained clean-forgot delight,
> He sat up, scowling on the bright
> Broad day that lit the hurrying crowd
> Of white-head waves, while shrill and loud
> About him cried the gulls; but he
> Lay still with eyes turned toward the sea,
> And yet beholding nought at all,
> Till into ill thoughts did he fall,
> Of what a rude and friendless place
> The world was, through what empty days
> Men were pushed slowly down to death . . .
>
> (p.119)

He sets off to sea with his fellows, but frequently goes apart from them when they land on shore, and tries to "deal by art With his returning memory", and weaves his tale into smooth verses "His weary heart a while to soothe." The whole tale ends with a glance at the changes the language the tale has gone through since it was first told Gregory:

> for soothly he
> Was deemed a craftsmaster to be
> In those most noble days of old,
> Whose words were e'en as kingly gold
> To our thin brass, or drossy lead:
> — Well, e'en so all the tale is said
> How twain grew one and came to bliss —
> Woe's me! an idle dream it is!
>
> (p.120)

And so, almost abruptly, ends this intricate tale in which, as May Morris has pointed out, Morris "has substituted for the early simplicities of thought the modern complication of love interwoven with doubt and perplexity." She has also noted that "The introduction of Gregory the Star-gazer skilfully draws us into the dream-reality, and all through, as the tale breaks off for his reappearance, heightens the feeling of expectancy and mystery."[63] Morris considerably changed his early drafts of this tale, gaining in intensity and meaning, revealing the relation of the poet to his material, showing us what the composition of such a poem meant for him. In her "Workshop Notes" May Morris goes on to point out how Morris dealt with his originals, and with his first conceptions of tales. In *The Land East of the Sun,* she says, "more than a touch of the "modern" introspective spirit is woven into the wandering

minstrel measure."[64] The poet of this tale is very far from the conception of an extrovert Morris, easily pouring out line after line, knowing nothing of the suffering of creation.

The link narrative is appropriately very short, as too much obtrusion of the main framework would disturb the effect of the intervening framework of Gregory the Star-gazer. We have already compared the sensitive proportioning of whole and part in *The Earthly Paradise* to Morris's craftsmanship in the decoration of his painted books, (cf. p. 22) No border must be so obtrusive as to interfere with the completed proportion of the whole page. The same propriety is observed in the design of the different constituents of the whole poem. Here the link narrative gives us merely a brief picture of the autumn days with their "Sad thoughts of old desires unsatisfied" against the clear picture of the afternoon:

> ... though the great clouds drew
> In piled-up hills across the faint-streaked blue,
> And 'gainst them showed the wind-hover's dark spot,
> Nor yet midst trembling peace was change forgot.
>
> (p.121)

The October lyric catches a moment when the dying year "too satiate of life to strive with death" suggests to the poet that death will mean rest from life. The "unchanging sea", the "grey slopes" and the "year grown old", the "wind-bitten ancient elms" that enfold "grey church, long barn, orchard, and red-roofed stead," the "strange old tinkling tune" of the church bell — all these well-known sights of the southern English countryside seem to confirm to the poet and the woman he loves and addresses in the poem, that death will be better than life, — "That rest from Love which ne'er the end can gain." Yet the last three lines deny or defy this conclusion, as the tune of the church-bells suddenly deepens:

> Hark, how the tune swells, that erewhile did wane!
> Look up, love! — ah, cling close and never move!
> How can I have enough of life and love!
>
> (p.122)

The thought of this lyric is expressed with so much restraint, we might say with such shyness, that it is not obvious at first reading. Yet it too belongs to the autobiographical testament of Morris, the meaning of which is obscured mainly by the lack of subjectivity and egoism in Morris's lyrical method. He is really saying what he says in so many of his narratives: life moves on, death comes and bereaves the hero or the heroine, but still their love and their life were worthwhile, because this is the way that the life of the world is con-

tinued. Here is the seed of Morris's later dialectic thought, so often implicit in his late prose romances and expressed openly in his two socialist romances, that it is the collective life of humanity which is important, that the individual merely plays his part and is gone, but that man in his short life can reach the greatest heights and depths of experience and should seek to do so.

The idea of experience being passed on consecutively from generation to generation is again stressed in the further link narrative, when the Elder who is to tell the next tale addresses it to the youths and maidens, as a tale which is to have a happy ending, "howso buffeting and rude Winds, waves and men were, ere the end was done." The following tale of *Acontius and Cydippe*, though according to May Morris[65] it was not a favourite of Morris's, gives us another aspect of the classical tradition, with its plangent four-stress metre that recalls the 16th century, whereas the formally similar metre of the previous tale seems to echo an earlier period.

The tale of the love of Acontius for the damsel Cydippe, and how he won her, is full of the beauty of cultivated nature, and an unusual decorative motif is the changing beauty of the tulips —

> In grey light did the tulips flame
> Over the sward made grey with dew —

and again, "the black-hearted tulips." The freshly observed, though mostly garden nature, accentuates the changes of time, of weather, of seasons. The tulip motif here creates an atmosphere both of the Renaissance and also to some extent of the East, which helps to round out the encyclopaedic view of the story heritage, which Morris aims at in *The Earthly Paradise.**

Acontius, a man of the Greek islands, arrives in the course of a voyage in Delos and goes ashore with his companions. He finds himself alone in a fair garden where he sings a graceful lyric:

> Fair is the night and fair the day,
> Now April is forgot of May,
> Now into June May falls away;
> Fair day, fair night, O give me back
> The tide that all fair things did lack
> Except my love, except my sweet!
>
> (p.125)

*) Morris was interested in and appreciated the traditional literature both of Slavonic countries and of Asia. This is not the only tale with an Eastern flavour — the later tale of *The Man Who Never Smiled Again* comes originally from the *Arabian Nights*. One token of his interest in the East was the very beautiful illuminated manuscript he made in 1872 of *Omar Khayyam*. But Morris rightly judged that the most important influence at the moment for the revivifying of English literature along its traditional lines was that of the North, and so the Eastern motifs are hinted at, rather than fully developed.

This is a perfect realisation in modern English of 15th-century lyric, especially the first verse, while the later verses have more of the Spenserian pastoral note. Especially noteworthy in the first verse is the effective transition from the rising rhythm of the phrase "Fáir is the níght and fáir the dáy" to the falling "Fair dáy, fair níght, O gíve me báck..."

Acontius dreams of an unknown love, and returns at dawn to the garden. He suddenly sees his love "Against a flowering thorn, Hidden by tulips to the knee." She is seemingly looking for something, and their eyes meet:

> There in a silence hard to bear,
> Impossible to break, they stood,
> With faces changed by love, and blood
> So stirred, that many a year of life
> Had been made eager with that strife
> Of minutes.
>
> (p.130)

The "black-heart tulips bow before her knees" as they step towards each other, but hearing a noise of talk, she leaves him:

> Slim tulip-stem and hawthorn-bough
> Slipped rustling back into their place.

He later returns to the garden to watch the procession of maidens to worship Diana, but Cydippe appears not to notice him. He hides in the cottage of a poor fisherman, so that he need not sail with his ship. Walking by the side of the sea, he thinks of his love, at another of those ambiguous moments between sea and land, day and night, so often stressed by Morris, and which help to form the special atmosphere of *The Earthly Paradise:*

> Across the waste of waters wide,
> The dead sun's light a wonder cast,
> That into grey night faded fast;
> And ever as the shadows fell,
> More formless grew the unbreaking swell
> Far out to sea; more strange and white,
> More vocal through the hushing night,
> The narrow line of changing foam,
> That 'twixt the sand and fishes' home
> Writhed, driven onward by the tide...
>
> (p.139)

Sleeping beneath an apple-tree, he has a vision of Venus and wakes planning how to win Cydippe from Diana, and brooding on the bitterness of love:

> But oftenest the well-beloved
> Shall pay the kiss back with a blow,

Shall smile to see the hot tears flow,
Shall answer with scarce-hidden scorn
The bitter words by anguish torn
From such a heart, as fain would rest*
Silent until death brings the best.

(p.145)

On waking, Acontius finds a golden apple lying by his side, on which he scratches with a thorn the words: "Acontius will I wed today." When Cydippe passes by to the altar of Diana, he throws the apple into her bosom, and she lays it on the altar, not knowing that there are words written on it which will have the effect of a vow. The priests seek to avert the anger of the Goddess, but are persuaded by the crowd to let the two marry, since "Love willeth it." An elder urges Diana that love is its own punishment, that she need not avenge herself. The lovers, disregarding all warnings, are united. The tale ends abruptly, with their coming together.

This poem is not so much an expression of deep personal feeling — apart from some of the commentary, as in the passages above-quoted — rather a mannered and yet graceful evocation of a certain mood or mode. It is a mode which Morris is already leaving behind him, and the aureate richness of the tale stresses its static quality compared with the rapid and nervous movement of *Ogier the Dane* and *The Land East of the Sun*. Nevertheless there is a melodious simplicity and directness of expression in the lyric passages which remind us that Morris's lyric poetry was nourished by the late medieval tradition.

The next tale is heralded by the breaking of the October weather, and the tale-tellers gather within doors:

Bright glowed the fires, and cheerier their light
Fell on the gold that made the fair place bright
Of roof and wall, for all the outside din.

But the tale, told by Rolf, is one he heard in his childhood, and takes us to the warm lands of the East:

... I see my father's son,
My father with the white cloth on his knees,
Beaker in hand, amid the orange-trees
At Micklegarth, and the high-hatted man

---

*) This passage would seem to have formal and verbal links with Blake of the type noted by Ford as typical of Morris (cf. p. 23), while on the other hand the work of later poets (e.g. Wilde, "Ballad of Reading Gaol" and Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death") show recognisable kinship with the method and feeling of Morris's lines.

Over against him, with his visage wan,
Black beard, bright eyes, and thin composèd hands,
Telling this story of the fiery lands.

(p.157-8)

Of the story of *The Man Who Never Laughed Again,* May Morris writes: "He has told over the story from the Arabian Nights, creating around it a different atmosphere, and, while reproducing the sense of the Predestined, has transposed it all into a higher key... Human nature fulfilling its destiny — the restless longing for the unknown, this is the undercurrent of most of these wonder-tales of the Western poet."[66]

The Man Who Never Laughed Again is composed in rhyme-royal stanzas. It is set in an Eastern city near the Indian sea; outside the house of a wealthy man, where a feast is being prepared, there stands leaning against the marble wall the young Bharam, poor, thin, ragged and unhappy, "For such a one was he as rich men fear, Friendless and poor, nor taught hard toil to bear." A nobly-dressed man passing by on mule back is struck by him, and recognising him as an erstwhile wealthy friend, bids him join him on his travels. Bharam now sets out with some hope, but his companion, Firuz, seems to be as one in whom hope is dead, and as they enter a dense forest Bharam is reminded of tales of travellers led astray by fiends, "So like his fellow looked to one long dead."

They move on through the "blackness like a wall", and Bharam, who has begun to sing "of roses and delight" falls silent.

But full the darkness seemed of forms of fear,
And like long histories passed the minutes drear
To Bharam's o'erwrought mind expecting death,
And like a challenge seemed his lowest breath.

(p.164)

They come to a wide bare plain that under the moonlight "Against the black trunks showed all stark and white." Firuz is riding mechanically by Bharam's side. When they leave the wood, they see far away across the plain a high watch-tower over a white palace surrounded by gardens, and Firuz speeds up his mule. He blows the horn by the gate, which opens to let them enter a garden. Delighted with its beauty, Bharam hopes to see the mask of despair fall from his friend's sad face, and asks, "Will they not now bring forth the bride?" But Firuz breaks out in a cry of dreadful misery,

Scaring the birds from flowery bush and tree;
"O fool!" he said; "say such things in the day;
When noise and light take memory more away!"

(p.165)

Still no nearer to solving Firuz's secret, Bharam follows him through the palace, the beauty of which still fills Bharam with delight and hope. But at last they come to a hall from which moaning and sobs can be heard. Six men, five of them in deep sorrow and agony, the sixth dead, sit on a marble bench. Firuz tells them that Bharam has come to bury whichever of them will be the last to die. They need Bharam as their master, to whom they will leave all their wealth. It seems to Bharam impossible that any grief could be so great as to make him forgetful of such wealth, and yet, as he looks at them, he longs to know their story, which they refuse to tell.

At Bharam's command the others carry away the dead man for burial, to a thick, black wood beyond the garden, where there flows a "swift broad stream", the description of which takes us back to the land of the ballads and *Pearl:*

> Beneath the boughs dark green it ran, and deep,
> Well-nigh awash with the wood's tangled grass,
> But on the other side wall-like and steep,
> Straight from the gurgling eddies, rose a mass
> Of dark grey cliff, no man unhelped could pass;
> But a low door e'en in the very base
> Was set, above the water's hurrying race.
>
> (p.170)

And as he looks at it, Bharam feels he has seen it before in a dream. They ferry the body across the stream and bury it in the wood, fearing to look up at the cliff.

As time goes on, one by one the men die and are buried, but they remain silent about the secret of their lives, though Bharam grows more and more eager "To know what evil deed had been their bane." When Firuz alone is left and feels that death is near, he offers to show Bharam the way back to the city, and leading him to the edge of the forest, bids Bharam bury him there, without returning to the palace and the stream. But Bharam protests that it is useless for Firuz to conceal his secret further, since Bharam already knows the way to the mysterious door. His dying friend cannot resist Bharam's desire to know the truth, and shows him the golden key to the door. Calling on some unknown beauty, Firuz dies, without having revealed the secret. Bharam now hastens back to the palace and takes the path that leads to the stream. A sudden horror convulses him, and he flees back to the spot where Firuz lies, digs a grave for him, and intends to fling the key into it. Nevertheless, he keeps the key, although he now rides back through the forest to the world he had left. Coming back to everyday life, he is struck with a sense of the beauty of ordinary things, and the poet describes an almost Augustan pastoral scene:

The slender damsel coming from the well,
Smiling beneath the flashing brazen jar,
Her fellows left behind thereat, to tell
How weary of her smiles her lovers are;
While the small children round wage watery war
Till the thin linen more transparent grows,
And ruddy brown the flesh beneath it glows.

(p.177)

At last he comes to the great city, with

The glimmering lights about grey towers and high,
Rising from gardens dark; the guarded wall,
The gleaming dykes, the great sea, bounding all,

and is filled with hope and optimism, "For pleasure of the beauty of the earth."

Bharam now possesses the great riches he has inherited from the dead men. But though he is glad to be back in the city, he cannot settle to any activity, love, glory, knowledge, travel alike leave him listless, and he lives friendless "as any king". After two years of this aimless life, he takes the key, saddles his horse, and rides away through the street

Wherein already folk for daily bread
Began to labour, who now turned the head
To whisper as the rich man passed them by
Betwixt the frails of fresh-plucked greenery.

(p.180)

Fearing all the time that he may have come too late, he returns through the forest to the palace, which is now desolate, over-grown with weeds, full of serpents and bats, and where a grey wolf glares at him the hall. He hastens away through the garden, where all is in equal desolation, But Bharam takes this desolation as a pledge that he will not return there to die, but that his quest will lead him either to life or to death.

Reaching the stream he crosses it, and puts the key in the lock. The door swings suddenly open and a cold wind rushes out from the black cavern, but with only one look back,

He stepped from out the fair light of the day,
Casting all hope of common life away.

(p.183)

The door swings to behind him, and he falls on the ground in a faint. When he awakes he is on a beautiful seashore at sunset, and as the sun sets and the moon rises, he sees a ship moving towards him over the water. Two women

from the ship bid him follow them and he sails with them to another land, on the shore of which sits a maid, crowned as a queen. Bharam now knows that it has been love that has led him on throughout his quest, and to the music of a languorous song he approaches the beloved, though through his mind there shoots "one bitter thought" of the dead mourners. Bharam rules this country along with his bride the Queen. Yet as time passes, through all his happiness, he has moments of feeling that he has not yet attained some "ne'er-accomplished bliss", that some happiness and some knowledge still remain closed to him. His Queen warns him that she must leave him, that he may not know where or why she is going, and that during her absence he must not enter their bridal chamber. But left alone, he is tortured with doubt as to what and who she really is, and opens the forbidden chamber hoping to find some clue. All is in order there, but as he is on the point of leaving, he catches sight of a cup with strange carving and lettering. He reads the inscription, bidding the finder to drink. Hoping that this will give him the final solution, Bharam drinks. A dim thought of the mourning men comes into his mind as he falls into a feverish sleep. When he awakes, he is lying outside the door to the cavern, which is shut fast against him. In the wildness of his grief he wanders back to the deserted palace and thence to the city, where

> Shut in his body's bonds, his soul would wait
> The utmost term of all its misery,
> Nor hope for any ease, nor pray to die.

He lives on in the city, noticed only now and then by the dwellers:

> And when they saw his dreamy eyes distraught,
> His changeless face drawn with that hidden pain,
> They said: "The man who ne'er shall laugh again."
> (p.204)

Thus ends the strange tale in which Morris has set himself the task of describing the utter hopelessness of bereft love. It can be assigned to that group of almost savagely cruel tales such as *The Watching of the Falcon, The Lady of the Land,* etc,. where Morris's power of evoking sensuous beauty is used sparingly as a contrast to the despair and emptiness of the heroes, all of whom suffer from some fundamental weakness. They cannot rise to the moral height demanded by life of those who are to be privileged to enjoy beauty and love to the full. Such would seem to be the "moral fable" behind all the tales of *The Earthly Paradise.* It is not so much the success or the unsuccess of the characters which is of importance, as their purpose and firmness in carrying out their task or quest, as well as the worthiness or unworthi-

ness of that quest itself. Those who are infirm of purpose, or whose purpose is merely sensual gratification and selfish pleasure, can never reach their happiness, which turns to dust and dreams as they seek to grasp it.

In her volume on William Morris as a Writer, May Morris places this tale alongside *The Hill of Venus* (Part IV — the last tale of *The Earthly Paradise*) as "somewhat apart from the rest," and adds some interesting comment. "In the case of both these poems a great deal of unused material exists which throws light on the thought and searchings and labour that went to the moulding of them... They are, as we know, both stories of wild, barren passion and are built up in an atmosphere of such an unquenchable melancholy that if my Father had written little else of note, and if they stood for an expression of himself... you would say, Here is an inward-looking being with scarcely a hope in his life, cursed with a sense of the futilities of the world while keenly alive to its beauties." May Morris goes on to point out that in the case of the present tale, "familiar as my Father was with the Eastern matter and much as he enjoyed its richness, its humour and variety, this tale is the only one taken directly from that wealth of ancient lore... I do not doubt that in searching among the 'best stories' to use for his own scheme, he considered subjects definitely of the East and with the full Eastern flavour, but one cannot be surprised at his making so little use of them. The Eastern attitude of mind was not native to him: the sense of Fate hanging over human action is always part of the equipment of a good dramatic story, but the fatalism of the East and the fatalism of the West are pitched in a different key. Though Morris takes up the story of the endurance of suffering in its self-concentration and monotony once again and under another guise in 'The Hill of Venus', his treatment of human troubles and the way in which they are to be borne did not lead him naturally to the blind submission into which the Eastern mind tends to fall."[67]

In the following link narrative Morris contrasts the enforced calmness and wisdom of the old men with the unrest and striving of the hero of the tale and those like him, while outside the hall the storm rises:

> Ah, how the night-wind raved, and wind and sea
> Clashed wildly in their useless agony...
>
> (p.205)

And this mood of storm leads us to the November lyric, one of the most striking of all the cycle. The three verses are in the form of a dialogue, the first two verses spoken in one person, the last in the other; but the subtlety of the lyric lies in the fact that the dialogue may equally well be between the poet and a second person, or else the poet may question and answer himself, or it may be he is addressing himself silently to a second person

in the first two verses, and himself giving the answer in the last. "Are thine eyes weary?" he asks in the first verse, "is thy heart too sick To struggle any more with doubt and thought... Art thou so weary that no world there seems Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams?" Thus the first stanza gives us a situation from real life, not sentimentalised. The problem this character is wrestling with is one of actuality, not of romantic imagination. The speaker urges in the second stanza an acceptance of reality, a return to the beauty and calmness of earth:

> Look out upon the real world, where the moon
> Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high trees,
> Turns the dread midnight into dreamy noon,
> Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze
> Died at the sunset, and no images,
> No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth —
> Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?
>
> (p.206)

Against the insoluble problems of life, we must set the beauty of earth, the silent night which the bright moon turns to daytime. But the speaker of the reply in the last verse can see in the beauty of the night nothing that can answer his or her problem:

> Yea, I have looked and seen November there,
> The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
> Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
> Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,
> Strange image of the dread eternity —

The night is too remote, too inhuman for the speaker, who longs for human contact, solution of human loneliness, for the idea of eternity has no consolation:

> In whose void patience how can these have part,
> These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?

After the calm serenity of the second verse we are back with the unresolved problem of the first.

The emotion expressed by this poem is anything but the passive "palely loitering" reaction to life which is apt to be so generally attributed to Morris. Of this poem Edward Thompson rightly rightly says that "because Morris dared to look steadily at his enemy, we are left with the sense, not of death, but of life."[68] In continuing his discussion of Morris's poetry, Thompson condemns the morbidity of, for example, *The Man Who Never Laughed Again*, and suggests that "one of the pressures which impelled him to write Jason

and The Earthly Paradise was the desire to shake off that morbidity of preoccupation which contributed in making James Thomson into a dipsomaniac." But more questionable is Thompson's conclusion that *The Earthly Paradise* is "the poetry of despair." It is James Thomson's poetry which is the poetry of despair, although today we can recognise *The City of Dreadful Night* as a wonderfully realistic mirroring of the overwhelming despair called up in the poet by Victorian London. Morris felt this horror no less keenly; if he does not treat the theme with the same "awareness" as does James Thomson, this is largely because he approaches it from a different and immeasurably more secure personal and family background; and also of course because *The Earthly Paradise* is not an apocalyptic rendering of personal despair, but a deliberately planned exercise in renewing the subject-matter of poetic tradition. It is not correct to say that in *The Earthly Paradise* tales dealing with what Thompson calls "the 'muted Hyperion theme' of the aspiring and defeated hero", the conflict is "never openly stated or posed in terms of human choice or agency." We are shown clearly again and again that the choice which the hero faces is that between acceptance of human life and its duties, which will lead if not to happiness, at least to a satisfactorily lived life, and on the other hand, dedication to a quest that is foredoomed to failure, because it leads the hero away from normal life into a selfish, self absorbed world of love.

While from the view-point of the mid-20th century, we may find more immediate value for us in James Thomson's rendering of the inner horror of 19th-century capitalist London, nevertheless we cannot ignore the fact that Thomson's vision led him to despair and death, while Morris's examination of the meaning of life and art led him progressively to Marxism and to his vital part in the British working-class movement. We cannot ignore *The Earthly Paradise* as one of the landmarks on this way.

The link narrative which now succeeds offers us again the contrast, but now with a growing urgency, of the "something like content" of the ancient men, and the impatience of the young, who have no use for rest and enjoyment of the world, "midst their vain raging for the hopeless best." This thought leads to the Elder's tale of Rhodope, the peasant maid "born for discontent."

The Story of Rhodope, the last of the clasical tales to be told before the "matter of the North" comes surging into the story, is also one of the most attractive and realistic. The tale, really an ancient form of the Cinderella theme, is that of a peasant girl whose shoe is stolen by an eagle, found by a mighty prince who swears to marry the owner, who is revealed by means of the second shoe. Morris treats it in a rhyme-royal stanza of great dexterity, which shows greater narrative skill than does the same stanza in earlier

use, and also greater flexibility as a medium for dialogue.* The dominant motif becomes the character of Rhodope herself, her proud independence, her attachment to the humble peasant life and hard work of the fields, and her relationship to her father. In this psychologically realistic treatment of the story the social contrast is firmly stated between the hard-working life of the peasant and the very different sphere of the court. Throughout the tale one feels that the picture of the peasant life of the "Grecian-speaking folk" to whom Rhodope belongs may have been influenced by Morris's growing sympathy for the simple society without deep class cleavages which he found in the Icelandic sagas.

Though this land is fertile and naturally rich, and life is easy "'twixt garden, field and fold", though there is no lack even of fine array and jewelry brought by traders, yet the folk are simple and hard-working, and it is a land "where few were poor, if none were lordly rich". Here there dwells a peasant, somewhat poorer and less prosperous than most, and growing old along with his wife. Troubled by his childless state, when at length a daughter is born to their old age, on the day of her birth he dreams that a blossoming flower grows into a mighty tree, through which a great wind comes blowing. He takes this dream as a good omen for the future of the child. But though the new-born daughter prospers, the family sink by ill luck to still greater poverty. Rhodope grows up in a strange indifference to all about her and seems untouched by life, feared by her parents although they love her. One day, after talking of former wealth and possessions, the goodman brings from a coffer two gem-embroidered shoes, and sends Rhodope to offer them to the high-priest, whose son wishes to wed her. She feels imprisoned in the narrow life she leads and convinced that she has been born for some other fate. She bids the priest's son give up thoughts of her, because

> I am not fallen so low
> As unto thee dreams of false love to show,
> Or for my very heart's own weariness
> To give thee clinging life-long sharp distress.
>
> (p.224)

Rhodope goes on her way to the temple, full of her own loneliness and

*) Although the form of stanza is the same as that of *The Man Who Never Laughed Again*, its effect is quite different, perhaps because of the very much greater use of enjambement. This gives a swifter, lighter movement suitable to the more optimistic and more human atmosphere of the tale, while the monotonously stopped lines of *The Man Who Never Laughed Again* emphasise the slow, gloomy movement of the story. Nevertheless there are in the present tale several examples of the clumsiness or carelessness for which Morris has been blamed, e. g. "She saw the man indeed he 'longed unto", or "At last upon the bridge the stream that crossed Just ere it met the lake she set her feet." These confirm that this metre never gives Morris the freedom he requires in poetry, however sensitively he may use it at times.

despair, following fate "adown the bitter road With weary feet, and heavy eyes and blind, That leadeth to thy far unknown abode." The idyllic beauty of the scene is contrasted with Rhodope's isolation and feeling of fated despair. She stops on her way to bathe on the sea-shore, and an eagle flies away with one of the shoes. She returns home, with her errand unaccomplished, to take up her daily life of tedious work, yet feels that she is waiting for something. Although the mother wants to sell the remaining shoe, her father, who still believes in some happy fate for the girl, allows her to keep it, and she expresses a little of her love and understanding for him. One day she comes to the little harbour town, where a large galley has just arrived from overseas. A sacrifice is prepared in the market-place, and on the altar lies the missing shoe. Rhodope shows the second shoe, and is acclaimed by the strangers as the bride their king has sent them to seek. Rhodope accepts her fate calmly, but says she must herself tell her parents and take them with her. At last she is about to set out in the galley, but her father has not yet accepted the decision to go with her. She steps on board, but after the ship is on its way, she is told her father has decided to stay among his own folk. Rhodope does not refuse this fated separation from all she has known, and turns towards her new life:

> her unseeing eyes did range
> Wide o'er the tumbling waste of waters grey
> As swift the black ship went upon her way.
>
> (p.248)

Here the story ends and we are told nothing of Rhodope's new life. Morris has given us a fairy-tale, but a fairy-tale without a happy ending. It has become a sophisticated fable of the loneliness of the individual, the powerlessness of the individual to resist the change which drives him from his own home and family into strange and unexpected ways of life. All the real interest of the tale is centred in the character of Rhodope, who is the first of Morris's characteristically independent-minded heroines, fated to be the centre of action which takes them away from settled home and familiar kindred. The Greek background and the undeveloped rather static incidents of the tale detract from the psychological reality. Presumably it was Morris's realisation that he could not achieve the kind of realism he was striving after against the background of classic myth, story and landscape, which made him finally give up the re-telling of tales of classic antiquity. Yet the story is interesting as evidence of the lines along which Morris's imagination was moving. Although we are apt — perhaps unduly influenced by Rossetti's paintings of the static beauty of Janey Morris, and by some of the early Guenevere poems — to think of the typical Morris heroine as caught in an arrestingly beautiful but

motionless pose of passive suffering, actually Morris in his later work prefers active, independent and somewhat scornful heroines. Medea is the most vivid of his classical heroines, Rhodope has considerable psychological depth, but it is not until Gudrun that Morris's women really come to life:

The link narrative now heralds the entry of the Northern theme:

> Scarce aught was left of autumn-tide to die
> When next they met; the north-east wind rushed by
> The house anigh the woods, wherein they were,
> And in the oaks and hollies might they hear
> Its roar grow greater with the dying morn:
> A hard grey day it was, yet scarce forlorn...
>
> (p.249)

This change of weather is amplified in one of Morris's country landscapes, a southern English scene painted in loving detail, for all that it is set in the fabled land in the distant sea, just as the medieval illustrators would paint their own familiar towns as the scene of whatever far-off or fantastic happening:

> Bare was the countryside of work and folk:
> There from the hill-side stead straight out the smoke,
> Over the climbing row of corn-ricks, sailed;
> A few folk stirred; a blue-clad horseman hailed
> A shepherd from the white way, little heard
> 'Twixt ridge and hollow by November seared...
> The smouldering weed-heap by the garden burned;
> Side-long the plough beside the field-gate lay,
> With no one nigh to scare the birds away,
> That twittered mid the scanty wisps of straw.
>
> (p.249)

The old men, as they gather round the fire, seem to see the "wild-wood dim with doubt And twilight of the cloudy leafless tide... the world grew old Unto their eyes, and lacked house, field and fold," and one of the Wanderers starts to tell a tale set

> In a strange land and barren, for removed
> From south lands and their bliss; yet folk beloved,
> Yearning for love, striving 'gainst change and hate,
> Strong, uncomplaining, yet compassionate,
> Have dwelt therein — a strange and awful land —
>
> (p.250)

We see some of the qualities which appealed to Morris in the saga tales, the simplicity of the society of these "few freemen of the farthest north, A handful",

who significantly "Wearied no God with prayers for more of mirth Than dying men men have," for these Icelanders have no God, and

> Therefore, no marvels hath my tale to tell,
> But deals with such things as men know too well;
> All that I have herein your hearts to move,
> Is but the seed and fruit of bitter love.
>
> (p.250)

We thus see that Morris's choice of the Icelandic theme is bound up not only with his developing view of society, but also with his progressive working-out of an atheist philosophy. If we wish to point to the moment in Morris's poetry which crystallises his turn from romance to reality, it is contained in these few lines. His choice of the North is decisive not only for his poetic method (if not immediately in *The Lovers of Gudrun*, then eventually, in *Sigurd the Volsung*), but also for his entire world outlook. By the same choice he rids himself of the classical mythological machinery, the Christian chivalric tradition, and the feudal trappings of Western medievalism.

The story of *The Lovers of Gudrun* is based on the *Laxdale Saga*. This is one of the Icelandic family sagas, that is to say it deals with actual families, people and events. Authorities however appear to agree that while many of the events mentioned and dealt with in the *Laxdale Saga* can be confirmed from other material as being historical, there is a considerable element of fiction in it. W. A. Craigie, in *The Icelandic Sagas*, contrasts it to other of the family sagas:

> "It is less connected, confused in its chronology, obviously fictitious in a number of its details, and exhibits a late romantic tone which is at variance with the true saga-style. The latter feature is especially noticeable in what must be regarded as the central part of the story, — that relating to Kjartan and Gudrún ... The story of these two really occupies but a small part of the saga, but its romantic character and its tragic ending make it stand out clear and distinct above everything else in the narrative. The situation is to a great extent the same as in the sagas of Gunnlaug and Björn, but is rendered much more striking by the strong character of Gudrún herself, compared with whom Helga and Oddný are weak and colourless. In the later part of the saga the defects in its composition become more marked; the fictitious element is very obvious, and defies all chronology. But while Laxdaela must in some respects be regarded more as a historical novel than history, there can be no question of its great merits as a saga, andt it well deserves the high esteem in which it has been held in Iceland and which it has won in other countries."[69]

The part of the saga used by Morris — the story of Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrún — may be summarised as follows[70]: Olaf Peacock is one of the wealthiest men in Iceland, and lives on his estate of Hjardarholt, in Laxdale. A neighbouring family is that of Ósvífr, whose daughter Gudrún is the most beautiful and the wisest woman in Iceland. Her four dreams are interpreted

by the wise man Gest as prophecies of her four husbands. Her first two marriages are described, her separation after the first and her widowhood after the second. She returns to her father's house. She makes the acquaintance of Kjartan, son of Olaf, and Bolli, son of Olaf's brother Thorleikr. Kjartan and Gudrún love each other, but Kjartan leaves for Norway, refusing to take Gudrún with him and bidding her wait three years for him to return. Bolli travels with Kjartan and they enter the service of King Olaf. Kjartan eventually decides to support King Olaf's introduction of Christianity. Bolli returns to Iceland but Kjartan remains in Norway at the King's wish, really as a hostage. He is involved with Ingibjörg, sister of Olaf, whom the King wishes him to marry. Bolli desires to marry Gudrún and eventually persuades her to do so, as she is led to believe from what he tells her that Kjartan will not return. Kjartan however comes back, only to hear of Gudrún's marriage. He takes Hrefna to wife. Olaf tries to bring about agreement between the two families. Kjartan shamefully insults Gudrún and her brothers. Gudrún urges her brothers and Bolli to attack Kjartan, who is killed by Bolli. Olaf prevents revenge being taken on Bolli, but dies three years later and his widow insists on her sons revenging Kjartan. Bolli is killed. Gudrún is now advised by the wise Snorri — a well-known character in the family sagas. Gudrún has had two sons by Bolli, Thorleikr and Bolli. She now weds Thorkel, through Snorri's intervention, and Thorkel is drowned on his return from Norway with wood to build a church. Thus all the dreams of Gudrún about her future husbands are fulfilled. In the last chapter of the saga, Gudrún's son Bolli asks her which of all these men she had loved best. Her answer is, that she did the most hurt to him whom she loved best, in other words to Kjartan, to whom she was never wed and whose death she caused.

Such is the bare outline of the original tale which Morris used. It is clear that what drew his attention to this saga was the dramatic tension between Kjartan, Gudrún and Bolli, of loyalties and betrayals, acknowledged and unacknowledged love — a situation which frequently attracted Morris in his creative work and was in some sense paralleled in his own life.*

Morris has been much castigated for his way of dealing with Norse saga, being accused generally of romanticising the sagas, of failing to understand either their atmosphere or their method, of reading into them what is not there and of omitting the essential spirit of the sagas. The best-informed study of Morris's dealing with saga material is D. M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature.*[71] While praising Morris's treatment of *The Fostering of Aslaug*[72], Miss Hoare considers that this was

*) May we suppose that the working-out of such situations in poetry was one of the factors which enabled Morris to deal in a civilised way with a similar situation in his own life — if indeed the situation existed?

possible because this story is a romantic tale, not primarily suited to the saga method of "allusiveness and compression." She very strongly objects to Morris's treatment of the *Laxdale Saga,* holding that while "the saga crisis is unified, Morris' version is a series of situations strung on the same chain, but forming no significant pattern."[73]

We must, however, at the outset remember that Morris in this poem was certainly not setting out to give a rendering, as accurate as possible, of the spirit and theme of the *Laxdale Saga.* He was using the *Saga* as he used all the other source material for *The Earthly Paradise,* and retold the tale of llth-century Iceland as it might have been told by his 14th-century Wanderers. It would be absurd to criticise Morris in this case for not reproducing exactly the tone and method of the saga. What we can do with justice is to attempt to assess the way in which Morris adapted the saga for inclusion in *The Earthly Paradise,* and to what extent he at the same time conveyed the essential value of the saga tale, or at least, what that value was for him at that moment.

We may also note, that on evidence adduced by May Morris in her introduction to Vol. V[74] and Vol. VII of the *Collected Works,* the first draft of *The Lovers of Gudrun* was finished in June, 1869. According to Magnússon, however, as May Morris quotes him[76], Morris was reading the *Laxdale Saga* with him in the Autumn of 1869 after his return from Ems. Volume III of *The Earthly Paradise* was published in December, 1869, with the imprint of 1870[76], so that it is chronologically possible that revision of the original June version could have taken place under the influence of closer study. How well did Morris know the sagas previous to this autumn?

He had been studying Icelandic with Magnússon since autumn 1868, and according to Mackail[77], he began writing *The Lovers of Gudrun* immediately after the publication of his and Magnússon's translation of the *Grettissaga.* He was thus not without at least some knowledge of the genuine saga outlook and method. His translations of *Gunnlaug Worm-tongue* and *Grettir the Strong* were published respectively in January and April 1869. Nevertheless the fact that even a f t e r having written *The Lovers of Gudrun* by June, Morris studied the *Laxdale Saga* with Magnússon in the autumn may suggest that he was not altogether satisfied that his handling was sufficiently close.

An interesting point is that the original MS of *The Lovers of Gudrun,* exactly dated June 1869, shows little divergence from the published version.[78] So it would seem that whatever further insight his closer study may have given him, he did not allow it to affect the story as he retold it for *The Earthly Paradise.*

According to Magnússon[79], it was while they were working through the *Laxdale Saga* in autumn 1869, that Morris suddenly felt the impact of the

Volsungasaga, which Magnússon had translated for him earlier*. Now Morris was seized with enthusiasm for tale of the Volsungs, calling it "the greatest tale that was ever told", and immediately left the study of the *Laxdale Saga* and set out with Magnússon to study the Eddic Songs which form the basis of the *Volsungasaga.* From this study, after his two visits to Iceland, sprang the poem regarded by many critics as the crown of his poetic vork, *Sigurd the Volsung,* vastly different from *The Earthly Paradise* in conception, method, style, metre and purpose.

What May Morris says of *The Fostering of Aslaug* and the unfinished tale of *Swanhild* (based on an interpolated episode at the end of the *Volsunga-saga)* — that they seem to have been Morris's "first reachings-out towards the realization of the Matter of the North before he became fully alive to the splendour of the Sigurd legend"[80] — can also be applied to *The Lovers of Gudrun.* He was not yet seeking, as he did in his translations and in *Sigurd,* to transmit the essence of the saga tale to his readers; and he was as yet, in spring 1869, merely beginning to formulate the outlook on life which made him wish to show the kindred or gens society as possessing values more lasting than those of Victorian capitalism, or medieval feudalism, or the Western European interpretation of classical antiquity. Nevertheless even in *The Lovers of Gudrun* we can see some signs of what Morris was later to find important in the sagas.

The beginning of Morris's tale (as the beginning too of *Sigurd the Volsung),* shows us immediately one of the aspects of the sagas which most attracted Morris — the feeling for place, homestead, family — feelings which were among the main preoccupations of his own life. Certainly one of the main motifs of the actual *Laxdale Saga* is this pride of family, already of course passing over into early feudal love of family possessions and family power.

Morris immediately introduces us to the main theme of the two neighbouring families of Herdholt and of Bathstead. The serene everyday atmosphere of the opening passage — with its modified genealogies, a reminiscence rather than a reproduction of the saga manner — appropriately establishes the mood of the saga, while it is not without warning of what may lie behind:

> For so much love there was betwixt the twain,
> Herdholt and Bathstead, that it well might last
> Until the folk aforenamed were all passed
> From out the world; but herein shall be shown
> How the sky blackened, and the storm swept down.
> (p.252)

The metre is the narrative iambic five-stress couplet, considerably enjambed,

*) Morris had already looked at Magnússon's *Volsungasaga* translation while at Ems, referring to it as "rather of the monstrous order". *(Vorks,* Vol. V., Intro., p. xvi)

which Morris has already used in other tales. Thus from the purely formal point of view the use of the saga material does not yet involve innovations. The effect of the saga original on the form of Morris's poetry at this stage can be seen in two ways: firstly, in the choice of language, which is simpler and less decorative than in the earlier, especially in the classical poems of *The Earthly Paradise*. Some hints are taken directly from the saga, and these are apt to be the most effective — for example, the description of Gudrun's blushing, after Guest's interpretation of her dreams (p.260), although an earlier description is far more elaborate than anything in the saga and concludes more in the previous Morris manner:

> Like an ivory tower
> Rose up her neck from love's white-veiled bower.
>
> (p.253)

Yet such "romantic" passages are comparatively few, and where Morris really departs from the saga is not so much in profusion of romanticised description, as in exhaustive examination and detailed analysis of states of feeling.

The second formal contribution which Morris takes directly from the saga itself, is the division of the tale into short chapters with chapter headings — Morris's chapters, however, not being identical with those of the saga. We may say in general of his treatment of the material in this case, that he selects and elaborates that part of the original which deals with the personal fate of a few leading characters, and plays down or ignores the more general material dealing with the collective fate of the kindreds.

As in the saga, Gudrun has four dreams which are interpreted by Guest the wise as referring to her four future husbands. Morris, who had not yet been to Iceland, though, according to Magnússon's testimony, he had read modern books of travel in Iceland and was "surprisingly well up in the geography of the island"[81], calls up a landscape atmosphere which is certainly not alien to the sagas, but is rather an extension of the atmosphere of the border ballads, than the authentic description of the Icelandic landscape. The rhythm of the verse is more reminiscent of the *Defence of Guenevere* volume than is anything else in *The Earthly Paradise*. The passage following Gudrun's description of her dreams is especially evocative of this atmosphere. Waking at dawn and hearing the neatherd's song outside in the snow, she looks from the window,

> ... and saw afar
> The wide firth, black beneath the morning-star,
> And all the waste of snow, and saw the man
> Dark on the slope; 'twixt the dead earth and wan,
> And the dark vault of star-besprinkled sky,
> Croaking, a raven toward the sea did fly —
> With that I fell a-yearning for the spring ...
>
> (p.257)

Morris now gives us a vivid glimpse of the gold-ridged roof of Herdholt, and a fine description of Olaf Peacock, "clear-browed and wide-eyed was he, smooth of skin, Through fifty rough years"; and he uses the description of the interior of Herdholt and its painted walls to introduce something of the Norse mythology — a counterbalance, with its sense of the brooding sorrow of life, to the classical mythology so-far prevalent in *The Earthly Paradise:*

> . . . and last of all
> Was Odin's sorrow wrought upon the wall,
> As slow-paced, weary-faced, he went along
> Anxious with all the tales of woe and wrong
> His ravens, Thought and Memory, bring to him.
>
> (p.263).

In the words of Guest, after he has had foresight of the future fate of Kiartan and Bodli, Morris amplifies and expands the saga, and this passage illustrates very well the way in which Morris deals with saga material in this poem. In the saga, Gest says simply and impressively, how terrible it is to foresee the future of such splendid men. But Morris endeavours to explain this emotion to his own day — and here, not through the mouth of his 14th-century narrator, but in terms such as he used in his personal lyrics:

> Yet I weep not because these pass away,
> Sad though it is, but rather weep for this,
> That they know not upon their day of bliss
> How their worn hearts shall fail them ere they die,
> How sore the weight of woe on them shall lie,
> Which no sigh eases, wherewithal no hope,
> No pride, no rage, shall make them fit to cope . . .
> . . . men may look to see
> Love slaying love, and ruinous victory,
> And truth called lies and kindness turned to hate,
> And prudence sowing seed of all debate!
>
> (p.269)

Morris, who is interested mainly in the drama between Kiartan, Gudrun and Bodli, passes swiftly over Gudrun's first two marriages and comes quickly to the love of Kiartan and Gudrun. Kiartan is a Sigurd-like character: handsome, gifted, without fear —

> And yet withal it was his daily way
> To be most gentle both of word and deed,
> And ever folk would seek him in their need,
> Nor was there any child but loved him well.

In this characterisation Morris closely follows the saga: the character of Kiartan

is straightforward, his feelings are simple and normal and scarcely need to be analysed. Where Morris most departs from the simple unelaborated statements of the saga is in his detailed analyses of the states of feeling and moods of both Bodli and Gudrun. Gudrun he deals with as elaborately as with Guenevere or Medea. While the saga simply shows us the tragedy let loose by the ambition of the two heads of families, Olaf and Ósvifr, by Bodli's implied treachery, and by Gudrun's combined jealousy and wounded pride, Morris is concerned to find moods and emotions adequate to motivate the tragic events. Some of the commonsense motivation of the saga vanishes. For example, Kjartan's reason in the saga for refusing to take Gudrún with him on his voyage to Norway is the excellent one that her father is old, her brothers too young, and she, renowned for her wisdom, must stay at home to run their affairs — reasons which Gudrún does not attempt to overcome. But Morris more romantically shows love for Gudrun fighting in Kiartan

> with the craving vain
> The love of all the wondering world to gain...
> (p.284)

and gives no reason, other than Kiartan's desire to make a name for himself before he claims Gudrun in marriage, for his not taking her. In contrast to the saga version, where Kjartan and Gudrún part in some disagreement, Morris's Gudrun bids Kiartan go forth and come back with honour — certainly a more chevaleresque parting than in the succinct version of the saga. Morris wishes here to stress the contrast of their lover-like parting with the fact that they

> never met again
> In loving wise; that each to each no more
> Their eyes looked kind on this side death's dark shore,
> That midst their tangled life they must forget,
> Till they were dead, that e'er their lips had met.
> (p.286)

In the treatment of the events at the court of Olaf Tryggvison, Morris makes some surprising changes in the saga version. For example, he omits the highly dramatic account of Kjartan's swimming match with Olaf, which one would have thought would have appealed to him. The reason would seem to be — apart perhaps from considerations of length and dramatic compactness — that he wants to emphasise the courtly character of Olav, the contrast between him as a feudal ruler and the simplicity of the Icelanders.

Morris makes much of the contrast in character between Bodli and Kiartan. Kiartan is content to live in the moment, and is even prepared for dalliance with Ingibiorg, for whose love he feels pity, and which gives him "a soft pleasure

that he would not name". Bodli meanwhile has realised his own consuming love for Gudrun. When the king sends Bodli back to Iceland to claim it for the Christian faith, he leaves without hope or enthusiasm, "knowing well How ill his life should go whate'er befell." Kiartan, on the other hand, "being such a man As through all turns of fortune never can Hold truce with fear or sorrow," lives on at Olaf's court "Not ill content with all the change and strife." Morris tends to stress ironically that it is "Bodli the Christian" who betrays Kiartan, wondering the while

> why that grief and rage and sin
> Was ever wrought; but wondering most of all
> Why such wild passion on his heart should fall.
>
> (p.304)

In Morris's treatment of Bodli's return, we see the need he felt for dealing with the incidents more plastically than is the case in the saga. The method of the saga is one of rather flat, matter-of-fact story-telling, in which certain of the great moments are reported with such trenchant restraint that they leave us with the feeling of completely adequate treatment. Yet other certainly no less dramatic moments of the tale are completely passed over by the story-teller. It is clear that Morris, telling the tale not as a piece of family history, but from the inner view-point of a few main characters, felt the need to elaborate certain moments which the saga practically ignores.* A case in point is the return of Bodli to Iceland and his first meeting there with Gudrun, passed over in a few reticent words by the saga (Chapter 42). Morris however makes it a dramatic encounter which again calls up the atmosphere of the poems in the *Defence of Guenevere* volume.

The passage begins with a long lyric soliloquy of Gudrun's, perhaps too subjective for a saga heroine, but the emotion is real and the situation has the saga dramatic irony:

> Ah, the hard world! I, who in hope so sure
> Have waited, scarcely may the days endure.
> How has it been with those who needs must wait
> With dying hope and lingering love, till hate,
> The seed of ill lies, told and hearkened to,
> The knot of loving memories shall undo,
> Break the last bonds of love, and cast them forth
> With nothing left to them of joy or worth?
>
> (p.304)

*) This sober treatment is of course the main beauty of saga literature, but there are moments when we feel that sobriety and stoic restraint are just on the border of indifference and inadequacy.

And as she calls on Kiartan to come back, she hears horsehoofs on the road. A horseman clad in red appears over the brow of the hill:

> . . ..her eyes, on the hill's brow intent,
> Beheld a spear rising against the sky
> O'er the grey road, and therewith presently
> A gilded helm rose up beneath the spear,
> And then her trembling limbs no more might bear
> Her body forward . . .
>
> (p.305)

But as he draws near, she sees it is Bodli.

We can note how far Morris at times departed from the saga, both in his conception of the characters and in the inner content of the incidents whose outward form he more or less preserves. In the saga, we are merely told that Bolli was heartily welcomed at Gudrún's home on his return, and that Gudrún questioned him about his journeying and about Kjartan. She appears to receive well the news of Kjartan and Ingjibörg, but she goes aside, her face is red, and some people doubt if she is as pleased as she makes out to be. Morris elaborates the incident of the return:

> She stared upon him panting, and belike
> He saw her now, for he his spurs did strike
> Into his horse, and, while her quivering face
> Grew hard and stern, rode swiftly to the place
> Whereas she stood, and clattering leapt adown
> Unto the earth, and met her troubled frown
> And pale face, with the sad imploring eyes
> Of Bodli Thorleikson.
>
> (p.305)

Again and again Morris returns to the analysis of Bodli's love: "What was the world to him with all its ways, If he once more into her eyes might gaze?" Even Kiartan is shown to have ambiguous and complex feelings, as when he bids farewell to Ingibiorg:

> And sick at heart he grew, for, sooth to tell,
> He feared her sorrow much, and furthermore
> He loved her with a strange love very sore,
> Despite the past and future.
>
> (p.317)

Again, when he hears of Gudrun's marriage to Bodli, Kiartan feels horror, sees familiar things as in a dream, and thinks "How weak and helpless and alone he was." Nevertheless Morris endeavours to give something of the saga atmosphere of events which pass regardless of personal suffering:

Thus Kiartan came
Back to his father's house, grown great of fame,
And tidingless a while day passed by day,
What hearts soe'er 'neath sorrow's millstone lay.

(p.323)

Whereas the saga devotes a good deal of attention to describing the negotiations of Bolli for wedding Gudrún, Morris reports this only indirectly:

Folk with one accord
Began to say, how that no little thing
It was, these two great strains of men to bring
Into alliance: "Pity though" they said
"That she to such a strange man should be wed
As Bodli Thorleikson of late hath grown!"
So sprang the evil crop by evil sown.

(p.313)

The saga preserves reticence about the feelings of Gudrún, Kjartan and Bolli and we see them in fact only through the eyes of others. We are told, for example (Chapter 44), that after Gudrún has accused Bolli of not telling her the truth about Kjartan, she spoke little on these matters, but that it was obvious she was not pleased, and most people believed that she was longing greatly for Kjartan, even though she hid her feelings. Morris attempts to describe the emotions of the three, more subjectively. While Bodli "in feverish eager wise Strove to pierce through the mask of bitter lies That hid the bitter truth" — for though he has won Gudrun in marriage, he knows she loves not him but Kiartan — Gudrun is torn between longing for Kiartan and the attempt to lead her new life with Bodli:

But over Gudrun changes wild would flit,
And sometimes stony would she seem to be;
And sometimes would she give short ecstasy
To Bodli with a fit of seeming love;
And sometimes, as repenting sore thereof,
Silent the livelong day would sit and stare,
As though she knew some ghost were drawing near,
And ere it came, with all the world must break,
That she might lose no word it chanced to speak

(p.324-5)

When Kiartan weds the beautiful Refna, Gudrun's jealousy is added to her unhappiness:

And she forgot the sorrow of the heart
That fate and time from hers had thrust apart.

Still wrong bred wrong within her; day by day
Some little speck of kindness fell away,
Till in her heart naked desire alone
Was left, the one thing not to be undone.

(p.337)

And the whole tragic nature of the drama is summed up in Bodli's words to Gudrun as, roused by her taunts, he rushes from her to lead her brethren to the ambush in which he is to kill Kiartan:

Wildly he cried: "Oh, Gudrun, thou has lost,
But look on me for I have never won!"

(p.371)

Kiartan, though of the three he has most control over himself, nevertheless when he hears the rumours spread by the envious sons of Oswif — Gudrun's brothers — begins to feel more bitter about Gudrun and Bodli. Yet he is not the type of man to waste his life in regrets, and he agrees to wed Refna:

This was a man some shreds of joy to save
From out the wreck, if so he might, to win
Some garden from the waste, and dwell therein.

(p.341)

The incidents leading up to the tragic climax of the tale are considerably softened. While we may forgive Morris for changing the rather crude form of revenge Kjartan takes on the household of Gudrún and Bolli for the stealing of the bridal coif — and it is not so much prudishness in Morris which makes him omit it, as the same sense of tragic fitness which leads him in Sigurd the Volsung to leave out the more grotesque incidents of the tale — we are bound to feel that he has tampered too much with the atmosphere of the saga in making Kiartan's raid on Bathstead so much like a chivalric piece out of Froissart. Yet there is some warrant even for this description of Kiartan's knightly equipment, in the earlier saga description of Kjartan (Chapter 44) clad in scarlet with gold helmet, sword, and cross-emblazoned shield.

The final ambush of Kiartan by Bodli and Gudrun's brothers is related by Morris in comparatively close agreement with the saga, and yet with a change of emphasis — instead of the feeling of unavoidable pressure of real events which actually happened, that we get in the saga, we have a too greatly heightened pathos in the description of how Kiartan met his death. The succinct narrative of the saga here really gives us a better picture of the hesitation of Bolli than does Morris's long-drawn-out account, and certainly Kjartan's terse remark: "I had rather be killed by thee, cousin, than kill thee" (Chapter 49) is undoubtedly more effective than:

"Ah, better yet
For me to die than live on even so!
Alas! friend, do the deed that thou must do!
Oh, lonely death! — farewell, farewell, farewell!"

(p.378)

On more than one occasion in *The Lovers of Gudrun*, his chosen metre obliges Morris to resort to this rather weak triple repetition of words to fill out the line, and is doubtless one reason why he sought another metre when he came in *Sigurd* to treat the saga world as he felt, with his greater knowledge of it, that it deserved.

The arrival of Bodli at Bathstead after the killing of Kiartan is another occasion on which Morris substitutes for the grimness of the saga another type of emotion. May Morris has referred to this:

> "It is characteristic of Morris's dealing with the Laxdale Saga that for all his passion for the Northern matter and for all his power of identifying himself with the thing he loved, he feels bound as a craftsman to present the story to us in a sympathetic form, making the inhuman human and softening the character of Gudrun so that she may not be quite remote from human experience at the end of the tragedy. The Gudrun that greeted Bodli on his return from the ambush on Kiartan with those often-quoted harsh words of hers: 'Mickle prowess hath been done; I have spun yarn for twelve ells and thou hast slain Kiartan'; the Gudrun who talked and smiled with the brethren who had been slaying her husband while she washed linen in the beck above the hut, this Gudrun is transformed into a figure less remote, less stoic in the expression of grief; the interpretation of her is a queen-like being, human and lonely amid the tangle of her tragic passion."[82]

In fact, this passage reminds us of the dramatic treatment of incident in Morris's earlier unfinished series, *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*:

But when they reached the stead, anigh sunset,
There in the porch a tall black figure stood,
Whose stern pale face, 'neath its o'erhanging hood,
In the porch shadow was all cold and grey,
Though on her feet the dying sunlight lay...
... She stepped aside,
And the dark shade her raiment black did hide
As they passed through into the dusky hall,
Afraid to see her face, and last of all
Went Bodli, clashing through the porch, but he
Stayed in the midst, and turned round silently,
And sought her face, and said: "Thy will is done..."
... She reached a hand
Out toward the place where trembling he did stand,
But touched him not, and never did he know
If she had mind some pity then to show
Unto him, or if rather more apart
She fain had thrust him from her raging heart...

(p.283)

Morris does not deal at all with the brutal death of Bodli, and in the last part of the tale the interest centres entirely on Gudrun. Morris's attitude towards society was not yet ripe for him to be interested in the type of motivation (property-ties, inter-kindred arrangements) which fills the saga at this point. He paints Gudrun aging and increasing in honour and fulfilling the destiny foretold by Guest:

> And though her days of keen joys might be bare
> Yet little did they bring of added care
> As on and on they wore from that old time
> When she was set amidst mad love and crime.
>
> (p.392)

But in the last sight of Gudrun which he gives us, Morris closely follows the saga, and we may feel that it was for the sake of the striking words which he quotes directly from the conclusion of the saga, and which end his poem, that Morris chose precisely this tale to retell. The aged and blind Gudrun is asked by her son Bodli, which man she loved the most:

> She turned, until her sightless eyes did gaze
> As though the wall, the hills, must melt away,
> And show her Herdholt in the twilight grey;
> She cried, with tremulous voice, and eyes grown wet
> For the last time, whate'er should happen yet,
> With hands stretched out for all that she had lost:
> "I did the worst to him I loved the most."
>
> (p.395)

It would be idle to pretend that Morris in *The Lovers of Gudrun* has given us a faithful rendering of the original saga. As May Morris points out, "Here is no copying of the abrupt and reticent style of the old writer. Morris has used the material, and the resultant poem fits in to the scheme of The Earthly Paradise without clashing with its harmonies. It is full of the subtleties of modern love — passion, hatred, jealousy, doubt of the reality of life itself."[83] Any other method would of course have been impossible within the framework of *The Earthly Paradise* and there is no reason to blame Morris for having treated the story in his way. In any case, by introducing the two tales of Northern provenance into *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris had sufficiently indicated and had proved to himself the lines along which his further development was to go. The greater familiarity with Icelandic saga which he acquired during the autumm after he had finished *The Lovers of Gudrun*, led him however at first to feel that it was impossible to render in modern English verse the great epics of the North.[84]

The last volume of *The Earthly Paradise* cannot but be something of an

anti-climax, coming after the unexpected weightiness of *The Lovers of Gudrun*. Nevertheless Morris remained faithful to his original design and in fact the final volume shows great skill in marshalling the various themes — classic, saga, and late medieval legend — which appear in the tale of *The Golden Apples*, the two tales of Bellerophon, the saga legend of Aslaug, and the two variations on the late medieval or early Renaissance conception of Venus.

The link lyric for December is perhaps the finest of all the link lyrics, expressing a mature and adult attitude to unhappiness in love, and combining something of the classic stoicism of Arnold with the passionate warmth of Keats. The first verse sets the December night scene:

> Dead lonely night and all streets quiet now —

with snow clouds swimming over the moon so that

> On earth strange shadows o'er the snow are cast.

The scene is one of grey, cold immensity:

> Pale stars, bright moon, pnoɔ ɥɯs make heaven so vast
> That earth left silent by the wind of night
> Seems shrunken 'neath the grey unmeasured height.

Through the silence the last bells of the old year ring out

> . . . above the year foredone,
> Change, kindness lost, love left unloved alone,

And personal emotion, remembrance of past love, wells up and makes the speaker deem

> Thou once wert loved, if but amidst a dream.
>
> (Vol. VI, p.1)

Not for the first time in these link lyrics (cf. p.126-7), the poet uses a mode of address which may equally well apply to himself, to the person he is addressing, and to the reader. Yet in this lyric it seems certain that Morris is above all thinking of himself and of his own personal problems.

The final verse must surely express Morris's own attitude to emotional experience — that however shattering it is, it can never be the whole of life — the attitude, we may recall, which he has just noted in Kiartan (cf. p.90):

> O thou who clingest still to life and love,
> Though nought of good, no God thou mayst discern,
> Though nought that is, thine utmost woe can move,

Though no soul knows wherewith thine heart doth yearn,
Yet, since thy weary lips no curse can learn,
Cast no least thing thou lovedst once away,
Since yet perchance thine eyes shall see the day.

Here we see illustrated Morris's refusal to accept any cheap or sentimental consolation, as well as his intense personal reserve and his final conclusion, to accept life and learn from it.

The following tale, entitled *The Golden Apples,* relates an episode from the story of Hercules. It does not really show any development of Hercules as a character, but presents him as an unindividualised type of the hero who helps mankind. The tale points the contrast, perhaps unconsciously, between the vitality of the "matter of the North" which Morris has just dealt with, and the smoother but far less real world of the classic myths in their Victorian conception. Perhaps this is the least sympathetic of all the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* — for Hercules never comes alive as a character. We may deduce from the link narrative that Morris himself acknowledged the inadequacy of the Victorian interpretation of Greek classic literature:

... but to some the tale did seem
Like to the middle of some pleasant dream,
Which, waked from, leaves upon the troubled mind
A sense of something ill that lurked behind,
If morn had given due time to dream it out.

(p.19)

Morris was by now conscious of the "lack of conflict" in the method of retelling of classic myths and tales — basically similar to that current among the other poets of his time. Jason is probably his most successful and original tale from classic sources; in its stronger characterisation and direr reality it is closer to *The Lovers of Gudrun* than are the smoothly surfaced classical tales in *The Earthly Paradise,* in which Morris makes even less of an attempt to go beyond this flat treatment than he does in *Jason* or in the posthumously published *Orpheus.*

A charming contrast to the Hercules tale, which it follows, and to the first Bellerophon tale, which it precedes, is *The Fostering of Aslaug* — the second tale taken from Northern sources and telling of the daughter of Brynhild and Sigurd, hidden for safety by her foster-father Heimir and brought up in a poor peasant household. This story is told at the beginning of the *Ragnarssaga Lodbrókar,* and really forms a romantic, somewhat apocryphal pendant to the *Volsungasaga.* As Morris tells it, it provides a transitional stage between his classical tales on this theme of the maiden brought up or condemned to work or poverty (Psyche, Rhodope) and the final flowering of this

motif in its most perfect and adequate form in the prose tale of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. It is told in the short four-stress romance couplet, the "minstrel-measure" as May Morris calls it, and combines elements of the fairy-tale and the ballad. It has much less of the saga atmosphere than has *The Lovers of Gudrun*, yet the mood, characters and "décor" are in keeping with the Northern background. The tale too seems more hopeful, less beset with the feeling of melancholy, decay and change, and instead of moralising on the transitoriness of life it ends in true chronicle manner with a short paragraph placing it in some — even if vague — historical context.

The tale is introduced by a few lines in the link narrative, a far-off prelude, as it were, to the theme which must already have been demanding expression in Morris, that of *Sigurd the Volsung*:

> The flickering firelight
> And the late sun still streaming through the haze,
> Made the hall meet enow for tale of days
> So long past over: nigh the cheery flame
> A Wanderer sat, and a long sunbeam came
> On to his knees, then to the hearth fell down.
> There in the silence, with thin hands and brown
> Folded together, and a dying smile
> Upon his face, he sat a little while,
> Then somewhat raised his bright eyes and began
> To name his people's best belovèd man.
>
> (p.20)

The teller of the tale now begins by apologising for not telling the story of Sigurd:

> But now have I no heart to raise
> That mighty sorrow laid asleep,
> That love so sweet, so strong and deep,
> That as ye hear the wonder told
> In those few strenuous words of old,
> The whole world seems to rend apart
> When heart is torn away from heart.
> But the world lives still, and to-day
> The green Rhine wendeth on its way
> Over the unseen golden curse
> That drew its lord to worse and worse,
> Till that last dawn in Atli's hall,
> When the red flame flared over all,
> Lighting the leaden, sunless sea.
>
> (p.21)

We clearly see from this passage how much the "few strenuous words of old" had already taken possession of Morris's imagination.

But neither Morris nor his poetic art was yet sufficiently mature to deal with the full significance of the Sigurd myth. Instead, he will tell the tale of how Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, was saved by her foster-father Heimir, the king who had also fostered Brynhild. After the death of Sigurd and Brynhild, the grief-stricken Heimir conceals the child Aslaug in an ingeniously constructed harp and leaves his own land in the hope of saving Aslaug from the foes of her race. The description of Heimir as he sets out could only belong to this saga-fairytale atmosphere:

> For now by trodden way and wild
> Goes Heimir long: wide-faced is he,
> Thin-cheeked, hook-nosed, e'en as might be
> An ancient erne; his hair falls down
> From 'neath a wide slouched hat of brown,
> And mingles white with his white beard;
> A broad brown brand, most men have feared,
> Hangs by his side, and at his back
> Is slung a huge harp . . .
>
> (p.24)

He comes to a poor steading by the sea, kept by an unprepossessing couple:

> There sat a woman all alone
> Whom some ten years would make a crone,
> Yet would they little worsen her;
> Her face was sorely pinched with care,
> Sour and thin-lipped she was; of hue
> E'en like a duck's foot;whitish blue
> Her eyes were, seeming as they kept
> Wide open even when she slept.
>
> (p.28-9)

It would seem that dealing with the saga material inclines Morris to realistic character drawing, of which earlier we have only a few lightly-touched examples.

The woman realises that this apparently penniless traveller has rich clothing and gold beneath his beggar's cloak, while she catches sight of a fringe of gold drapery hanging out of the harp. She sends him to sleep in the barn, and in the night she persuades her husband to murder him in his sleep. They take the child Aslaug to bring up as their servant. Aslaug grows up in poverty, accustomed to hard work, but delighting in life, though she is apparently dumb. Once, when she is seventeen, she is pasturing her flocks on the hillside, when on her way back to the steading, she suddenly sees a ship on the sea:

> . . . A long ship, with shield-hung rail,
> And fair-stained flapping raven-sail,

And golden dragon-stem, there lay
On balanced oars amidst the bay
Slow heaving with the unrippled swell.

The seamen have come to the steading to bake their bread, but they are so struck by Aslaug's beauty, that they bake it badly, so that their leader on their return demands the reason. He sends for Aslaug, and the two are smitten with love for each other. She refuses however to go with him before he has completed his quest and won fame. After a year he returns for her, they wed, both having dreamt that Sigurd and Brynhild have blest their love — for the leader of the shipmen is Ragnar. The conclusion of the tale relates it to its historical context:

But so great Ragnar's glory seemed
To Northern folk, that many deemed
That for his death, when song arose
From that Northumbrian Adder-close,
England no due atonement paid
Till Harald Godwinson was laid
Beside his fallen banner, cold
Upon the blood-soaked Sussex mould,
And o'er the wrack of Senlac field
Full-fed the grey-nebbed raven wheeled.

(p.64)

Little though the romantic descriptions of Aslaug's beauty, and the extended analyses of mood and feeling, may have to do with the saga original, nevertheless the general background and way of life depicted is in keeping with the saga: the sorrow of Heimir at the death of Brynhild, the incidents of his stay at the lonely farmstead, his murder by the old man, and especially the characterisation of the two peasants, besides the general tendency to keep within the world of reality, and the precise relation to historical context at the end, all show how strongly the sagas he was reading were beginning to affect Morris's poetical method.

In the link narrative which follows, as if to emphasise the growing urgency of the poet's preoccupations and his desire to relate his whole poem more closely to life, there occurs a lyric cry which echoes the recurring themes of the link lyrics:

Drag on, long night of winter, in whose heart,
Nurse of regret, the dead spring yet has part!
Drag on, O night of dreams! O night of fears!
Fed by the summers of the bygone years!

(p.64)

The link lyric for January is perhaps the most outspoken of all, and is obviously addressed by the poet to his wife. Set against the "dull rainy undersky" and "half-thawed snow", at the "murky ending of a leaden day", he addresses her as she turns away from the window and the gloomy evening beyond it:

> Silent, but with thy scarce-seen kindly smile
> Sent through the dusk my longing to beguile.
>
> (p.65)

The second verse, however, shows that in spite of the poet's tender love, some misunderstanding or other circumstance has intervened. As the lights suddenly gleam, in the contrast between the dark outside and the light inside "our eyes meet dazed," and it seems to the poet that for a moment their understanding is completely renewed:

> There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without!
> And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed —
> O look, love, look again! the veil of doubt
> Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised!
> O eyes of heaven, as clear thy sweet soul blazed
> On mine a moment! O come back again,
> Strange rest and dear amid the long dull pain!*

But this is only a gleam of relief, a moment which passes, and though "there she sitteth still, With wide grey eyes so frank and fathomless", yet the communication between them has been again interrupted. And though the poet believes they will again find mutual understanding (there is no suggestion of dislike or hostility in their relationship, merely a certain alienation), yet this solution has not yet arrived and the conclusion of the poem expresses the poet's longing and pain:

> O unseen hurrying rack! O wailing wind!
> What rest and where go ye this night to find?

What there is to say about *The Golden Apples* applies to a large extent also to the two final classical tales, that of *Bellerophon at Argo* and *Bellerophon in Lycia,* the twenty-first and twenty-third tales respectively. The first tells the story of the evil love of the Queen Sthenoboea for Bellerophon and her re-

*) We may note that this "moment of recognition" comes at the simultaneous presence of two lights — evidently an idea of considerable symbolical significance for Morris, as throughout *The Earthly Paradise* the magic moment is that when the sun and moon are at once in the sky. Here, as befits contemporary reality, it is the moment when lights in the house suddenly leap out against the dark outside.

venge on him, the second tells of Bellerophon's further adventures, his fight with the Chimaera and love for Philonoe and his final happiness, but always with the moral that happiness is never a final state in this life. Like the Hercules tale, these too are attempts to portray a "folk hero" of the type Morris was coming more and more to favour, though not until Sigurd did he attain success in the delineation of such a hero. All the classical heroes of *The Earthly Paradise* are too half-hearted, too much bound by the classical provenance of the tales.

These two tales of Bellerophon — originally intended as one tale, but divided because of too great length — occupy together nearly 170 pages, as compared with the 140-odd of the Gudrun tale, and are related in five-stress iambic couplets with very considerable enjambement. It is obviously the character and the fate of Bellerophon, the man accursed of destiny —

> For what I love I slay, and what I hate
> I strive to save from out the hands of Fate —
>
> (p.69)

that is the centre of Morris's interest, and not the action of the story. Once again, direct description of incident frequently gives way to description of states. And yet we cannot deny a certain appropriateness to this method, since the interest of these two poems is not so much the narrative, as the psychological analysis of succeeding states of mind, especially of the Queen in the first poem, who loves Bellerophon but is denied by him, and of Philonoe and Bellerophon in love, in the second poem. Certainly the preoccupation of Morris in these two poems is not so much with death, as with problems of human relationships. Even in the over-romantic context, Morris tries to solve his situations in terms of psychological realism.

The recounting of the various achievements of Bellerophon, because of this method, are long-drawn-out, and we feel that Morris does not emotionally share those activities. His treatment of the whole incident of the Chimaera falters between realistic description and an inadequate symbolical presentation of the Chimaera, the imaginary monster which vanishes when it is slain, as a psychological or moral illusion. The result is a lack of clear purpose in the whole poem, which is much more evident here than in any of the previous classical poems, except perhaps *The Golden Apples*. Certainly in this direction Morris's poetic development had reached and passed its greatest power. The two Bellerophon stories are little more than decorative scroll-work, and too much space is devoted to a hero whom Morris failed to make appealing. We may regret that in place of at least one of them Morris did not include the Orpheus tale, which would surely have been an appropriate foil between the two stories of Venus with which *The Earthly Paradise* ends. We

may apply to the Bellerophon tales what Thompson says of *The Death of Paris* — that this is "poetry of imprecise dreamlike moods", though these two poems, with their ever-present spiritual restlessness and sense of impending fate, cannot be said to be "soothing and relaxing to the mind."[85]

Perhaps one compositional reason why Morris included these two lengthy tales is that they amplify and contrast the two aspects of woman's love which occur again and again in the tales — the selfish passion which destroys, and the tender love which seeks to help. In the first tale, Sthenoboea endeavours to destroy Bellerophon, while in the second, her sister Philinoe, outwardly like her, loves him and saves him from death. Yet the length and ornateness of the two tales deaden the effect both of this contrast, and also of the heroic presentation of Bellerophon.

Even the link narrative which succeeds *Bellerophon at Argos* seems more vivid and alive than the tale itself, and for a moment the emotions of the listeners, against the background of the hall where "the pale moon shone In fitful gleams," while "ragged clouds still streamed the pale sky o'er", usurp our interest. Here the balance between frame and picture, tale and ornamental border, has become curiously reversed.

The tale of *The Ring Given to Venus,* like that of *The Hill of Venus,* is taken from William of Malmesbury's *De Gestis Regum Anglorum.* This 12th-century legend of the Pope Sylvester II who lived in the 10th century, takes on, in Morris's retelling, something of a Renaissance richness, without losing the simplicity and charm associated in Morris with the four-stress couplet. It would also be a rich quarry for evidence of Morris's method of "borrowing" from his romantic predecessors[86], for we will find reminiscences of Keats, especially of *Isabella* and of *The Eve of St. Agnes,* and of Coleridge: subtle echoes which instead of limiting the poem by suggesting "imitation" of other poets — which of course they are not — enlarge its appeal by extending its reference to the whole field of romance and what the poets have made of it.

The opening lines set the tale in an ancient and wealthy city,

> Well built upon a goodly shore;
> The wide lands stretched behind it bore
> Great wealth of oil and wine and wheat;
> The great sea carried to its feet
> The dainty things of many lands;
> There the hid miners' toiling hands
> Dragged up to light the dull blue lead,
> And silver white, and copper red,
> And dreadful iron; many a time
> The sieves swung to the woman's rhyme

O'er gravelly streams that carried down
The golden sand from caves unknown...
Least of all things this lucky land
Lacked for the craftsman's cunning hand.

(p.136)

Though not so trenchant as those lines of Keats in *Isabella* which were so much admired by Bernard Shaw[87], the introductory passage stresses the background of toil that lies behind the luxury of the city, the reason for the uneasy conscience of its pleasure-loving and prosperous inhabitants. For amidst all its prosperity, "Enough there was of ill and sin", and sorcery is rife in the land, and the inhabitants fear the power of evil; and in this city of powerful merchants there are many poor:

...No men richer wines might drink,
Were better housed, or braver clad,
Or more of all the world's joy had
Than their rich men; that no king's door
Could show forth greater crowds of poor,
Who lacked for bread and all things good,
Than in that land a merchant's could —
Yea, rich indeed 'mongst all were they.

(p.139)

However, the tale is not to deal with contrasts between rich and poor, but with the precariousness of human happiness. In one of the richest palaces, the young merchant-lord is to be wed. The description of the palace and its garden, though highly decorative, is not oppressively so, but rather in the style of a delicately tinted and gilded illumination. The echo of Coleridge in the bridal procession,

Yet when the Church all dues had had,
And the street, filled with minstrelsy,
Gave token of the twain anigh;
When through the hall-doors, open wide,
Streamed in the damsels of the bride...

(p.140)

mingles harmoniously with Morris's scene. Later in the day, the revellers make merry in the garden:

Midmost, upon a space of green,
Half shaded from the summer sheen,
Half with the afternoon sun thrown
Upon its daisies glittering strewn,
Was gathered that fair company...

(p.143)

The young revellers begin a game of ball. Before he joins in, the bridegroom stops by a bronze statue of Venus placed in the wall:

> ... her loveliness
> That hearts, long dead now, once did bless,
> Grown dangerous 'gan to lead his mind
> On through a troublous maze and blind
> Of unnamed thoughts, and silently,
> With knitted brow, he drew anigh,
> And midst the babbling close did gaze
> Into the marvel of her face:
> Till, with a sudden start, at last
> His straying thoughts he seemed to cast
> Aside, and laughed aloud —
>
> (p.145)

and mocks Venus for her fallen glory. As he decides to join the players, his glance falls on his new wedding-ring, which he decides is too precious to risk in the game, and he places it in the outstretched palm of the statue. After the game, when evening is beginning to fall, he returns to the statue for the ring:

> Daylight it was, though broad and red
> The sun was grown, and shadows led
> Eastward with long lines o'er the grass —
>
> (p.147)

but the hand of the statue has closed over it.

Laurence the bridegroom is filled above all with shame and confusion at the loss of his ring; he waits till the guests have left, before returning with file and chisel to regain his ring by force, but the hand of the goddess now lies open, and the ring is gone.

He returns to the bride-chamber, but is prevented from reaching his bride by an apparition of the goddess, who claims that he has wed her. Ecstasy is succeeded by despair:

> His soul grew blind, his eyes could see;
> And moaning from an empty heart,
> He saw the hangings blown apart
> By the night wind, the lights flare red
> In the white light the high moon shed
> O'er all the place he knew so well,
> And senseless on the floor he fell.
>
> (p.152)

After three nights of vain attempts to reach his bride, Laurence, full of shame, confides in her father, who takes him to Dan Palumbus, the mysterious astronomer-priest, who lives beneath the belfry of the great minster. Palumbus is an alarming figure:

> But now they heard the priest draw nigh,
> And saw him and his shadow high
> Wind round the wind-worn buttresses;
> So coming by the last of these
> He met them face to face: right tall
> He was; his straight black hair did fall
> About his shoulders; strong he seemed,
> His eyes looked far off, as he dreamed
> Of other things than what they saw;
> Strange lines his thin pale face did draw
> Into a set wild look of pain
> And terror.
>
> (p.165)

Palumbus knows that the task they have come to set him will spell his doom. After six days of study, he is able to advise Laurence, who returns to hear what he must do.

The priest sends him to watch on a dreary and bare headland at the verge of the sea, to wait there, with his face turned towards the land, until a "strange company" will pass him from the sea, the last of which will be "A great lord on a marvellous beast" to whom he is to hand over the scroll which Palumbus has prepared, and which will mean Palumbus' death and the end of his power.

Laurence takes his way to the sea-shore. At first, the calmness of the scene fills him with hope and he begins to sing,

> Though still amid the quiet night
> He could not hear his song aright
> For the grave thunder of the sea
> That smote the beach so musically
> And in the dim light seemed so soft
> As each great wave was raised aloft
> To fall in foam, you might have deemed
> That waste of ocean was but dreamed...
> While o'er head fields of thin white cloud
> The more part of the stars did shroud.
>
> (p.161)

In accordance with this quieter mood of hope, he passes "a few rough fisher-carles" making ready for the night's fishing, and sees far-off lights in a

homestead. But as he approaches the sinister sandy headland, the mood changes:

> But the moon rose, and 'neath its light,
> Cloud-barred, the wide wastes came in sight,
> With gleaming, sand-choked, reed-clad pools,
> And marsh lights for the mock of fools;
> And o'er the waste beneath the moon
> The sea-wind piped a dreary tune...
>
> (p.162)

As he stands there, a succession of dreams of frustration pass through his waking mind. While the moon rises higher in the sky, the outlines of the flowers and shrubs grow sharper:

> Thin and bright
> The horned poppies' blossoms shone
> Upon a shingle-bank, thrust on
> By the high tide to choke the grass;
> And nigh it the sea-holly was,
> Whose cold grey leaves and stiff stark shade
> On earth a double moonlight made...
>
> (p.164)

He falls asleep, only to waken as the first figures in a strange pageant flit by him; and the strangest thing in it is

> That though the moonshine, cold and grey,
> Flooded the lonely earth that night,
> These creatures in the moon's despite
> Were coloured clear, as though the sun
> Shone through the earth to light each one,
> And terrible was that to see.
>
> (p.165)

The figures of Mercury and Aurora, which vanish "up the grey hill-side", are followed by a pageant of battle, of slaughtered men and those who have slain them, and all those who have suffered from the aftermath of war. As she passes, a wounded woman presses her blood-stained hand on Laurence's breast. After the pageant of Mars, comes a band of youths and maids, who leave him a fresh red rose; and after them, those who have been unhappy in love, the last of whom lets fall a black-bound wreath of bitter herbs. They are followed by the god of Love (none of the gods being named — for according to the legend, their power on earth is gone); then, as Laurence is about to look out to sea and risk destruction, he is passed by Venus, wearing his ring.

Laurence is almost overcome with longing, but remembers in time his purpose. The procession is concluded with a crowd of desperate and suffering people — people:

> And then swept onward through the night
> A babbling crowd in raiment bright,
> Wherein none listened aught at all
> To what from other lips might fall,
> And none might meet his fellow's gaze;
> And still o'er every restless face
> Passed restless shades of rage and pain,
> And sickening fear and longing vain . . .
>
> (p.170)

who are immediately followed by "the Lord of all the pageant":

> As a white flame his visage shone,
> Sharp, clear-cut as a face of stone;
> But flickering flame, not flesh, it was;
> And over it such looks did pass
> Of wild desire, and pain, and fear,
> As in his people's faces were,
> But tenfold fiercer —
>
> (p.170)

and as the king of the rout passes, all turn on Laurence and mock him; but he hands to the god the parchment he has from Palumbus. The god trembles, for he knows he must obey, since Palumbus is both on the side of evil and of good, and thus has power over him. The pagan god calls on the Christian god:

> "Make thy souls better, Lord, or worse!"
>
> (p.171)

and leaves Laurence with a sneering smile. Nothing remains to bear witness to what has passed but the bloody mark, the rose, and the faded wreath. As the dawn comes, Venus returns the ring to Laurence. He sets it on his hand, and all that has happened begins to seem like a dream. As he returns to normal life, it is as if the heavy mood of the night had vanished completely:

> A light wind o'er the ocean blew,
> And fresh and fair the young day grew;
> The sun rose o'er the green sea's rim,
> And gave new life and joy to him . . .
> And soon the white sails specked the sea,

And fisher-keel on fisher-keel
The furrowed sand again did feel,
And round them many a barefoot maid
The burden on her shoulders laid,
While unto rest the fishers went,
And grumbling songs from rough throats sent.

(p.173)

As so often in Morris, the moment of return to reality is associated with the work of everyday life.

Laurence returns to his happy future, but Palumbus is fated to die, and is buried by Laurence in a gold-decorated tomb. Thus abruptly, on the note of return to the hard but rewarding work of the world, concludes one of the most brilliantly-told tales in *The Earthly Paradise*. The whole atmosphere of the tale is in keeping with the fantastic theme, and the transition from enamelled, jewelled garden to bare, barren, moonlit seashore, with the evocative figures of the gods, is carried out with more conciseness and rapidity of movement than have most of the other tales. In spite of the wealth of incident and detailed descriptions, it takes up less than forty pages. The Rout of Bacchus is one of the most striking passages in *The Earthly Paradise* and one might think that Morris was harking back to the appearance of the Planets to Cresseid in Henryson's great poem. The moonlight in the tale is the same faery gleam which glitters outside the oratory of the old Scots poet, and through the stained-glass window in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, in defiance of the laws of light, casting "warm gules on Madeleine's fair breast". This evocative power of the poem led it to be specially selected for mention by Saintsbury: "The long passage describing the procession of the dead gods and Lawrence's (*sic*) journey to the site thereof is one of the finest things of the kind in English poetry and... its fineness is very largely due to masterly arrangement — the check and loosening and swing and sway — of the metre... And though it may be a mere fancy, I like to think that, in the opening sketch of the minster-close where Palumbus lives, is a salute of acknowledgement to ancient Gower."[88]

So real is the atmosphere of this tale, that it is carried over to a greater degree than usual into the link narrative. The old Swabian priest, turning over the worn leaves of his illuminated book, sees the scenes of his past life there:

Was it then the name
Of some old town before his eyes that came,
And drew his thoughts there? Did he see it now?
The bridge across the river choked with snow;
The pillared market-place, not thronged this eve;
The muffled goodwives making haste to leave

The gusty minster porch, whose windows shone
With the first-litten candles; while the drone
Of the great organ shook the leaded panes,
And the wind moaned about the turret vanes?

(p.174)

This is so much the atmosphere of the tale we have just read, that we seem to be still within it. But the narrative changes to a subjective expression of the Swabian's thought:

— Nought changed there, and himself so changed mid change,
That the next land — Death's land — would seem
nought strange
To his awakening eyes!
Ah! good and ill,
When will your strife the fated measure fill?
When will the tangled veil be drawn away,
To show us all that unimagined day?

(p.174)

That this is the thought of the priest, and not a sudden reappearance in Morris of an idealistic view-point or belief in a future life, is shown by the immediately succeeding lyric for February.

The poet looks out on a lonely rain-washed country scene in February. It occurs to him, that some day in May, in the future, he may awake, and be able to remember nothing but this present February day on which he has been so unhappy.

Shalt thou not wonder, looking from thy bed,
Through green leaves on the windless east a-fire,
That this day too thine heart doth still desire?

(p.175)

Will he not surprised that "the useless hope, the useless craving pain" are still alive — and will this not paradoxically lead him to new hope:

Since no grief ever born can ever die
Through changeless change of seasons passing by.

Instead of hoping for some "unimagined day" in a future life, the poet bids himself use his grief to teach him that even happiness may come again. The impersonal tone, the lack of tenderness, makes it clear that the poet is here addressing himself, that (unlike the January lyric), no second person is addressed or referred to directly.

With the coming of February, the link narrative tells of the wind that "ruffles up the water thin that lies Over the surface of the thawing ice", while "The wet-lipped west wind chilleth to the bone More than the light and flickering east hath done", and the old men, gathered round the fire, seek to "Shut out the memory of the cloud-drowned sun, And dripping bough and blotched and snow-soaked earth" by listening to the end of the story of Bellerophon. The second Bellerophon tale ends with the triumphant gaining of his bride by the hero. We may note how the ideas of change, death, and changelessness are linked together in these last tales, through the tales themselves, the lyrics, and the link narrative. After the play on these very words in the link narrative (p.174), in the February lyric, and in the link narrative immediately following on p.176, the tale of Bellerophon ends with the teller's regret that such a glorious life must also change:

> O Death-in-life, O sure pursuer, Change,
> Be kind, be kind, and touch me not, till strange,
> Changed too, thy face shows, when thy fellow Death
> Delays no more to freeze my faltering breath!
>
> (p.277)

The subsequent link narrative allows us to see the Elders discussing the tale, while one of the young people is impelled to leave the company of his fellows, walks alone, and finally takes his place among the Elders. The passage ends with an apostrophe to the Earth:

> Many-peopled earth!
> In foolish anger and in foolish mirth,
> In causeless wars that never had an aim,
> In worshipping the kings that bring thee shame,
> In spreading lies that hide wrath in their breast,
> In breaking up the short-lived days of rest —
>
> (p.278)

in short, in all their activities which are without real meaning, mankind cling together; while in the sorrow of love, which touches each man intimately, they remain alone and isolated.

The introductory narrative to the tale shows us the first flowers of spring brought in from the woods by the young people, who sit down to weave garlands. The Swabian begins to tell a tale of a mysterious cavern, which he himself had seen in his youth, the entrance to the Hill of Venus.

The tale of *The Hill of Venus* was one of those on which Morris worked for about a decade before it reached its final form. In the generally familiar version, the "Tannhauser" legend dates back to a 16th-century German ballad,

though the legend was known earlier and the theme of the magic kingdom of love is familiar to myth and legend from a very remote date. As a popular legend of Western Europe the tale belongs to the later feudal period, so that Morris in using it was moving somewhat forward in time from his set period.* In his retelling, Morris concentrates on the inward experience of the lover. May Morris writes of the tale:

> "Morris's poem is a wild sombre rendering of the old tale interweaving rich fantasy with the empty silence that confronts the lover's distracted quest when he is again outside the magic place. Here fairy-land is no longer, as in most of the other tales, friendly, quaint and of childlike beauty, leading the human who braves its marvels to a happy fortune: the charm is a menace, the beauty a thing of terror... All this brooding, this questioning of the vanity of passion, the self-dooming of the man who returns to the wasting of life upon the Hill: all this is worked out at great length in the various drafts. Morris has spent more time on bringing this strangely arresting tale to its final form than on any other poem in the book, and the fact that he did have to work so much on it, identifying himself with such intensity with the brooding spirit of doom that pervades it, gives it an interest beyond that which must already attach to the modern handling of this group of legends."[89]

A significant difference betwesen Wagner's treatment and Morris's is that while Wagner introduced the saintly Elizabeth as the sentimentalised embodiment of "ideal" love as contrasted to the "material" love of Venus, Morris develops the theme of love itself as the disturbing element which, if acknowledged, will prove its own salvation. May Morris points out that in the German legend it is because of his sin in partaking of the love of Venus that the Pope curses Tannhauser; whereas in Morris's final version "the curse is the outcome of Walter's declaration that he belongs to the Hill"[90] — in other words, it is his whole-hearted avowal of his love that in the end saves him from spiritual destruction.

The poem is written in the rhyme-royal stanza, doubtless because it permits greater solidity and conclusiveness in the final tale of the whole book than would the four-stress metre, and at the same time gives a contrast to the heroic couplet of the link narrative. It also seems the most appropriate metre — because of its links with Chaucer, Henryson and even with the Spenserian stanza — for the moral and psychological content after which Morris strives in this tale. In addition, the metre also links up with the first tale of *Atalanta's Race* and thus is important compositionally.

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*) That Morris did not keep the mood of all his tales strictly within the mode of his 14th-century scene has already been suggested (cf. p. 26-7). This was the necessary result of his purpose of bringing back the scattered seeds of poetic tradition and a testimony to his avoidance of lifeless pastiche. In all that he ever wrote he never forgot that he was writing for his own day, in the full context of whatever had been written up to that time. The structural justification for the jump forward in time of some of the tales is the personal lyric framework, which imperceptibly reminds us that the final story-teller is a modern poet.

The poem opens with a description of the brooding, terror-laden atmosphere of the mid-German forest, the ancient wood "wild with sour waste and rough untended tree", the terror of stillness, which "made the sward yet more bright, As, blocking out the far-away blue sky, the hard and close-packed clouds spread silently." The knight Walter comes slowly riding through the trees, weary of life: "Woe worth the world's false love and babbling hate — O life, fain, grasping, uncompassionate!" He comes to the traditional scene: a gloomy clearing edged with a cliff in a fir-clad hillside, with a small stream running by — and in the cliff, he sees the mouth of the cavern. Walter in his present mood feels he would risk hell and death for the moment of love promised by the legend. As he dreams of seeing the ancient goddesses walking in the clearing, he notices "the hard lift blacker and blacker grow", and as the storm approaches, "To his heart there went home suddenly A sting of bitter hatred and despair, That these things, his own heart had made so fair, He might not have." p.281-285)

Although the storm now breaks, Walter has heard the call of Venus and rides wildly on, till as he stands before the cavern, he flings his knightly sword far from him, and rushes blindly into the darkness, where he falls fainting.

He wakes up to the feeling of happiness and finds himself in a quiet forest, where the only loud sound is the clink of his armour as he rises to his feet. He moves on until he hears a far-off song which gradually draws near. This is the beautiful song to Venus, which seems to catch the very note of the medieval lyric, the plangent note which persists from the Latin of the Wandering Scholars down to the early glow of the Renaissance:

> Before our lady came on earth
> Little there was of joy or mirth;
> About the borders of the sea
> The sea-folk wandered heavily . . .
> Therefore, O Venus, well may we
> Praise the green ridges of the sea
> O'er which, upon a happy day,
> Thou cam'st to take our shame away . . .
>
> (p.290)

A procession of youths and girls passes, but Walter moves onward, forgetting them, waiting for some unknown love. The wood gradually changes into a garden, then to a flowery plain leading to hills whose passes seem to invite the traveller. In a valley by a stream that glows red in the sunset, Venus appears to him:

> What matter by what name of heaven or earth
> Men called his love? Breathing and loving there
> She stood, and clung to him; one love had birth

In their two hearts — he said — all things were fair,
Although no sunlight warmed the fresh grey air
As their lips sundered.

(p.294)

Their life seems flawless for a long time. Walter is privileged to see the lovers of old, who pass before him in a pageant, which seems to sum up much of the background of *The Earthly Paradise*. He sees Orpheus,

Crooning o'er snatches of forgotten rhyme,
That once had striven against eternity,
And only failed, as all love fails, to see
Desire grow into perfect joy, to make
A lonely heaven for one beloved's sake.

(p.295)

Orpheus and Eurydice are followed by Thisbe, Helen, Ariadne, Phyllis, Dido, "with her slender fingers laid On the thin edge of that so bitter blade." The mood changes, and Brynhild and Sigurd appear:

A loveless waste of ages seemed to part
And through the cloven dullness BRYNHILD came,
Her left hand on the fire that was her heart,
That paled her cheeks and through her eyes did flame,
Her right hand holding SIGURD's; for no shame
Was in his simple eyes, that saw the worth
So clearly now of all the perished earth.

(p.296)

The song of thrushes heralds the passing by of Tristram and Iseult. Other nameless lovers pass by,

And many a story from their hearts he drew,
Some sweet as any that old poets knew,
Some terrible as death, some strange and wild
As any dream that hath sad night beguiled.

(p.297)

And yet, as time passes, he finds no answer to his appeal to be told by Venus what his love means to her, and his fear grows that she has no knowledge of the thoughts that trouble him, of the feeling that this love is too perfect to last, that it can be only a dream. At length in the midst of his happiness Walter is struck with the conviction of his own baseness; he knows that for his salvation he must return to earth, that the remembrance of the way back is his last hope of redemption. No sign comes from Venus to stop him, and he seeks the entrance

to the cavern in fear, rage and despair. As he returns to earth, he catches a last glimpse of Venus, but it is too late, and he falls into deep darkness.

The scene of his reawakening in the forest is dramatic and somewhat recalls the Morris of *The Defence of Guenevere*:

> Into bright sun he woke up suddenly,
> And sprang up like a man with foes beset
> Amidst of sleep; and crying an old cry
> Learned in the tilt-yard, blind and tottering yet,
> He stretched his hand out, that a tree-trunk met
> Dank with the dew of morn, and through his blood
> A shiver ran, as hapless there he stood.
>
> (p.303)

He sweeps from his brow "a strange-wrought golden crown, Mingled with roses, faded now and brown." In his fairy raiment, he feels cold in the real world:

> Cold to the very bone, in that array
> He hugged himself against the biting wind,
> And toward the stream went slow upon his way;
> Not yet amidst the mazes of his mind
> The whole tale of his misery might he find,
> Though well he knew he was come back again
> Unto a lost world fresh fulfilled of pain.
>
> (p.304)

As he approaches the stream, his foot strikes on the sword he had flung from him earlier, now lying rusty in the grass. All those he meets fear him, but he cannot return to the cave. Fear of hell and restlessness drive him on. He clothes himself in poor peasant raiment and wanders on, passing without interest his father's home, walking aimlesly along the highway by the river. He meets in with a company of pilgrims, and though he feels that "a fiery wall Of scorn and hate seemed 'twixt their hearts and his", nevertheless he asks them where they are going. The whole country is full of the rumour that the end of the world is at hand, as the first millenium is coming to its close. At length Walter decides to join the pilgrims and seek salvation. But when he is brought before the Pope, he is struck with horror at the idea that salvation will mean the utter renunciation of his love. At last he finds strength to speak out and admit that he finds it impossible to deny his love, even though he is hated by men and scorned by God. The Pope tries to persuade him to renounce his love and turn to God, but Walter replies that God has also made evil, and has not slain it —

What if a man's love cling,
In sore despite of reason, hope and will,
Unto the false heart of an evil thing?

(p.321)

He is convinced that Venus has betrayed him, for her presence, which appears to him, does not speak. Yet he feels moved to defend the pagan gods and argues that the country of Venus showed new life to him. And now Walter makes his final decision:

Lo, from THE HILL OF VENUS do I come,
That now henceforth I know shall be my home!

(p.322)

The Pope utters his stern curse and Walter hastens back to the cavern in the forest:

No ignorance, no wonder, and no hope
Was in his heart, as his firm feet passed o'er
The shallow's pebbles, and the flowery slope,
And reached the black-mouthed cavern . . .

(p.323)

He has made his choice. The poet has nothing to tell of this second sojourn, except that both its horrors and joys are greater than those of ordinary life.

The tale ends with the old Pope walking in his garden, thinking of Walter and longing for his salvation. He dies at the moment in which he sees the blossoming of his staff, with an expression of great joy on his face. This is the conclusion of the tale.

Why did Morris choose to end *The Earthly Paradise* with this tale which seems to set Christian doctrines of sin, forgiveness and everlasting life above the pagan acceptance of death? Perhaps the main reason is his sense of timing, his desire to crown his tales of love and endeavour with this most typical later medieval variation on the theme of the justification of love. We may note that within the tale, all the references to supernatural power are dramatic, i.e. spoken by the characters, not by the poet himself, and even the conclusion of the poem must be understood as being spoken by the Swabian priest. Morris is in no sense identifying himself with Christian belief; in fact, his version of the tale is directly in contradiction to this, for Walter finally affirms, instead of denying his love.

That we are not to regard this tale as of any greater ideological significance than the others is indicated by the two last short paragraphs of the link narrative (p. 326). The young people wonder "that any tale should make love weak

To rule the earth, all hearts to satisfy", and continue uninterrupted in their love-play; whereas the Elders "Were glad to leave untouched the too rich store Of hapless memories", and are content to sit merely watching the peaceful scene in the noonday sun.

The *Epilogue* which follows sums up one aspect of *The Earthly Paradise* — the idea that inevitable death must come to put an end to all the joys and strivings of life. But Morris defends his Wanderers, both for their quest and also for their final rest in the land beyond the sea:

> Cry out upon them ye who have no need
> Of life to right the blindness and the wrong!...
> Pass by in hate, ye folk, who day by day
> Win all desires that lie upon your way!
>
> (p.328)

Only those who are ignorant of life and have never suffered, can condemn the Wanderers for having tried to find a solution. The successful Kings and Princes of the prosperous world, the extroverts, the practical men, who like King Edward

> ...once had dreams of one great victory
> Wherein that world lay vanquished by my throne,
> And now, the victor in so many an one,
> Find that in Asia Alexander died
> And will not live again...
>
> (Vol. III, p.20)

will also come to their unavoidable end. But why is it, Morris asks, that mere tales have such power to create happiness, or the illusion of happiness; and gives the answer that poets, like the tale-tellers in the Earthly Paradise, strive "In their wild way the heart of Death to move", and though in the same way they are also doomed to fail, nevertheless

> Surely on their side I at least will be,
> And deem that when at last, their fear worn out,
> They fell asleep, all that old shame and doubt,
> Shamed them not now, nor did they doubt it good,
> That they in arms against that Death had stood.
>
> (p.329)

And he bids farewell to his book by turning back to life, facing it, perhaps, like Walter, with "No ignorance, no wonder, and no hope," for Morris had as yet nothing but his innate optimism and faith in life and earth to help him to deal with his own time:

And thou, O tale of what those sleepers were,
Wish one good-night to them thou holdest dear
Then die thyself, and let us go our ways,
And live awhile amid these latter days!

(p.329)

This concludes *The Earthly Paradise* proper, but Morris added *L'Envoi*, picking up in it the threads of the "Apology" with which he prefaced his work, but stressing rather the positive reasons for which he had written the poem. As *L'Envoi* is addressed to his Book, we may assume that it refers to the completed Book and it thus takes precedence even of the "Apology" which is so often quoted as Morris's final statement of his intention. Unlike the "Apology", it is not ironical:

— I love thee, whatso time or men may say
Of the poor singer of an empty day.

(p.330)

Even if the book is forgotten, the praise and encouragement of those the poet most loves mean more to him than anything else.

It may be, he says, that the book he is sending out on its travels will never gain lasting fame — will never reach "the Land of Matters Unforgot" — but on the way it may meet in with others who have attained true fame. He imagines that the book may encounter "a friend, Of whom for love I may not be afraid" — namely, "My Master, Geoffrey Chaucer", whom the book is to address. The book is to explain to Chaucer that it faithfully represents its author, since

rhyme hath little skill to lie:
I have beheld him* tremble oft enough
At things he could not choose but trust to me,
Although he knew the world was wise and rough...
Thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him through...
— Earth of the earth lies hidden by my clay,
The idle singer of an empty day!

(p.332)

Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere
Though still the less we knew of its intent...

(p.333)

The poet concludes, that whoever may scorn him and his book, Chaucer will not be one:

*) "I" is the book, "him" the author, Morris himself.

Thou mayst toil in vain,
And never draw the House of Fame anigh;
Yet he and his shall know whereof we cry,
Shall call it not ill done to strive to lay
The ghosts that crowd about life's empty day.

(p.333)

And the final verse sums up the poet's justification:

And if indeed
In some old garden thou and I have wrought,
And made fresh flowers spring up from hoarded seed,
And fragrance of old days and deeds have brought
Back to folk weary; and all was not for nought
— No little part it was for me to play —
The idle singer of an empty day.

(p.333)

The non-ironical iteration of the phrase "empty day", which certainly seems such an inappropriate characterisation of Morris's life at this or any other time, nevertheless undoubtedly represents his state of mind, the feeling of emptiness and bereavement, when he had finished his long task. Several letters of late 1870 confirm this[91]. At that moment he was still looking for "something else of importance", "something serious to do as soon as may be." This feeling is far from the "profound dissatisfaction with life, and a fear of death under whose shadow all human values seem to fall part", which Thompson considers the leading characteristic of the mood in which *The Earthly Paradise* was completed.[92]

If we re-read consecutively the link lyrics, we shall see that in them Morris gave fine expression to his faith in the power of life. That this was deliberate is shown by his careful selection of those lyrics finally printed. May Morris, in the Introduction to the final volume of *The Earthly Paradise,* publishes several eventually rejected verses for the various months.[93] None of these verses have the intensely personal note of the finally published lyrics. When we compare them with those lyrics which Morris chose for the completed poem, it becomes clear that his final choice was governed by the intention of allowing this "autobiography so delicate and so outspoken"[94] to express not only the poet's personal problems of the time, but also the deepest intention of the poem. The lesson of this autobiography is that we must cling to life and love, that neither joy nor grief are alien to life, that we must accept "all the gifts that Death and Life may give." It is by means of these verses that Morris links his tales, the "hoarded seed" of the literary heritage, to those "latter days" in which he recognises and admits that he must live.

One of the most perceptive tributes to the whole conception of *The Earthly Paradise* — and all the more remarkable, because it was written in 1868 after reading only the first volume — was given by Robert Browning in a letter of thanks to Morris, already mentioned above, but certainly demanding to be quoted here more fully. Browning writes that the poem affects him "much as do Handel's fine suites, as he calls them, for the clavecin of his day: all the newer for their archaic tinge, all the more varied (to the appreciatively observant) because of the continuous key and recurring forms — the New masked in the Old and perpetually looking out of the eyeholes of its disguise."[95]

The Earthly Paradise must indeed be seen as a harmonious structural whole if we are to correct the misconceptions and misapprehensions which have grown up around it.