

## CHAPTER II

### THE POETRY OF DESPAIR

#### *I Scenes from the Fall of Troy*

WHEN Morris joined the Democratic Federation in 1883, he signed his membership card, "William Morris, Designer". But his comrades in the Federation and the Socialist League, when advertising his lectures or pamphlets, preferred to identify him as "The Author of *The Earthly Paradise*". In doing this, they echoed the opinion of Morris's importance, which was held by the Victorian middle-class public. With the publication of *The Earthly Paradise* in 1868-70, and of its forerunner, *The Life and Death of Jason*, in 1867, Morris's reputation as a major poet and notable personality of the age first became established: and the kind of reputation he held among his contemporaries was, until the end of his life, based in large part upon the reception of this work by the reading public.

To-day it is rare to find readers who have read all, or most, of the twenty-four poetic narratives which make up *The Earthly Paradise*. Few of the works of the Victorian Age have been brushed aside in this century so conclusively as the poem which was once acclaimed as Morris's masterpiece. Only one line (from the "Apology" at the opening of the poem) remains in common currency—"the idle singer of an empty day"—and around this line there have gathered vague associations of sweetness and languorous melody, too shallow and uncomplicated to be worth the attention of the sophisticated twentieth century. And from these associations there has been built, in turn, the common picture of Morris so often presented by contemporary writers: of a bluff, straightforward extrovert, part designer, part sweet singer, with wide interests but with a shallow response to life, who in some miraculous way is supposed to have by-passed the acute mental conflicts and emotional stresses which racked and wasted even the greatest of his contemporaries. This supposed absence of arduous intellectual or spiritual struggle in Morris's life has given rise to a faint air of condescension in the treatment

of him by contemporary scholars. But a careful reading of *The Earthly Paradise* must lead us to quite different conclusions. Alongside our picture of "William Morris, Designer", with his great capacity for application and his constructive confrontation of life, we must set another picture—of Morris, the late romantic poet, over whom flowed those waves of objectless yearning, nostalgia for the past and dissatisfaction with the present, which dragged him backwards towards despair. The middle years of Morris's life were years of conflict and only when "hope" was reborn within him in the 1880s do the "poet" and the "designer" become one, with integrated aim and outlook. Only when Morris became a Communist did he become (as W. B. Yeats was to describe him) the "Happiest of the Poets".

The evidence of this conflict may be found in Morris's poetry, and some of the causes of it in the climate of his times and in his personal life. First, let us turn to the poems.

Nine years of silence passed between the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere* and *Jason*. During a part of this time, at least, Morris continued writing. In the months after he returned from his honeymoon and had moved into the Red House he was working on a poem in dramatic form, *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*,<sup>1</sup> which he left unfinished, and whose parts were not published in his lifetime. The manner of writing, the stress of feeling, in these fragments is closely related to the earlier poems, especially to "Sir Peter Harpdon's End". The scenes of Troy are sketched with touches of vivid and realistic detail. The pervasive sense of inevitable failure in the face of overwhelming odds, already present in the earlier poem, is deepened. Continually the note recurs of the passing of the old heroic values—Helen's beauty, Hector's courage, the heroic story of the siege itself becoming, in its later stages in the description of Paris, a tale of brutality, cunning and fraud.

" here we are, glaring across the walls,  
Across the tents, with such hate in our eyes  
As only damned souls have, and uselessly  
We make a vain pretence to carry on  
This fight about the siege which will not change  
However many ages we stay here.

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, Vol. XXIV

But now—alas' my honour is all gone  
 And all the joy of fight that I had once  
 Gone mouldy like the bravery of arms  
 That lie six feet under the Trojan turf.  
 Ah when I think of that same windy morn  
 When the Greeks landed with the push of spears.  
 The strange new look of those our enemies,  
 The joyous clatter, hurry to and fro,  
 And if a man fell it was scarce so sad—  
 'God pity him' we said and 'God bless him,  
 He died well fighting in the open day'—  
 Yea such an one was happy I may think,  
 Now all has come to stabbing in the dark."

Contrast with these passages the final stanza of "The Death of Paris", one of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, and something of the very marked change between these two phases of Morris's poetry will become evident. In this verse the narrator is made to reflect, in conventional late romantic manner, upon the oblivion of time:

"I cannot tell what crop may clothe the hills,  
 The merry hills Troy whitened long ago—  
 Belike the sheaves, wherewith the reaper fills  
 His yellow wain, no whit the weaker grow  
 For that past harvest-tide of wrong and woe,  
 Belike the tale, wept over elsewhere,  
 Of those old days, is clean forgotten there "

We pass, in this contrast, from poetry which (for all its unfinished effect and occasional clichés of sentiment) lays a constant claim upon the reader's intellect and perception, to poetry of imprecise dreamlike moods, soothing and relaxing to the mind. In the *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*, the great legend is used, not—as in Morris's later manner—as an antique picture-land with decorative figures but as the setting within which the heroic values lost to the nineteenth century can be evoked with freshness and conviction. It is true that the sense of failure is ever-present. But the forces, human and natural, making for failure are evoked with a sense of active conflict, rather than recorded with passive nostalgia. Courage, beauty, endurance, wisdom—all are overthrown but their value is never denied. Rather, the dramatic method of narration, the occasional sharp realistic details, the meaningful

irregularities of rhythm—all work together to evoke the feeling of real struggle and life. As in the earlier poems, Morris lays brutality side by side with beauty and melancholy. the scenes of battle are treated with realism and care, as in Aeneas' account of the encounter between Troilus and Diomed.

“Into the press came Diomed softly  
And like a cunning fighter, on each side  
He put the strokes that met him traversing  
With little labour till his turn might chance  
Then comes my lord King Priam's youngest son,  
With no hair on his face, Sirs, as you see,  
Who all day long had struck the greatest strokes  
And bent his knees and stiffened up his back,  
But when his eye caught Diomedes' eye  
He cried and leapt—crur, how the handles jarred!”

There is no slackness here in imaginative perception or rhythmic control. We are made to share in the aspirations of the heroes and when Hector is trapped by Achilles, his death, like that of Sir Peter Harpdon, strikes a note of affirmation rather than defeat, and the concluding line of the whole poem evokes not disaster alone, but a boundless vista of further endeavour and experience:

“To the ships!  
Aeneas and Antenor—to the ships!”

There are failures and immaturities enough in the *Scenes from the Fall of Troy* to account for Morris's abandoning the work uncompleted. But even so, many problems remain. At some time between leaving off work on the *Scenes* and the full adoption of his plans for *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris took a conscious decision to alter the whole manner of his writing. Moreover, in this alteration he turned his back upon much of what is strong and moving in his earlier work, while maintaining—in a more sophisticated and self-conscious form—the weaknesses and immaturities. This decision is an important one. An understanding of it provides a key to the poetry of his middle period. It reveals much of the change of attitude from revolt to disillusion in his personal outlook during these years. And it marks a stage in the degeneration of the English Romantic movement

## II *The Earthly Paradise*

*The Earthly Paradise* is a collection of twenty-four poetic narratives, of greatly varying lengths, and from many sources, classical, Eastern, medieval, and Norse. They are grouped in pairs for each month of the year, prefaced by verses for the month. As in *The Canterbury Tales*, the poems are bound together by a slender narrative. In the long Prologue, "The Wanderers", a group of Northern warriors in the Middle Ages set sail in quest for a land of eternal life and youth, and after many adventures and much disillusionment, they reach in their old age a friendly and fertile land where Greek traditions still linger. They are welcomed, entertained, and the stories are those with which the Wanderers and their hosts entertain each other. The resemblance to the method and plan of *The Canterbury Tales*, however—despite Morris's invocation of his "master", Geoffrey Chaucer—is only superficial, and the comparison much to Morris's disadvantage. While Chaucer's plan is dynamic—the interplay of character, the emergent figure of Mine Host, the strongly contrasted attitudes to life expressed in the tales of the different pilgrims—the framework of *The Earthly Paradise* is entirely static. It is the pretext, not the occasion for the stories. Neither among the Wanderers nor the hosts is there any differentiation of character: the stories, whether intended as tragic or felicitous, express similar attitudes to life throughout which are always felt to be those adopted by Morris the poet, rather than those held by the narrators he has shadowed forth. In this way, the framework, so far from giving added vigour and interest to the narrations, by revealing the attitudes and beliefs of living men and women, acts to dull the immediacy of their impact, to remove them even further from the region of everyday belief. We are reading not stories, but a story about people telling stories; and these stories were told very long ago about events which took place in an even further distant and fabulous past.

Moreover, Morris adopts, as the prime narrator, the character of the careless folk-bard, beguiling, saddening, or sweetening the lives of his listeners by his tales, but always avoiding any full treatment of their implications. Since he speaks not in his real voice but in a self-consciously assumed character, this is a further

means by which the impact of life is cushioned in the poem.

The method of narration throughout is leisurely—"a smooth song sweet enow"<sup>1</sup>—and full of archaisms. That this style was adopted after deliberation is clear from some of the earliest rejected drafts for the poems.<sup>2</sup> A comparison between two passages of the Prologue, "The Wanderers" (one of the first to which Morris turned his hand), will reveal the change in manner. The first Prologue was written in quatrains, both more diffuse and more regular than his early poems, but still preserving some roughness and overrunning from verse to verse when demanded by the action. In these two passages, the Wanderers are the victims of a night-attack in a strange land. In the rejected version Morris wrote:

- "But in the dead of night I woke,  
And heard a sharp and bitter cry,  
And there saw, struck with a great stroke,  
Lie dead, Sir John of Hederby
- "We armed us with what speed we might,  
And thick and fast the arrows came,  
Nor did we any more lack light,  
For all the woods were red with flame
- "Straight we set forward valiantly  
While all about the blacks lay hid,  
Who never spared to yell and cry—  
A woeful night to us befell
- "For some within the fire fell,  
And some with shafts were smitten dead,  
Neither could any see right well  
Which side to guard, nor by my head
- "Did we strike stroke at all that night,  
For ever onward as we drew  
So drew they back from out our sight . . ."

<sup>1</sup> "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon"

" . . . for so it is

That verse for battle-song is meet,  
And sings of sorrow piercing-sweet,  
And weaves the tale of heavy years  
And hopeless grief that knows no tears  
Into a smooth song sweet enow,  
For fear the winter pass too slow "

<sup>2</sup> See *Works*, Vol XXIV, and May Morris, I, pp 397 ff.

This is thin verse, with several careless and flat lines thrown in, as it seems, to marry off a rhyme. But it is still verse which can carry action. the sudden awakening is vividly shown. the sequence of events is clear. the confusion and impotence of the warriors at night presented with movement and conviction. There is a suggestion of characterization in the oath and the choice of words of the narrator. The published version is in the usual rhyming couplets.

“But therewithall I woke, and through the night  
 Heard shrieks and shouts of clamour of the fight,  
 And snatching up my axe, unarmed beside  
 Nor scarce awaked, my rallying cry I cried,  
 And with good haste unto the hubbub went,  
 But even in the entry of the tent  
 Some dark mass hid the star-besprinkled sky,  
 And whistling past my head a spear did fly,  
 And striking out I saw a naked man  
 Fall 'neath my blow, nor heeded him, but ran  
 Unto the captain's tent, for there indeed  
 I saw my fellows stand at desperate need,  
 Beset with foes, nor yet more armed than I,  
 Though on the way I rallied hastily  
 Some better armed, with whom I straightway fell  
 Upon the foe, who with a hideous yell  
 Turned round upon us . . .”

On the surface this passage reveals that technical maturity so often claimed by nineteenth-century critics for *The Earthly Paradise*. The verse seems to scan all right, there are no grammatical howlers, a few “felicities” of poetic diction. But—as too often in these poems—it is a “technical mastery” at odds with real poetic achievement. The passage describes action: it does not begin to evoke it—what line could with less conviction convey speed and confusion than the sedate, “And with good haste unto the hubbub went”? The archaisms of phrasing underline the static, decorative effect—“therewithall”, “beside”, “at desperate need”, “beset with foes”. Even more characteristic, in the press of imminent death the narrator can find time to note the conventional poetic beauties, “the star-besprinkled sky”. The confusion at the end of the passage, in which by an afterthought the narrator reaches the captain's tent with some better-armed comrades, conveys not the confusion of battle

but an imprecision in the poet's imaginative realization of the scene. The rhythms are ugly and clogged: the action muddled.

Not all of Morris's scenes of action in *The Earthly Paradise* can come under all these criticisms. But the general sense of the criticism is true throughout. These leisurely narratives never falter but at the same time they never mend their pace. They are old tales re-told, and this is constantly emphasized by the liberal use of archaic, or "poetic" diction. The poem marks an important stage in the tendency, so often commented upon, for the later romantics to confine both their themes and their vocabulary to certain limited fields of experience. Even in the first version of the Prologue, Morris describes the ship of the Wanderers, when they first set out, as supplied with "stockfish and salt-meat". in the published version, it is a "fair long-ship", "well victualled". Consistently the vocabulary is limited so as to prevent the intrusion of the humdrum, the sharp realistic detail, the unpleasant or shocking fact. If scenes of labour are presented, they are seen by the observer as picturesque—the sickle, the bare-footed damsels, the mellowing grapes. If scenes of battle, they are decorative, as seen through a dim heroic mist. If scenes of love, they are sensuous but featureless, presented as a mood of luxury rather than as a human relationship. The characters are the simplest shadows of folk types, the fabulous king, the hero, the lovelorn maiden, the scholar, the traveller, the misanthrope. They are brought into relationship, not through the pressures of character, but through the incidents of the story. From the very opening of the poem, the "Apology" and the first lines of the Prologue:

"Forget six counties overhung with smoke,  
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,  
Forget the spreading of the hideous town,  
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,  
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean     "

we are transported to a "shadowy isle of bliss", a land of "romance" insulated from the real world, in which we are not invited to judge either the events or the characters according to our own experience of life. In the *Defence of Guenevere* volume we are made to feel that the characters—Sir Peter Harpdon, the narrator of "Geffray Teste Noire", Guenevere herself—are motivated by passions whose nobility or intensity may exceed our own, but



which we still recognize in ourselves. The conditions within which they act may be strange to us, but the consequences of their actions follow with the same logic that we experience in our own lives. With *The Earthly Paradise* we enter through Keats's "magic casements" into "the realms of gold".

"A nameless city in a distant sea,  
White as the changing walls of faerie,  
Thronged with much people clad in ancient guise  
I am now fain to set before your eyes"

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—a land filled with dragons, magic of several kinds, fabulous kingdoms and hoards of wealth, Gods on earth and pagan sacrifices. The land is a land of dream.

So much is generally recognized, 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. But romance, however far-fetched and dream-like, cannot escape from some indirect relevance to living experience. Morris himself, indeed, claimed this relevance for one of the most miraculous of his tales, "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon".

"A dream it is, friends, and no history  
Of men who ever lived, so blame me nought  
If wondrous things together there are brought,  
Strange to our waking world—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; else, indeed,  
Were all such marvels nought to help our need."

Morris did not think that he was writing fairy stories for children, but adult poetry. Moreover, he had shown himself in his first volume to have one of the most original poetic talents of the

century, and he showed throughout his life a deep reflective seriousness inconsistent with the character of a casual entertainer. What impelled him to chose the form of romance for his most sustained poetic work? Why did his tales of magic and dragons establish for him so high a reputation among his contemporaries? What relevance did these stories have to his own experience? These are among the problems which demand some answer.

### III "A sense of something ill"

Romance is often seen as a symptom of decadence within a culture. In its sophisticated literary forms it has flourished among the idle class, divorced from the labour of production. But in the nineteenth century it found an even wider and growing audience, among the exploited as well as among the exploiters and their hangers-on. This audience found in it a refuge from the drabness of their own lives, a compensation for the extinction of the heroic and the beautiful in their everyday existence. And the Manifesto of this new romance was in the often-quoted "Apology" which prefaces *The Earthly Paradise*

"The heavy trouble, the bewildering care  
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,  
These idle verses have no power to bear,  
So let me sing of names remembered,  
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead. . ."

Here there is evidence enough that Morris's turn to romance was deliberately and consciously taken:

"Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,  
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?  
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme  
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,  
Telling a tale not too importunate  
To those who in the sleepy region stay,  
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

"Folk say, a wizard to a northern king  
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,  
That through one window men beheld the spring,  
And through another saw the summer glow,  
And through a third the fruited vines a-row,  
While still unheard, but in its wonted way,  
Piped the drear wind of that December day

"So with this Earthly Paradise it is,  
 If ye will read aright, and pardon me,  
 Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss  
 Midmost the beating of the steely sea,  
 Where tossed about all hearts of men must be,  
 Whose ravening monsters mighty men must slay,  
 Not the poor singer of an empty day "

Because this "Apology" is concerned with a real and personal experience—the poet's own creative problems—and because it claims the attention of the reader's mind and evokes his feelings with its constant sense of contrast between the rich illusions of art and the hostile realities of life, it is finer poetry than all but a few passages of the poems for which it serves as a Preface. It carries still the flickering spirit of revolt—"Of Heaven and Hell I have no power to sing"—where Morris turns his back upon the impoverished moralizing of contemporary schools, rejecting the age of "progress" and "national prosperity" But in its sum it is a confession of defeat considered within the traditions of the romantic movement, it is a rejection of Shelley's claims for the poet, a refusal to sustain the struggle of Keats for full poetic consciousness and responsibility on the altar steps in the revised *Hyperion*. The tension between the ideal and the real, between the rich aspirations of life and art and the ignoble and brutal fact, which underlies the best of Keats's poetry and (in a more complex way) Morris's own early poems, is no longer present. It is restated in the "Apology", but when the main poem is entered the open conflict has been abandoned.

But the conflict cannot be exorcised as easily as that. While the conscious effort to reconcile, or merely to bring into poetic opposition, man's desire and the reality of his life, is abandoned, the same conflict persists in a muted form upon nearly every page of *The Earthly Paradise*. A close reading of every poem in the sequence reveals that Morris is not really interested in either the characters or in the action—in the sense that the action is in itself either significant or purposeful. The poetry is a poetry of mood. the climaxes are climaxes of mood. the real action lies in variations of mood. The narratives are little more than the machinery for this variation, the basic movement of which is an almost mechanical oscillation between sensuous luxury and

horror, melancholy or despair "The Lady of the Land" is discovered by a voyager among fabulous cloisters stored high with precious gems and gold

"Naked she was, the kisses of her feet  
Upon the floor a dying path had made  
From the full bath unto her ivory seat,  
In her right hand, upon her bosom laid,  
She held a golden comb, a mirror weighed  
Her left hand down, aback her fair head lay  
Dreaming awake of some long vanished day "

At the end of the tale she is transformed into a vile dragon:

"A fearful thing stood at the cloister's end,  
And eyed him for a while .  
And as it came on towards him, with its teeth  
The body of a slain goat did it tear,  
The blood whereof in its hot jaws did seeth,  
And on its tongue he saw the smoking hair "

This movement is repeated in poem after poem. It is stated early in the Prologue, where the narrator tells of a dream that he was a king,

"Set on the throne whose awe and majesty  
Gold lions guard, before whose moveless feet  
A damsel knelt, praying in words so sweet  
For what I know not now, that both mine eyes  
Grew full of tears, and I must bid her rise  
And sit beside me, step by step she came  
Up the gold stair, setting my heart a-flame  
With all her beauty, till she reached the throne  
And there sat down, but as with her alone  
In that vast hall, my hand her hand did seek,  
And on my face I felt her balmy cheek,  
Throughout my heart there shot a dreadful pang,  
And down below us, with a sudden clang  
The golden lions rose, and roared aloud,  
And in at every door did armed men crowd,  
Shouting out death and curses "

Repeated once again, purely in terms of mood, in "The Hill of Venus"

"Time and again, he, listening to such word,  
Felt his heart kindle; time and again did seem  
As though a cold and hopeless tune he heard,  
Sung by grey mouths amidst a dull-eyed dream,

Time and again across his heart would stream  
 The pain of fierce desire whose aim was gone,  
 Of baffled yearning, loveless and alone "

It is found in a significant image which recurs several times in the poems, of the living struck dead in the postures of life: the human sacrifice met by the Wanderers: the figures in the tomb in "The Writing on the Image": the dead-alive people at the end of "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon". the land peopled with the dead images—

"Of knights and ladies sitting round,  
 A set smile upon every face;  
 Their gold gowns trailing on the ground,  
 The light of gold through all the place,"

in the first version of the "Wanderers".

In fact Morris has made this oscillation of mood the prevailing movement in many whole poems. It is a mechanical oscillation the sense of real conflict and struggle is absent. In "King Arthur's Tomb" (one of the *Defence of Guenevere* volume) Morris speaks of "that half-sleep, half-strife/(Strange sleep, strange strife) that men call living" It is a significant phrase. In this early volume, life—while strange and idealized—is made up equally of action and of desire. Men are not content with moods alone. they fight, work, enter into relations with each other, in the effort to make their desires into realities. A symbolical incident takes place at the opening of *The Earthly Paradise*. The Wanderers, setting out on their quest for the land of eternal life (a desire which Morris would never have put into the head of Sir Peter Harpdon or even Launcelot), encounter King Edward III in the Channel. He is perhaps the only real character in the poem.

"Broad-browed he was, hook-nosed, with wide grey eyes  
 No longer eager for the coming prize,  
 But keen and steadfast, many an ageing line,  
 Half-hidden by his sweeping beard and fine,  
 Ploughed his thin cheeks . "

He, after hearing of their quest, gives them licence to proceed.

"the world is wide  
 For you, I say,—for me a narrow space  
 Betwixt the four walls of a fighting place."

Then he is left in the world of strife and action the Wanderers go on into the world of sleep and of dream, leaving the "fighting place" behind. It is true that they meet adventures enough. but these adventures happen to them they are not willed, and their significance is only in their shattering of the subjective illusions of the Wanderers. The world of social realities, of the ambitions, strife and achievements of men and women, have little more significance than they have to "The Man Who Never Laughed Again"

"But all the folk he saw were strange to him,  
And, for all heed that unto them he gave,  
Might have been nought; the reaper's bare brown limb,  
The rich man's train with litter and armed slave,  
The girl bare-footed in the stream's white wave—  
Like empty shadows by his eyes they passed,  
The world was narrowed to his heart at last "

We are left with the question asked in the verses for November

"Art thou so weary that no world there seems  
Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams?"

The four walls of the "fighting-place" have contracted to the four walls of the solitary individual's heart

It is impossible not to judge *The Earthly Paradise* within the context of romanticism in decline. To Morris, oppressed by "bourgeoisdom and philistinism", and by the final thwarting, after 1848, of the impulse towards "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" at the source of the movement, the real world of "the piston stroke" and "hideous town" (and also of his unhappy personal life) had become unbearable. We do not need to reconstruct his state of mind from hints and suggestions, for he did this himself in a remarkable passage in his article, "How I became a Socialist" (1894).

"Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation. What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organisation—for the misery of life! Its contempt of simple pleasures which everyone could enjoy but for its folly? Its eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour? All this I felt then as now, but I did not know why it was so. The hope of the past times was gone, the struggles of mankind for

many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion, the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilisation had settled down on the world. This was a bad look-out indeed, and, if I may mention myself as a personality and not as a mere type, especially so to a man of my disposition, careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind. Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing, and a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make all men content together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world, and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley? Yet, believe me, in my heart, when I really forced myself to look toward the future, that is what I saw in it, and, as far as I could tell, scarce anyone seemed to think it worth while to struggle against such a consummation of civilisation. So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilisation the seeds of a great change, what we others call Social-Revolution, were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery."

This passage was written at the end of Morris's life, when his new convictions enabled him to express his earlier attitudes with greater logic than they were felt by him at the time. But what is important (and this has too often been brushed aside) is that Morris was not imagining emotions which he *might* have felt when he was in his thirties, but striving to re-create his earlier state of mind with the greatest possible precision. The passage is not one of rhetoric or passing propaganda, but one of the profoundest challenges to "Victorianism" ever written. It is rubbish to suppose that Morris, in his middle years, was a bluff craftsman, insensitive to the life around him, or that *The Earthly Paradise* is a sweet song of pleasure written carelessly by a man advancing by easy steps to the effortless acceptance of Socialist convictions. Such an interpretation lessens the splendour of the struggle for the human spirit enacted in Morris's life. In truth, the underlying note of *The Earthly Paradise* is neither sweet nor careless. It is a note of despair. If we set some of Swinburne's poems aside, the poem closest in mood to much of *The Earthly Paradise* is that of James Thomson, the unhappy rationalist, drunkard and insomniac—*The City of Dreadful Night*.

This is no empty paradox. "The hope of the past ages was gone. . . ." As we have seen (p. 47), "hope" was a key-word in Morris's vocabulary. By "hope" he meant all that gives worth and continuity to human endeavour, all that makes man's finest aspirations seem possible of achievement in the real world. The "hope" of Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley had been destroyed by Napoleon, by the Reform Bill, by the crushing of the Chartist movement, and by the complex of social changes which accompanied the dominance of the Victorian middle class. Of his later conversion to Socialism Morris wrote (in the same article) "I did not measure my hope, nor the joy it brought me." But without hope the romantic movement lost its forward impetus. It was no longer a movement of revolt, but one of compensation or escape. "only in ourselves and the world of literature and art was there any hope" Aspiration, denied the hope of fulfilment, could only be nourished and brooded upon in the solitary individual's heart. But, as William Blake had warned, "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence". The romantic is caught in the mood of "The Man Who Never Laughed Again".

"If, thinking of the pleasure and the pain,  
Men find in struggling life, he turned to gain  
The godlike joy he hoped to find therein,  
All turned to cloud, and nought seemed left to win.

"Love moved him not, yea, something in his heart  
There was that made him shudder at its name,  
He could not rouse himself to take his part  
In ruling worlds and winning praise and blame,  
And if vague hope of glory o'er him came,  
Why should he cast himself against the spears  
To make vain stories for the un pitying years?"

The world is "empty" because it is an entirely subjective world. No matter how rich the illusion of happiness it is always transient and poisoned by the knowledge of mortality. The Wanderers, in the Epilogue of the poem, recall

" . . . that day of their vanished youth, when first  
They saw Death clear, and deemed all life accurst  
By that cold overshadowing threat—the End "

The "isle of bliss" is amid the "beating of the steely sea" the



wizard to the northern king transforms the room by his miraculous windows, but the continuous reality outside is the piping of the December wind. always we are on the verge of—

“ . . . the waking from delight  
Unto the real day void and white”

of “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon”.<sup>1</sup> Never are we permitted to escape into illusion for long. rather, we are trying in anxious wakefulness to recall a dream, like the narrator of the same poem, who—

“ . . . seemed to bring,  
Now and again, some things anigh  
Unto 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 ”

Nor are the illusions themselves free from the same taint: more often, like “The Golden Apples”,

“ . . . 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 ”

Mortality is a theme common to all poetry. But the attitude of poets to the fact of death has changed no less than attitudes to other aspects of man's experience. Death has been faced with resignation or with a fear of the unknown: it has been seen as a leveller or as a welcome release. Mortality has given value to heroism and poignancy to love. Rarely, before the nineteenth century, was death felt as the poisoner of all value in life. The great advances of science, and above all Darwin's evidence of evolution published in the mid-century, had thrown the apologists of religion into confusion, and had made men view themselves in a diminished perspective. Even Tennyson was impelled to question, in *In Memoriam*, not only whether individual men were doomed to extinction, but the human race itself:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *The City of Dreadful Night*, Section XII, with its refrain “I wake from daydreams to this real night ”

"Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,  
Who battled for the True, the Just,  
Be blown about the desert dust,  
Or seal'd within the iron hills?"

Tennyson quickly put the question back behind a veil of wishful religious sentiment. But for James Thomson—who must have been at work on *The City of Dreadful Night* at the same time as Morris was finishing *The Earthly Paradise*—the question had become an accepted fact.

"The world rolls round for ever like a mill,  
It grinds out death and life and good and ill,  
It has no purpose, heart or mind or will

"While air of Space and Time's full river flow  
The mill must blindly whirl unresting so  
It may be wearing out, but who can know"

"Man might know one thing were his sight less dim,  
That it whirls not to suit his petty whim,  
That it is quite indifferent to him

"Nay, does it treat him harshly as he saith"  
It grinds him some slow years of bitter breath,  
Then grinds him back into eternal death"

And, to the horror of the fact of mortality in an indifferent universe, James Thomson could only oppose the refrain, "No hope could have no fear".

It is not sufficient to attribute this change in attitude to a growth of rationalism or atheism alone. Marlowe, or Shelley, or those among the ancients who doubted the immortality of the soul, created poetry vibrant with life, rich with sensuous delight, confident in the values which man has made for himself. It is the total absence of hope which is new—hope not for a future life, but for human fulfilment upon earth. Moreover, this absence of hope fell within the context of a society whose basic ethic was that of naked individualism, where every pressure tended to isolate man from his neighbour, to inflate the subjective ego, and to deny the objective values of men acting together in society, striving for goods both wider and more permanent than those of the individual's satisfaction. "The place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley . . ."—it is no accident that Morris singled out as the enemy not the great scientist Darwin, but the notable publicist

of evolutionary theory and polemical rationalist, T. H. Huxley. For it was Huxley, far more than Darwin, who was responsible for that caricature of science commonly mistaken for "the theory of evolution" by the Victorian public—a caricature in which nature was seen as "red in tooth and claw", engaged in a merciless and meaningless struggle for survival on the pattern of the competitive ethics of industrial capitalist society, in which the predatory instincts formed the motive power of "progress". Indeed, Huxley repeatedly crossed the border into political theory, and declared in a phrase which lodged in the popular memory. "For his successful progress man has been largely indebted to those qualities he shares with the ape and the tiger." Moreover, he came forward as the champion of a mechanical materialism which—while it helped to liberate scientific enquiry from the trammels of superstition and orthodox theology (still strongly entrenched in the academic centres)—was closely akin in spirit to Mr. Gradgrind's utilitarianism, the deadly foe of Morris's youth. Where Morris's master, Keats, had written, "Truth is Beauty, Beauty Truth", T. H. Huxley declared that he had no faith "in any source of truth save that reached by the patient application of scientific methods". Morris had (perhaps unfairly) taken Huxley as the Prophet of a society utterly careless of beauty, of art, and the finer human virtues, which looked upon both nature and the past of mankind as an "ugly confusion", a jungle of accidents within which predatory passions and lusts fought for survival, and in which self-interest and the values of possession contaminated every relationship, from the labour market to the marriage bed. Within such a society, with such a Prophet, "the world was narrowed to his heart", because self-interest was the law of life, and man's love for his fellow man was (except within certain well-defined limits) an offence against economic and "natural" law. Not only was society itself the climax of a series of mechanical and largely accidental phenomena, without any noble direction or aim: but the individuals within it were losing that sense of secure value and purpose which only a confident society or class can give.

These are among the reasons why the recognition of mortality fell with such horror upon Morris's mind, and those of many of his more sensitive contemporaries. On every side he was faced by

the "sordid, ugly, aimless confusion". Death appeared as doubly bitter: as closing with terrible finality a life whose potentialities had never been even partially fulfilled, whose aspirations, denied by a hostile society, must always remain unsatisfied and as sealing a life whose focus was becoming ever more subjective, without the compensation of that sense of continuity which the active participation in the struggle for wider social ends must always bring. But, paradoxically, this horror bred its opposite. Since the romantic mind, once "hope" was abandoned, could not contemplate life without turning to the fact of death, so a desire for death was generated as a means of escape from the "unpitying" reality of life. So marked in Swinburne, it is also one of those undertones in *The Earthly Paradise* which bring that "sense of something ill that lurked behind".

Morris, in *The Earthly Paradise*, rarely turned to look his fear in the face—perhaps only in the finest of the verses for the months, as at the close of "November"

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

In these lines, because Morris dared to look steadily at his enemy, we are left with the sense, not of death, but of life. But whenever he took refuge from his fear in the world of romance, we meet, not life, but the constant undertow back towards death. The dream, so much desired, is always breaking down.

"Ah, these, with life so done with now, might deem  
That better is it resting in a dream,  
Yea, e'en a dull dream, than with outstretched hand,  
And wild eyes, face to face with life to stand  
Than waking in a hard taskmaster's grasp  
Because we strove the unsullied joy to clasp—  
Than just to find our hearts the world, as we  
Still thought we were and ever longed to be,  
To find nought real except ourselves, and find  
All care for all things scattered to the wind,

Scarce in our hearts the very pain alive  
 Compelled to breathe indeed, compelled to strive,  
 Compelled to fear, yet not allowed to hope—"

he concludes "The Man Who Never Laughed Again". Indeed, it may be suggested 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. The speed with which he wrote—on occasion upwards of 700 lines in a night—not only accounts for much of the technical slackness (the easy, often repeated rhymes, the clumsy archaisms—"therewithal", "gan", "uswards", etc.—thrown in to enable the rhythm to muddle through) but is also evidence that neither his mind nor his feelings were seriously engaged in much of the work. It is as if his feverish activity, both in the crafts and in poetry in these years, is like the labour of the craftsman in "Pygmalion and the Image", which "soothes his heart, and dulls thought's poisonous sting"

The reason for the constant oscillation of mood in the poem now becomes more clear. It is caused by the constant undertow of death. The movement reminds us of Keats once again, and of the "Ode to Melancholy":

"She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die,  
 And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
 Bidding adieu, and aching Pleasure nigh,  
 Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips  
 Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
 Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine. . . ."

"Veil'd melancholy", the consciousness of the passing of life and of beauty, may only be seen by him "whose strenuous tongue/  
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine". This melancholy is met and accepted as the price of consciousness in the revised *Hyperion*. What may be called a "muted *Hyperion* theme" persists in *The Earthly Paradise*. It is the theme of the hero, dissatisfied with humdrum life, aspiring to some goal, which, once achieved, brings a moment of bliss, and then disaster or despair. Among whole poems where this theme predominates are "The Watching of the Falcon", "The Man Who Never Laughed Again", "The Writing on the Image", "The Hill of Venus", while it appears with slight variations in "The Wanderers" and "The Lady of the

Land", and, in an inverted form, in "Pygmalion and the Image" and "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon", which, while ending happily, do so with many suggestions of the evanescence of mortal happiness. But, because Morris never treats with full awareness the conflict which this theme symbolizes, it has gone tawdry and picturesque. The aspirations of the heroes have diminished to the lust for wealth or sensuous pleasure or mere romantic restlessness and curiosity: the struggle is replaced by the miraculous, the satisfaction suited to the aspiration, the disaster mechanical, and having little more moral implication than that "curiosity killed the cat". The conflict is never openly stated or posed in terms of human choice or agency: certainly it is never resolved. Its recurrence represents little more than a profound dissatisfaction with life, and a fear of death under whose shadow all human values seem to fall apart.

Here, then, is some answer to our questions. *The Earthly Paradise* is the poetry of despair. The extinction of hope in the world around him drove Morris to abandon Keats's struggle, and the struggle of his own youth, to reconcile his ideals and his everyday experience, and he turned his back on the world by telling old tales of romance. But, as Keats had warned in his revision of *Hyperion*, this road must lead to the death of the poetic genius, by excluding from poetry the active, suffering consciousness, and limiting its themes to certain "poetic" regions of experience. Since one of his main impulses towards writing poetry was in the desire to shake free from despair, the poetry itself reveals this feeling of despair as a constant undertow. But since he rarely met his despair openly, he rarely evoked it with any depth of feeling or dignity. For these reasons, *The Earthly Paradise* must be seen as romantic poetry which has entered the phase of decadence. Much of it is exceedingly competent narrative verse. "The Man Born to Be King", "The Writing on the Image", "The Man Who Never Laughed Again". these and others are well-told tales. Morris has a persuasive manner of telling a story, an unflinching self-possessed passage from event to event, which cannot fail to hold the reader's attention. But the essential qualities of great art are absent.

Is this all that can be said of the poem? Fortunately, no. If it were, then we would be hard put to it to explain that capacity

for change, for the re-birth of life and hope, evident in Morris's life. As another constant underswell to the poem, never dominant except in the verses for the months, and rarely found without a note of melancholy, there is a suggestion of that "deep love of the earth and the life on it" recalled in his essay *It is found*, again and again, in the sensitive evocation of natural beauty and of the seasons. It is found in touches of description of ordinary human life, which, while still picturesque, carry a feeling of a world outside the circle of despair in which men and women carry on the business of life, perhaps without conscious aim, but at least with faith in life and confidence in the future. This sense of normality comes with freshness in the return of "The Man Who Never Laughed Again" from his sojourn of horror to human habitation, passing—

"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

"The trooper drinking at the homestead gate,  
Telling wild lies about the sword and spear,  
Unto the farmer striving to abate  
The pedler's price, the village drawing near,  
The smoke, that scenting the fresh eve, and clear,  
Tells of the feast; the stithy's dying spark,  
The barn's wealth showing dimly through the dark,

"How sweet was all! how easy it should be  
Amid such life one's self-made woes to bear!"

Above all, it is found in the struggle to throw off the mood of death-longing at the end of the verses for "October".

"—O hearken, hearken! through the afternoon,  
The grey tower sings a strange old tinkling tune!  
Sweet, sweet, and sad, the toiling year's last breath,  
Too satiate of life to strive with death.

"And we too—will it not be soft and kind,  
That rest from life, from patience and from pain,  
That rest from bliss we know not when we find,  
That rest from Love which ne'er the end can gain?—  
—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?"