“The Land of Matters Unforgot”
North and South, Past and Present in William Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise*

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Largely in response to the dislocating social and cultural upheavals that had transformed Europe over the preceding two hundred years, nineteenth century Britain sought to reference a past golden age to address the anxieties and inadequacies of modern society. The antiquarian revival did not draw exclusively upon Northern European traditions however, and in fact the ancient Hellenic world inspired many writers and artists to a greater extent than did the native cultures of Britain. Ancient Greek art and literature were held in much higher regard than works of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Norse origin, and it was pagan Greek society that writers held up as an admirable precursor to European Christianity rather than the “barbarian” Germanic world. Those nineteenth century writers who did reference Northern European sources concentrated largely upon medieval, Christianized material such as the post-Celtic Arthurian romances, which did not have the stature of the more ancient Greek classics.

In his epic narrative poem *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70), William Morris draws upon tales from the Northern European folk, Norse, and Germanic traditions and presents them in dialogue with stories from classical Greece, constructing a substantive cultural interchange between Northern and Southern European societies. Morris’s wandering Northerners remain grounded in and true to their own culture whilst inspiring and being inspired by the Southerners with whom they exchange legends. As the tales unfold, both groups recognise the universal human truths shared by their traditions. Through this communication between geographically and temporally heterogeneous cultures, Morris presents a
utopian, humanistic solution to modern society’s anxieties: “the redemptive power for the present and future of an identification with past emotions” as Florence Boos states in her introduction to the poem (1: 21). It is this intertwining of historical cultures, past, and present accomplished by Morris in *The Earthly Paradise* that potentially integrates and legitimises the various retrospective endeavours of the period, situating it as a singular and highly sophisticated poetical work.

*The Earthly Paradise* is a multi-layered poem narrated by voices speaking from and referring to a multitude of times and places. Morris introduces, apologises for, and converses with the book itself, and weaves both narration and his own poetic reflections between the tales recounted by its characters. These storytellers wrap the legends in accounts of their own lives, and muse upon the stories that they receive. The seasons of the year also permeate and revolve around the poem, providing a structure for the exchange of tales (one “classical” and one “medieval” each month) and influencing Morris’s contemplation of love and loss, and the characters’ pondering of the cyclical passage of time.

The medieval Norwegian mariners, fleeing their plague-ridden homeland, seek a legendary country where life is everlasting. Their perilous voyage eventually brings them to an island lost in place and time which Morris constructs as “… a shadowy isle of bliss / Midmost the beating of the steely sea,” (1: 53; lines 38–39) and explicitly characterizes as Hellenic:

On one side of the square a temple stands,
Wherein the gods worshipped in ancient lands
Still have their altars; …

Gods of the nations who dwelt anciently

The poem’s core narrative thus alludes to the modern predicament—the yearning of we travel-worn “old men” of the corrupted, strife-ridden present for the peace and purity of a long-gone idyllic (Greek) society. Morris as narrator shares this sense of disquiet, referring to himself in the poem’s “Apology” as a “Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,” (1: 52; 22). In the opening lines of the Prologue, he invites the reader to turn away with him from the sordid present and imagine England’s medieval past:

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, (1: 69; 1–5)

Like the Wanderers and Elders in their ancient Greek haven, Morris and his audience seek retreat to an earlier, idyllic incarnation of their own homeland. This establishes the interconnection of Morris’s contemporary (and English) voice with the medieval characters and the tales that flow around them.

Returning to the poem’s inner frame story, Morris has the Elders of the city, “the seed of the Ionian race” (1: 72; 79), receive the Wanderers and recount how they were dispersed to the island:

No written record was there of the tale,
Ere we from our fair land of Greece set sail,
How this may be I know not, this I know,
That such-like tales the wind would seem to blow
From place to place, e’en as the feathery seed
Is borne across the sea to help the need
Of barren isles; so sirs, from seed thus sown,
This flower, a gift from other lands, has grown. (1: 381–82; 33–40).

Morris introduces the theme of intercultural exchange as a beneficial, organic process whilst emphasizing the importance of ancestry in the Elders’ conception of self. His Northern Wanderers similarly express their own cultural legacy as they introduce themselves:

For ye shall know that though we worshipped God,
And heard mass duly, still of Swithiod
The Greater, Odin and his house of gold,
The noble stories ceased not to be told; (1: 74; 111–4).

Christianity has not supplanted the indigenous Norse culture; rather the traditions coexist and are closely entwined. The inferior pedigree of Northern European medieval Christian culture to that of classical Greece is negated by the Wanderer’s connection to their earliest traditions and pride in their ancestry. They, like Morris, are conscious of the deep roots of their own culture and do not need to imitate or feel inferior to any other:

… Wick was once my home
Where Tryggyvi Olaf’s son and Olaf’s sire
Lit to the ancient gods the sacred fire,
Unto whose line am I myself akin, (1: 81; 324–7).

The Elders immediately value their visitors as a “living chronicle” (1: 154; 2751) and propose a mutual telling of tales from the groups’ respective traditions. The stories, though old, are valued as both relevant and imbued with cultural specificity: “Be pleased to hear an ancient tale again, / That, told so long ago, yet doth remain / Fresh e’en ‘mongst us, far from the Argive land:” (1: 263; 13–15). As tales are retold and the year revolves from March through to February, the old men (and to some extent their occasional audience of younger “Greeks”) reflect upon the human qualities portrayed in the stories and how life is affected by the passage of time. This process evolves as the seasons pass and the tales become richer and more complex, but even in the narrative’s springtime, the Wanderers reflect upon the inevitability of fate after hearing “The Doom of King Acrisius” (1: 342–3) whilst the reciprocal medieval tale “The Proud King” prompts a lively discussion about the transitory nature of power (1: 377–8). Before long, the intensifying cultural interchange and mood of the seasons moves the participants beyond amiable conversation, infusing memory and emotions:

And in those old hearts did the story move
Remembrance of the mighty deeds of love,
And with these thoughts did hopes of life arise,
Till tears unseen were in their ancient eyes,
And in their yearning hearts unspoken prayers,
And idle seemed the world with all its cares. (1: 460; 5–10).

The act of remembrance, though often poignant, allows a stepping back from the present moment to contemplate what is important in life and reconcile oneself to it: “Bitter and sweet so mingled in them both, / Their lives and that old tale, they had been loth, / Perchance, to have them told another way.” (1: 521; 19–21). By the end of the cycle, the world-weary, disillusioned old men, at peace with the narrative of their lives through the telling of their own tales and receiving of others, are accepting of approaching death rather than striving to escape it.

Morris also contemplates love and sorrow in the outer frame’s narrative interludes and seasonal lyrics. Whilst these reflections have an intensely personal, individual quality, the sentiments expressed also resonate on a societal level. Early in the annual cycle, Morris’s interlude for April depicts a lover anticipating spring yet still yearning for the past: “Still long for that which never draweth nigh, / … Come again, / Come back past years! why will ye pass in vain?” (1: 262; 17, 20–21). In July’s lyric, the narrator expresses trepidation about love’s renewal, but could also be referring to the decline of culture in the contemporary age: “Ah, love! although the morn shall come again, / And on new rose-buds the new sun shall smile, / Can we regain what we have lost meanwhile?” (1: 547; 12–14). As summer reaches its height, Morris, affected as are the aged men of the inner frame by the turning year and the increasingly intricate tapestry of tales told, begins to question seeking past perfection at the expense of living in the present:

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? (1: 603; 15–18).

Again, the “we” appears applicable to a society dissatisfied with itself, mourning a greater age long since vanished. The affecting September lyric intensifies this sentiment:

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 beheldest 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. (2: 4; 15–21).

Morris eloquently evokes the futility of trying to rekindle lost love, yet also seems to caution more generally against mourning a past that cannot return before its natural time. Even though the past (be it lost romantic love or a culture’s golden age) cannot be willed back into existence, the natural cycle of human life, the seasons, and civilization means that all things must fade, yet also be reborn. This is the conclusion (or beginning) that the narrator reaches in the final interlude for February: “Shalt thou not
hope for joy new-born again, / Since no grief ever born can ever die / Through changeless change of seasons passing by?” (2: 611; 19–21). Furthermore, this universal theme of inevitable death and regeneration is apparent in all of the tales that intertwine within the poem, as Morris states in the Epilogue: “Since each tale’s ending needs must be the same: / And we men call it Death. …” (2: 769; 8–9). This binds together the reader, narrator, medieval inner frame characters, and the characters within the told tales as the year turns full cycle and this shared human condition is revealed.

The complex interplay of narratives within The Earthly Paradise exemplifies Morris's conception of heterogeneous cultures able to draw shared human experience from their historical legacies. Culture is intertwined with both the history and the homeland of a folk, and severance from either can only diminish that culture. As we have seen, both Morris the narrator and the medieval characters of the poem wrestle with their relation to place and time. The author begins his epic poem with an apology, regretfully cautioning the reader that these songs “of names remembered” (1: 52; 18) cannot restore past happiness nor ameliorate present woes:

Of Heaven and Hell I have no power to sing,  
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,  
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,  
Or bring again the pleasure of past years,  
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,  
Or hope again for aught that I can say,  
The idle singer of an empty day. (1: 52; 1–7).

Morris thus incorporates the central question of the poem within its outermost level: how we are to live with the inevitable loss that results from the passage of time. The sentiment is echoed, yet tempered, in the outer level passage following the Prologue. Morris likens his collection of ancient tales to the petals of flowers gathered from a glorious land that he once visited. The tales are traditional, not of his invention, and the flowers are likewise “Not plucked by me, nor over-fresh or bright;” (1: 155; 5). Pressed between the pages of Morris’s book, they have faded even further yet act as a reminder of his beloved land. The interdependence of land and past is beautifully articulated in this brief address to the reader:

By these dull stains, some men may yet descry  
As dead upon the quivering leaves they lie.  
Behold them here, and mock me if you will,  
But yet believe no scorn of man can kill  
My love of that fair land wherefrom they came,  
Where midst the grass their petals once did flame. (1: 155; 11–16)

Though Morris acknowledges the past’s inability to change the present, he emphasizes its role in connecting us to our selves, each other, and our homeland. Each tale contains the indelible imprint of the culture in which it blossomed.

As discussed above, the cross-communication between reader, narrator, characters, and tales within The Earthly Paradise effects a gradual transformation of the participants. However, the inner tales
themselves, whilst providing a vehicle for their own characters’ metamorphosis, undergo interpretation and modification at the hands of the author. As editor Florence Boos mentions in her analysis of the Morris’s sources for each tale, the author often casts the classical and medieval tales in a distinctly Victorian mould. For example, Boos notes that in his version of the classical theme “The Death of Paris” Morris departs from the early texts’ censure of Paris’s unfaithfulness to his wife Œnone, concentrating instead on his doomed yet unwavered passion for Helen (2: 7–8). This imposition of contemporary sensibilities on tales that the author presents as a precious cultural inheritance potentially weakens Morris’s work, yet as he reminds us in the poem’s envoi, his purpose is to reinvigorate the ancient tales so that they might connect contemporary (and future) readers. Morris reprises the organic imagery of cultural legacy as flowers and seeds in his address to the now completed book:

   … 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; all was not for nought.
   No little part it was for me to play,
   The idle singer of an empty day. (2: 775; 106–12).

William Morris stands as a distinct figure in the nineteenth century British cultural milieu. Like many of his Hellenistic contemporaries, he found inspiration in tales from ancient Greece—his long narrative poem The Life and Death of Jason was published shortly before the first volume of The Earthly Paradise in 1867. Yet Morris was increasingly drawn to the Northern European tradition: following his early work drawing from medieval Arthurian romance The Defence of Guenevere (1858), he translated many of the Icelandic sagas and in 1876 published his interpretation of the ancient Germanic-derived tale of Sigurd the Volsung, Northern Europe’s own great epic. In contrast to many of the Hellenistic writers, he does not elevate ancient Greek culture above his own tradition—for Morris, imitation or appropriation of another culture to the exclusion of one’s own lacks authenticity. Indeed, “The Writing on the Image”, the medieval tale for May, warns against stealing the treasures of a dead civilization. Though we share fundamental elements of humanity with other cultures and should intermingle our traditions in order to reveal these truths, our own specific cultural legacy binds us to land and past. Morris’s sentiment recalls Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” in which the author visualises Sophocles gazing across the Ægean sea: the same sea that now laps upon Arnold’s English shore. The time and place are distinct and different, yet the same water flows between. In The Earthly Paradise, Morris offers an integrated, mutually affirming interplay of cultures rooted in time and place. Fortified by a deep awareness of our own cultural legacy and its resonances with human cultures across place and time, we are able to live in our present and face our future conscious of our shared human condition and its natural cyclical progression.
Works cited