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“Us Poor Singers”: Victorians and *The Earthly Paradise*
Audience, Community, and Storytelling in William Morris’ First Success

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis; that the following thesis is entirely my own work; and that no part of this thesis has been submitted for another degree or qualification.

Emily Rose Doucet
1 March 2014

Thesis Abstract

The Earthly Paradise was William Morris's first real success, and it remained his best-known work even after his death. It has not fared as well since the mid-twentieth century, when it became overlooked and problematic, as the Morris of *The Earthly Paradise* years became coextensive with a portrait of Victorian middle-class myopia. This verdict has been brought to the doors of the poem's first readers, who are imagined to have liked it for uncomplicated reasons of fashion and entertainment. I reconsider these assumptions by returning to the contemporary reception of the poem to ask what audiences thought about Morris as a public figure, what it was that they so responded to in his work, and what the poem itself says about reception—the relationship between story, audience, and speaker. I argue both within the text and in the reception of it, such relationships are nearly always understood as communal, as storytellers—Morris and those in his text—address audiences as collective publics, and speak on behalf of them. Moreover, this speech is always marked by a mutually inclusive relationship with text, so that stories are properly understood as arising from the discursive field established through the participation, both textual and vocal, of anyone who understands himself or herself addressed by the discourse.

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Introduction

“There are many writers greater than Morris,” admits his admirer C. S. Lewis. “You can go on from him to all sorts of subtleties, delicacies, and sublimities which he lacks. But you can hardly go behind him” (*Rehabilitations* 55). W. B. Yeats gives us a slightly different version: “I would choose to live his life, *poetry and all*, rather than my own or any other man’s” (*Autobiographies* 132 emphasis added). These observations, yoking emphatic praise with caveats, reveal a relationship to William Morris that is foundational, life-shaping, and yet aware of his—and its—limitations. In his 1936 article on the reception of William Morris, Karl Litzenberg identifies a trend in contemporary criticism that he paraphrases as “he was a great poet, *but*”(421). Later critic Florence S. Boos writes that as Morris’s writing developed he “never lacked for readers, but they seemed more and more to demand what he least wished to say” (“Victorian Response” 24). The aim of this study is to consider the complexities in Morris’s reception through an investigation of the contemporary reception of *The Earthly Paradise*, the poem for which he achieved his first fame, and which is now not often read, or liked. Indeed it has become one of the more problematic examples of his disconnect between readers and what Morris wished to say. The tensions between Morris’s critical reputation, his readership, and his own desires as a writer to write what he “wished to say” can be located from the period of the writing and the publication of *The Earthly Paradise*. It was from this time that it became feasible to think of him both as a public figure and a “great poet” and as

someone who might not lack for readers. This project considers the intersection of these phenomena: the creation and subsequent reception of William Morris the public figure; how that figure emerges in the particular instance of the reception of his first success *The Earthly Paradise*, what it was in the poem his contemporary audiences responded to; and how this poem itself frames the question of reception. This project seeks to recreate—as far as it is able—the cultural context of *The Earthly Paradise*'s contemporary reception, the affiliated rise of William Morris the writer, and the ways in which William Morris himself engages with questions of audience, community, identity and public performance in the poem itself.

The Earthly Paradise is a multi-framed verse narrative of 42 000 lines that begins with an address by a contemporary narrator to the nineteenth-century inhabitants of London, it then backwards in time, first to medieval London, and then to a city of indeterminate location and provenance, but populated by people who live under the cultural inheritance of the Greco-Roman classical tradition. Here we meet a scraggly group of seafaring Norwegians—the Wanderers—who have alighted upon that city's shores after having left their native Norway long ago in search of the fountain of youth, which is to say, the Earthly Paradise. After leaving Norway and before ending up in this city, they undergo trials and adventures, lose some of their group through misadventure, fail in their quest, grow older and faint of heart. We hear this tale, itself a very long narrative, and only then settle into the heart of the work as the Wanderers and the Elders of the city begin a year of exchanging the cultural heritage of their respective old tales. These tales are presented in a calendar structure upheld by both the Wanderers and the Elders, as well as the contemporary narrator, who interjects, after each pair of stories, with an intimate, opaque lyric poem on the subject of both his own emotional landscape and the newly starting month.

This adventure narrative, and its emphasis on the storytelling moment—an activity associated with leisure, relaxation and diversion—have all helped to give *The Earthly Paradise* a reputation for escapism. The Prologue’s first line, and certainly the most famous line of the whole work, urges us to “Forget” contemporary London and travel back in time with the narrator to a different London—“small and white and clean” (I: Prologue 5). Nevertheless, the poem itself is primarily about dashed hopes, lowered expectations, and coming to peace with a world depicted as sad and occasionally cruel. The monthly lyric cycle has moments of real joy, but even these function through the narrator’s sense of their stolen character; the joy is always under the shadow of a fundamental sadness. The Wanderers never find their Earthly Paradise and by the time they meet the city’s Elders it is their survival, rather than any previously desired triumph, that turns out to be adequate achievement and consolation. This realization takes its tentative and occasionally ambivalent shape in the narrative interludes that register the two groups’ reactions to each tale. The tales themselves are rarely happy either in their endings or in their particulars. In each of the frames it is suffering more than anything else that marks the human experience and defines the human condition. Ruskin remarked, of the poem, “there’s such a lovely misery in this Paradise. In fact, I think it’s—the other place” (qtd in Helsinger 108).

This lovely misery has not stopped the poem from bearing a reputation for pretty escapism. We can trace certain erroneous assumptions about the nature of Morris’s work through a brief account of the various interpretations of *The Earthly Paradise*’s title, which has taken on a life of its own, and has been susceptible to misunderstandings in its own right. *The Earthly Paradise* is often used to refer to some version of Morris’s aesthetic, often as a blend of pre-Raphaelite and Arts &

Crafts elements. A 1923 book of excerpts from Morris's writings offers itself as a primer on the house beautiful, and was called *The Earthly Paradise of William Morris*. A 1993 exhibition of "arts and crafts by Morris and his Circle" at the Art Gallery of Ontario was called *The Earthly Paradise*. A current lifestyle blog called *The Earthly Paradise* uses Millais's *Lady of Shalott* as its title image, and describes itself as "a celebration of the quest for truth, the good, the beautiful" inspired by the Pre-Raphaelites, mythology, Morris and the romantic poets. The blog's author goes on to write: "I'm fascinated by the idea of living in the moment and using everything I have at my fingertips in order to create a bit of paradise here on earth".¹ Such interpretations imagine William Morris in terms of the fantasy of his domestic aesthetic. Moreover, they seek (and indeed find) in Morris a rubric for an entire lifestyle.

These interpretations and appropriations are not exclusive to the poem *The Earthly Paradise*, although they take on an interesting character in that case. Such adaptations demonstrate the way in which any consideration of his work has to first encounter the larger-than-life figure of William Morris. There is only one William Morris. This is a commonplace reaction of Morrisphiles to the energy, range, and charisma of his life's work. Yet of the one, there are many versions. Although he lived in a century with no shortage of renaissance men burning their candles at both ends, by any reckoning the scope of Morris's interests and engagements was particularly prodigious, and any list of those pursuits contain fractals opening up still more lists. Although champions for each of these many camps—aesthetic, political, literary, and so on—take their pains to speak to Morris's multi-faceted vision; in practice, it is more common for commentators to find one or the other of these guises

¹ "About." *Earthly Paradise*. n.d. Web. 1 March, 2013.

more authentic or at least more representative of that vision. “The real Morris belongs to us,” asserts Marxist Robin Parge Arnot on the occasion of the centenary of his birth, and so claim many writers of many stripes (31). In the first instance, then, William Morris is encountered as a role-model and a spokes-person for a number of different causes. The examples of the art exhibition, the blog, and the book of excerpts all imagine Morris in terms of his design work, and look to find their connection to him through ruminating on his textiles. Michelle Weinwroth, for example, locates another version of Morris at the centre of a political debate over national identity. She describes “Morris’s *oeuvre*” as the “symbolic treasure-house of Englishness,” and argues that control over his memory “came to define, on a more general level, the necessary strategy for tapping a popular (read nationalist) sensibility with the larger struggle to win or maintain hegemonic power” (9). Weinwroth is speaking specifically of Morris’s legacy in the 1930s, but the quarrel over the rights to Morris’s ultimate meaning begins even before this, and for similarly expansive stakes.

The affective pull of William Morris as a figure often dictates, as we shall see, reading practices.

[Morris’s] vision is true because it is poetical, because we are a little happier when we are looking at it; and he knew as Shelley knew, by an act of faith, that the economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like him, from the vision that is buried under all minds. (*Essays* 63)

So writes Yeats, in his essay “The Happiest of Poets,” of his old friend and leader at the Hammersmith Socialist League. Yeats frames his reaction to Morris in terms of communities of the like minded—uniting the “we” who are happier when considering Morris’s vision, or Morris and Shelley, or Morris and “men like him,” and finally uniting “all minds.” Yeats’s invocation of the ineffable of the privately felt, here represented by the “act of faith,” stands in unusual partnership with the measurements

of economists. Yeats's reminiscences display a whole school of Morrisphiles' responses to his work, in which the interplay of human relations and the space of affective interiority is brought to bear on a sense of public commitment. To speak about William Morris, is often to consider this connection between the public and private. Because Morris has lasting fame primarily as a visionary—as someone who offered different versions of worlds and lives—in their responses to him, people reveal what they want from the world. As such, these responses, which originate in an introspective instinct, are interested in public effects. These public agendas exist alongside a persistent tendency for individual readers to speak of Morris in the language of shared, half-secret affinities. This is a phenomenon at the heart of Morrisphiles responses to him—the celebration of the scope of a unifying vision delivered by both a trusted and a loved sage. Such unifying bonds, moving from the privately felt to the publicly shared, are at the very core of how *The Earthly Paradise* functions as a text.

The floundering fortunes of *The Earthly Paradise*

Nevertheless, although Morris continues to have his followers, they rarely locate his value in any discussion of *The Earthly Paradise*, although it was the poem that made his name. Why then was *The Earthly Paradise* so popular, and why is it not now? There are, of course, a few ready answers: the most convincing of these is that Victorians loved long narrative poems, and we modern readers, even the most dedicated among us, tend to avoid them.² Others are more problematic, such as the

² Which is not to say they have ceased to exist. Modernist epics such as William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* demonstrate a changing but lasting interest in long verse, as does the popularity of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and, at a stretch, much of the Beats oeuvre, and post-modern long verse narrative such as Ann Carson's *The Autobiography of Red*.

explanation that Victorians liked armchair exoticism, nostalgia, and in particular escapism—the charge frequently leveled at *The Earthly Paradise*. If these things were true, I am not certain they are not *still* true and, regardless, this has not deterred the critical longevity of other works. Of course William Morris is not unique in having written a work that was popular and is now no longer read or studied, but such falls from fortune are not often enough treated as interesting in and of themselves, and such ready explanations of fashion, taste and inclination beg a number of good questions. What does it mean for a reader to encounter *The Earthly Paradise* as escapist? Can this be a generative encounter? What value did contemporary readers find in the poem that made it such a publishing event for the relatively small group of middle class readers who read it first? What positive reading practices might we discover suggested within *The Earthly Paradise*? Is there anything more to be said about why it became so out of favour? These are the questions I pursue in this thesis.

It was as the poet of *The Earthly Paradise* that Morris first gained critical recognition and popular regard, and it was as a poet that Morris was chiefly known even in the generation after his death. He was approached after the death of Tennyson to gauge his interest in the Laureateship, and the first line of all his obituaries identified Morris as the “idle singer of an empty day,” and the author of *The Earthly Paradise* (I: Apology 7). Nevertheless, before the middle of the twentieth century he had fallen out of literary favour. By 1939 C. S. Lewis diagnoses Morris as undergoing a period of such “obscurity” that dismissing him is a cultural commonplace. “A mention of him in literary circles,” writes Lewis, “produces a torrent of objections which have been learnt by heart” (37). A mid-century biographer begins her own study on the defensive, in the process giving us some sense of what these rote objections might be: “such an intuitive craftsman and creator as William Morris is

never expected to have a particularly subtle or sensitive mind. Therefore Morris, so skillful and abounding as a pattern maker, was himself fitted into a pattern which actually left him little room for growth or development” (Meynell 1). By the middle of the last century, not only was Morris no longer a literary figure of any note, this negative reputation always preceded him. Critics such as Raymond Williams, for whom Morris is such an important figure, nevertheless made pronouncements such as: “there is more life in the lectures, where one feels that the whole man is engaged in the writing, than in any the prose and verse romances” (155). These assessments dismiss Morris’s literary efforts on the grounds of their lack of depth and quality; they do so by appealing to the measure of Morris himself. It is through comparison to his own larger achievements that he is criticized in the literary instance.

These casual dismissals had occurred with particular force in the case of *The Earthly Paradise*. Certain works have been able to make it past these criticisms, but usually for reasons that cannot be assimilated with a more general recuperation. *The Defense of Guenevere and Other Poems*, for example, has become critically interesting for what has been interpreted as the startling stylistic features of its proto-modernism. *News from Nowhere*, as an articulation of Morris’s more popular political interests, have been a fruitful battleground for claims of affiliations with utopians, Marxists, anarchists, eco-critics, socialists, and the Labour Party, each in their various guises. These recuperations have been by and large episodic, as eloquent in their omissions as in their critical reconsideration. Chief among these omissions is *The Earthly Paradise*. In *Victorian Poetry* for example, Isobel Armstrong offers a case for the “boldness” (232) of *The Defense of Guenevere*; she compares it favourably to *The Earthly Paradise*, which she summarises dismissively, if not damningly: “[*The Earthly Paradise*] is a cycle of alternating classical and Teutonic legends, and advises

its readers to ‘Forget six counties overhung with smoke’ and to retreat into the past or to an idealized past. Morris’s poetry becomes a “source of therapeutic beauty to redress the damage done by work in an industrial society” (232). These are the perceived sins for which the author of *The Earthly Paradise* has yet to be entirely forgiven—critics’ implication that the poem endorses a tactic of retreat and that it myopically privileges beauty as a balm to industry rather than engagement with a cause.

The reputation of the poem for pretty escapism is aided by a certain interpretation of the most obvious elements of the text: its amalgam of a number of different adventure scenarios, the emphasis on the storytelling scene as a place of diversion and relaxation, and the occasionally monotonous, rhythmic repetition of its verse. In addition to these elements, *The Earthly Paradise* famously opens with a narrator who identifies himself as “the idle singer of an empty day” (I: Apology 7). This moniker, and its frequent quotation, has plagued Morris and the poem with misunderstandings. It is taken as a preemptive undermining of the narrative voice in the poem; it is also assumed to indicate something of the lack of seriousness, and therefore value, of the work. Charlotte Oberg, acknowledging the distinction Armstrong makes between this poem and other works, calls rectifying the seeming tension between the William Morris of *The Earthly Paradise*, the so-called “idle singer,” and his prodigious work and commitment elsewhere, “the greatest problem to be resolved with respect to Morris the writer” (18).

It is certainly true that modern commentators on *The Earthly Paradise* have difficulty squaring the author of this work with other versions of Morris. Although it is the work that first turned Morris into a public figure, within the Morris *oeuvre* it has become a wild-card. It is neither pre-Raphaelite like *The Defense of Guenevere*, nor is

it, for all its Northern inflections, quite the work of Morris the Icelandic enthusiast like *Sigurd the Volsung*, and it is certainly not the work of the Hammersmith socialist, alongside *A Dream of John Ball* or *News from Nowhere*. Nor has *The Earthly Paradise* had any afterlife of the sort his late prose romances have had as inspiration to Tolkien. For these reasons, and because of its discomfiting alliances with an escapist attitude, *The Earthly Paradise* is treated as a phase in Morris's life that is at odds with these other, more fruitful and representative chapters. Charlotte Oberg, for example offers the unsatisfying solution that Morris's posture as the idle singer was genuine, at least in terms of his "conscious intentions"(19), but that it was impossible for him to not be the man of action he was at heart, so that he could not help conveying "indirectly through symbol and association" that which was "so basic to his nature" (19). Carole Silver identifies the episode of this poem in Morris's life as something to move beyond, calling it a "period of necessary, if painful, reflection" (77). Amanda Hodgson similarly sees the era of *The Earthly Paradise* as one in which Morris is struggling for purpose and meaning. If his writing, she argues, "is to show the same forceful vitality as his design work, Morris must find a way of reconciling man's dreams of happiness with the real world in which he must act" (*Romance* 81). These critical moves indeed tackle *The Earthly Paradise* as a "problem" that, amongst other things, undermines the content of the work, and its meaning. Like Virginia Woolf's famous discussion of Charlotte Brontë's skill in writing *Jane Eyre*, interrupted by Brontë's un-authorly anger, the topic of the poem does not cohere to the poem itself in these readings, but instead acts as a parasite on it, or a mistaken addition that detracts from its artistry.

The Earthly Paradise is then doubly fallen from grace. As an example of Morris's now underappreciated literary work, interest in it has waned; as his biggest

contemporary achievement, it has also suffered its own particular fall. “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” (110), declares E. P. Thompson at the beginning of his discussion of the work. C. S. Lewis calls it Morris’s “dullest work” (44). Here’s Thompson on the verse: “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 . . . If scenes of battle, they are decorative” (117). Biographer Fiona MacCarthy speaks of the “Victorian materfamilias lulled into believing it ideal public reading” (264) because of its “soporific charm” (263). We have already seen how little interested Isobel Armstrong is in what she call the “relaxed prolixity” (*Poetics* 232) of *The Earthly Paradise*. Herbert Tucker speaks of the “bland protocols” of the work’s structure and of Morris’s “narrative parquetry of precious things tallied from afar” (*Epic* 432). Tucker’s adjectives usually contain multitudes, and this second image, which makes its point in the language of home décor and accounting, reveals some of the tacit implications of these types of criticisms. As when biographer Henderson refers to the book’s “tremendous vogue” with Victorians, or when Thompson describes its popularity with the “middle class public,” these criticisms often imagine the author of *The Earthly Paradise* as coextensive with a certain portrait of Victorian middle-class consumer myopia.

Critical Engagements

In *The Design of the Earthly Paradise*, Florence S. Boos argues that early readers and reviewers, to appease their second thoughts about the much lauded simplicity of Morris’s pretty verse, “redoubled praise for the facility of Morris’s

formal skills” (20). Boos considers that this may be in order to “gloss over the work’s more disquieting content” (20). In fact, the tradition of emphasizing generic and formal aspects of the poem has continued. Modern critics still spend much of their analysis analyzing Morris’s use of ancient genres—romance, epic, pastoral—as well as anatomizing the structure of the poem. Such endeavours are still connected to a certain critical perplexity with the content of the poem, but one wonders if “glossing over” is what is in fact in play, then or now. My research will demonstrate that contemporary critics were not skittish about acknowledging the despair of the poem, and modern critics are not either. Nevertheless, they are often at a loss—analytically—about what to do with that despair. Blue Calhoun wonders whether “the poem lends itself to explication” (2). Jeffrey Skoblow argues that it “challenges the prerogatives of interpretation and scholarship” (xi). There is, after all, only so much one can say about Morris’s most characteristic poetic gesture, what C. S. Lewis has called “facing the facts,” a gesture more concerned with preparing one’s face than with the facts it faces. The urge to make something of this message, to take it and move beyond it, is one of the discomfiting aspects not only of the reading experience of *The Earthly Paradise*, but perhaps of the analysis of it. This project will reconsider the relationship of readers to *The Earthly Paradise*, and in particular its contrasting elements of despair and pleasure—Ruskin’s “sweet misery”—by reexamining such assumptions about what it was contemporary critics and contemporary readers did or did not manage to find, to notice, or to engage with in their reading practices. Amongst its tasks then, is to readdress those areas of criticism that most concern speculation about possible reading practices.

Modern critics Herbert Tucker, Jeffrey Skoblow and Elizabeth Helsinger, have all considered the swell of *The Earthly Paradise*’s totalisation, that oceanic

atmospheric inclusivity that has been a part of the response to Morris's poem since its inception. For Tucker and Helsinger, the totalizing power of the poem is tempered by its self-referentiality. Tucker describes the work's structure as "decentered, non-cumulative" (*Epic* 431). He argues that *The Earthly Paradise*, as a collection rather than a unity, is "an invitation [to readers] to browse, to help themselves, to customize the book" (*Epic* 431). He focuses on the lack of "cultural exchange" (*Epic* 431), arguing "anthological pattern trumps ethnological energy at every turn" (*Epic* 432). Elizabeth Helsinger, in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* argues that the poem's overwhelming atmospheric effects offer an alternative sense of the world that is fundamentally always thwarted: the poem is a "continuous gesture elsewhere, a desire constantly aroused and never fulfilled" (214). She theorises a "door of imagination" that invites free play with the imaginative spaces of the past that is nevertheless held constantly in check by a "wall of order" (214). Like Tucker's "anthologizing pattern," Helsinger reads the patterned structure of *The Earthly Paradise* as a check on what he calls its "energy" and what she refers to as imagination. Helsinger argues that the creative storytelling of the work is supervised and limited by the work's structure, its "elaborate patterns of alternating verse forms and typefaces, of shifting singers and narrators, and the physically insistent beat of the meter" thwart the imaginative travel away by reminding readers that they are bound by time and are in fact "reading or listening in the present" (214).

This project returns to the contemporary engagements with these effects in *The Earthly Paradise* and reconsiders ways in which Morris's "broad atmospheric effects" have succeeded in proposing a totalizing experience, and how that can be brought to bear on an understanding of readers' engagement with the text. Some modern critics have offered readings that assume such a success. For Jeffrey Skoblow,

Morris embodies what he calls “an aesthetic of immersion” that he pits against, using Adorno’s vocabulary, the capitalist “Administered world” (4). Immersion, for Skoblow, is related to the nearly deliriously precise detail of the pre-Raphaelite aesthetic and, in this, corresponds with his doctoral supervisor Jerome McGann’s observation in *Black Riders* of a totalizing experience when reading Morris that “forces the reader into a verbal environment that is so thick and dense as to stagger the irresolute imagination” (49). Such readings as Tucker’s and Helsinger’s, while thought-provoking, underestimate the potentialities of the trance-like effects of monotony, and I believe misunderstand the relationship of the reader to *The Earthly Paradise*. Both Tucker and Helsinger’s readings argue the atmospheric effects of the poem are undermined by readers’—and in Tucker’s case, contemporary readers’ in particular—own sense of belatedness. The sense of being in the present keeps readers from entering, as it were, fully into the story. For Tucker, this is ultimately because the poem seems to put the reader in the position of consumer in a shop of antiquities. For Helsinger, however, it is not that readers are radically free to move (shop) about the poem, but rather that they are compelled to follow a reading program that undermines the very escape into the past that the poem appears to endorse. I argue instead that the totalizing effects of the work facilitate rather than frustrate the absorption of the reader into the text.

We have seen how Tucker and Helsinger read the multi-tiered structure of *The Earthly Paradise* as a mechanism that keeps readers in the present and undermines the atmospheric effects of its verse. Another reading by modern critics imagines *The Earthly Paradise*’s relationship to the past locates, in the poem, an ironic self-awareness that criticizes the notion of art as escape. Having identified *The Earthly Paradise* as a poem that challenges notions of escapism, Carol Silver argues that

Morris nevertheless, in looking to the past for inspiration and forms, “aligns himself with those in his poems who—perhaps fatally—turn from their own time to search elsewhere for patterns by which they hope to order their lives” (51). Morris’s critique of this behaviour within the poem “ironically calls into question the validity of his own artistic practice” (52). Blue Calhoun similarly argues that Morris’s use of traditional structures and modes is ironic. She argues Morris’s narrator invokes, in the opening lines, the Miltonic omniscient voice with its “soothsayer” (67) vision and power to sing of heaven and hell, only to reject it: “ironically retaining its form for a kind of song that does not pretend to ease psychological or physical burdens, to strive towards solutions, or to slay dragons” (67). Hodgson argues that each tale told by a member of the remnant is on the “theme of the Earthly Paradise,” and that these are always “ironically counterpointed” by readers’ knowledge that the remnant have already themselves failed in their quests to find such an Earthly Paradise (*Romance* 51-52). She also argues, as Helsinger would later do, that the lyrics “draw our attention away from the historical/mythical past in which the stories are told” (*Romance* 63) by shifting the time frame to an indeterminate temporal setting.

In each of these cases, it is through the use of irony that Morris’s narrator delivers the conclusions of the poem. This self-awareness of the poem’s own artifice of its own presentation is read by critics in terms of ironic undercutting, which bears an interesting relation to what has been identified as the “message” of the poem. That “message,” as Charlotte Oberg describes, is “that man must acquiesce to the cosmic plan” (170). Tucker identifies it as the “no” to the question “can man be made content?” (*Epic* 435). Amanda Hodgson calls it “the pain that results from our unending search for the unattainable” (*Romance* 59). At the level of its content, critics discuss the stalwart suffering of the poem in terms of the beauty of the human

capacity to endure. Here, that same suffering is discussed as the ironic undermining of Morris's own thematic decisions. Critics, then, are torn about the strength of surrender in *The Earthly Paradise*. Within the tales it is sublime; within the framing narratives it is ironic. The difference between the two is their respective subjects. The framing narrative takes art as its subject, while the tales of the inner frame have the human condition as theirs.

The Earthly Paradise's Unity

These arguments for irony demonstrate two readings I wish to contest in this project. The first reading is of our relationship to individual characters or groups of characters within the text; the second reading is of the relationship between the inner sequence and the framing narrative. When Amanda Hodgson refers to the core of the work as “the pain that results from our unending search of the unattainable” (*Romance* 59), she misreads the preoccupations of *The Earthly Paradise*, in part by misreading the work's structure. Importantly, the activities of the Wanderers' Tale are finished before the narrative present begins. That present starts only when the narrator of the outer frame has successfully brought his audience back in time to join its fictive counterparts in the Elders' City. The movement of these preliminaries is precise, and takes readers from contemporary London, to Medieval London, and then to the city of the Elders, which the narrator erects before us in precise detail, even offering us the sound of the door opening to the Council House, and finally deposits us just at the moment of meeting between the Elders and the weary Wanderers. It is only at this moment that the Wanderers tell their tale. This structure, and its positioning of the external readers as an audience on equal terms with the two audience groups within

the work, align us not with the Wanderers and their quest, but with that which comes after—getting to know each other.

The structure also positions each of the three groups in the same relationship both to this story and to the experience of story itself: by placing the narrative present chronologically after the struggles of the Elders and the Wanderers, neither of these groups occupies a role as the external readers' proxy actors. Herbert Tucker argues that *The Earthly Paradise's* journey of realization is one in which characters come to accept themselves *through* these narratives, even, in fact, as these narratives, but he suggests a sickness in this activity, arguing that all that is left is the “*compulsion to narrate*” (*Epic* 435 - emphasis added). To call this year of storytelling a compulsion is to misunderstand its goals—or to fail to see that it has goals. Tucker is only one of a number of critics to miss that although *The Earthly Paradise* begins at the end of one epic journey—The Wanderers' Tale—it also begins at the beginning of another. At the start of their proceedings, an Elder refers to the Wanderers as “our living chronicle” (I: Prologue 2751). They tell stories because stories reveal themselves to each other, and because they discover themselves in these stories. They tell stories because they understand themselves through stories, but also because through exchanging the narratives of their lives and feelings, they can know each other; the goal is connection, and the reception of a tale is the achievement of that goal. These small but significant goals drive the plot along, even if the adventure quest has finished before the poem ever begins.

The year of story-telling begins when the “chief-priest” of the Elders addresses the group in the first Narrative Interlude for March. He says that the Elders would like to “hear some tales from that now altered world, / Wherefrom our fathers in old time were hurled / By the hard hands of destiny and fate” (I: 55-57), which is to

say, the Wanderers' stories of their home, and further that he imagines the Wanderers would themselves like to hear "how we have dealt with stories of the land / Wherein the tombs of our forefathers stand" (I: 59-60). These preliminaries establish communal relevances. The plural pronouns, the ancestral links, and the links to places that fostered communities all clarify what is never far from the surface: these are origin stories shared amongst a number of communities, and in this sense it is something like an international summit.

The structural inclusion, at each level, of a sympathetic audience, is no mere formal convenience. From the opening lines of the Apology, Morris not only addresses, but also considers, depicts, and empathizes with his audience. The opening section anticipates the feelings of his readers, and describes the process of reception: what it is they can expect to feel about the poem and how it will make them reflect. To do so, the Idle Singer's address must successfully display an awareness of the inner-life of his audience, and more importantly, must convince his audience that he shares in it. The singer establishes his credentials by demonstrating that he understands his readers, and this because he is one of them; by the close of the third verse, he is referring to "*us* poor singers of an empty day" (I: 21 emphasis added). This establishes what is at stake each time someone in *The Earthly Paradise* addresses the rest: speakers in this work are spokespersons.

The Apology, which asks us to "read aright" (I: 37) demonstrates a reading practice that requires us to read between the frames, as it were. The first three verses do outline what it is that the singer cannot do—"ease the burden of your fears" (I: 2), for example, or "make quick-coming death a little thing" (I: 3)—but they also demonstrate an important awareness of the innerlife of his audience, and inscribe the suffering of that audience within the verses, as the first of many characters to suffer so

within the book. This shared identification is addressed again in the final verse of the Apology, where the emotional landscape of readers' lives is recast in the language and imagery of the tales, in which the "steely sea" (I: 39) is "where tossed about all hearts of men must be" (I: 40). There are monsters here, as in the tales, and they require mighty men to kill them. This is not the only time in *The Apology* in which the demarcations of the frames flicker and disappear for a moment. "Folks say," begins the penultimate verse, the multi-voiced, repeated nature of story-telling, and its circulating, shared explanations.³ He then likens his work—"this Earthly Paradise" (I: 36)—to courtly tale telling at "Christmas-tide" (I: 30) when a "wizard to a northern king" (I: 29) tells such tales to the court that the audience can see different seasons through different windows. Here the language and logic of the innermost frame—wizards, kings, magical apparitions—emerge in the outmost frame, ostensibly the contemporary frame of lyrical realism. The frame will continue to leak: the project itself introduced as it is here, in the Apology, directly mirrors the introduction in the next frame of what is in fact the same project. The Apology introduces the project:

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,
Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day. (I: 15-21)

This is the same exercise the Wanderers and Elders shall instigate, several thousand lines later, when, in the first Narrative Interlude for March, they "[tell] of poets' vain imaginings, / And memories of vague half-forgotten things, / Nor true or false, but

³ Amanda Hodgson argues the work asks us to "consider the role of the artist, he whose creations may be seen as potentially untouched by time" (51), but *The Earthly Paradise* is often just as interested in the storyteller—that figure who does not *create* but rather transmits story, foregrounding, as is often the case in *The Earthly Paradise*, the collective over the individual achievement.

sweet to think upon” (I: 41-43). Linda Julian, commenting on “The Lovers of Gudrun” in particular, observes that Morris reminds us of the artifice of the tale he is telling, highlighting “narration as art” in order both to emphasize its importance and to “distance the reader from the characters and action” (365). Elisabeth Helsingr locates the power of the poem in its deliberate emphasis on its own “artifice” (215). Jerome McGann writes, of Morris’s poetry, that it is “at once extremely concrete and extremely reflexive. The poetry calls attention to every feature and every level of its construction” (46). It is certainly true that at every level of its communication the poem asks us to consider the power of narrative, but artifice has very different meanings in the case of *The Earthly Paradise*, where lines between people and tales are never drawn very clearly.

Thesis Outline

My reading of *The Earthly Paradise* is driven by a desire to treat the poem holistically and generatively, and to locate this reading in the contemporary reception of the poem. Because this is a poem itself so interested in the effects of reception, this study treats the external mid-nineteenth-century audience as just one group of audiences intimately connected to *The Earthly Paradise*; I consider this real, external audience alongside the audiences inscribed within the text itself—the Wanderers and the Elders. That they are groups, rather than isolated individuals, is important; crucial to this exercise is an understanding of *The Earthly Paradise* as a poem primarily interested in the community forming bonds of the storytelling scene. Throughout Morris’s poem, audiences are addressed as collectives, and speakers speak on behalf of them. This study is concerned with the consequences of this phenomenon, with the role it played in the poem’s popularity, and with the fundamentally related question of

what evocations, messages, and thematic preoccupations it shapes within the text. To that end, I consider the concept of an audience always in terms of the related issues of vocal and textual performance, the public / private divide, identity, and community. In particular, this project traces the representation of the interplay, in *The Earthly Paradise*, between vocal and textual forms of storytelling in order to argue that the poem establishes, and invites readers to participate in, the discursive activity of a public demonstrated through the interplay of textual and vocal interactions with stories. By locating the meaning and the value of story neither in vocal forms, nor in textual ones, but instead by situating it as a participatory, reciprocal *activity*, and one undertaken both within the book and by its readers, *The Earthly Paradise* makes a bid for the power of story as a community-forming activity of engagement that challenges contemporary conceptions of poetry and reading. This project, then, is in three main parts. The first part considers readers of William Morris in general and of *The Earthly Paradise* in particular, and looks to clarify both how he was read, and who read him. The second part of this project is still interested in Morris's reception, and places *The Earthly Paradise* in a contemporary context to consider both its use of source material and its status as an epic. The final part of this project turns to the tales themselves in order to trace how Morris himself portrayed the themes of community, reception, identity, and the relationship between the public and the private.

Part one of this project, "Reading Morris: Private Affect, Public Bonds, and the Morrisean Appeal," looks at a number of different ways of reading Morris: the persona and the poetry. The first section of part one asks how Morris is read, and begins by considering how Morris, as a persona, has himself been read as a character in the narrative biographers' have constructed of his life. Critical engagement with *The Earthly Paradise* often includes a biographical element, and biographers

themselves are the stewards of the public persona of William Morris. How critics and biographers have come to understand the relationship between Morris, heartsick and urban, and the melancholy *Earthly Paradise*, clarifies the ways in which this poem has become problematic within the Morris canon. The period of *The Earthly Paradise*, from 1865-1870, was a pivotal one for Morris. I focus on how his biographers have narrated several key events of this period: in particular the sale of Red House and the move back to the city; Janey Morris's escalating extramarital relationship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti; the increasing professionalization of his design firm; and the unexpected popularity of *The Earthly Paradise*. These events demonstrate a conflict between Morris's public roles as the up-and-coming businessman and the young poet enjoying his first literary success with his private ones as a cuckolded husband and as a man trying to find ways to negotiate the ideals of his youth—so easily fostered at Red House—in the space of the city.

In the representations of this period, biographers read a rift between Morris and his poem by presenting Morris in the midst of his most sustained involvement with and complicity in the affairs of the middle classes, and, in particular, read him as a public figure on display for the middle classes. In contrast, biographers discuss the poem itself as the work of a tortured, private man who turns to composition either for solace, respite or, in some cases, as the result of the work ethic of the Victorian gentleman turned inward and sickening. *The Earthly Paradise*, in these accounts, becomes a poem of despair that negotiates what is left out of Morris's public obligations and his public selves, hidden in full view.

The next sections of Part One are broadly informed by the field of reception studies, which considers a text's audience(s) as active participants in a text's meaning, and galvanizes interest in actual readers of texts in order to clarify how they are read.

In cases such as *The Earthly Paradise* in which modern and contemporary fortunes seem to have drifted so far apart, it is a particularly fruitful endeavour. I consider the records of reading experiences preserved in diaries, letters, and memoirs in order to demonstrate the reading practices of Morris's audiences. In the process, I ask also how the understanding of the term 'escapism,' so often associated with Morris, is complicated by the evidence of the power discovered by his readers in his texts, as well as within *The Earthly Paradise*.

Beginning with the general reading responses as recorded in personal memoirs and essays by Morris's contemporaries and near contemporaries, I demonstrate the affective, acritical and communal responses to William Morris. These texts reveal the affective affinities at play in any encounter with a Morris text; the Morrisian reading practice organizes itself around a series of personal affiliations with Morris as a key figure and role model, and it also contains a curious sense that his appeal is left unaffected by the awareness of his limitations as a writer. These intimate connections are matched, however, by a sense of Morris as a poet of expansive, transcendent vision. The interplay of these two modes, the private and intimate and the expansive and transformative, are at the heart of Morris's appeal.

The final sections of Part One consider audiences in and of *The Earthly Paradise*. Drawing on descriptions in accounts such as Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" of the anxieties of Victorian reading practices as being isolating, curtailed, and lacking the communal wisdom of ancient modes of oral storytelling, I argue that *The Earthly Paradise* seeks to correct the limitations of contemporary textual forms not by privileging or fetishizing vocal forms, but instead encouraging readers to partake in story as a discursive activity that combines both these forms. This activity is represented within the poem, in which narrators and characters move

between vocal and textual forms of the same story, emphasizing story as the intersection of these circulating texts and the discussions they foster. This activity is best understood as that of a public sphere in action. I trace how this ideal reading practice, as Morris imagines it for his readers in *The Earthly Paradise*, is in fact brought to bear on actual accounts of reading *The Earthly Paradise*, in which readers privilege reading aloud and together, using the book to source inspiration for a way to encounter the world.

The study of the reception of the book must also consider the contexts in which it was read, and this one in particular, which was so intertextual, raises the question of its perceived relationship not only to these other texts, but also to the discourses they invoke. *The Earthly Paradise*'s reliance on the familiar stories of history, and the poem's structural emphasis on these stories *as* stories, invites such a reading. In the second section of the study, "Contemporary Contexts: *The Earthly Paradise*, the Epic, and the Stories we tell," I consider *The Earthly Paradise*'s interaction with discussions of history, historical and mythical stories, and the extent to which such stories spoke to communal relationships and identities. The source materials from which *The Earthly Paradise* takes its stories had particularly rich heritages, and were embroiled in a contemporary discussion about the right to speak for and about Victorian Britain. These sources included classical material, a tradition long at the heart of elite education, and a certain type of British identity; they also included Chaucerian and medieval romance as well as old Northern⁴ material, all up-and-comers in the fight for origin stories that often, in their various bids for recognition, explicitly challenged the dominance of the

⁴ Terms abound for the cultural group that makes up this field of study and collections of texts. Contemporary critics appear to favour 'Scandinavian' or 'Norse,' but I shall follow Andrew Wawn's lead in *Vikings and Victorians* and use the more general term 'old northern' to refer to the collection of texts and their scholarship.

classical material. Although the discourses of these different source materials were not themselves unified they were all vying for space in a single work, and above all a work that privileged the unifying power of narrative as at the heart of a community.

To articulate the relationship between a community and a story is precisely the work of epic, and part two also considers *The Earthly Paradise* in the context of the epic genre. There are a number of different generic contenders to describe *The Earthly Paradise*. I consider it from the point of view of the classical epic because it meets its criteria; it is expansive in scope, and also in length. Like all epics, it is a communal poem, which is to say it is a narrative about the fates of many people. It describes a shared experience that incorporates its readers in a special way, because it is ultimately a story about their own origins and their own fate, and it addresses them at a moment of reckoning. *The Earthly Paradise* has something to say to and about that whole community.

Taking Herbert Tucker's identification of 1868 as an "*annus mirabilis*" (*Epic* 391) for the nineteenth-century epic, I consider the reception of *The Earthly Paradise* alongside a reading of the reception of two epics to have parts published around the same time—Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, and *The Holy Grail* installment of Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*.⁵ Throughout their reviews of these poets' epics, critics make frequent reference to a post-epic world, one which is analytic, scientific, small, mercantile, which is to say, uninspired—the "empty day" of Morris's poem. In such an age, heroic greatness—the stuff of epic poetry—is near impossible. In their reviews of the epic attempts of these three

⁵ George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* was also published in 1868, adding to the tally of epics for that year, although I will not address its reception both for lack of space and because it was received in the press as less of an event—though she would have her moment only a few years later with the release of *Middlemarch*.

poets, critics encounter a Browning who insists on dissecting the conditions of his age, an exercise that evokes admiration, wariness and skepticism amongst critics, and a Tennyson who manages to thrive in the age, a phenomenon that in this period is beginning to cause critical resentment. Only in Morris do critics find a poet who both critiques the age, and manages to find a way to articulate a communally shared feeling of suffering through it. In this way *The Earthly Paradise* offered a story in which contemporary readers were able to find themselves reflected, but not placated, as with Tennyson, or alienated, as with Browning.

The final section of this study, “ ‘Tales Feigned and True’: Negotiating reception in the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*,” reads the tales of the poem against an account of the poem’s first tale: the Wanderers’ Tale. I argue that Rolf’s first story, the account of how the wanderers came to find themselves on a quest for the earthly paradise, in fact articulates a series of problems in the storytelling experience, problems with which the tales themselves imaginatively engage. Using the concept of public spheres, discursive spaces in which individuals come together to share their ideas and concerns, I argue that *The Earthly Paradise*’s structure creates the opportunity for just such a public, and that failures of a healthy public are to blame for the Wanderers’ failed quest.

I offer a sustained reading of a number of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* in each case reading the concepts interrogated in the tales against a problem to be solved from the Wanderers’ Tale. These problems stem from Nicholas, who first tells the earthly paradise story to Rolf, as well as from the problematic relationship to stories upon which Nicholas insists. This relationship is not the discursive, dynamic, reciprocal activity of a public, but rather the closed, hierarchical and undemocratic

speech of a tyrant. Only Nicholas is allowed to decipher tales, and moreover he insists that he can tell which stories are true, in some literal sense. Such avowals are what set them off on their doomed journey. First I trace the privileging of intertextuality and polyvocality as they are valued in tales, in particular “Ogier the Dane” and “Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” the two tales to feature earthly paradises and that in fact serve to correct Nicholas’s more problematic account of the earthly paradise in *The Wanderers’ Tale*. Nicholas’s ability to dupe Rolf is in part the result of an inability to read people, to interpret authenticity and sincerity. The second group of tales I address all interact with problems of believability, authenticity, and the challenges of interpreting people, and all suggest that communities depend on such skills. Considering these concepts from a more intimate point of view, I also read a series of tales that represent the activity of uniting two subjectivities, and in the process of demonstrating the relationship between the strength of private bonds as at the heart of healthy participation in the public sphere. Finally, taking my cue from the Idle Singer’s address to his readers as city dwellers called upon to “Forget” their city, I consider the representation of urban identities in several of the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*. In “The Man who Never Laughed Again,” “Pygmalion and the Image,” and “The Story of Rhodope,” Morris considers a series of characters who have forms of social sickness, and reads them against the backdrop of an urban gaze which interprets, avoids, or judges their behaviour. In different ways, these tales all consider the life of the imagination, the relationship between the individual and the public, and the ways in which such relationships are resolved through reflections of the life of the imagination.

Chapter One

Reading Morris:

Private affect, public bonds, and the Morrisean appeal

Introduction

In his *Autobiography*, twentieth-century Orcadian poet Edwin Muir recalls his childhood introduction to owning his own books and reading for his own pleasure.

One day as a child he came into a windfall of three pennies gifted from his brother; Muir spent it all on books, picked haphazardly from the local bookseller. Of the three ‘Penny Poets’ books he chose—Arnold, Shakespeare, and an abridged version of

Morris’s *Earthly Paradise*:

it was *The Earthly Paradise* that I read over and over again . . . it seemed to me I was watching the appearance of a new race in my familiar countryside: a race of goddesses, beautiful women and great warriors, all under the low Northern sky, for even the Greek stories unfolded for me in a landscape very like Orkney. (77)

Muir’s reminiscences dated from a period well after initial readers discovered *The Earthly Paradise*, and yet he recalled an experience that would certainly have seemed familiar to many of those readers. The relationship between the text and going out-of-doors, the sense of transference onto the landscape, and the devouring pleasure that caused readings and re-readings, were aspects of the reading experience of *The Earthly Paradise* present from the beginning. Moreover, although *The Earthly Paradise* has since become problematic in the Morris literary canon, such reading experiences are to be found throughout readers’ relationships with Morris’s work. The sense of affinity framing this entire account aligns Muir with a community of Morrisphiles all on record with similar reactions.

The subject, or subjects, of this chapter are accounts like this, by the readers of Morris's texts. We turn to both the records of reading experiences of William Morris's texts in general, and of *The Earthly Paradise* in particular. General accounts are taken from memoirs and memorial essays published in the years after his death, which often outline personal responses to Morris's work. Contemporary recorded reading experiences of *The Earthly Paradise* in letters and diaries also offer a glimpse into the responses of Morris's first readers of the poem, so often assumed to have liked it because it was fashionable or escapist. To expand this picture we shall also consider those aspects of contemporary critics' reviews that deal primarily with the experience of reading the work as distinct from those analytical and critical elements of the reviews.

Moreover, this chapter considers these questions as well from within the text itself. This inclusion is necessary because *The Earthly Paradise* is itself a work that is replete with audience, with readers, with listeners, storytellers and writers of tales. In order to consider the contemporary reading experiences of Morris's poem, I read them alongside the representation, in *The Earthly Paradise*, of what amount to an ideal reading experience. Morris's account, I argue, engages with contemporary preoccupations about the relationship between voice and text in contemporary literature, and in particular engages with anxieties about the isolating, market-determined activities of the material book in the nineteenth century. In place of reading practices that are vulnerable to the limitations of solitary reading, but also of the effects of books presented as consumer objects, Morris argues in *The Earthly Paradise* in favour not of oral storytelling or the reading of texts, but rather the discursive activity of a public made up by the interaction between these different forms. This account of a public arising out of the participatory activity recorded in

The Earthly Paradise is also demanded of its readers, and we shall see how records of contemporary reading experiences reflect the sort of engagement Morris describes in his poem.

These endeavours are prompted by the need to re-evaluate certain assumptions modern criticism makes about these first readers, who are now largely assumed to have liked the book because they failed to properly understand it. “His own public liked his poem partially because they misread it” (55), summarises Carole Silver. Fiona MacCarthy speaks of the “failure of Morris’s contemporary readers to grasp [its] desperation” (262). Other critics have found that it provided a distraction, or pandered to its audiences in unchallenging ways. Jeffrey Skoblow describes modern assumptions about contemporary relationships to the work: “it was capable of nourishing the illusions of a wide and varied audience for a short time and . . . has come to assume the status of waste” (2). Herbert Tucker offers a similar interpretation when he writes that “*The Earthly Paradise* is at pains to enlist its reader as a conspirator in its dream, on an individual basis that underwrites the culture of the middle classes,” and that while the poem “came from deep in the cultural thesaurus of myths, [it] nonetheless spoke a pleasantly accented version of a tongue Victorian readers already knew” (*Epic* 430-431). This argument suggests readers liked the book because it was gentle on them, and was merely reaffirming of a series of self-satisfied assumptions those readers had about their place in the world. These pronouncements assume *The Earthly Paradise* shared with its readers a blindered view of the world and was popular for that reason.

Because they have been the object of such speculation, this project is interested in what can be recovered about the reading experiences of actual readers of Morris’s text. Jonathan Rose warns against what he calls the “receptive fallacy” in

trying to “discern the messages a text transmits to an audience by examining the text rather than the audience” (4). Certainly the examination of a text can tell us much about possible readings, about ideal readings, and about potentialities, and this chapter includes a study of the text of *The Earthly Paradise* itself. As Rose reminds us, however, it will not do to imagine these interpretations stand in for the activity of reading as it happens for the people holding—or listening to—the volume. Often, readers are creatures speculated about by literary critics as passive or manipulated, reactive or indoctrinated receivers of texts, while the texts themselves are analysed, critiqued, read, and re-read by critics in order to determine (among many other things) what they did to readers. The latter approaches are important, but risk failing to take into account the rich detail of, for example, something like Muir’s testimony. The unlikelihood of the three pennies, Muir’s brother’s decision to give them to him—and his brother’s subsequent reaction, which was to be confused and slightly hurt to see the money spent on something as boring as books—the limitations of the local Orcadian bookseller, the accessibility of the penny-poet editions, the history of those editions, the other texts Muir bought, and the location of the consumption (and re-consumption) of the text under a “low Northern sky” (77): these are all details that have much to say about how Muir encountered *The Earthly Paradise*. Attention to such details reminds us, as well, that reading is a dynamic, real-world activity, and that readers interact with larger contexts, and invite texts to participate in their experience of the world.

In considering memoirs, diaries, letters, and reminiscences of all kinds that make up a diffuse record of readers’ reading experiences, we can come to better understand not just texts, but how these texts are read. For example, the large scale project *The Reading Experience Database* is collecting, through a network of

volunteers, a database of just that: reading experiences. Accounts previously published and unpublished are being gathered in a searchable database in order that we might learn, for example, what A. E. Houseman thought when he first read Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* at age 8, or what books the seventh Earl Beauchamp read to his young daughters during the first World War.

Examining an audience, however, is a notoriously difficult activity.⁶ As many reception theorists have noted, audiences are not always unified or singular things. An examination of *The Reading Experience Database* reveals both the possibilities and the inherent limitations of this kind of project. The majority of reading experiences collected are those of writers, artists, public intellectuals and other public figures. A reading experience leaves no trace unless the reader chooses to record one, and those likely to do so and further, of those the ones likely to be preserved for posterity, are overwhelmingly the records of the well-known. This presents inevitable biases, and potentially privileges an educated, studied response. Nevertheless, works such as Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working-Class*, Jane Purvis's *Hard Lessons* and Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader* have all gone far in demonstrating just how much can be recuperated of the reading experiences, and the reading lives, of more culturally marginalized groups.

Edwin Muir spent a penny on an abridged *Earthly Paradise* during his childhood at the turn of the last century. Glaswegian socialist John Bruce Glasier, who spent his late nineteenth-century childhood herding sheep, recalled looking for *The Earthly Paradise* at the public library in Glasgow, but having to settle for *Love is*

⁶ See, for example Kate Ablow, ed. *The Feeling of Reading*; Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity*; Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray. *A Companion to Classical Receptions*. Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 2008.

Enough, the only text of Morris's they had (Glasier 18). In *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, Jonathan Rose recounts the reading history of A. E. Coppard, "a laundrywoman's son who grew up in dire poverty" in the late 1800s, who used money he won as a runner to buy, among other books, *The Earthly Paradise* (Rose 420). Morris's poem, before it fell from grace, proliferated in a series of editions and abridgements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and as it became more readily available, it became a part of the reading life of a much more diverse group. As we shall see, however, this is not the reception story during the mid-century period of the poem's first publication that is this project's focus, and so this study does not address any specific discussion of the rich tradition of affiliation between William Morris and the reading lives of the members of the working classes.

To the extent that this project does address reading experiences beyond the initial period of publication of *The Earthly Paradise*, it is interested in the recurring sense amongst readers of a feeling of deep familiarity of the sort that marks Muir's reaction to Morris's text. *The Feeling of Reading*, edited by Kate Ablow, is one recent contribution that calls attention to a burgeoning interest in considering readers—in her case Victorian readers—and what they might have thought about what they were reading. *The Feeling of Reading* "ask[s] both how we can construct the alien historical circumstances of Victorian reading *and* how those distant reading experiences are restaged in attentive acts of reading in the present" (4, emphasis in the original). Of particular interest for Ablow and her contributors is constructing this reading experience as precisely an experience, which is to say affective, sensual, and emotional. Ablow highlights a developing approach that privileges the affective qualities of a reading experience, considering the reading moment as one that is not solely, or even primarily, intellectual, but rather experiential. She draws a distinction

between interpreting and feeling (4), conceiving of these as two different but complementary ways of engaging with a text.

This approach is more obviously suited to some texts than others. Muir's conception of the poem as "unfolding" for him in an Orcadian landscape demonstrates the urge, when reading Morris, to personalize the experience, to make it intimate, to bring it close. Ablow's model, with its emphasis on experiential reading, is helpful for coming to better understand the role of affective intimacy in Morris's writing, so often noted by Morris's friends, his biographers, and his critics. In the records of memoirists, biographies, and literary fans famous in their own right—W.B. Yeats and C. S. Lewis, for example—they describe their experiences of reading Morris in quasi-spiritual language. They often write of subjective affinities, which they couple with discussions of his comprehensive 'vision.' The result is a program of experience that is at once intimate and expansive. Through this unrooted subjectivity, the sense of connection is strong, but not always clear. This opens the field of appropriations and affinities and paves the way for the extent to which Morris, in the twentieth century, is at the centre of a series of debates in which he seems available as the banner under which to launch ideological, political, and aesthetic campaigns, and as a way for people to take stock of their own place in those campaigns.

Between the general account of Morrisean reading experiences and the more specific discussion of the contemporary reception of *The Earthly Paradise*, I consider a more figurative use of the phrase "reading Morris." I shall ask what it means to read Morris as himself a character in the story of his life as it is told in a biographical tradition that begins with John Mackail's *Life* and ends, at the moment, with Fiona MacCarthy's *William Morris: A Life for our Time*, the most recent addition to the biographical canon. Morris the public figure has long captured the imagination of his

readers, as well as the consumers of his other art forms. As we shall see in the records of reading experiences, his personal strength, his vision, the inspiration of his life as a model, are all enduring elements in our experience of William Morris. Our interactions with the character, however, come to us mediated through the large body of texts that speculate about the larger-than-life character that is William Morris.

The question I pose in this interruptive middle section is what happens when the problem of *The Earthly Paradise*, the seemingly middle-class, escapist, decadent text of Morris's urban years, must be accounted for in the telling of the larger story of Morris's life? Through a reading of both the biographical legacy of the critical literature of *The Earthly Paradise*, and the biographies themselves, I demonstrate that in the representations of this period, biographers frame the author of *The Earthly Paradise* in terms of his involvement with an urban middle-class existence introduced as a disappointment and a compromise after the bohemian, holistic, visionary energy of the Red House years. In the process, through a reading of the turmoil of Morris's private life, conflated with the loss of this more authentic, ennobling version of Morris represented by the Red House years, the poem itself becomes the work of a heartsick, private man. In this reading of the poem, Morris's expansive, visionary, outward strength is cut off from the private negotiation of weakness.

1. READING MORRIS

'the real Morris belongs to us'

In June 2013 The Venice Biennale featured a painting by British artist Jeremy Deller called *We Sit Starving Amidst our Gold*. It depicts a larger-than-life William Morris angrily hurling the luxury yacht of the exorbitantly wealthy tycoon Roman Abramovich. This is only the latest example of the ways in which the public image of

William Morris continues to be available to stand in for our disgust, or our hope, or our conviction. There are very few other figures that could have replaced William Morris in this painting, and it is a telling demonstration of the desire to look to Morris and the Morrisean persona to represent convictions about the problems of society, to perform a model for the good life, and to be seemingly available to endorse certain types of anger, hope, or conviction about the present and the future.

Such identifications are not without their conflicts. After the death of Tennyson in 1892, Morris was informally approached, with the approval of Gladstone, to gauge his interest in the Laureateship. Morris has only two years earlier, in *News from Nowhere*, located Nowhere's city dump in the Houses of Parliament, and was fond of referring to Queen Victoria as "the widow Guelph" (*Letters* I: 403) among less kind monikers; he was, predictably, not interested. Meanwhile, much of the early twentieth century saw Marxists and Socialists fighting for ownership of the symbolic and cultural capital of Morris, with each camp insisting his political convictions made him one of them.⁷ In the mid 1990s Tony Blair cited Morris as one of the role models for what he called the active community, in his vision for a "New Britain" (Blair 238-239). Morris's example has been cited by designers of various stripes, by environmentalists, by revolutionary Marxists and by establishment politicians. That these interpellations never sit quite flush with the historical character that is William Morris is surely a problem faced to some degree by all public figures. The case of Morris, however, is a particularly potent one.

⁷ There are many interventions into this discussion. Paul Meier's two volume *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer* offers an exhaustive and impressive reading of Morris as a Marxist, while Michelle Weinroth's *Reclaiming William Morris: Englishness, Sublimity, & The Rhetoric of Dissent* discusses the battle, in the 1930s, between various political factions for the right to Morris's symbolic capital.

This potency is related to the ways in which Morrisphiles identify with him. In a tribute on the occasion of the centennial of Morris's birth, Hugh Walpole wrote: "I look back and see him shaking his fist at us, shouting at us to clear the deck—then laughing at us, with us—because he is one of us" (*Appreciations* 35). In a work published that same year, in 1934, called *William Morris: A Vindication*, Marxist Robin Page Arnot looked to reclaim Morris's legacy from the socialism of the Labour Part. The short pamphlet ended with a battle cry: "it is high time that the Morris myth was destroyed; for the real Morris belongs to us" (31). These components of Morris's public legacy: his availability to represent a position on another's behalf, and the sense of personal affiliation, and even ownership, combine in powerful ways.

In his *Autobiographies*, W. B. Yeats gives voice to the personal relationship many readers imagine they have with Morris:

It was now Morris himself that stirred my interest, and I took to him first because of some little tricks of speech and body that reminded me of my grandfather in Sligo, but soon discovered his spontaneity and joy that made him my chief among men. To-day I do not set his poetry very high, but for an odd and altogether wonderful line, or thought; and yet, if some angel offered me the choice, I would choose to live his life, poetry and all, rather than my own or any other man's. (131-132)

This passage contains much that is common in William Morris's reception.

Yeats's choice of the verb 'stir' introduces the recurrence of physical, emotional responses, while his emphasis on Morris *himself* identifies the extent to which the dynamism of Morris as a figure is so bound up in the reception of his work.

Yeats's association of Morris with his own grandfather, and his reference to him as "chief" typifies a tradition of discussing Morris as a sage and leader. Even Yeats's dismissive "today I do not set his poetry very high" is a common enough refrain amongst even Morris's most ardent supporters. Morris's reputation, to these supporters, is impervious to their own critiques, and their praise is often

undercut with these acknowledgements. Taken together, these remarks illustrate the ways interest in Morris is so often a personal, felt phenomenon. What draws people to him is his ability, authenticated by the feeling of kinship, and an ineffable atavistic sense of connection over and above his writing, to offer a model for the good life.

Yeats's confession that he would live Morris's life above any other man's, and the incidental insertion of "poetry and all" into the vision of that life suggests that Morris's personality is at the heart of readers' experiences of him. Arthur Compton-Rickett's 1913 work on Morris, called *William Morris: Poet, Craftsman, Social Reformer* takes as its subtitle *A Study in Personality*. In the years after his death, a number of these works were written by writers who had often, to varying degrees, known him personally. These works included John Drinkwater's *William Morris: A Critical Study*, John Bruce Glasier's *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*, Holbrook Jackson's *William Morris: Socialist Craftsman*, and James Leatham's *William Morris: Master of Many Crafts*. There were also a number of essays, including R. B. Cunninghame Graham's recollection of Morris's funeral in "With the North-West Wind," W. B. Yeats's "The Happiest Poet," and George Bernard Shaw's (somewhat gossipy) "Morris as I Knew Him," an essay in May Morris's *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*. They blended literary criticism with personal recollection, and often sought to get down on paper a sense of the large personality of the man. This desire to conflate man and work, and to enjoy the work through the man, and *vice versa* continued through the century. In 1979, Roderick Marshall, a twentieth-century tenant of Kelmscott Manor, published a book called *William Morris and his Earthly Paradises*. In the book he criticized Morris's many biographers for their

“treatments of Morris in terms of a single art or a dozen, or of all the facts verified and unverified” (xii). These approaches “leave him without a centre, without coherence or true humanity. Marooned among a thousand facts, he seems to shrink rather than grow” (xii-xiii).

R. B. Cunninghame Graham, in an introduction to one of the early Morris memoirs, goes so far as to suggest that appreciation of Morris requires the sense of a personal bond: “there was something so simple and direct, so faith-inspiring and whole-sided about him, that all his verse and his many-sided life seem to me incomplete unless one knew him and had *felt* his charm” (*Poet, Craftsman* xii). Here Morris’s power can only be described through the vocabulary of affect; it is a series of feelings, rather than thoughts. John Drinkwater makes the same point in reference to the impetus behind Morris’s decorating work: “it is only when we have been into a house where everything is beautiful that we can understand the precise aim that caused Morris to become a manufacturer,” he writes. “There is an enchantment about such a dwelling-place that cannot be described, an atmosphere of health and completeness that must be experienced to be understood” (87). James Leatham puts it succinctly: “as Morris usually had a theory and a reason regarding everything about him, one could not help being interested in everything he used or wore” (70). The theoretical compels the personal, and a sense of shared interiority precludes either criticism or argument. The shift in ultimate authority from “theory and reason” to feeling and believing intensifies the convictions of the Morrisphile. Yeats valued Morris in spite of the poetry; C. S. Lewis introduces his essay with an anecdote about a friend who “could come no nearer to an explanation of Morris’s charm than to repeat ‘It’s the Northernness—the Northernness’” (37). Locating Morris’s power and his meaning outside the sphere

of rational justification in turn serves as its own justification for circumventing particulars. Taken whole, he becomes his own best argument.

Morris's attraction has often circumnavigated precise articulation, and has done so from the contemporary reception of *The Earthly Paradise*, during which reviewers struggled to locate their impressions in the particulars of the text, often commenting that it would be useless to provide an exemplar of their point through a few choice lines, because no such exemplar exists. Instead, the poem is, as Pater puts it, "water to bathe and swim in" (309). It would be difficult to convey, by means of extracts," explained an anonymous writer in *The London Review*, "any part of the impression produced by this book" ("Earthly Paradise: Part I" 545). *Blackwood's*, in trying to describe "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," admitted, "how well he tells her story no extracts can show" (Hasell 72), while *The London Quarterly Review* (Jan 1869) complained, "so smoothly do the charmed waters flow, that it is hard to find some little break whence we may dip for our reader's pleasure" ("Life and Death of Jason" 509). Nineteenth-century periodicals as a matter of course included long sections of text or verse in their literary reviews, and so their struggle here is worth mentioning for its irregularity.

This difficulty with discovering Morris in the particulars of his poetry continues after his death. Compton-Rickett remarks that "there are singularly few memorable lines in Morris's copious verse; and the one most quoted—the 'idle singer of an empty day'—has in reality little of the true Morris flavour about it" (77). As with Morris's first critics, he instead suggests that, "the distinguishing quality of Morris's poetry is its atmospheric charm" (77). John Drinkwater observes that Morris's poetry is marked by "a pervasive mood rather than a series of isolated impressions" (27). The difficulties of dissection have an element of the secrets of the

elect in them. Through their insistence on a feeling that they cannot point to in the particulars of a line, critics rely on audiences to feel for themselves something they can only promise is there, but cannot identify in any one place. The feeling acts as a shibboleth, and successfully finding it for oneself confirms a membership in a community.

The atmospheric power of Morris's poetry, and his personal compulsion towards a faith, to use Cunninghame Graham's language, balances the intimacy of felt connections with the expansiveness of a revolutionary vision. Drinkwater remarks that in Morris's writing, landscapes and people are described only with a "few casual strokes of suggestion" that "by their very assurance and implication of knowledge, both on the part of the poet and of his reader, carry conviction" (26). What this means, for Drinkwater, is that Morris's audiences are always at home, and therefore in a position in which it is possible to be swayed by his vision: "we never feel ourselves to be in strange surroundings or listening to strange men," he argues, "and it is this privilege of close association with the world of the poet's fashioning that enables us to realize how accessible is that larger and clearer life of which he sings"(26). How commentators on Morris understand his power in these passages is very personal, and yet this sense must be paired with this vision, which is equally noteworthy to his readers. As Drinkwater describes it, we are swayed to Morris's larger arguments by having put at ease, and made to feel included.

Holbrook Jackson's *William Morris: Socialist Craftsman* argues that

The position occupied by William Morris among the great men of the last century was that of one who accepted the intimation of an inner vision of beauty and used it as a challenge to the triumphant ugliness of the day. By that vision he threw down the age, and ever afterwards carried on a kind of holy warfare in favour of joy and beauty. (26)

Here Jackson imagines this vision as its own weapon, and the means by which Morris achieves greatness. If most ‘great men’ are in possession of visions, there is something singular about the extent to which writers on Morris fall back on its power to understand him. In her introduction, MacCarthy begins with his vision. “His largeness of vision is the key to it,” she writes; “Morris was his own emblem of wholeness” (vii). This is a common refrain when Morris commentators are pressed to describe him. Encompassing as it does an entire “hatred of modern civilization” and a profound desire not for reform, but for revolution, Morris’s vision is a large one, and the intimate, subjective responses audiences record take this on as well. The Walthamstow Antiquarian Society, in honour of the centenary of Morris’s birth, published a volume called *Appreciations*, which was a series of short musings by famous men and women on Morris’s continuing power. The contributors frequently make use of a vocabulary of vision. Frances Evelyn, Countess of Warwick, called Morris “a seer” who “gave us a Pisgah sight of the promised land” (36); A. Compton-Rickett, quoting Wilfred Scawen Blunt wrote, “he had a larger outlook on the world than any of the Pre-Raphaelite group” (15). Gordon Bottomley wrote that he “foresaw the pit into which the Industrial Revolution was going to lead us” (12), and Sir Reginald Blomfield called him “one of those rare men of genius who . . . are faithful to their vision to the end” (8).

Morris’s vision and his wholeness are two aspects of the same unified expansiveness, which no one is quite able to locate within his work itself, but instead through these affinities by which his writing authenticates itself. His verse requires the paratext of his vision. Through its help, it is possible to disregard shortcomings, analysis and meanings, and yet still draw inspiration from Morris’s undiminished power. Hence the prevalence of comments such as “we do not go to

Morris to have our minds stretched, but to have them cleansed as receptacles for literary experience” (Tillotson 14) or “he may not have been, indeed he was not, among the very greatest of the poets, but he was among the greatest of those who prepare the last reconciliation when the Cross shall blossom with roses” (Yeats “Happiest” 64), or “there are many writers greater than Morris. You can go on from him to all sorts of subtleties, delicacies, and sublimities which he lacks. But you can hardly go behind him” (Lewis 55). In these assessments, Morris was foundational, essential and necessary, and it is for this reason that we read him; the reputation, however, preceded the work, and was its justification.

The Case of *The Earthly Paradise*

It is with a sense of the value of Morris’s holistic vision, and the affective power of his persona that we consider the case of *The Earthly Paradise*, because this era is one when the narrative of the public persona of William Morris, as it is available for mobilization as discussed above, stumbles. Before this project turns to the contemporary reception of the poem, and to the text itself, it is worthwhile to trace the intertwined fortunes, in the twentieth century and beyond, of *The Earthly Paradise* and the public representations of its author. Such a reading demonstrates the ways in which *The Earthly Paradise* exists as a special case, and as a hermeneutic challenge, within Morrisean scholarship.

A reading of the ways in which both critics and biographers have framed the story of the period of the composition and publication of *The Earthly Paradise*, roughly between 1865 and 1870, is revealing. The poem’s seemingly escapist aesthetics in the work, and his association with modern consumerist London during this same period, are difficult to reconcile with the larger readings

of Morris. Because Morris's hatred for that world is such an intrinsic aspect of the larger story of Morris's life, when dealing with the years of *The Earthly Paradise*, biographers—and indeed many twentieth century critics—have felt compelled to explain, contain, and, to a certain extent, disregard the poem. To do so, Morris is positioned as heartsick and figuratively homeless, a characterization tacitly contrasted with the bohemian hospitality with which they characterize the immediately preceding Red House years.

Moreover, if this is an era that poses some problems in the construction of the narrative of Morris's life, *The Earthly Paradise* itself is read as symptomatic in a diagnosis of a floundering man. In the process, Morris is disassociated from his own poetry. While locating middle-class, male virtues in his role as poet, the constructed narrative of this era alienates the content of *The Earthly Paradise*, interpreting the poem in terms of despair, secrecy, languor and illness, all phenomena that contradict and challenge the simultaneous portrait of Morris as the healthy, hard-working, objective middle-class businessman. The result is a hermeneutics of containment as biographers are able to effectively quarantine two problematic elements of the Morris biography—his authorship of a poem now fallen out of favour, and his commercial endeavors in London.

Critics are still dealing with a legacy of *Earthly Paradise* criticism that is often biographical, and which finds its origins in a prompt from Morris's first biography, written by J.W. Mackail, the son-in-law of Morris's best friend, Edward Burne-Jones. In his discussion of *The Earthly Paradise*, Mackail makes tactful (but also titillating) reference to an "autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself" (210). Mackail is referring to the poem's lyric interludes which are intimate, melancholy and obliquely confessional, and have always been read as

spoken by the author himself, an interpretation the narrative voice of the poem encourages. The tacit connection Mackail makes here is between these lyrics and the turmoil of Morris's personal life during this period. Janey Morris,⁸ by most accounts, had never been in love with her husband, whose attentions perhaps seemed to a stablehand's daughter an unlikely opportunity to make a 'good match,' although maybe not a romantic one. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, on the other hand, the wild painter and poet who saw her first, captured Mrs. Morris's interest in a way Morris never had, so the story goes, and the period of the writing of *The Earthly Paradise* coincided with the solidification of Janey and Rossetti's extra-marital affair, condoned by Morris himself, which culminated in Rossetti and Morris taking out a joint lease on Kelmscott manor in 1871 so that the lovers might live together without scandal. It is not without excellent reason that Burne-Jones called this period, in a private letter, "the stormy years of *The Earthly Paradise*" (qtd in MacCarthy 249).

Morris's loss of Janey to Rossetti becomes a defining feature of the period, and one that leaves its mark everywhere. Carole Silver's *The Romance of William Morris* summarizes this biographical approach as it makes links between Morris's personal tragedies and his work:

In despair [Morris] sought to deal with the question of how much fate or its agent, the force of change, intervened in the lives of men, and to ascertain how men could best endure it. More than half in love with easeful death, he confronted his desire for and fear of it directly, through his journeys to Iceland and—symbolically—by exorcising his emotions through the writing of poetry. (79-80)

Reading the creative catalyst of *The Earthly Paradise* as profound despair, Silver locates both the symptoms and the cure in Morris's working out of the concept of

⁸ For a biography of Janey Morris, see Jan Marsh: *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story: 1839-1938*. London: Pandora, 1986.

human unhappiness in the verses of his poem. Charlotte Oberg reads the poem similarly, and adopts the strategy of dividing Morris in two:

Morris, however stoically he was finally able to face his unsatisfactory home marital relationship and deal with the social inequities and idiocies he saw on all sides, must have learned the hard way, like the wanderers and the idle singer, to reconcile himself to his own fate. (171)

The stalwart “bluff extrovert”(110), as E. P. Thompson has described characterisations of Morris, is placed alongside the reflective, sorrowful thinker discernible through the poem. Through these sketches critics, as Oberg demonstrates here, identify Morris’s battles in his own life not only with the narrative voice of the idle singer, but also with the perils of the heroes, and most of all with the listless, searching, foiled wanderers of the poem. As a result of this identification, Morris’s role as creator is, in complicated and fundamental ways, bound up with a sense of Morris as representative, also, of the audience. By conceiving of Morris’s personal pain so radically as the impetus of the poem, Morris becomes the subject and also the target auditor of his own work, fundamentally reducing its scope. Silver’s suggestion that Morris “exorcis[ed]” his personal demons in the writing of *The Earthly Paradise* also comes dangerously close to presenting the work as a vanity project, or else as a private one, thereby negating its public orientation and, in some important ways, its status as art at all.

In the process of this conflation of Morris and his poem, Morris as author is imagined to succumb to the same despair to which the characters of *The Earthly Paradise* do, blurring the lines between the characters of his poem and himself as its creator. As they approach the poem biographically, critics are divided as to whether or not the despair driving the work is a help or a hindrance. Nevertheless, it is a feature that profoundly links the Wanderers and Morris himself. Unlike Carole Silver’s straightforward account in which Morris works through the issues of his personal life

in his popular poem, or Oberg's account, which is willing to argue that Morris at least learns the same lessons his Wanderers learn, Amanda Hodgson, in *The Romances of William Morris*, is occasionally less optimistic about the creative possibilities of this much touted despair. Nevertheless, she identifies it as a defining and personal quality in the work: "some of the stories seem to slide to a halt under the weight of their own languor and melancholy. Morris's feeling that he could create little of value in literature . . . is in danger of causing him to give up altogether" (81). The poem here suffers under the effects of its own mood, and Morris's personal emotional involvement in its verses is stultifying.

Blue Calhoun, in *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris*, describes him during the period of *The Earthly Paradise* as "between two worlds"—which is to say his home at Red House and London—and "hardly a happy man" (29). Again, this characterization mirrors the Wanderers' own unhappy, searching homelessness. Yet it is precisely this unhappy liminality, in Calhoun's view, which allows him to write: "painfully removed from a setting that epitomized romantic idealism and surrounded by the civilization he was irrevocably committed to, he could begin the process of evaluative contrast that would continue for a productive lifetime" (29). This is a sentiment Jeffrey Skoblow shares in *Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, Art*. He observes that it is "appropriate that *The Earthly Paradise* was composed in association with Morris's move back to London—the anti-world of Earthly Paradise (and ghoulish mirror of it), the maw of the production of labour" (24). In the introduction to her new scholarly edition of *The Earthly Paradise*, Florence S. Boos locates the consequences of the Morrises' failing marriage in the text, writing of the "growing incongruence between the emotional burden and narrative context" (13) particularly in the later tales. Like Silver, Oberg, and Calhoun, Boos reads Morris's

thematic preoccupations as explicitly personal, demonstrating “Morris’s desire to find some sustained artistic and ethical purpose in a growing sense of loss” (*Paradise* 13). These readings, excepting perhaps Skoblow’s, frame *The Earthly Paradise* as the work of a poet who is learning, suffering, but who has not found his voice. The conflation of Morris’s emotional state and the atmosphere of the poem is reductive, of course, but it is also potentially dismissive, and is the only one of his works to be read in this way.

Blue Calhoun places William Morris “between [the] two worlds” of London and Red House. This formulation is central to biographical depictions of the period. The discussion of *The Earthly Paradise* often begins with this textual act of un-homing Morris. Red House,⁹ designed and built in collaboration with friends according to medieval principles of function and hospitality, was as if Morris’s living dream, kept full of friends, and nestled in an apple orchard. From here he and his family move to the prosaic, the impersonal, the unmemorable, “rooms at Queen Square.” In these introductions, biographers once again take their cues from John Mackail, who begins his chapter “The Earthly Paradise: 1865-1870,” with a description of Queen Square. Georgiana Burne-Jones is eloquently poignant on the subject of the move:

One of the happiest chapters of our life was closed that year by the sale of Red House. But it had to go, for Morris, having decided in his unflinching way that he must come up and live at his business in London, could not bear to play landlord to the house he loved so well—it must be sold outright and he would never see it again. Nor did he. (294)

Philip Henderson’s terse “Red House was vacated in November. Much of the furniture was judged too heavy to move” (78) is itself dramatically final, and the reference to the abandoned furniture tacitly invokes the pragmatism of the move. Jack

⁹ For an extended discussion of Morris’s red house, which elaborates on MacCarthy’s reading of the space, See Waithe 34-50.

Lindsay combines the loss of Red House with a growing distance between William and Janey Morris, writing, in his characteristic prose: “with the loss of the dream of recreating around himself a medieval world he lost also the love of the woman who had been for him the incarnation of the dream” (138). Esther Meynell is similarly elegiac: “to leave Red House was to go from dream to reality, from fellowship to a fight” (70). These biographers employ the vocabulary of dreams to position Red House implying a cold, prosaic realization in the move away.

Red House is remembered for its bohemian, communal happinesses. “Life at Red House in those years,” writes Mackail, “was indeed realized felicity for the groups of friends to a greater degree than often falls to the lot of schemes deliberately planned for happiness” (158). Meynell calls Red House a “centre of beauty and work and happiness,” and the site “from which the firm has sprung” (68). Jack Lindsay calls it Morris’s “medieval dream” (115). MacCarthy writes of the “deeply symbolic” nature of the house as an “act of separation, the retreat from and defiance of the world” (156). Of Philip Webb and Morris’s teamwork in designing the house, she writes that it was “a building that arose in all its splendor from an unusual rapport, almost from the intuitive closeness between lovers” (156). Finally, she refers to its “extreme visual integrity, a flow of living-spaces, a sense of human scale and human possibilities” concluding “it is a building that inspires and enfolds” (161).¹⁰ This language positions Red House as part of Morris’s identity, and also of his powers. As we shall see, in their descriptions of *The Earthly Paradise* years, Morris is given no such space to draw on.

To May Morris, her “memory of Queen Square days” is “less a far-off

¹⁰ On my own visit to Red House in 2010, I was approached by different strangers in three separate rooms, all eager to share their thoughts and enjoyment with me, as a fellow visitor to the house. This is certainly the only National Trust property where I have been thus invited to participate in other visitors’ enthusiasm.

dream than those curious bright pictures of Red House days” (*CW* Vol III xxiv). Georgiana Burne-Jones writes, “some of us saw [Red House] for years afterwards as one does a house known in childhood” (*Memorials* 294). Both of these reminiscences see Red House through the powerful lens of nostalgia, painfully close, yet simultaneously “far-off.” Georgiana Burne-Jones’s use of “us” to speak of dreams and childhood is a telling choice of pronoun, and it is evidence of Red House’s powerful intimacy—in remembering it, she shares dreams and an imagined childhood with the community Red House is seen to have fostered.

Biographers’ interpretations of Red House’s communal intimacy are part of what clarifies the depiction of Morris as a middle-class, urban businessman during *The Earthly Paradise* years, as biographers use the Red House version of Morris as a foil to the London version of the same man. In the presentation of the Red House years, biographers return to the same store of intimate anecdotes. The description of Jenny Morris’s christening, during which mattresses were strewn about the sitting room to accommodate all the assembled guests, is a representative recollection, as are any number of stories about baiting and teasing Morris himself. To Morris’s motto “If I can,” painted above the mantle, Rossetti added “as I can’t.” The Red House set—variously made up of the Burne-Joneses, Faulkner, Rossetti, Madox-Brown, Swinburne and others, set candlesticks on top of doors to fall on Morris as he entered then room, and would ignore him at his own dinner table, or else communicate with him only through Janey, hoping to bait him into one of his infamous tantrums.

Philip Henderson’s description is representative of the tone here:

They used to send Morris to Coventry at his own dinner table and refuse to speak to him, all becoming helpless with laughter. After dark there were games of hide-and-seek all over the house, or they sang old English songs round the piano. Good cheer flowed in abundance. ‘It was the most

beautiful sight', says one of his friends, 'to see Morris coming up from the cellar before dinner, beaming with joy, with his hands full of bottles of wine and others tucked under his arms.' Janey at Red House became a regular tomboy. There is a story of Morris sitting on a stool in front of the fire and someone coming up and slapping him hard behind. 'Don't do it, Janey!' he said, without looking round. Or they would play upon Morris's fear of getting fat and put a tuck in his waistcoat during the night. 'You fellows have been at it again', he would remark good humouredly next morning. (62-63)

These informal antics are a far cry from the Victorian domestic life of London, with its at-home cards, servant led meals, and guests discretely welcomed into suitable guest bedrooms. The cozy, happy intimacy of these passages is enveloping, it is almost the playing out of a fantasy of hospitality and felicity. The descriptions of the loss of this idyll set up the introduction of the Morris of *The Earthly Paradise* who, from the beginning, is characterized as an urban man who has compromised his rural paradise for the demands of money.¹¹

If depictions of the Red House years are intimately welcoming of readers into the imagined space of the house and its fellowship, the era of *The Earthly Paradise* is represented in biographies through a series of closed off or curtailed domestic spaces, catapulting Morris into the public world of London, its shops, and its streets. Although both Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. and *The Earthly Paradise* were begun prior to the move back to London, there is a distinct life shift in this move that organizes biographers' descriptions of the Red House days as something less suited to the discussions of either of these events. The move from

¹¹ If Red House was a beautiful and welcoming house, full of creative energy and fellowship, the era that takes its name was certainly not without tragedy and hardship. Morris was seriously ill with rheumatoid fever during the Red House years, the Burne-Joneses lost an infant son, and Georgiana herself was quite ill with Scarlet fever. Lizzie Siddal, a visitor to Red House and intimate of the circle, also died during those years. Nor was the Morris of that era entirely inward and rural. The Firm's inception at Red House was likely more professionally oriented than the narrative suggests, and whilst living at Red House, Morris continued to commute to and from London.

Red House—bohemian, communal and nurturing—to London—bourgeois, isolating, and difficult—a move made in favour of the interests of the Firm, marks a shift in the figure of Morris as he becomes more professionalized and more middle-class in the recollections of these years. The escalations in the public obligations of Morris include, of course, the publication of *The Earthly Paradise*, but also the increased success of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. The poem itself is read in this context, and through this frame. Lindsay writes that “the great success of [*The Earthly Paradise*] came from the extent to which it appealed to almost every section of the bourgeois public” (148); Thompson, from the first paragraph of his chapter on the poem, positions it in relation to the “Victorian middle-class public” (110), while Faulkner argues that the poem’s popularity was “due largely to its providing inoffensive pleasure to its middle-class readers” (*Against* 58). The unease that more recent biographers have for *The Earthly Paradise* is inextricable from its portrayal as, ultimately, a poem enjoyed by bourgeois philistines, and there is a tacit identification between the fashionable middle-class public that so enjoyed the poem, and its author.

Philip Henderson’s montage of anecdotes of chaotic frivolity and high spirits is typical of biographical accounts of the Red House days. Henry James’s letter to his sister, recounting an evening visit with the Morrises in London, demonstrates the symbolic difference between the two eras. Biographers are fond of quoting it, often in full, as I do here:

Oh ma chère, such a wife! *Je n’en reviens pas!*—she haunts me still. A figure cut out of a missal—one of Rossetti’s or Hunt’s pictures—to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It’s hard to say whether she’s a grand synthesis of all pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made—or they a keen analysis of her—whether she’s an original or a copy. In either case she’s a wonder . . . There was something very quaint and remote from actual life, it seemed to me, in the whole scene: Morris

reading in his flowing antique numbers a legend of prodigies and terrors (the story of Bellerophon, it was), around us all the picturesque bric-a-brac of the apartment (every article of furniture literally a 'specimen' of something or other,) and in the corner this dark silent medieval woman with her medieval toothache. Morris himself is extremely pleasant and quite different from his wife. He impressed me most agreeably. He is short, burly, corpulent, very careless and unfinished in his dress, and looks a little like B. G. Hosmer, if you can imagine B. G. infinitely magnified and fortified. He has a very loud voice and a nervous restless manner and a perfectly unaffected and business-like address. His talk indeed is wonderful and to the point and remarkable for clear good sense. He said no one thing that I remember, but I was struck with the very good judgment shown in everything he uttered. He's an extraordinary example, in short, of a delicate sensitive genius and taste, saved by a perfectly healthy body and temper. All his designs are quite as good (or rather nearly so) as his poetry: altogether it was a long and rather rich sort of visit, with a strong peculiar flavour all its own. (qtd in MacCarthy 229-230)

The domestic space is here privatized, and out of reach. Unlike the Red House accounts, which are intimately inclusive of their readers, the *Earthly Paradise* accounts keep Morris at arm's length. In place of the intimate Red House description of a raucous, good natured Morris, and mischievous Janey, here are commodified versions of the Morrises. The sense of access is feigned, as they demonstrate, to James, not the easy teasing of the Red House portraits, but instead postures of the most satisfying fulfillment of the promise of their public images. In James's account both Janey and Morris are consumable, rather than productive players in the scene, and they occupy the letter like a tableau from a lifestyle catalogue. Janey lounges, she is not, as she is in Henderson's description, an active member of the group. She has become the Pre-Raphaelite version of the retiring woman. Morris reads from his work, but it is work already completed, and he is performing a set piece, not dynamically engaged in the production of art. It is a fascinating and evocative letter, but as a primary source for biographers, it offers an opportunity to highlight symbolic differences between Red House Morris and London Morris.

The newly urbanized Morris is newly energized as well, a detail that encourages a reading of Morris as somehow culpable or at least suited to London. Mackail wonders if Morris was not simply too content to write at Red House (166), a speculation that positions these London years as postlapsarian. “In spite of all the depressions caused by his loss of the country, and by the crowded squalor of the district immediately adjoining this end of Bloomsbury, he felt ‘as if he could kiss the London pavement’” (177) writes Mackail. MacCarthy calls it a “definite return to the great city” (197). Lindsay attributes Morris’s return to writing to the move (138), and Grey writes, “the work did not seem to go very well at Red House” (97). Mackail and MacCarthy both cite the opportunity for writing in the time no longer devoted to a daily several-hour commute between London and Bexley Heath (Mackail 177; MacCarthy 200). The tension between these two Morrises, the one living the Morrisean ideal at Red House, and the other demonstrating Morrisean productivity, and their seeming inability to co-exist, sits uneasily with the idealized picture set up by biographers, so that London Morris is from the beginning a creature of pragmatic compromise, and so a moment of disappointment in our experience of the narrative of his life. If his move from Red House symbolizes the loss of a dream, Morris is held responsible for the loss.

Although Morris had already begun work on *The Earthly Paradise* before the move to London (MacCarthy 199), like the contemporary critics of the poem, biographical representations of this period of transition contextualize the composition of and inspiration for *The Earthly Paradise* in the space of the city. MacCarthy writes of a “movement outwards” (214) in the Morrises’ lives, which meant, for example, that the Morris children rode rented donkeys on Hampstead Heath, as they no longer kept the stables they had in the country. May Morris

writes of her garden at Queen Square as a “place where one could be in two worlds at once”: “the wilderness of one’s own fashioning” within the garden walls and, “the other world, where people walked busily over the pavement” (*CW* III: xxv). Biographers describe the Morrises’ life during these years as one that interacted a great deal with the space of the city, with its houses, its people and, of course, its society. As May’s recollection suggests, however, this expansion means that the world of the busy pavement was always potentially encroaching on, or at least implicated in, the “wilderness” of the imagination.

Not only was Morris’s private life framed by, and juxtaposed with, a sense of the public world of London, but Morris’s business life also became much more substantial. Alongside the discussion of the composition of *The Earthly Paradise*, biographers include the narration of the rise of the Firm. The move to Queen Square was not only a domestic arrangement, but with the Firm’s storeroom downstairs, it was also a professional one. Biographers struggle to find a way to approach the rise of the Firm in this period, although they read it as implicating him more deeply in the public world of London’s commerce. E. P. Thompson is perfunctory on the subject of the sale of Red House, but he does note the significance of the transition, dating Morris’s sense of a public obligation from the time of the sale, after which “the public significance of the Firm became all-important for Morris” (94). Lindsay writes that “the effort to build, furnish and develop Red House as a centre of a new kind of living is turned into the effort to create and develop the firm, bringing the medieval craft-values to the world in general, but here he is no longer making a love gift, he is . . . trying to find his place in the world of the cash nexus which he despises” (142).

In Arthur Compton-Rickett’s 1913 study, he tells the story of the origins of

Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.:

Dissatisfied with the commercial supply at hand, Morris resolved to make his own furniture. Having satisfied his own artistic feeling, he wished naturally to project his artistic ideals into other places. The commercial side of the case appealed to him very little; Rossetti, on the other hand, with his keen business instinct, saw from the start, money in the concern. Money there certainly was, though Morris put an enormous amount of work and ability into the business for which he neither had (nor desired to have) any substantial financial return. (141)

Compton-Rickett solves the problem of the tawdry moneymaking aspects of the Firm by ascribing them to Rossetti. This narrative is one strategy for dealing with Morris's rise as an entrepreneur, which is one of the central elements, for biographers, of the *Earthly Paradise* years. If Rossetti gets some of the blame for the entrepreneurial energy of those years, another figure consistently appears in accounts of Morris's business activities of the period. Warrington Taylor was the Eton educated man who, prior to being hired as the business manager for the Firm in 1865, had fallen on hard times. Before he started his post at the Firm, he had been a ticket collector at an Opera House. He is a charismatic and enigmatic figure in the narrative of the *Earthly Paradise* era. Taylor remained business manager until his early death from tuberculosis, in 1870. Biographers take their cues here from Mackail and Georgiana Burne-Jones's early statements that Taylor's influence and work were largely responsible for saving Morris, and the firm more generally, from significant debt. Georgiana Burne-Jones summarizes the general impression nicely: "within a few weeks of his appointment the rumour spread amongst us that he was keeping the accounts of the Firm like a dragon, attending to the orders of customers, and actually getting Morris to work at one thing at a time" (291).

In particular, biographers make much of Taylor frequently chastising Morris for living beyond his means. As Morris would sometimes draw capital

from the Firm, his personal excesses fell under Taylor's jurisdiction. Biographers juxtapose a strident, socially conscious Taylor with a feckless, spoiled Morris who is unable to keep his wine consumption down to Taylor's budgeted two and a half bottles a day. MacCarthy, as is often the case, is the most nuanced in her account, telling the story of Taylor's worry, enlisting Webb to supplement his words of caution, which contain suggestions for a series of middle-class retrenchments: keep fewer servants, burn fewer fires at once, reduce wine consumption (MacCarthy 242). Faulkner quotes Taylor's caution to Webb to be professional during the commission to redecorate the rooms at St. James Palace: "just remember," Taylor writes, "we are embezzling the public's money now—what business has any place to be decorated at all?" (qtd in Faulkner 34). MacCarthy describes what she calls Morris's "extraordinary meekness" (242) in the face of these criticisms, writing that at times he sounded "defensive," but that he "received Taylor's diatribes with patience, even gratitude" (242). Lindsay also comments on Morris taking Taylor's criticisms to heart, which he calls "part of a struggle to regain inner balance" (160). These descriptions all represent Morris not as the sensible reformer of later depictions, but instead as a slightly oblivious, slightly spoiled, son of a gentleman. Lindsay and MacCarthy's comments on Morris's reactions in particular make him appear lost, and Lindsay's suggestion of Morris's lack of balance implies that Taylor's more rigorous conscience, work ethic, and sense were the elements missing from Morris himself in this period.

Curiously, E. P. Thompson's biography makes little mention of Taylor. He first appears in a footnote, in which Thompson refers to Taylor's strident epistolary lectures to Morris as offering "an amusing commentary of Morris's qualities (or lack of them), in the financial affairs of the Firm" (Thompson 99n1).

The only two other references are as brief, although Thompson does quote from a note Taylor wrote on an estimate for the decoration of a church, which requested “a silk and gold altar cloth.” The note reads: “in consideration of the fact that the above item is a wholly unnecessary and inexcusable extravagance at a time when thousands of poor people in this so-called Christian community are in want of food—additional charge to that set forth above, ten pounds” (qtd in Thompson 249). Thompson uses this anecdote to illustrate his point that the Firm’s products were coming to represent what he calls “a kind of ostentatious cultivation among a fringe of the upper and middle classes” (249), a fact which Thompson above all mines to discuss Morris’s growing unease, another gesture of disassociation between who Morris would become and who he was during the *Earthly Paradise* years. Perhaps emphasizing Taylor’s more developed implicitly socialist sympathies at this period—indeed this note’s tone sounds strikingly similar to Morris’s later socialist talks—undermines the narrative of Morris’s own socialist awakening by appearing here a decade too soon. Faulkner’s discussion of Taylor is similarly brief, with two mentions, although he offers a glimpse of a man in full possession of a galvanizing social conscience. Thompson and Faulkner are two of the more explicit biographers in terms of offering a teleological account of Morris’s path to socialism, and it is significant that they make such short work of this man where other biographers, MacCarthy, for example, read him as a distilled proto-socialist figure. She writes about “echoes” and “mirroring” between the two men, and uses similar language to describe their confrontational personalities. Taylor rant[s] and rail[s],” he has a “streak of the outrageous,” while Morris “stamp[s] and storm[s]” MacCarthy (209).

Regardless of emphasis, biographers have used Taylor as a foil for Morris

in a way that alienates Morris from future depictions of his public identity. Against Taylor's financial prudence, Morris appears as a novice in business matters. Compared to Taylor's vigilant sense of appropriate expenditure, and his social conscience, Morris gives up the ground of the moral centre. In short, Taylor embodies the mix of a social conscience with business acumen that has otherwise been assigned as a characteristic of Morris in later years. Locating the voice of dissent in Taylor during this period distances the representation of Morris from the concerned labour reformer of subsequent years; he is never more a wealthy man's son, nor more in danger of seeming a dilettante, than in the passages that pit him against Taylor's righteous indignation. Such depictions point to a conflict in the representation of Morris at the helm of the Firm during this period, in which he is both held accountable for "trying to find his place in the cash nexus," as Lindsay describes it, but simultaneously unprofessional.

It is not the aim of this reading to correct the facts of the current narrative of the *Earthly Paradise* years with some attempt at a truer version, but instead to comment on the consequences of the general narrative choices biographers have made. Nevertheless, it is worth considering Charles Harvey and John Press's study of Morris's commercial enterprises, as they offer an alternative account of Morris's business activities during this period. According to them, Taylor's substantive contributions to the Firm's success have been significantly overemphasized. Not only was Taylor, for much of his five-year term, business manager in name only, as he was gravely ill, but according to Harvey and Press, he also specifically advised against measures that would have helped the Firm's development at that time. His proposals were "invariably short-sighted and often wrong-headed" (65). Harvey and Press point out that Taylor mainly urged more

designs for stained-glass, and failed to consider the importance of serial production of the Firm's designs, or of finding new markets—specifically for textiles, wallpapers, and carpets, all markets, they point out, that Morris entered from 1870 onwards, on his own counsel, and which, of course, became the mainstay of the newly reformed Morris & Co.

Harvey and Press uncover a William Morris who, even from the Firm's early days, was business savvy and professional. In the process, they challenge two foundational interpretations of Morris during the era of *The Earthly Paradise*. Many of the biographers make much of the comment that Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company was created in order to furnish the newly built Red House, and as a result treat the origins of the Firm as intimate, mythical, romantic and amateur. In place of this interpretation, Harvey and Press argue for a high level of professionalism from the beginning of the Firm, back in the Red House days. "The degree of forethought and planning shown by the partners in MMF & Co.," they write, "is hardly consistent with feckless amateurism or organizational ineptitude. Nor was there anything casual or lighthearted in the thinking which caused the seven partners to band together in this way" (40). Certainly MMF & Co.'s prospectus, as Harvey and Press argue, indicates a clearly organized and thought out endeavour. Its introduction proclaims a large and ambitious reformist vision: "The growth of Decorative Art in this country . . . owing to the efforts of English Architects, has now reached a point at which it seems desirable that Artists of reputation should devote their time to it" (qtd in Mackail 150). Further, the prospectus promises "that work of all the above classes will be estimated for, and executed in a business-like manner; and it is believed that good decoration, involving rather the luxury of taste than the luxury of costliness, will be found to

be much less expensive than is generally supposed” (qtd in Mackail 152). The Firm had a formal organization and structure, in which partners held shares. They found business premises at Red Lion Square in London, and also received a loan from Morris’s mother. It was a small venture, certainly, but one that from the beginning understood itself as entering the professional world of decoration.

Harvey and Press also complicate the chronology of the Firm’s rise. Although there is no doubt that the Firm began to be successful by the time of Morris’s move back to London, it was not, they argue, until the Firm diversified in the early seventies, and stopped relying so heavily on commissions for ecclesiastical stained-glass—a market which was not really expanding—that the Firm, under Morris’s control, and the new name of Morris & Co., began to flourish, and to take on the identity by which it is now remembered, that is, as a firm predominantly devoted to the rising demand for domestic design, rather than the more limited market of ecclesiastical decoration (Harvey & Press 66).

Although biographers have failed to emphasize the extent to which the Firm was a professional endeavour, they engage with Morris as a businessman in other, more oblique, ways. In particular they interpret Morris’s methodology as just so much hard work and honest effort, so that it becomes part of that project of “finding his place in the world of the cash nexus.” Here Morris simply applies the middle-class work ethic to more rarefied production. Esther Meynell describes, at one point, a gruff, unreflective poet-worker:

The poet of that time . . . was expected to pose, to be peculiar: to be wrapped in Olympian glooms like Tennyson, to droop in a hot-house atmosphere like Swinburne, to be strange and slightly sinister like Dante Gabriel Rossetti. But Morris would have none of this. He took the opposite attitude to a slightly absurd extent when he said with his usual vigour, ‘that talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense. I may tell you flat. There is no such thing; it is a mere matter of craftsmanship’. (77)

Morris is a straightforward, honest poetic labourer. If his tireless work ethic and his gruff manner have otherwise been discussed as attitudes put to use to find new dye forms, or to learn and co-translate the Icelandic sagas, in the case of *The Earthly Paradise* the poem becomes the site where the healthy energy of his drive to work breaks down, so that he is alienated from his own expression, and therefore from his own creative force. Such representations, however, are decidedly at odds with a more fraught history of what is tacitly identified as the secret life of the poem. E. P. Thompson, for example, had begun his treatment of *The Earthly Paradise* by arguing that he was going to correct “the common picture of Morris: of a bluff, straightforward extrovert” (110). Thompson’s correctives, however, pathologize the *Earthly Paradise* years. He saves Morris from accusations of objective simplicity, only to diagnosis him with the malingering illness he calls “despair” (111), and locates its symptoms in *The Earthly Paradise*. Lindsay offers a similar interpretation. He calls *The Earthly Paradise* “a consolation and an encouragement, for all its languors and despairs, if he were going to carry on the firm with all his dedicated zeal and vigour” (142). Meynell’s reading is similarly critical of the poem’s excesses, writing that in the poems there is sometimes “too much beauty, too much love, too much languour, too much everything, so that the soul sickens for plain bread, cold water, and a little cheerfulness” (75).

These interpretations often imagine the despair of the poem to be the result of Morris’s unformed political vision during this period. Thompson offers the following version of the *Earthly Paradise* era 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”

(111). Others, however, read the despair more introspectively. MacCarthy agrees that “those years of *Earthly Paradise* were in a way self-education” that “moved Morris onwards steadily towards his years of action in the form of practical political involvement” (261), but does not seem to read such an antagonistic relationship between the Morris of those later years and the poet of the 1860s. Instead, she argues that in *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris is able to engage with his emotional life in a way that he seems unwilling to do in any other medium (MacCarthy 259-262). Though different in emphasis, these readings share a common gesture of alienating the rest of Morris’s endeavours of this period from the poem for which he gained his fame. Lindsay shares this reading of the poem as the secret narrative of Morris’s private self. He writes that upon leaving Red House for Queen Square, Morris “threw himself into versifying with all the desperation induced by his inability to face the contradictions of his life, the ultimate bearings of the campaign represented by the firm, the fact that Janey was fast being irredeemably lost” (140), while Roderick Marshall in *William Morris and his Earthly Paradises*, writes: “One of Morris’s main reasons for writing *The Earthly Paradise* was to relieve his anguish over failing to hold Jane’s love” (163).

Similarly, Mackail ends his chapter on *The Earthly Paradise*, as we have seen, by rather tantalizingly alluding to “an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself” (210). In these last comments, Mackail meditates on the relationship between the poet of *The Earthly Paradise* and his sympathetic audience:

people who have not this imaginative instinct often wonder how a poet can bear to lay open his inmost feelings, and uncover the weaknesses of which man is made: still oftener the self-revelation passes clean over the heads of his audience, and so far are they from wondering that they do not even

notice. It is the knowledge, no doubt, that all of his innermost heart, his love and hope and sorrow, which he pours into his verses is to the unsympathetic reader simply meaningless, which allows a poet to write fearlessly what, being a poet, he must write in any case. (212)

The “weaknesses of which man is made,” which some biographers receive more sympathetically than others, though most locate that such a strain in the poem, serve to sever it from the man who wrote the poem, a man consistently described, even by these biographers, in terms of manly virtues. He is bold, he is loud, and vigorous. At Red House he is a sort of bohemian paterfamilias. In Queen Square he is the enterprising man of the house. *The Earthly Paradise*, as a poem, is consistently represented as despondent, languid, excessive, and hopeless. Its objective role as an objective product of pleasure is undercut by its representation as a subjective account of grief. These latter characterizations stand opposed to those of young, bohemian Morris at Red House, and the yet-to-come properly matured socialist Morris in Hammersmith. As a result, the poem announces the public birth of a man not yet fully formed. Biographers encounter the poem itself as a symptom of the disconnect between his public identity and all they want him to be.

2: READING *THE EARTHLY PARADISE*

The Earthly Paradise and its contemporary popularity

We turn now to *The Earthly Paradise* itself, and to its contemporary reception. *The Earthly Paradise* was an unexpected success, and it marked the beginning of Morris’s literary fame (Litzenberg 418; Gardner v). The *Life and Death of Jason*, which had always been intended as one of *The Earthly Paradise*’s tales, until its length made its inclusion impossible, had given a preliminary indication that critics and readers alike were making an about face where William Morris was concerned.

Looking back, Amy Sharp's 1891 survey *Victorian Poets* remarked, "the long but fascinating story of *The Life and Death of Jason* showed that Morris had found his own special line, and already attained mastery in it; and this was quickly followed by the great work on which his fame must chiefly rest—*The Earthly Paradise*" (174). James Leatham's 1900 *William Morris: Master of Many Crafts*, declared that *The Earthly Paradise* "set the seal upon Morris's place at the very front rank of poets" (37). Alfred Noyes's 1908 study of William Morris referred to *The Earthly Paradise* as "the achievement by which Morris will be chiefly known to future ages" (103), while John Drinkwater's 1912 account argued, "in his poetry . . . is found the clearest challenge to oblivion" (22). These consistent assessments of the merits of *The Earthly Paradise* demonstrate just to what extent the poem was synonymous with William Morris's name.

As both Litzenberg and Boos mention in their respective articles on the reception of *The Earthly Paradise*, in spite of his fame, Morris was nevertheless "frequently condemned, and sometimes violently abused" (Litzenberg 420), and the reception of the epic was "complicated" ("Victorian Response" 16). These complexities do not alter the fact of his popularity, which, though it was not without qualification, was nevertheless an accepted element of critics' understanding of Morris. They described the arrival of *The Earthly Paradise* in terms of a phenomenon. Popularity came "very rapidly, and much to the author's astonishment" ("Contemporary Portraits" 562) as one journalist put it. An anonymous critic for *The Illustrated Review* wrote, "the very suddenness of his popularity, his immediate bound into a reputation, [sic] and the ready acceptance of ditties so new in one sense, and yet so old in another, attest conclusively to the fact that the coming of a poet has very rarely indeed, if ever, been more distinctly opportune" ("William Morris" 161). *The*

London Review began its review of the first volume by commending both Morris, and his sudden public, “The reputation which Morris has won for himself is creditable not only to him but also to the reading public” (“*Earthly Paradise: Part I*” 545) announced its author. By the time the final volume was released, periodicals were as interested in the fact of its popularity as in its poetic merits (“*The Earthly Paradise*” 148).

Modern commentary on *The Earthly Paradise* often describes its positive reception as somehow predetermined because it adhered to contemporary taste. Such commentary obscures the novelty of the poem, and as a result imagines the positive contemporary reception as static, as expected and often not worthy of investigation in its own right. Contemporary reactions to the poem, however, demonstrate that these aspects were not necessarily ready ways into the poem for its first readers. Victorians loved long narrative poems, which *The Earthly Paradise* certainly was. Critics, however, often remarked that it was, in fact, *too* long. The critic for *The Examiner* wrote that although “we skip a leaf or two at our peril,” still “we cannot help finding ourselves glancing at the bulk of pages that are to be gone through before we can look back with pleasure at the finely toned and perfect whole” (“*Earthly Paradise: Part III*” 20). George William Cox, in *The Edinburgh Review*, called Morris “one of the most voluminous of poets” (251). This was in part because of the perceived cause of the length of Morris’s poem—its prolixity. It was not merely its length, which Victorian readers were used to, it was its excessive length due to a failure of poetic economy. Indeed, “*The Lovers of Gundrun*,” by far the longest single tale in *The Earthly Paradise*, was among critics’ favourite parts of the poem. Nevertheless, insofar as the length of the whole work was considered a flaw, the result of undisciplined composition, it was often a detraction rather than an attraction of the whole work.

This prolixity often produced monotonous effects. The critic for *The Examiner* admitted to simultaneously admiring the poem and wishing it would end more quickly. Similarly, in Georgiana Burne-Jones's biography of her husband, she famously described her first experience of *The Earthly Paradise* during evening gatherings when Morris would read aloud from the as-yet-unpublished tales. She "remember[ed] with shame . . . often falling asleep to the steady rhythm of the reading voice, or biting my fingers and stabbing myself with pins in order to stay awake" (qtd in MacCarthy 200). This intimate portrait is amusing for Burne-Jones's candour, but it also speaks to the affective characteristics of the work, here its monotonous, languorous qualities lulling a tired woman to sleep. As is so often the case in the reception of William Morris, these challenges of length, and the accompanying monotony, did not diminish the positive response to his work, but neither were they aspects that facilitated its popularity. *The Earthly Paradise* was liked in spite of it, but the idea that readers would have reacted to its prolix length without question or skepticism is not borne out in the contemporary records, which above all demonstrate that it was a challenge to be overcome.

Another common attribution of *The Earthly Paradise*'s success is that of its "tremendous vogue" (88) as biographer Philip Henderson phrased it. It certainly was a publication event, and one to which people responded quite positively. To call it fashionable, however, is to suggest that it conformed to some pre-existing trend and was appreciated for its similarity to such a trend. It is perhaps easier for modern readers to elide the differences, as contemporary readers would have experienced them, between *The Earthly Paradise* and other popular poems such as Tennyson's, for example, which also treated historical subjects and themes. In broad historical strokes, Morris's poem certainly does belong to that large group of Victorian texts that

engages in this conversation in important ways. Critics and readers of Morris's poem, however, identified it as unexpected, surprising, and unusual; this complicates the verdict that *The Earthly Paradise* was a predictable poem released to a market that was eager for more examples of the same.

This was particularly the case when commentary focused on what it felt like to read the poem. Elizabeth Hasell, in a *Blackwood's Magazine* review of *The Earthly Paradise* commented: "this gift of relating a story well, is, as we have said, a rare gift in these days," (57). The sense of the novelty of Morris's approach, and its emphasis on the story itself, was both unusual and anachronistic. This skill was related for some to the ability to tell a story straight, without pausing at each turn to relate the story back to the self, or to become introspective, as the psychological poetry of the age appeared to do. Browning was the chief culprit of this school, and an excerpt from *The Spectator* offers a representative example of the irritation such a style could provoke, complaining of the "intellectual fashion" in which Browning deals with his subjects: "tossing them in the air to catch them again, twirling them about by their crumpled outside surfaces, and generally displaying his sense of mastery, and the enjoyment which belongs to it, by acts not unfrequently something resembling caprice" (*William Morris: Critical Heritage* 289). Morris, as John Morley declared in *The Fortnightly Review*, had no such tendencies: "there is no English poet of this time, nor perhaps any other, who has so possessed this excellent gift of looking freshly and simply on external nature in all her many colours, and of reproducing what he sees with such effective precision and thoughtfulness" ("Earthly Paradise" 714). This language demonstrates both the novelty, and the allure of Morris's approach in *The Earthly Paradise*.

Defining the readership of *The Earthly Paradise*

How many people read *The Earthly Paradise*? Modern critics have described it as a “Victorian bestseller,” and yet a “cult” success, as Fiona MacCarthy call is (264) is certainly a more appropriate description, at least from the point of view of its sales. In 1864, *Our Mutual Friend* sold 50 000 copies in three days; in 1870, Volume I of *Edwin Drood* sold 50 000 copies. In 1864, the first edition of *Enoch Arden* had a print run of 60 000, of which 40 000 sold in a few short weeks.¹² Although there are no extant sales figures for *The Earthly Paradise*,¹³ we know that it had nothing like this success. Information on print runs, and their indication that editions turned over quickly, tell us that the volumes sold swiftly and well, although an unrecorded number of those volumes were exported to Boston. Nevertheless, the first volume of *The Earthly Paradise* had an initial print run of 1000 copies. These quickly sold out, and a second and third edition were duly printed of 750 and 1250 copies respectively. We can deduce from these print runs—the smaller second edition and the increased third edition—that the fortunes of *The Earthly Paradise* were still unclear, even to its publisher.

The scramble to determine the trajectory of the work’s popularity reveals itself as well in a small detail of The English and Foreign Library Company¹⁴ advertisement in *The Athenaeum* in mid October 1868, where amongst the listed new items in their catalogue is the *Defense of Guenevere*. The volume makes no other appearance in The

¹² Richard Altick. *The English Common Reader*. (Ohio State University Press, 1998. Appendix.

¹³ Morris’s publisher for *The Earthly Paradise*, F. S. Ellis, was essentially a one-man operation, and although the British Library lists his “correspondence and papers” in their mss archives, it is only his correspondence with the Rossetti family.

¹⁴ Three years later, in 1871, this company was bought out by Mudie’s: “From the 18th August, 181, the Directors of Mudie’s Select Library (Limited) became possessors of the English and Foreign Library and its large connection [sic]. This library, which was originally known as ‘Hookhams’s,’ at one time possessed the finest collections of rare and valuable standard works in London” (Curwen 426).

English and Foreign Library Company, and never appears in Mudie's lists, although some initial reviews of *The Earthly Paradise*, which often included a discussion of *The Life and Death of Jason*, also revisited *The Defense of Guenevere and Other Poems*, and treated it, if not necessarily more positively, at least more patiently than ten years before. These small presences of *The Defence of Guenevere* further demonstrate this moment of lucrative popularity.

Parts II and III¹⁵ of *The Earthly Paradise* had similar print runs to its first part, which were followed some short months later by subsequent editions, indicating that print runs—at least those not exported to America—were still selling out. In a letter to his father in 1871, Edmund Gosse excitedly relayed that Ford Maddox Brown had just the previous evening invited him to meet Morris at some point in the future. “Morris, the greatest gun of all!” he exclaims, before tempering the thrill with practicalities: “I tell you these little particulars because you told me you like to know them, because they are all significant as steps gained in my profession” (36-37). Morris's sales figures do not place him in the company of Dickens or Tennyson, but it is unlikely that this was his aim, or indeed his attraction to others. He was nevertheless identifiable as “the greatest gun of all” amongst his circle—Rossetti, Maddox Brown, Burne-Jones, and so on—in the midst of a critical and popular swell of support. He was also, as Gosse's intimation of professional strategizing makes clear, an emerging figure of clout in professional literary circles.

Who could afford to read *The Earthly Paradise*? *The Earthly Paradise* of the late 1860s and early 1870s was not the ornate decorative books of the later Kelmscott years, nor was it the first dreamed-of artefact, the ‘Big Book’ of Morris and Burne-Jones' earlier schemes. An octavo volume with undemonstrative end papers, printed

on standard machine-wove paper, and featuring only a single wood cut by Burne-Jones, appearing on the title page and as a tail piece (LeMire 26), it was not an art-object, but rather a working book; it still cost 14s. Later parts, which were split into smaller volume units, still sold for 8s each, or 16s for the two together. In 1872, capitalizing on the success of *The Earthly Paradise* and looking to prolong it, F. S. Ellis released a “popular edition” in ten monthly parts. These were priced at 3s. 6d each. 2000 copies were printed of the first two parts, 1250 of the third part, and 1000 copies were printed of each subsequent part (*Books of William Morris* 71). As Harry Buxton Forman explained in *The Books of William Morris*, “the scheme of publication was to get these charming little pocket volumes into the hands of the trade with the monthly magazines during ten months of the year 1872” (70).

Richard Altick writes that by the late 1860s, 6d was a “common price” for books; these books, however, are “bound in paper and printed in strenuously small type, usually in double columns” (307), reprints of old books or “sixpenny thrillers.” New novels, meanwhile, had a standard price of 10s 6d a volume, a price at which they were “accessible to few but literary subscribers and the members of book clubs” (Altick 311). *The Earthly Paradise* was of a higher quality than that, with uncrowded text of a reasonable size. Nevertheless, books could be considerably more expensive than this as well: *Elaine*, *Guinevere*, *Enid* and *Vivienne*, each with illustrations by Gustave Doré, were priced at £21. Although there were much cheaper editions available, one special edition of *Idylls of the King*, with photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron, cost six guineas per volume (*History of the Book* 107).¹⁶ *The Earthly Paradise*, then, was decidedly not available to those of limited incomes, but

¹⁶ In fact, twenty-five copies of *The Earthly Paradise* printed on hand-made paper and bound by an “old-fashioned binder” (*Books* 52) were also released, although neither LeMire nor Buxton Forman list the price.

neither was it a collector's item. Later working-class memoirists will recall their first introductions to Morris's epic, either in abridged, penny poet format, as with Muir, or through the more established public libraries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as was the case with John Bruce Glasier. But with those avenues still largely unavailable the price of 14s, nearly a week's wages for many—and indeed more than a week's wages for some—would certainly have limited the available readership of the poem. While it would still have been unaffordable at even half the cost, its 14 shilling price tag placed it squarely in a middle-class domain.

Mudie's Select Library, and other circulating subscription libraries, offered readers an opportunity to read more extensively than their pocket-books would have otherwise allowed. Subscriptions for most of these libraries started at one guinea. Most commonly associated with the three decker novel, Mudie's catalogue contained much besides. Advertisements in *The Athenaeum*¹⁷ for Mudie's new and upcoming titles includes boasts of having "1000 copies of *Middlemarch*[sic]", but they also list books such as *How to Study the New Testament*, *A Natural History of Birds*, and Ruskin's *Letters to a Working Man*.

Mudie's catalogue described its mandate as "designed to promote the circulation of the best New Works in every department of literature" (ii). Its catalogue was huge; it claimed a "rate of increase of One Hundred and Twenty Thousand Volumes per Annum" (ii). Mudie's assigned itself a moral responsibility as well, and one that was implicitly middle-class, rejecting "cheap Reprints, Serials, Costly Books of Plates, Works of merely Professional or Local interest, and Novels of objectionable

¹⁷ For this information I am indebted to the Sara Keith Collection (MS 1142) at the University College London. Sarah Keith tirelessly collated, corrected, fact checked and otherwise organized several of Mudie's annual catalogues in her own typewritten ms. Her papers also include a helpful and extensive collection of Mudie's advertisements from various periods.

character or inferior ability” (ii). Neither elitist, cheap, nor provincial, Mudie’s occupied a middle ground and spoke to a perceived clientele who had taste, time, and intellect, but not too much. Consider, for contrast, The English and Foreign Library Company’s description in its *Athenaeum* advertisements: “As the public demand is the only correct guide and arbiter, the literature of the day is added in accordance with the claims of subscribers, and without any impertinent selection or dictation whatever on the score of private opinion” (5 Jan, 1868, 5). *The Earthly Paradise*’s popularity with Mudie’s clientele, and its tacit endorsement by that company, which kept it on its selected list advertisement for much of the three years of its publication, confirms its status as a middlebrow, middle class success.

From 1868 through 1871, *The Earthly Paradise* was consistently included in the advertisements of notable titles in the current Mudie’s Catalogue. Mudie’s would occasionally list two books together in a line, in order, it seems, to boost the circulation of the less popular title. As the months went by, *The Earthly Paradise* was given the top billing in such schemes a number of times, most notably yoked to George Eliot’s *Spanish Gypsy* on several occasions in 1869, but also with *Forest Life in Acadie* in 1870. Another clue to its continued draw with subscribers comes to us through advertisements for the circulating libraries’ secondary business—the selling off of extraneous copies of its titles. By May 1869, *Spanish Gypsy* is listed for sale through the English and Foreign Library for the cut price of 4s 6d (its original price had been 12s 6d). *The Earthly Paradise* makes it through to 1871 without ever appearing on the second-hand books lists, for either The English and Foreign Library Company or for Mudie’s.

Another clue to the readership, both actual and targeted, of *The Earthly Paradise*, is in which periodicals it was discussed. Morris was extensively reviewed

by the more high-brow two-shilling monthlies, those serious, and with high enough tone to be now included in the *Wellesley Index*, and a few others besides. These included *The Fortnightly Review*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *Blackwood's*, and *The Contemporary Review*. The various parts of *The Earthly Paradise* were also consistently reviewed by the intellectual weeklies *The Athenaeum* and *The Examiner*. There was however, no mention of *The Earthly Paradise* or *The Life and Death of Jason* in *Cornhill Magazine*, *MacMillan's Magazine*, *St. James's Magazine*, *Belgravia*, or *Chambers*, although it was reviewed in both *Tinsley's* and *Temple Bar*. These titles all belonged to the brand of periodical pioneered in the sixties by *Cornhill Magazine*, catering to “the middle-class audience of superior education but relatively little spending money: the people who disdained cheap weeklies, with a few exceptions like *Household Words*, but who could not spare the two shillings or half-crown at which the principle monthly magazines were based” (Altick 359). It was not mentioned either in the light popular weeklies *All the Year Round*, or *Punch*.

These small clues of the continued draw of *The Earthly Paradise* as a lucrative title throughout the three years of its sequential release give some insight into the reading habits of the relatively small section of the mid-Victorian public who seem to have been continuously eager to consume Morris's texts. With a self-proclaimed annual new title list in excess of one hundred thousand, *The Earthly Paradise's* continued circulation through Mudie's is significant; but more strikingly, its continued placement as a banner book for the company, as demonstrated by its choice placement in advertisements throughout its three year publication demonstrates just how it resonated with its first audiences, even with print runs significantly lower than the biggest books of those years.

Voice, discourse, text and audience in *The Earthly Paradise*

That the story of *The Earthly Paradise* can be described as I have just described it, in terms of sales figures, its success in the market, and its ability to be mass-produced and mass-circulated, speaks to a central anxiety at the heart of Victorian print culture, namely that the contemporary age had fallen away from some more authentic, sincere form of artistic connection, a connection replaced by Carlyle's cash nexus. As we have seen in an early section of this chapter, subsequent biographers and modern critics have also been uneasy over *The Earthly Paradise's* participation in Victorian middle-class consumerism, demonstrating that forms of this anxiety still perpetuated as a mark against the Morris of the period. If *The Earthly Paradise* is implicated in the Victorian bourgeois print culture and its market place by virtue of its status as a book, and a book that sold well, it is nevertheless also fundamentally concerned with resisting precisely the forms of value and exchange that such an association suggests. *The Earthly Paradise* offers, for the consideration of its readers, a different account of the relationship between readers and texts. This takes form, in the first instance, through *The Earthly Paradise's* interpellation of its external audiences, its privileging of the continuum between text and speech, and its insistence that participation in the reception of the poem requires one to move beyond text, while nevertheless also moving in relation to it. Morris's poem addresses contemporary anxieties about failures of authenticity and immediacy in textual forms—those forms of the 'empty day'—by outlining their interconnections with human speech. Moreover, he invites his readers to take their place alongside the audience groups inside the poem, and in the process to take part in the discursive practices of a public that resists connections of a market place account of texts without undermining, transcending, or occluding texts themselves.

In his work *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, Ivan Kreilkamp engages with the “legacy”(1) of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay “The Storyteller.” This essay argues that the ancient figure of the storyteller, and the special sort of wisdom he embodies, is replaced by the novel and its more curtailed, isolating, and closed-off form. Accounts like this, in various ways, imagine the rise of the novel and of print culture in terms of a tension between what is imagined as a pre-print storyteller and his special wisdom and the modern, mass production of books, for a market, written by authors whom reading audiences are never likely to meet. Kreilkamp, however, calls this a “fabricated struggle” (3), suggesting instead the storyteller figure is itself a product of this very print culture. “Victorian print culture grants special authority to forms of writing that pay homage to, or even pass themselves off as, transcriptions of that voice whose death knell was supposedly sounded by print” (6), writes Kreilkamp. Affective communication and human connection, which in eighteenth-century novels had been “generated . . . by an exchange of confidences through letters or the revelation of private journals” (6) is now privileged through accounts of more direct presence and exchange: “speech, increasingly, becomes the sign of the human and the humane” (6), he argues.

Kreilkamp’s insight is useful in the case of *The Earthly Paradise*, which is after all a work that is very much engaged with the human voice, and with the exchange of human voices as a form of redemption, consolation, and connection. Nevertheless, *The Earthly Paradise* also values textual forms, and not as vehicles for human voice, but in their own right. Rather than try to obscure, transcend, or challenge the book, Morris places it alongside the human voice as two complimentary, interconnecting forms of exchange and connection. Kreilkamp suggests that mid-century Victorian poets, also wary of print culture’s “mechanized,

disenchanted, and bureaucratized” (155) atmosphere, responded to it in two very different ways. First, by using voice in verse in ways that “appear to transcend the medium” (155), which is to say, to try to occlude the textual nature of that voice, and second, by drawing attention to the very artificiality of voice. Browning, for example: “continually reminds us that the various ‘voices’ of his narrative—indeed narrative ‘voice’ itself—are always fictional effects of print” (164). Ultimately, however, Morris’s poem values neither voice nor print above the other, presenting instead a mutually affirming relationship in which both voice and text participate.

Certainly *The Earthly Paradise* is a poem that is replete with speech, and which values the communal immediacy inherent in speech based receptions. In particular, Morris finds a way to connect his contemporary, print-culture immersed audiences with earlier storytelling forms and their audiences by embedding his own readers’ participation *within* the text. Nevertheless, although *The Earthly Paradise* privileges the oral traditions of ancient storytellers by making the oral performance of a story so central to the poem, the stories in Morris’s poem all have their origins in text. This is the case not only for Victorian audiences, who might recognize versions of the tales they are reading from Ovid or from Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*, but within the text as well. Throughout, each new narrator makes certain to acknowledge that his utterance is just one in a tradition, in each case of a story that has many forms. These forms are explicitly identified as textual. In the process, the polyvocal, shared ancient wisdom that Kreilkamp identifies as being a particular glamour of the old storytellers is reinscribed in text not solely because it represents the affective connections of human speech, but because it presents text and speech as a continuum, not a tension. The “fabricated struggle” (3) Kreilkamp locates in the representation of

storyteller in Victorian print culture is in *The Earthly Paradise* presented as no struggle at all.

To call upon voice to present different accounts of textual forms, to comment on textual forms, but also potentially to become a textual form itself, as often happens within the tales and of course with *The Earthly Paradise* itself as a poem, is to engage with the concept of a public sphere, that discursive space shared by voice and text. The (western European) public sphere, first described by Habermas as an eighteenth-century phenomenon was characterized by private subjects coming together to form a public; they performed their roles as citizens speaking up for their collective interests to the state. The story Habermas tells about the formation of the public sphere begins with the rise of journals, newspapers, and the democratic space of the coffee shop, in which people otherwise unknown to one another came together—either in person or in print—to voice opinions about the state. This world was entirely the product of participation in a shared discourse, in which people spoke to and for each other about common concerns.

In the years since Habermas's study of the public sphere, which focuses on a particular, historical phenomenon, other theorists have come to expand and refine it. In an influential re-examination of Habermas's theory, Geoff Eley argues that the public sphere has always been made up of a multiplicity of "publics." He argues against what he sees as the occasionally facile division between, on the one hand, a rational-critical bourgeoisie and on the other the irrational working masses, positing instead a concept in which "cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place" (306). This reading opens up the application of the concept of the public sphere to more diverse imaginings of a multiplicity of publics.

In particular, it allows us to consider, rather than the expansive, singular Public Sphere of Habermas's account, smaller, discrete versions of public spheres.

Michael Warner, in his work on the public sphere, has offered a useful definition of the particular sort of community he calls a public in the multiple sense in which Eley defines it. As in Habermas's definition of the public sphere, a public is not a physical place, but rather an imagined one created, sustained, and defined entirely through texts, their circulation, and the discussion prompted by them. Although the activity of a public can have physical dimensions, it is primarily a discursive space. Moreover, while a public forms a sort of community, this community is never formulated entirely by personal bonds; the circulation and discussion that characterizes a public requires that it always potentially addresses or includes strangers, or at least can never confirm that it is not addressing strangers. This is of course to say that a public is not insular, is not private, but open to the include anyone. The criterion for inclusion is solely one's participation in the shared discourse.¹⁸

In the framing sections of *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris outlines the relationship between text and voice, between the external, reading audiences and the internal, listening audiences in order to demonstrate the creation of a public, a community defined by shared participation in discourse. Morris must first bring into communion these different types of audience: oral/aural storytelling audiences and the contemporary consumers of printed texts, and to create from them a communal enterprise. First, the internal audience of the tale telling proceedings is established to include the external readers of *The Earthly Paradise* on equal footing—or at least as

¹⁸ See also *New Imaginaries*. Spec. Issue of *Public Culture*. 14.2 (Winter 2002); Michael Warner *Publics and Counter Publics*, and Craig Calhoun, ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.

equal as such footing can be. The audience is a shared human community, half reading, half listening, and its members, made up of imagined and real people, of speakers and listeners, readers and writers, are all equal participants. Second, as equal participants they are—as the value system of the Envoi reminds us at the end—all equally invested in, understanding of, and sympathetic to the shared tales. The atomizing, mechanized account of print culture is here replaced by a voice and text continuum that manages to foster human connection.

Direct address is used throughout the opening frame of *The Earthly Paradise*, as well as in the storytelling inner frame. The Idle Singer's address to his readers introduces speech as above all an inclusive act. The concept of human community begins to be established from the very opening of *The Earthly Paradise* when the self-reference to "the idle singer of an empty day" shifts, by the end of the second verse of the Apology, to the inclusive reference to "*us* idle singers of an empty day" (I: 21 emphasis added). The language encompasses, and the Idle Singer understands himself to be a spokesperson referring to not only to himself, but also to those who "live and earn our bread" (I: 16). Nearly everywhere in the framing narratives—both the idle singer frame and the Remnant frame—speakers are spokespersons. Their speech is on behalf of a group. We see this most simply in the casual slips between first person singular and first person plural as here in the Apology, but also in the monthly lyrics, perhaps most notably in the monthly lyric for June. In this lyric what appears to be a monologue of one man and his particular emotional state slips into a reference to a community by the third verse, with the line "if but pensive men we seem" (I: 16). The narrative interludes offer more complex opacity of antecedent when the "we" and "us" appear to extend beyond the Remnant to include the contemporary frame as well. In each case however, the casual and occasional slip between "I" and "we," a slip that

usually comes without explanation, establishes an atmosphere in which “I” is always potentially also “we.”

This address, which values the inclusive capacity of speech to speak for, as well to, someone is nevertheless not intimate, private, or personal. While the monthly lyrics’ occasionally address to the Idle Singer’s recalcitrant beloved demonstrates what this voice sounds like, more often the address is of the sort described in Michael Warner’s account of a public. Always potentially including strangers, who are addressed to the extent that they find themselves accounted for, this form of speech is that of a public. The public to which this “we” refers is made up of both real people—Morris’s singer persona and his contemporary audience—and imaginary ones—the whole cast of characters in the various frames of *The Earthly Paradise*.

Of course these different audiences need to be brought together into the same imagined space if they are going to participate in the same public. So famous is the opening section of the Prologue that it is easy to overlook that none of its action takes place in London’s “six counties overhung with smoke” (I: Prologue 1) nor does the action begin in medieval Norway, from whence the Wanderers depart on their search. Instead, Morris uses the opening lines to situate his own readers, and to connect them to the stories he is about to tell. References to that famous line, in which he bids that his readers think on “London, small, and white, and clean” (I: 5) obscures the set up of the larger context, which begins in London in order make this past immediately graspable to his readership.

Small, white, and clean it might be, but London is also an international hub of trade and discourse, and Morris’s description here is cosmopolitan and bustling:

Think, that below bridge the green lapping waves
Smile some few keeps that bear Levantine staves,
Cut from the yew wood on the burnt-up hill,
And pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,

And treasured scanty spice from some far off sea,
 Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
 And cloth of Bruges, and hogsheads of Guienne. (I: 7-13)

London is within and connected to a series of cosmopolises; taken together, the scene emphasizes human networks and human industry. By bringing readers to where London meets up with this human network, Morris offers a logical mechanism of transition to the “nameless city in a distant sea” (I: 19) where the Elders live, and which finally introduces the logic of the outer frame structure. The external audience is brought back in time through a meditation on the history of a space, and by emphasizing its human connections. This is a tactic Morris uses, in different ways, throughout his oeuvre, from the early *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* piece “The Forgotten Church,” to *A Dream of John Ball* and of course *News from Nowhere*. This strategy condenses time by rewinding it in reference to (usually) the human infrastructure of a specific space. Here London is situated in a cosmopolitan network that establishes the logic by which these stories—as things born of human endeavour—are to be understood.

These preliminary establishing structures ensure that the external reading audiences of text and the internal aural audiences of storytelling are blurred, rather than contrasted. Rather than begin at the beginning, and narrate the story of the Wanderers’ arrival at the city of Elders, Morris jumps to its denouement in order to bring together the three participating audiences: his readers, the Elders, and the Wanderers. Morris has already described his readers as ravaged by the sea, and this move further parallels the contemporary readers with the Wanderers themselves as Morris’s readers arrive in the “nameless city in a distant sea” (I: 17) at precisely the same moment as the Wanderers, rather than experience this arrival mediated through the Wanderers’ tale. The Wanderers and the contemporary, external readers arrive in a

similar fashion, blindly, after (at least figuratively, imaginatively) leaving their homelands.

As Morris introduces this city to his external audience, he takes striking pains to reproduce a sense of arrival. The map of the place unfolds as readers are invited to walk through the city, following the narrator's directions, until they come to the "pillared counting house" (I: 35). The attention to participatory detail here is significant. Consider, for example, this description of entering the council-house:

Push the brazen door,
And standing on polished marble floor
Leave all the noises of the square behind;
Silent at first, but for the noise you made
When on the brazen door your hand had laid
To shut it after you. (I: 39-45)

The tactile, auditory, but also affective (calm, reverent) evocation of this passage places readers in the room. This places demands on readers not only to listen (or to read) but also to actively participate.

Throughout the Wanderers' tale which, with everyone assembled can now begin, readers are often reminded that this is a story with an orator, as for example when, nearing the end of the tale, Rolf the Wanderer checks himself: "Ah me! I loiter, being right loth to tell / The things than happened to us in the end" (I: 2248-2249). The result is to highlight the tale as a vocal performance. There are also several interruptions by the Elders, all of which serve to highlight the preoccupation with reception. During these interruptions the Elders commend the Wanderers for their bravery—interlocutory moves that help to both interpret and validate the story. Together these structural strategies, and the inclusion of the paratexts of reception and delivery, help to make sense of a tale. These gestures replace the hoped-for narrative resolution (namely the discovery of the earthly paradise) with the consolation of an audience, a substitute the Elders finally emphasize.

This storytelling scene is above all depicted as vocal performance. Rolf's glosses and the Elders interruptive responses all aim to reproduce the effects of voice, and of active listening to voice. Nevertheless, the relationship between vocal performances of this sort and textual forms are also reinforced, as the Elders take over to describe the process by which this story will come to take on textual form. The Elders call the Wanderers their "living chronicle" (I: 2751). They complete the story telling exchange by solemnizing its worth for future generations, imagining it as an artefact imbued with power and likening it in importance to the gods delivering them "some ancient chronicle / Of that sweet unforgotten land long left, / Of all the lands wherefrom we now are reft" (I: 2736-2738). This textual form imagined by the Elders both is and is not the book contemporary readers have in front of them, so that the Wanderers' tale is simultaneously the text being read, the vocal performance being imagined, and some other, alternate material form that will evolve from the immediacy of this exchange just completed. Moreover, it does not end there. The Elders imagine this "ancient chronicle" (I: 2736) of their homeland being reproduced by scribes and paraded through the streets "to hear the people shout" (I: 2747). This public display is likened to the presentation of the newborn babies of monarchs, in which the symbolic and physical body are similarly conflated, "when all the city falls to joy and mirth" (I: 2750).

This complex relationship to the story and its reception is at the heart of *The Earthly Paradise*. The Wanderers, having been prompted to undertake their search by listening to *and* reading tales of the same search, arrive at the City of Elders, deliver their version of this proliferating tale, which is then imagined as a future text, which is then imagined as surpassing its status as text. The Prologue, most of which is dedicated to the telling of the Wanderers' Tale, is ultimately not about the adventures

within that tale, but about documenting the moment when a story is born. This moment is a complicated interplay between vocal and textual forms. The Wanderers' narration becomes, finally, an artefact of commiseration and pleasure, to be read or heard. In short, it becomes a story.

Contemporary Reading Experiences

The recorded reading experiences of the Leweses and of R. L. Stevenson both document precisely this sort of openness to the “wisdom”—to use Benjamin’s vocabulary—that *The Earthly Paradise* both encourages and requires. The Leweses’ is perhaps the most famous recorded reading experience of *The Earthly Paradise*. The couple read the first volume of the poem while in Germany in June 1868 when they were there to take the waters. This experience is thrice recorded: first in George Henry Lewes’s personal journal and then again, on the same day, in a letter he wrote to Blackwood. George Eliot’s reflections are found in her part of a co-written letter with Lewes to his son and daughter-in-law. A letter from R. L. Stevenson to his friend Charles Baxter recalls a more solitary reading experience, but it is similarly founded on two principles: a deep value for the vocality of the poem, and the transformative powers of the poem fundamentally linked to its vocal performance out of doors.

The language in Lewes’s reflection in his journal offers a picture of a reading experience that square with critics’ interpretations; it is atmospheric and evocative. It is generative, above all, of a sense of mood. The entry in Lewes’s diary, which begins “Monday 15th. Our enjoyment encreases [sic]” (450) is full of “rambles” (450) and the repetitive enjoyments of a satisfying routine. A sort of timelessness sets it, as “the beauty of the place” supersedes the passing of days, which are all described together: “ravishing walks . . . agreeable water and baths, good food and perfect repose make

life without a wish,” writes Lewes in an entry that equally describes all the days of the holiday. “We rise at 6. Drink waters and walk till 7. Breakfast in the open air. Ramble and read Morris’s ‘Earthly Paradise’—Bathe, drink, ramble” (450). Lewes’s letter to John Blackwood, written on the same day, offers a more fleshed out description in which Morris’s poem is fully revealed as the central source of this mood. “The Earthly Paradise” arrives in the letter both as a text and a place that saves he and Eliot from an unsatisfying time in Baden. Ill health, weather “cold and wet” and “fatigue with the grandeurs and the stupid gambling” (450) left the Leweses discontented and dispirited. These references to grandeurs and gambling, stripped of any referent, become more mundane and all-encompassing, evoking the false social glamour of life at its most superficial. Baden-Baden seems the worst sort of fashionable watering hole, full of unsympathetic society. “We were glad enough to get away and find ourselves in this Earthly Paradise ‘unknown to Murray,’” writes Lewes, relieved. This ‘Earthly Paradise’ blurs poetry and appetite, inner and outer landscapes, as “life is all peace and poetic suggestion, and the food is excellent” (450). The relationship between “life” and “poetic suggestions” is made explicit, as *The Earthly Paradise* resolves itself into the landscape: “we take Morris’s poem into the woods with us and read it aloud, greedily looking to see how much *more* there is in story for us. *If ever* you have an idle afternoon, bestow it on the ‘Earthly Paradise’” (450-451; emphasis in original).

In this reading experience, the poem becomes a third companion, the filter through which the world is experienced. The Leweses escape the mundane urban banality of Baden with, as well as by, their copy of *The Earthly Paradise*. When Lewes writes that they take the poem into the wood with them and “read it aloud, greedily looking to see how much *more* there is in store for us” (450) the subject of

their greed is potentially equally the woods and the poem. In George Eliot's contribution to a letter from the both of them to Lewes's son Charles, she follows a similar path to that of her partner, moving from a literary rendition of the setting: the "lovely river Rensch, rushing clear among grey stones, gives us its music perpetually," (454) to a mention of Morris's poem: "Morris's charming poem 'The Earthly Paradise' has been our companion in our shorter morning rambles, which we have been happy to break with frequent halts and readings" (454). The "poetic suggestion" of Lewes's phrasing is everywhere here as well, as the lovely river and the charming poem are equal and shared sources for the pleasure of the day. These are embodied, communal, and holistic accounts. There is an easy, continuous relationship between the natural world and the world of the text, such that the two appear mutually interdependent.

R. L. Stevenson, in an April 1872 letter to his friend and frequent correspondent Charles Baxter, offers us an implied reading experience of *The Earthly Paradise* than has much in common with that of the Leweses. Stevenson is an excellent mimic, and his letters to Baxter are often mockingbird performances. In a letter that begins "then indeed did I remember the tale unknown to men, how that on this night of all nights you should tread to the Thessalian measure, being girt with the skins of leopards and your temples girt with ivy leaves" (217) and so on, he eventually explains: "I have been reading translations of Bohn" (218). Another letter begins in a long stream of some whimsical form of French that the editor's note explains is "an attempted imitation of Balzac's imitation of Rabelais" (219n1). Stevenson interrupts his own stream of French to reveal that he has just read a story of Balzac.

This tendency to mimic the texts he is reading involves a deeper immersion in the case of his account of *The Earthly Paradise*. While offering a similar performance of the recently consumed text, this mimicry is not merely language-based but also emotional and atmospheric. The first paragraph of the letter deals with some matters of business to do with a society in which they were both members. Stevenson jokingly chides Baxter for having sent him “certain illegal, uncharitable, unchristian, and unconstitutional documents called *business letters*” (224). The rest of the letter is worth quoting in full:

I have been walking today by a colonnade of beeches, along the brawling Allan. My character for sanity is quite gone, seeing that I cheered my lonely way, with the following, in a triumphant chaunt: ‘Thank God for the grass, and the fir-trees, and the crows, and the sheep, and the sunshine and the shadows of the fir-trees’. I hold that he is a poor devil who can walk alone, in such a place and with such weather, and doesn’t set up his lungs and cry back to the birds and the river. Follow, follow, follow me. Come hither, come hither, come hither—here shall you see—No enemy—except a very slight remnant of Winter and its rough weather. My bedroom, when I awoke this morning, was full of birdsongs; which is the greatest pleasure of life. Come hither, come hither, come hither, and when you come bring the third part of the *Earthly Paradise*. You can get it for me in Elliots for two and tenpence (2s/10d) (*business habits*). Also bring an ounce of Honey Dew from Wilsons. The whole latter half of this letter was written to a chaunt; and may be read in a similar style by a judicious reader, if he be lighthearted (224-225).

Like the structural juxtaposition Lewes makes between the world of “foolish talk” and going into the woods with *The Earthly Paradise*, Stevenson here pits the world of “business letters” against the experience of some better world here again represented by and through the affective experience of Morris’s poem. The world of prosaic concerns—represented for the Leweses by the middling mediocrity of Baden—is purged through the experience of *The Earthly Paradise*. Like the Leweses, Stevenson’s experience of external surroundings is shot through with “poetic suggestion,” which is then reflected back into the letter, interrupting and indeed acting

as a corrective to the “uncharitable, unchristian, and unconstitutional” discursive field of “business letters.”

These accounts reflect the contemporary criticism, which associated the experience of reading the poem with ease understood as idleness, with relaxation and with restoration. Hasell, in *Blackwood's*, wrote, of the poem: “the hour for lotus-eating has come; when we stroll up the lane beneath its banks of honeysuckles and roses.” In such an hour it is “the turn of the poet who is willing and able to amuse us” (Hasell 73), such a poet is Morris. An anonymous writer of an article comparing Chaucer and Morris for *The New Monthly Magazine* observed that Morris “does not pretend to teach us how to forget our cares and troubles, but he provides a shady retreat from them into which we may retire to be calmed and refreshed” (“G. Chaucer and W. Morris” 282). Harry Buxton-Foreman, in *The London Quarterly Review*, argued that as Morris’s poems deal with “action, incident, external form, colour, and . . . the simpler phases of emotion,” readers are able, without taxing themselves, to thoroughly “appreciate” the work. “All we have to do, in order to fully appreciate and enjoy his work, is to read ‘right away’” (“Robert Browning” 334), he concluded. When critics argue that the poem offered an escape from the work-a-day cares of the contemporary world, some understood that to mean it was escapist in some frivolous way. The Leweses and Stevenson’s descriptions of these restorative readings demonstrate an immersive scope that requires a more satisfying explanation. To the extent that escapism is co-extensive with entertainment, it is a pleasant, but not particularly valuable term. Escape, however, is an amoral concept. These recorded contemporary reading experiences of the poem suggest that the concept of idleness and of escape, have their own transformative richness.

In fact, rather than imagining these scenarios in terms of idleness, there are more fruitful models for understanding the effects of *The Earthly Paradise*. In Benjamin's "The Storyteller," he describes the effects of this relationship between an audience and the lulling power of monotonous languor, the affect critics have sometimes associated with escape. The "process of assimilation" by which the storyteller's narrative is received by the listener, demands "mental relaxation" or "boredom" (90), which is increasingly rare: "the more self-forgetful the reader is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory" (91). Benjamin locates the origin of this sort of audience, and its sort of tale, with the storytelling scene arising out of medieval labour practices. Benjamin describes the two strains of storytelling wisdom in what amounts to a description of the Wanderers and the Elders, the two storytelling groups of *The Earthly Paradise*. His two types of storytellers are the traveler (often a seafarer) and the citizen who has stayed at home to embody a sort of corporate memory of a specific place. These two strains he locates in medieval forms of physical labour—handicrafts in particular, and trade—the "milieu of work" (91). Storytelling thrives in trade because it brings people from different places into intimate contact with one another, and it thrives in labour because the monotonous, repetitive work creates an atmosphere at once soporific and open.

The quality of reception in the sense that *The Earthly Paradise* values it requires these conditions, the very conditions that its verses create. In Morris's poem, tales are told, retold, reinterpreted, written, read, spoken and written again. Each new iteration of a tale requires attentiveness of this sort, because of the proliferating aim of tale-telling, tale reading, and their audiences. Benjamin writes: "When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by himself" (91). Morris's readers of *The Earthly Paradise*, or at

least this first generation of them, were quite unlikely to have been actually participating in any labour whilst listening to or reading the poem, although both the Leweses and Stevenson, however, were walking, which is another sort of repetitive physical activity. Nevertheless, such rhythms of work as Benjamin describes are imaginatively embedded in frequent descriptions of the reading experience of *The Earthly Paradise* as soporific, languorous, monotonous, and so on, and they are the conditions that allow, in both the case of the Leweses and Stevenson, the sort of immersive, totalizing affect that makes their experiences of *The Earthly Paradise* so transformative. Benjamin suggests these conditions are an inherent part of the reception of the epic wisdom to be found in story. *The Earthly Paradise's* repetitive, lulling rhythms, which might seem to have their origins in the affect of idleness are more reasonably connected to the mental openness Benjamin describes, as indeed Morris before him, offering a case for the restorative powers of labour for stimulating—or in this case opening—the mind.

Of course the other notable element of both the Leweses and Stevenson's reading experiences is their emphasis on orality. This emphasis is repeated, in different ways, in many engagements with *The Earthly Paradise*. Georgiana Burne Jones's first memories of *The Earthly Paradise* are of listening to it read aloud by Morris. Henry James, in his letter to his sister, also described the experience of listening to Morris reading from the poem. In both accounts the experience was atmospheric, lulling. For James, it is more the overall effect than the work itself, and he offers the title of the tale read as an aside that is almost inconsequential. In her biography, Fiona MacCarthy remarks of Morris's *Jason* and *Earthly Paradise* era verse that "you need to read it slowly, preferably aloud, and to *get into the swim of it*" (205 emphasis added). A number of contemporary critics also remarked that the poem

was suited to communal readings—calling it a summer picnic poem, or else a Christmas gathering poem. Both the Lewes and Stevenson reminisce about their reading experiences in terms of vocality. The Lewes read their copy of *The Earthly Paradise* aloud to one another, while Stevenson reimagines its effects using vocal forms in his letter to Baxter. Such preoccupations are telling and they demonstrate an engagement with orality (and auralty) equally represented in the text as well.

As Eric Griffith points out in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, the very absence of a voice in printed text necessitates our participation in a fundamental way, so that “as we meet the demand a text makes on us for our voices, we are engaged in an activity of imagination which is delicately and thoroughly reciprocal” (13). We have seen how the structure of *The Earthly Paradise* compels readers’ participation in a reading experience that privileges reciprocity and propinquity. Within the text written forms exist alongside spoken ones, demonstrating the creation of a public defined by virtue of a shared stake in the address of the work. Here that connection between voice and text, and the special sorts of experiences that arise from the spectrum of address and expression they contain is taken outside the text, as readers themselves feel compelled to continue that interplay by reading the poem aloud, and often communally.

The Earthly Paradise’s appeal was largely that it offered what seemed to readers to be an experiential, embodied, participatory account of the activity of reading. It did so both by illustrating fundamental links between text and speech, and by allowing those links to make a case for contemporary reading that appeared to resist the commodification of the book for the market place. The process by which Morris inscribed reading practices (and indeed readers themselves) within the book, and the ways in which readers themselves appear to have read and enjoyed the book

avoids locating the pleasure in its reception not in the artefact, nor in the solitary, isolating, intellectual reading experience associated with contemporary reading practices. Instead pleasure and meaning in *The Earthly Paradise* are generated by a discursive field that is at once vocal and textual, imagined and embodied.

Chapter Two

Contemporary Contexts: *The Earthly Paradise, The Epic, and the Stories we Tell*

Introduction

A complete and chronological reading of Norman Kelvin's *Collected Letters of William Morris* through to *The Earthly Paradise* is revealing. The publication and—mainly unfavourable—reception of *The Defense of Guenevere and Other Poems* passed nearly unnoted in Morris's letters, save for one or two to prospective publisher Alexander MacMillan. These letters were apologetic and self-effacing; anticipating MacMillan's rejection to carry the expense, Morris offered to pay himself. The eventual publication of the volume by Bell and Daldry, which would indeed be at Morris's expense, passes without extant remark. There is, however, no reason to assume that any subsequently lost correspondence did not similarly depict a nervous, unsure poet. In comparison, the first mention of *The Earthly Paradise* appeared in what has since become a frequently quoted letter to Edward Burne-Jones, in a conversation on the subject of the positive reviews of *The Life and Death of Jason*. Morris may have referred to these reviews self-deprecatingly as "puffs" (I: 51), but they nevertheless encouraged him, as he intimated to Burne-Jones, to keep up with his work on the longer poem on which he had nearly given up hope. Morris did continue to "work hard" (I: 51), and the first volume of *The Earthly Paradise* was published the next year.

This letter is significant for the emphasis it placed on the encouragement of the positive reviews. This encouragement, Morris told his best friend, kept him at it. There are a number of partial explanations for such an emphasis. Having

experienced so decided a flop with *The Defense of Guenevere*,¹⁹ Morris could be forgiven for feeling unable, or at least unwilling, to carry on without an indication of support from the critics. Older and, with the faltering of his mining shares and the loss of that income, more in need of financial stability, Morris could also be forgiven for not wanting to undertake another volume of poems at a loss.

Whatever its motivation, this letter demonstrates a significant preoccupation with reception absent from his earlier efforts; indeed it demonstrates a preoccupation with reception at the very heart of the motivation for writing at all. The letter revealed, finally, that Morris saw his work as oriented towards an audience, and that he felt an obligation to please that audience.

Amongst the proceeding correspondence are his responses to those letters of praise of which he was soon to be the frequent recipient. These letters indicated a new orientation towards publicity, as Morris became part of a textual community of letters beyond his Pre-Raphaelite circle. There was a letter from a geologist and paleontologist who wrote to ask Morris his opinion on some aspects of early Scandinavian culture. Another series of letters was an exchange with an undergraduate Edward Williams Byron Nicholson who wrote to ask that Morris look over his poems and offer his opinion and advice. Nicholson was to be more successful as a librarian at the Bodleian, and never did publish any poems (I: 70n1) but this exchange in 1868, the first of its kind for Morris, demonstrates just how quickly he came to occupy a position of public literary authority. His lengthy response to Nicholson shows as well how seriously Morris took up this membership.

¹⁹ One critic condemned its “coarseness and immorality” (*Critical Heritage* 31), another its obscurity: “you cannot quite make out what it means . . . or whether it means anything” (*CH* 46).

Reading these letters through, there is a very real sense of a dynamic expansion of Morris's world in this period into the realms of the literary and intellectual communities of London. This expansion announced the birth of an epithet, as it was from this period and until long past his death that Morris would be identified, in the textual worlds of schoolbooks, monographs, and periodicals, as "William Morris, author of *The Earthly Paradise*." These details in Morris's correspondence illustrate the formation of a new public identity; they also reveal *The Earthly Paradise* as, from its inception, a text that was imagined in terms of this public world, and of course that it was one of the lucky texts that was embraced by that world. If William Morris demonstrated a new preoccupation with publicity during this period, the public was also demonstrating a new preoccupation with him. He became a fixture in periodical literature, and in the world of letters. His name was on the tip of many pens.

Even his detractors criticized Morris in terms of his popularity (or perhaps especially) his detractors. Robert Buchanan's "Fleshly School of Poetry," the famously scathing anti Pre-Raphaelite review of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first volume of poetry, identified Morris as one of its victims. Buchanan imagined the debate on contemporary poetry as a production of *Hamlet* and cast Morris as a Guildenstern presumptuous enough to take Hamlet's spotlight. Buchanan took umbrage not only with the poetry, which he believed to be poor, but also with the performance of a series of public characters. When he wrote, "*The Athenaeum*—once more cautious in such matters—advertise[s] nearly every week some interesting particular about Mr. Swinburne's health, Mr. Morris's holiday-making, or Mr. Rossetti's genealogy" (336), Buchanan was taking issue not only with the fact that Morris and the rest were writing poetry that was more respected than it

deserved to be, but also—and relatedly—that they were figures of public interest and even fascination.²⁰

As we have seen, twentieth century biographers have a problematic relationship to this era in Morris's life. Nevertheless, when it was published, *The Earthly Paradise* brought Morris respect and fame. More importantly, it also gained him entrance into the world of public discourse. The previous chapter ended by considering the ways in which readers encountered the poem privately. This chapter moves outward to the public sphere to consider the ways in which *The Earthly Paradise* contributed to this world of ideas, as it unfolded in discussions in the periodical press. I aim to clarify what cultural assumptions, problems, and debates were in the air and, tracing this line of influence in either direction, to consider both how *The Earthly Paradise* fit into these debates, and what their presence in world of print might have itself brought to a reading of the poem.

No book is released into a vacuum, and this one in particular, which was so intertextual, raises the question of its perceived relationship not only to these other texts, but to the discourses they invoke. *The Earthly Paradise*'s reliance on the familiar stories of history, and the poem's structural emphasis on these stories *as* stories, invites such a reading. We shall consider *The Earthly Paradise*'s interaction with discussions of history, historical and mythical stories, and the extent to which such stories spoke to communal relationships and identities. The source materials from which *The Earthly Paradise* takes its stories had particularly

²⁰ Writing to John Blackwood to complain about the lack of notices of *Middlemarch* in the periodicals, George Henry Lewes expressed a similar sentiment, although not so maliciously, we hope: “not only has the ‘Academy’ has no notice of either Part—but has not even mentioned its appearance among literary intelligence—though if Swinburne has a cold, Rossetti goes to Scotland, or Morris comes to a new edition, it is duly chronicled!” (*Letters of GE*. Vol IV, 13 Feb, 1972).

rich heritages, and were embroiled in a contemporary discussion about the right to speak for and about Victorian England. These sources included classical material, a tradition long at the heart of elite education, and a certain type of English identity; they also included Chaucerian and medieval romance as well as old Northern material, all up-and-comers in the fight for origin stories that often, in their various bids for recognition, explicitly challenged the dominance of the classical material. Although the discourses of these different source materials were not themselves unified, in *The Earthly Paradise*, they were all vying for space in a single work, and above all a work that privileged the unifying power of narrative as at the heart of a community.

What might the presence of each of these stores of stories have meant to the contemporary reader of the poem? How might the cultural status of these differing source materials have influenced, or helped to shape, the reading experience of the poem? I consider in particular the contemporary significance of the intermingling of source materials from different traditions—the classical, the medieval, the old Northern—together in a single work. No single source material's pre-existing cultural framework was sufficient to articulate the mood of the poem, not even the classical inheritance, which would have been the most likely, because of the strength of its cultural power. Indeed, in the reception of *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris was often commended for his judicious and learned treatment of the classical material, which critics spoke of as a shared inheritance, tacitly of class and education. At the same time, critics were keen to discover in one of their own generation a poet of Chaucerian power, with his fresh, energetic, hearty, and of course English, expression, and yet they acknowledged such qualities whilst privileging the quality of the old Northern material, in particular “The Lovers of

Gudrun,” and identifying with what they saw as the believably human characters in that material. No one cultural framework could offer a complete account of the riches critics found in the text, and what emerged instead was a sense of the reception as one in which readers were invited to find themselves at home, in different ways, in each of these discursive fields. This identification with each of these groups of source materials managed, however, to leave a remnant, as Morris, celebrated as the “least modern” of contemporary poets, was also, inevitably, recognized by his contemporaries as one of them. This recognition was articulated through a shared joy in the source material, but also in a shared sense of sadness attributable to none of them.

This sadness was, critics found, a mark of the age. Morris’s invitation for his readers to “Forget” the smoke of contemporary London, worked on the assumption that this desire to not remember united his readers; that it in fact formed a sort of inverse national belief. When critics made encompassing statements, as Morris does here, about a communal relationship or way of feeling about the contemporary predicament they all found themselves in, it invited a reading of the communal effects of the poem, and granted permission for the poem to articulate for them what that predicament felt like. To speak to or reflect a group of people to themselves is precisely the work of epic, a genre through which *The Earthly Paradise* is occasionally interpreted. While there is no critical consensus, then or now, about its status as epic, this generic hesitation is at the heart of most epic reception in the nineteenth century, a century that often believed itself be incapable of producing epic poetry at all. I trace the reception of *The Earthly Paradise*’s sadness, and the sense, in reviews of the poem, of historical time and a sense of belatedness as they offered an opportunity to reflect

on the age, in order to contextualise the poem in terms of the ongoing debates about the function and the presence of epic in the nineteenth century.

Such a reading is apposite if for no other reason than that a number of epics by significant English authors were released between 1868 and 1869 alone, suggesting that the epic was very much on the minds of certain sorts of readers in this period. In 1868, in addition to Morris's epic contribution, Robert Browning published the first part of *The Ring and the Book* and George Eliot released *The Spanish Gypsy*.²¹ A year later, Tennyson published the long awaited *Holy Grail* installment of his ongoing *Idylls of the King*.²² This reading does not presume to offer a comprehensive study of Browning and Tennyson, or even of *The Ring and the Book* or *The Idylls of the King*, but rather reads the reviews of these authors in terms of this particular poetic moment in order to see what the coincidence of their publication has to reveal about the case of *The Earthly Paradise*. I read these reviews specifically as a discussion of epic poetry in the periodical literature of the time, looking for evidence of reading practices and attitudes towards the epic. I am particular interested in those reviews of Tennyson and Browning when they are written by journalists who are in the same period and for the same periodicals reviewing Morris as well. This chapter will look at the question of *The Earthly Paradise's* contemporary reception, and at its own conception of the relationship

²¹ To keep the comparison from becoming ungainly, I focus only on Browning, Tennyson, and Morris. *The Spanish Gypsy* was the least successful of the four epics, a problem exacerbated by modern scholarship. *The Spanish Gypsy* is left out of *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* altogether. Nevertheless, a preliminary consultation of the reviews of *The Spanish Gypsy* suggest that it was reviewed similarly to Browning's work of the period: it was found to be difficult, psychological, and subtle (though often also declared worth the effort).

²² I am grateful to Herbert Tucker for pointing out this happy coincidence in his book *Epic*; he calls 1868 the "annus mirabilis" (391) of epic poetry, although he mistakenly lists *The Holy Grail* as being published that year as well, rather than a year later in 1869.

between text and audience, through a reading of how this period understood its own production of the epic—that most public of poetic genres—and its relationship with the reader. What is revealed is a reading practice that makes epic the daily life of the reader of *The Earthly Paradise*. In Morris's poem critics discovered a stance in relation to the world that felt not like escape, but resistance, and one that reframed the relationship between the reader and the “empty day” as an epic struggle, thereby imagining the very impossibility of epic as itself epic.

The Sources

Where did the stories that made up *The Earthly Paradise* come from? Very little in it is entirely of Morris's original invention, although it is all, of course, marked with Morris's hand. Some of these source materials, for example Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, would have been familiar in name if not in content, to most of his readers, while others, like the store of classical material, would be remembered, especially by a certain type of reader, from childhood schooldays or, in the case of female readers, from overheard discussions of brothers' and fathers' childhood schooldays. As a result, readers would have come to the poem with foreknowledge, varying in depth, carrying its own assumptions and connections. May Morris had previously outlined many of these through her editorship of her father's *Complete Works*. In her more recent scholarly edition of the poem, Florence S. Boos has supplemented this work, identifying more sources used in *The Earthly Paradise*. Some of this work reveals a number of lesser-known source materials, but these are for the most part supplementary. Most of Morris's tales, both classical and medieval, had one or two primary sources on which he based his tale, with a series of secondary sources offering some supplementary detail. These main sources were often not very

obscure. In particular, the chosen sources for the Greek and Roman tales, in a country that still gave its (upper, and increasingly middle class) boys a classical education, were very well known. His chief sources are mainly compendia, which as source materials, are both relatively brief, and relatively accessible. These include Pseudo-Apollodorus's dictionary of Greek mythology, the *Bibliotheca*,²³ Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, the medieval Latin text the *Gesta Romanorum* and, to a certain extent, Mandeville's *Travels* as well. For the classical tales, Morris also drew on Herodotus, Homer, and relied heavily on Ovid.²⁴ He used his *Metamorphoses* on several occasions, as well as *Ars Amatoria* and *Heroides*.²⁵

The most regularly consulted source for the classical tales was, however, simply Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, a well-known reference book in the period. Of the twelve classical tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, at least seven take the *Classical Dictionary* as their main source.²⁶ Lemprière's *Dictionary* was accessible and ubiquitous amongst those who were exposed to the classics, especially as children. It was symbolic of a certain type of primary education in the classical tradition. An 1867 article in *Fraser's Magazine*, in the course of reviewing the recent *Manual of Mythology*, called the *Dictionary* an "old friend" ("Cox's Mythology" 216) to all, citing it as the most likely source for most readers' first acquaintance with the

²³ "The Death of Paris"; "Bellerophon in Lycia"; "The Doom of King Acrisius"; "The Love of Alcestis."

²⁴ For Victorians, Ovid was a (potentially over-used), popular contemporary classical author. Speaking not just of the nineteenth century, but of the entire Western canon, Charles Martindale opens his anthology of essays on Ovidian influence emphatically: "Ovid is everywhere" (1). Norman Vance, speaking more specifically on Victorian contexts also argues for Ovid's ubiquity, but he is more ambivalent, calling him "part of the Victorian literary consciousness, but a small conveniently detachable part often concealed behind intermediaries" (174).

²⁵ "Atalanta's Race"; "The Doom of King Acrisius"; "Pygmalion and the Image"; "The Death of Paris".

²⁶ "The Story of Acontius and Cydippe"; "The Story of Rhodope"; "The Golden Apples"; "Bellerophon at Argos" and "Bellerophone in Lycia"; "Atalanta's Race"; "The Doom of King Acrisius".

classics. “If not particularly attractive in itself,” wrote the reviewer, it is “still sufficiently complete to furnish the information once likely to be required for reproduction, and sufficiently amusing to induce a schoolboy, generally, to spend, or waste, a good deal of time upon it” (“Cox’s Mythology” 216). Such a comment takes for granted the cultural comfort of readers with a certain type of classical education, and places Lemprière’s *Dictionary* at its very origins.

Critics often discovered in *The Earthly Paradise* the quotidian familiarity of the sort bred by the *Classical Dictionary*, and it was in particular the classical tales that were old friends. Critics often remarked on the shared previous acquaintance with these stories. Elizabeth Hasell in *Blackwood’s* noted the tales’ “familiar outlines” (57). Sidney Colvin, for *The Academy*, described Morris’s plots as comprising “incidents foreknown in the main to all of us” (57). The anonymous reviewer for *The Saturday Review* (May 1868), in the notice of the first volume, called the work’s alternating tale structure “exceedingly judicious, as the tales of the wanderers transport the reader to fresh ground, while those of the Greeks show him . . . how much of what is rare and evergreen is to be found on the beaten track” (“Earthly Paradise” 730). The clear reliance on Lemprière’s *Dictionary* clarifies this familiarity; these tales had likely been schoolday companions, and part of a shared educational and cultural inheritance. Morris’s skill in mastering and articulating these various source materials was well admired. One critic for *The London Quarterly Review* (January 1870) goes so far as to suggest that *The Earthly Paradise* could be a text to replace the *Classical Dictionary* as the work that first introduced these tales and characters to young people. Arguing that “familiarity with the larger outlines” (“Morris’s Poetry” 339) of classical subjects was worthwhile for “any generation” (“Morris’s Poetry” 339), because of the imaginative richness of *The Earthly Paradise*,

measured against the dry treatment of the same subjects in the *Dictionary*, he argued: “it is better that we should gather this familiarity from books such as these, than from such as Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*” (“Morris’s Poetry” 339).

Of course this assumption of familiarity with Lemprière interpellates readers in a particular way, speaking to an imagined reader who is well versed in his classics. Consider the difference between such an address and this one, from an April 1868 review in *Sixpenny Magazine* that made no such assumptions about Tennyson’s readers, although it acknowledged the type. Isidore Ascher, in the course of the comments on Tennyson’s accessibility, wrote: “his mythological allusions scattered through the poem . . . give it a learned flavour to all those who have no occasion to open their Lemprière in order to be wise and must even charm those who are well-up on their mythology” (Ascher 62). *The Earthly Paradise*’s popularity was not so widespread, nor was William Morris so well-known, that he was reviewed in the more populist periodicals such as *The Sixpenny Magazine*, and unlike Tennyson, his imagined readership was specifically those who were well versed in their Lemprière. *The Earthly Paradise* is even assessed as an imaginative parallel text to this bastion of classical education.

We have seen *The Saturday Review* refer to *The Earthly Paradise*’s so-called medieval tales as fresh ground, and compared to the well-worn territory of the classical material they certainly were. The classical tales represented a relatively cohesive tradition of learning and culture, while the sources of the medieval tales were less so, coming to *The Earthly Paradise* via a number of different traditions. “The Man Who Never Laughed Again” was a modified version of a tale from *The*

Thousand and One Nights. Two²⁷ of Morris's tales "The Lovers of Gudrun" and "The Fostering of Aslaug" were based on the Icelandic sagas, the *Laxdaela Saga* and the *Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok* respectively, while The Wanderers' Tale, and the seafaring wanderers themselves, were from Norway, and took to the sea like the exploring Vikings of the past.²⁸

The Icelandic saga tales, in particular "The Lovers of Gudrun"²⁹ cast a long shadow. It was a real attraction of the poem, and critics were eager to discuss it. In their responses, however, critics did not have recourse to a well-established and wide-spread tradition, in England, of saga literature and other Northern tales more generally. During this period, however the discourse surrounding this old Northern source material was evolving and expanding, attracting the attention of more scholars and readers. Nevertheless, unlike the classical and other medieval sources, it could not be assumed, even in a general way, that the material of the Icelandic sagas would have been familiar to readers of *The Earthly Paradise*. In this way it differs from the ignorance associated with Chaucer, who was also during this period in the midst of a renewed campaign for his significance. In the case of Chaucer, however, he occupied an ambiguous position in which he was both known and not known, everywhere assumed to be loved but also assumed to be unread. In the case of the Northern material, however, *The Earthly Paradise* was in the vanguard. Indeed, Eiríkur

²⁷ "Ogier the Dane," the medieval tale for August, sounds Northern, but has French origin, and Morris's source here is Comte de Tressan's "Ogier le Danois" from his 1782 work *Corps d'extraits de Romans de Chevalerie* (EP Vol 1 635), while "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" shares a title with a story from Dasent's *Popular Tales from the Norse*, but is otherwise unrelated (EP. Vol 2 32).

²⁸ Florence Boos' annotations of "The Wanderers' Tale" in her edition of *The Earthly Paradise* include a discussion of their debt to Samuel Laing.

²⁹ See Chapter 9 "William Morris and the Old Grey North" in Andrew Wawn's *Vikings and Victorians* for a discussion of Morris and the sagas, as well as Linda Julian's "The Laxdaela Saga and 'The Lovers of Gudrun': Morris's Poetic Vision." *Victorian Poetry* 34.3 (Autumn 1996); and Simon Dentith, "'Morris, 'The Great Story of the North', and the Barbaric Past.'" *Journal of Victorian Culture*.

Magnússon cited “The Lovers of Gudrun” as one text that introduced the sagas to “wider circles” (qtd in Wawn 263).

Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales* were not, strictly speaking, source materials for *The Earthly Paradise*. No tale within the text drew explicitly on Chaucer’s work. He is, however, addressed by name, once in the Prologue and once in the Envoi. The notion of a group of strangers coming together to exchange tales is of course evocative of a similar set up in *The Canterbury Tales*,³⁰ but for the most part, the associations with Chaucer were encouraged in the reviews themselves, which made much of the similarities in style, although not unreservedly, as we shall see. Although not Chaucer’s, the majority of Morris’s medieval tales were from Western European sources in Latin, French and English originating in France and England. These were less consistently reused than the classical source texts, although *The travels of Sir John Mandeville* was a recurring source,³¹ and there were a number of tales also recognizable from *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, a well-reviewed and relatively popular contemporary volume by Sabine Baring-Gould that had been published a few years earlier in 1865.³²

Morris’s most used source for the medieval tales, however, was the *Gesta Romanorum*.³³ This text, like Lemprière’s *Dictionary*, was a compendium. Although it was not at all as well known, it was nevertheless referenced enough in the period to

³⁰ As well, of course, as Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

³¹ “The Lady of the Land”; “The Watching of the Falcon”;

³² “The Ring Given to Venus”; “The Hill of Venus”.

³³ “The Man Born to be King”; “The Proud King”; “The Writing on the Image”; The Early English Texts Society published an English version, but not until 1879. Its introduction began: “perhaps there is no work among those composed before the invention of printing, of which the popularity has been so great and the history so obscure, as the compilation known under the title of the *Gesta Romanorum*” (vii). There were a number of English translations throughout the centuries, however, including the 1824 edition translated by Rev. Charles Swan, and promising to deliver “entertaining moral stories”. This translation went through several editions and forms in the nineteenth century.

suggest some modest cultural awareness. There are some references in the more intellectual periodical literature, for example an August 1868 *Dublin University Magazine* article called “Book Hunting in the Middle Ages,” offered a summary and a description of the work. More often, however, references cropped up in the lighter periodical literature, and made connections between it and storytelling, rather than the schoolboy scholarship that Lemprière invoked, which as it did not belong to the classical tradition, was not surprising. In 1867 Elizabeth Louise Herney contributed the story “The Singer of the Sea” to *Once a Week*. The tale, Herney wrote, “will be found in the notes to the ‘Gesta Romanorum’.” (602). In 1866, the *Gesta Romanorum* received an off-hand mention in *All the Year Round*, in a play on the word ‘jest’ in an article about John Skelton’s *Merie Tales*. A critic for *The Reader*, in an 1866 review of *Curious Myths* was skeptical of Baring-Gould’s archaeological approach, writing that just “because a story was told in the ‘Gesta Romanorum’ six hundred years ago is no reason why its counterpart should not have occurred again, even at such places as Lewes in Sussex the other day” (“Curious Myths” 905). Laura Valentine, in an article called “Story-Telling, Past and Present” in *Sharpe’s London Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction for General Reading*, traced a history of the storyteller, writing in part: “the subtle, sarcastic, sometimes witty, too often coarse stories of the *Gesta Romanorum* and the *Centro Novelle Antiche* were clothed in the magic style of Boccaccio, and from that day prose fiction became an established fact” (Valentine 6). She further traced the “charming fancy of Portia’s three caskets” (Valentine 6) in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, to the *Gesta Romanorum*. Such examples demonstrate that while this medieval compendium would have had nothing like the ubiquity of the *Classical Dictionary*, it was available to be referenced off-

hand as a medieval text.³⁴ This association with the less highbrow journals, and the associated focus on the storytelling connections contrast with Lemprière's affiliation with the more elite realms of classical education; it suggests that the *Gesta Romanorum* was, while not as a medieval Latin text, precisely populist, nevertheless associated with folktale forms of storytelling.

Morris himself was seen to straddle a line between scholarship and storytelling. These two strains, as represented by approaches to the *Classical Dictionary* and the *Gesta Romanorum*, are equally present in the reactions to *The Earthly Paradise*. The critic for *The Saturday Review* suggested *The Earthly Paradise* could improve upon Lemprière's *Dictionary* because it was at once learned and imaginative. Endorsements for the credibility of Morris's scholarship ran through the contemporary reception of the poem. The author of an 1871 review of a reprint edition of Baring-Gould's *Curious Myths* in *The Illustrated Review* justified reviewing Baring-Gould's book, now several years old, on the grounds that the cultural moment of *The Earthly Paradise* justified revisiting other "collections of myth-lore" ("Curious Myths" 441). Making note of the similarities between the two works, and suggesting Baring-Gould's work might help to "illustrate" and "interpret" *The Earthly Paradise*, he nevertheless assured readers that "we do not mean to say that one so versed in Icelandic Sagas, Scandinavian legends, and native Tales of the Norse, has needed to go to Mr. Baring-Gould's researches for the materials"

³⁴ Morris's other medieval inspirations also made appearances in the periodical literature. Marie de France, whose *Lais* are one of Morris's medieval sources, was referenced in Valentine's article as well, and was again discussed in *Sharpe's London Magazine* as well as in *Chamber's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Arts*, both in May 1870, and in both cases during the course of an article about women and the middle ages. The July 1868 issue of *Belgravia* offered a story called "The Lady of the Land: Adapted from Sir John Mandeville" and an 1867 article on the divining rod in *All the Year Round* was prompted, the writer informs his readers, by Baring-Gould's "remarkable book" (391).

(“Curious Myths” 441) of his texts. Nevertheless, What Baring-Gould’s volume offered, argued the critic, was something for those “who have neither the time nor inclination for deep research . . . and the author of them deserves the praise of having made accessible in a popular shape the prose forms of those poems which Morris has succeeded in rendering attractive to modern ears” (“Curious Myths” 441). These observations suggest a similar distinction to the one evoked in the comparison of the reference to the *Classical Dictionary* in the Tennyson and Morris reviews. In both of these cases, Morris’s contribution is framed as more rigorous, although still accessible. An anonymous writer for *Tinsley’s Magazine*, in an 1870 article on several recent saga translations, including Morris and Magnusson’s, wrote: “some critics have been grumbling that ‘other men could translate sagas, ‘but no other could finish *The Earthly Paradise* for us’” (“Later Labours” 457). Not so, he argued, “there is . . . scarcely a man who could furnish so thoroughly a rendering of the word and spirit of an Icelandic Saga as could the author of *Jason* and *Earthly Paradise*” (“Later Labours” 457). Such remarks yoked Morris’s imaginative engagement with his more intellectual credentials, so that he was both edifying and enjoyable. Taken together, they also suggest that a large part of Morris’s appeal, and the respect and trust he was afforded, was located in his seeming mastery over this diffuse collection of cultural and storytelling materials.

Telling stories about the past: Challenges to the Classical Tradition

That *The Earthly Paradise* used historical sources was not unusual. It is hardly necessary to say that many works in the period found their inspiration in historical

contexts, characters, and stories.³⁵ Contemporary debates about the place for old Northern stories, Chaucer studies, and the English cultural reliance (in particular in elite education) on the classical tradition were some of the ways Victorian readers and writers negotiated a relationship to their own sense of themselves through a discussion of the past. In each of these cases, by engaging with these characters and stories in *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris is in amongst the crowd. What was unusual about the case of *The Earthly Paradise* was the way these diverse source materials came together in a single work. What makes this inter-mingling particularly noteworthy was that the discursive fields surrounding each of the groups of texts that made up the influences and sources of *The Earthly Paradise*: the classical, the Chaucerian, and the old Northern, were undergoing periods of shift, growth or change when *The Earthly Paradise* was first published.

A Liberal Education

The influence of the classical tradition in the nineteenth century was both wide-reaching and multi-faceted. It was available as a model, as a justification, and as a field of discourse for romantic revolutionaries, for liberal humanist democracy, and for imperialist politics. The type of classical discourse evoked by the engagement with this material in *The Earthly Paradise* is, however, one at the source of many of

³⁵ See, for example Simon Goldhill in *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*: “it was a commonplace of nineteenth-century writing that Victorian England was a great age and was acutely aware of it. Yet it is also striking just how intensely and repeatedly the rapidly changing culture of Britain expressed its concerns, projected its ideals, and explored its sense of self through images of the *past*” (24 emphasis in the original); and Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*: “Although the Victorians obviously did not discover the classics, they did make the antique past and its peoples uniquely their own. Classical literature—philosophy, mythology, and history—provided a means for achieving self-knowledge and cultural self-confidence within the emerging order of liberal democracy and secularism” (xii).

the tradition's subsequent mobilizations: its status and value as the form of a liberal education, a status that was undergoing vigorous debate during this period. The critic for *The Examiner* (6 June) called Morris's poem—not unkindly—a very good “Oxford prize poem” (“The Earthly Paradise” 356). In *The Illustrated Review*'s long biographical article on William Morris, the author took imaginative pleasure in the image of Morris both as an entrepreneur and poet. As a poet he was associated explicitly with his university education:

it is something, surely, when, in the midst of a vast and roaring mart like London, a willing concourse can be gathered around one of the young Sons of Commerce, *fresh from college*—one who, while donning the singing robes, takes pride in toiling and moiling to the last among the busiest of his fellow workers. (“Morris” 161 emphasis added)

Here Morris's education occupies the centre of this imagined sketch. References, such as the one in *The Saturday Review*, to the “beaten track” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 730) of Morris's classical source material, the comparison with Lemprière's *Dictionary*, and other texts of a shared education, the accessible but knowing approach to the material, are all discussed as aspects of an inherited high culture. The discussion of the role of the classics, as it unfolded in the periodical press's response to *The Earthly Paradise*, was at least in part a discussion of a shared experience of the same liberal education, which was treated with significant respect in the reviews. Morris was commended for having chosen such a noble foundation for his work. “Familiarity with the larger outlines of these subjects is a thing desirable for any generation” (“Morris's Poetry” 339) wrote the critic for the *London Quarterly Review* (January 1870), while *The Saturday Review*'s May 1868 notice declared: “classical subjects are the fittest and worthiest upon which to bestow toil and moil” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 730). *Blackwood's* commended Morris for having “contrived to reap all the advantages which an antique model should bestow” (Hasell 57).

Moreover, Morris is commended for his mastery over the material, and for bringing it to heel. The classicism of *The Earthly Paradise* was decorous, appropriate, well managed. *The Saturday Review*, having just contrasted the “beauty and ideal of the Greek model” with the “rougher and ruder fancy” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 730) of the medieval tales, still acknowledged the need for Morris to temper them, commending him for writing the tales in such a way that they offered access for “wives and daughters” to a “refined though not undiluted version of those wonderful creations of Greek fancy which the rougher sex alone is permitted to imbibe at first hand” (“Part I” 730). The critic for the *London Quarterly Review* described the scene in “The Doom of King Acrisius,” in which Jove rapes Danae, as “entirely purified of all barbaric warmth, and we are enabled to take it as a specimen of Greek legend; retaining all its child-like freshness, but overlaid with an exquisite delicacy new to its fabric” (“Morris’s Poetry” 353). Hasell similarly argued that in his dealings with classical myth Morris “softens down its more repulsive features . . . but he had imbibed fully the spirit of the story” (Hasell 65). Such assessments identify Morris as mastering, but also interpreting, the classical material for his contemporary audience, a delicate balance that once again tacitly identifies the types of classics under discussion as of the establishment.

The self-surveillance of this world circumscribed by a shared liberal education and, by extension, its shared values, was revealed in small moments, as in the December 1869 *Saturday Review* article, which sang the praises of “The Land East of the Sun West of the Moon” and “The Lovers of Gudrun,” and favourably compared Morris’s writing to Chaucer’s. It nevertheless had this parenthetical criticism: “(why on earth should Mr. Morris provoke the shade of Ovid, and the wrath of everyone who is familiar with Latin poetry, by spelling this worthy’s name with a double

‘cc’?)” (“Earthly Paradise: Part II” 772).³⁶ These comments had the effect of both restricting and identifying a group in the know.³⁷ If Morris was included in the public demarcated by the knowledge of Latin poetry, his participation required certain consistently displayed credentials in order not to cause derision or alarm.

A classical education had been the education in England for centuries for the upper classes and by the nineteenth century for many in the middle classes³⁸ as well, and it was an aspirational ideal for many others. This classical education was largely the painstaking—and from all accounts excruciating—acquisition of Greek and Latin that moved from rote memorization to composition, sometimes culminating with the success of the prize poem to which *The Examiner* compared *The Earthly Paradise*. By the mid-nineteenth century momentum had built to challenge the pedagogical stronghold of a liberal education. This was spurred on in part in the 1860s by the three commissioned reports into the state of the three tiers of education in England. *Essays on a Liberal Education*, published in 1867, was one influential volume that responded

³⁶ In her modern edition, Boos appeases this early critic, and Acontius is spelled with only one ‘c’.

³⁷ See, for example, Frank Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*: “That now dissipated general familiarity with the classics was once one of the distinguishing and self-defining marks of the social and intellectual elite of Europe” (4); and Christopher Stray, “The first century of the Classical Tripos (1822-1922): High Culture and the Politics of Curriculum”: “The expansion of the reformed public schools was linked to the growth of an urban bourgeoisie concerned to maintain social distance from its presumed inferiors. The establishment of classical examinations, at a time when entry rates to the ancient universities had been rising fast for several years, can be related to this enlarged intake. Classics was the preferred knowledge of gentlemen and of those who wanted their sons to be gentlemen” (2).

³⁸ While it is certainly true that classical education was the purview of the upper classes, its trickle (slightly) down effects were widespread for Latin, if not for Greek. See, for example, Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*: “Outside the great public schools hundreds of grammar schools and possibly thousands of private schools offered at least a smattering of Latin. Government commissioners in the 1860s recommended that even middle-class boys likely to leave school altogether at the age of fourteen should be taught the rudiments of Latin, as ‘a knowledge of Latin supplies a bridge to span the gulf that would otherwise separate scholars of this grade from the world of culture’” (15).

to The Clarendon Report, which of the three pedagogical investigations was the report that looked at the nine major public schools in England. The Clarendon Report discovered, among other things, that these schools were spending over half their lessons—eleven out of a possible twenty—on the classics (Goldhill 2). The call for knowledge of ‘things not words’ was a repeated refrain of these essays, and indeed of a whole movement of education reform that sought to break the stronghold of Greek and Latin grammar and composition.

The arguments in favour of a classical education were many, but one significant one was summarized in an article for *The North British Review* (June 1868) commenting on the ongoing debate: “Modern nations are too much like ourselves; Oriental nations are altogether remote and apart: Greece and Rome alone present this strange combination—are unlike us, yet closely connected with us” (“Liberal Education” 312). It was this sense of connection both real and imagined (and real because imagined), strengthened over centuries of classical education, that made this tradition available to articulate the struggles and the values of a great power. As Rome and Greece were, so Britain is.

There were many challenges to this commonplace, as put forward by reformers including those contributors to *Essays on a Liberal Education*. Among these challenges was the bid for new and improved origin stories. At the centre of many of these essays was the question of the relationship between England and the classics. There were specific complaints directed at what it was that the curriculum left out: namely any systematic study of the English language or of English literature, and of any course of study in the sciences. The essays often took stock of England’s position in the Europe, and all writers took it as read that England was woefully behind many nations, in particular Germany and France. In this way the need for

reform was strongly linked to a sense of what constituted an appropriate and respectable English identity on the European stage. Contributor John Seeley was particularly forthright on that subject: “[the] barrenness in ideas, [the] contempt for principles, [the] Philistinism which we hardly deny to be an English characteristic now, was not always so” (177). Insisting that the national character could be improved by a more vigorous and useful education, Seeley dismantled a home truth of English identity: “it is not then the English character which is averse to thought; we are not naturally the plain practical people that we sometimes boast, and sometimes blush to be” (177-178).

These criticisms, and the connections they drew between problems with English identity and an over-reliance on classical education, suggested a desire for new traditions. In his contribution “The Theory of Classical Education,” Henry Sidgwick acknowledged contemporary debts to the ancients, but suggested there was much to be learned from “French, German, and English thought of recent centuries” in order to understand “the intellectual life of our own age” (103). Sidgwick argued as well for the need for such education to be pleasurable. The solution to a host of problems, was more literature, not less: “if the middle-class Englishman (as he is continually told) is narrow, unrefined, conventional, ignorant of what is really good and really evil in human life,” he argued, “it is not because these persons have had a literary education, which their ‘invincible brutality’ has rendered inefficacious: it is because the education has not been (to them) literary: their minds have been simply put through various unmeaning linguistic exercises” (129). Such arguments privilege the work of literature in education, whilst simultaneously urging that it be freed from the monopoly of the classical tradition. What is more, these arguments are justified through a reference to the improvement of a national English character.

Old Northernism

Meanwhile, other discourses were eagerly pushing their boundaries. An anonymous critic, in a review of volume II of Baring-Gould's *Curious Myths*, the critic for *The Examiner* wrote:

Just as the old Greek and Roman legends of Hercules, Romulus, and Lucretia, for a long time believed, then merely disbelieved, are now looked upon as valuable evidence concerning the state and the character of races at the periods to which they belong, so we are beginning to find, in all our own myths and romances, a much greater value than would attach to them could they be stripped of all their quaint extravagances and brought within the proportions of orthodox history. ("Notes on the Folklore" 790)

As with the contributors to *Essays on a Liberal Education*, arguments such as this drew direct links between the stories of people *as stories* and their origin-articulating work. Those interested in Chaucer, in Early English texts, and in old Northern literature felt that both their fields of inquiry, and the stories they contained, had been overlooked, and that there was now a new and blossoming interest.³⁹

In an article called "Recent works on Icelandic Literature" for *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review*, the writer declared: "the old ignorance of Scandinavian literature has passed away, and given place to zealous study . . . the winter—the long dark winter—is past and gone" ("Icelandic Literature" 238). *The Illustrated Review*, in a notice of Julia Goddard's recent children's book called *Wonderful Stories from Northern Lands*, acknowledged the scarcity in England of published material on the saga, and commended Goddard for writing a volume that

³⁹ In the case of the Northern literature, justification for newly invigorated pursuits was found partially in linguistic evidence: "By challenging the existing Graeco-Roman linguistic (and cultural) hegemony, the new philology encouraged the investigation and celebration of other literatures and cultures previously deemed barbaric by classically trained chroniclers and scholars" (Wawn 62-63).

would introduce English children to the stories already loved in other “northern nations” (“Wonderful Stories” 298).⁴⁰

Interest involved, as with Goddard’s book, the general reader, but also the scholar, and in the mid-century two old Northernists had both written galvanizing manifestos, outlining the cultural importance of old Northernism, and situating it within the Western literary tradition. George Webbe Dasent was, as Andrew Wawn writes in *Vikings and Victorians*, “mid-Victorian Britain’s most accomplished old northernist” (194). Samuel Laing’s translation of the *Heimskringla*, meanwhile, was one of a “handful of canonical texts of Victorian old northernism” (Wawn 92). In Laing’s Preliminary Dissertation, which prefaced the *Heimskringla*, and in Dasent’s introduction to his *Popular Tales from the Norse*, both men looked to contextualise the literary work of Northern cultures within the Western canon, and both used the language of tyranny to frame their discussions of classical influence on the Western world. In his Preliminary Dissertation, Laing dismissed the value of the Roman influence on Britain, calling it fundamentally “despotic” and “material” (7), while the Norse influence was both “deeper” and “nobler” (7). All of Europe would have been one “vast den of slaves” (8) if not for the Vikings and their Germanic tribesmen who, in Laing’s telling of it, alone kept life from being nasty, brutish and short, introducing a civilizing influence which could claim no less than a list that included “all that men hope for of good government and future improvement in the physical and moral condition,” as well as “civil, religious and political liberty—the British constitution, representative legislature, the trial by jury, security of property, freedom of mind and person, the influence of public opinion over the conduct of public affairs, the Reformation, the liberty of the Press, the spirit of the Age” (7).

⁴⁰ See Wawn, p.197-201, for discussion of “attempt[s] to introduce Viking-age mythology to young Victorian readers” (197).

George Dasent's argument, in his introduction to *Popular Tales from the Norse* emphasized the links between a culture and its stories and hoped for greater attention to be paid. He hailed Jacob Grimm as a sort of philological freedom fighter who "[threw] off the yoke of classical tyranny, and claim[ed] for all dialects of ancient speech a right of ancient inheritance and perfect freedom before unsuspected and unknown" (xi). Dasent shared in the anxiety that English readers were being forced to import their own cultural inheritances. Mourning the loss of the days when "English nurses told these tales to English children by force of memory and word of mouth" (x), like the contributors to *Essays on a Liberal Education*, he saw some aspect of the English identity as compromised by these stories' exile from the cultural collection.⁴¹

Laing and Dasent's arguments that English identity could be partially traced through these Northern influences were reflected in the reception of the Northern aspects of *The Earthly Paradise*, in which critics showed significant interest. Critics were particularly fascinated by "The Lovers of Gudrun." Morris himself called it the best of *The Earthly Paradise*.⁴² It is also the clearest articulation—aside from the seafaring Wanderers themselves—of the Northern influences in the poem. John Skelton

⁴¹ Christopher Fee, in *Gods, Heroes, and Kings* argues that the British experience is a unique blended one: "'In Britain, as nowhere else in Europe, Germanic, Celtic, classical, and Christian influences came into contact, conflict, and eventually confluence; the consequent assemblage of ancient heroes, gods, and practices resulted, long after 'pagan' beliefs were assumed dead and gone, in a particularly rich, fertile, and volatile medieval literary tradition, a tradition through which it is possible to gain genuine insight into the shadowy gods of ancient Britain" (6).

⁴² "The story in question I think on the whole the most important thing I have written; the deeper I got into the old tale the more interested I found myself, and now it is finished, I feel somewhat used up" (*Letters* Vol I. 82) and "I am delighted to have pleased you with the Gudrun; for the rest I am rather painfully conscious myself that the book would have done me more credit if there had been nothing in it but the Gudrun, though I don't think the others quite the worst things I have done—et they are all too long and flabby—damn it!" (*Letters* Vol. I 100).

wrote that while he thought very well of the “Greek stories,” still “it is impossible not to feel that, exquisite though they are, they lie in many respects apart from us” (“Morris and Arnold” 235). Not so with the Northern stories, in which “we feel that we are dealing with our own ancestors, and that there is a root of reality even in their most grotesque superstitions” (“Morris and Arnold” 235). In a commentary on “The Story of Rhodope,” *Blackwood’s* (May 1870) set up a tacit distinction between Greek and northern as between ancient and modern, arguing that “the atmosphere is not Greek, but northern,” and that Rhodope is not a “primitive classical maiden, but a musing modern one” (“New Books” 646). This sense of the relative modernity of this old Northern material extended beyond the reviews of *The Earthly Paradise*. The author of an 1871 *London Quarterly Review* (April 1871) article on the Icelandic Sagas compared them to modern novels: “except for their priceless simplicity and foster-childhood to a fresh and dauntless mode of life these tellings of the early Northmen correspond with our modern fictions, which purport to reflect our complex modern life in its innumerable phases, as those reflected in the simpler life of old” (“The Prose or Younger Edda” 37). The presence of these tales, then, offered a different form of identification than that offered by the classical material which, while culturally familiar, was peopled by characters and actions here demonstrated to have been in some fundamental ways, impossibly distant.

In an impassioned dissection of “Gudrun,” G. W. Cox in *The Edinburgh Review* sought to contextualise the behaviour of the tale’s main characters in terms of the morality of his own culture. The result was an uncanny uneasiness with characters at once similar and strange. First he established parallels. On the subject of Kiartan’s marriage to Refna and not Ingibiorg, he evoked an ancient, but yet a Christian text: “it would not be easy to find a parallel to this mingled baseness and absurdity, unless

perhaps we look for it in the confessions of Augustine, who sends away the long-loved mother of his child because he wishes to marry a Milanese lady” (263). As Cox followed Kiartan’s romantic entanglements further he grew frustrated at the depiction of his behaviour, which he found doubly unbelievable on the grounds of proper Christian comportment and the conventions of Icelandic culture: “this is intolerable . . . what we would have is the plain duty of a Christian man”(263). Meanwhile, “according to the Icelandic ethics of the day, all might be settled on Gudrun’s part by an appeal to the divorce court” (263). Such frustrations demonstrate an assumption that Kiartan behave believably, because he is recognizably ‘like us.’

In an article on the sagas in *Tinsley’s Magazine*, a critic wrote that a saga “claims respect in its degree as unquestionably as an Illiad or an Odyssey, an Imitation of Christ or a Divine Comedy” (“Later Labours” 457), and there is certainly the sense that critics were not insensitive to the cultural weight of these materials. Although links were made between the northern tales and the classical tradition, the verisimilitude demanded of the former material differed in kind from that of the latter. In his review, G. A. Simcox compared Kiartan, from “The Lovers of Gudrun,” to Achilles, and it is only his failure to protest with the same “unrestrained eloquence” (121) as Achilles that kept the tale from belonging to the “same order as Homer’s” (122). Nevertheless, while it was certainly the case that critics sometimes found their credulity strained in the course of the classical tales, their protests were rarely that the characters behave as they themselves would have. Cox also says as much:

It may, indeed, be said that if there are horrors here, there are also horrors in the story of Jason. But when we get among fire-breathing bulls, and men springing up after the sowing of dragon’s teeth, and the marvels wrought by the wise Colchian maiden, our thoughts pass at once into another channel, where the contrast of the tale of Gudrun with the laws which underlie all our social life is not forced upon us. (Cox 264)

The interest in the northern source materials and in the northern tales was not as pronounced as the interest in the classical tales, but it was nevertheless present. What is more, the old Northern material was treated as historical, and therefore real in a way that the classical material was not.

Chaucer in the mid-Nineteenth Century

In 1864 Furnivall founded The Early English Texts Society and four years later, in 1868, he also founded the Chaucer Society.⁴³ An anonymous reviewer, in an article on “Early English Texts” in *The British Quarterly Review*, praised the small manuscripts clubs such as the Roxburghe for what work they had done, but acknowledged the limitations of such a project: “the numbers of copies is so small, and their commercial value so great, that they are placed almost as far beyond the reach of the ordinary literary man as the manuscripts themselves” (“Early English Texts” 329). His hope for the Early English Text Society was one he quoted from its prospectus: “I should rejoice to see my books in the hands of a hundred, where they are now on the shelves of one” (qtd in “Early English Texts” 329). In *The Academy*, George Waring observed: “the fact that the critical study of Chaucer had now taken real hold of the minds of the English, American, and German scholars may be hailed as a tide-mark of progress in the history of our literature” (Waring 33).

⁴³ In David Matthews’ *The Making of Middle English*, he notes that the Chaucer Society was a separate enterprise from the more general mandate of the Early English Text Society in part because the challenges were quite distinct. While the texts of the EETS were quite rare and existed only in one or two manuscripts, were often privately owned, and had no known authorship, Chaucer’s case was quite different. His work had been consistently available for centuries and his authorship had always been known (even if his biography had been unclear). “Insofar as [Chaucer editors] were rescuing Chaucer’s text, they were rescuing it not from obscurity, but from bad editions” (165).

Such advancements were just in time. An anonymous reviewer, writing in *The North British Review* (October 1870), was anxious that Chaucer scholarship in his native England lagged behind other countries, in particular Germany. The work reviewed was Ten Brink's *Studien*, and the article displayed some typical preoccupation with Chaucer's Englishness. He praised Ten Brink's recent work over that of French Chaucerian scholars in part because Ten Brink, "following the lead of English Chaucer students divides the master's poetic life into three periods" ("Contemporary Literature" 239). These three periods, the first two of which are the period of French influence, followed by Italian, culminate in the final period, in which he comes into his "full power and independence" ("Contemporary Literature" 239), which is surely to say that he no longer languished under foreign influence, but became more fully English. Such remarks suggested interest in Chaucer is newly invigorated, and that this energy has significance to a national identity.⁴⁴ Those interested in Chaucer and medieval texts felt both that they had been, until now, woefully overlooked, and that there was in the air a sense of change, and that perhaps the cultural moment had arrived.

It was not only scholarship that was perceived to be on the rise. As with old Northern texts, there was also a push amongst (or at least for) the literary general reader. Chaucer had the benefit of his work being better known than most of the manuscripts of the EETS, and of course of being a historical figure about whom facts were known (some of which turned out to be not at all so). His enthusiasts were aiming slightly higher than the "hands of a hundred" ("Early English Texts" 329) possessing other early English texts, although in this period (as indeed now) critics

⁴⁴ See Charlotte C. Morse. "Popularising Chaucer in the Nineteenth Century." *The Chaucer Review*. 38.2 (2003) 99-125. For an excellent history of the rising fortunes of Chaucer in the Victorian period.

were reassuring skeptical would-be readers that reading him was not at all as hard as it seemed. Such reassurances went some way to clarifying a sense of Chaucer who was either loved, or seen as someone who *could* be loved. As such, readers and critics had a special relationship with him, as he collapsed time to deliver a national English past to contemporary English readers, often quite cozily. “Bear in mind,” explained an anonymous author in an article on Chaucer for *The Westminster Review*:

the strangeness of three-fourths of the words results from the antiquated ways in which they are spelled, and that when deprived of an *e* or an *n*, or otherwise slightly altered, they become familiar. They are old friends disguised in foreign garb; when we hear them speak their strangeness vanishes. (“Geoffrey Chaucer” 390)

Such reassurances, and the language they use, suggest the possibility of an intimate relationship with him and his work. Morris promotes such characterizations of Chaucer in *The Earthly Paradise*, in which the two references to the writer are intimate and speak of bonds between readers and this grandfather of English literature.

Such assurances are complex, as representations of Chaucer at this period simultaneously present him as popular, as loved, and as unread and overlooked. The blame for such divisions in his fortunes was largely placed on his absence from school curricula and the diffusing results of this lack.⁴⁵ An anonymous reviewer of Richard Morris’s Clarendon Press Series selection of the *Canterbury Tales* in *The Examiner* wrote that “Old Dan Chaucer . . . has always enjoyed a lusty popularity in his native

⁴⁵ This was beginning to change at exactly this period, as Morse explains: “In the 1860s Chaucer’s poetry began rolling off the presses, both in Middle and modernized English, and from the 1870s the stream of books becomes a flood (though something smaller than the deluge of Shakespeares) . . . Richard Morris and W. W. Skeat began publishing Middle English school editions of selected Canterbury tales for school and university use. University scholars were applying the philology developed in Germany to explain the relationship of older and contemporary English, principally for the Oxford English Dictionary project but also to illuminate Middle English texts” (116-117).

land” but that it has only been recently that schools and universities “ ‘seem to see’ the importance of making the study of their ‘land’s language’ a portion of the studies of English youths and young men entrusted to their charge” (“Works of Geoffrey Chaucer” 39). If Lemprière was at every schoolboy’s elbow, why not Chaucer? In an 1871 article for *MacMillan’s Magazine*, Furnivall wrote that the creation of, and support for, the Chaucer Society was encouraging, and that it offered

more grounds for hope that the pitiable indifference (due to pure ignorance) shown by the classically trained men of the present generation to the second greatest English poet—which Chaucer undoubtedly is—will not be shared by their successors, the youths and boys now training at college and school. (Brewer 168).

This sentiment explicitly challenges the tradition of a classical education for omitting other texts, here specifically English texts.

In the critical reception of *The Earthly Paradise* we see real joy and significant pleasure at the Chaucerian style of the work. Florence S. Boos has previously remarked that critics were apt to compare Morris with Chaucer, putting to one side the more melancholy, introspective elements of *The Earthly Paradise*. In an 1863 article, Alexander Smith described Chaucer’s view of the world as “a pleasant enough place, provided good dinners and a sufficiency of cash are to be had” (126). Furnivall spoke of his “sunny soul” (Brewer 175). None of this resembles the worldview of *The Earthly Paradise*.⁴⁶ Mid-nineteenth-century criticism of Chaucer listed his jolly big-heartedness, and his uncomplicated way of being in the world, merrily and with good cheer, to be among his chief attributes. Although we have seen

⁴⁶ In *Signs of Change*, written much later in 1888, Morris offered a similar understanding of Chaucer and his age. His world was one that was “fair and full of adventure; kind men and true and noble are in it to make one happy; fools also to laugh at, and rascals to be resisted, yet not wholly condemned; and when this world is over we shall still go one living in another which is a part of this” (Brewer 227).

Morris himself described using similar elements in memoirs by those who knew him, *The Earthly Paradise* itself is never described thus.

The similarities between the two writers, however, were real enough. Here were mid-century critics on Chaucer on the subject of story: “all that is peculiar, all that seems now so distant and unattainable, in the poetry of Chaucer, arises from the one great typical fact, that it is always nothing more nor less than the telling of a story” (Brewer 111). And here were Morris’s critics: “To [Morris] a story of the olden times is dear for its own sake; the task he chooses is to set it forth in all the grace and beauty which are its rightful dowry, not to use it as a vehicle for subtle analysis of motive, or as an introduction to philosophical reflections” (Hasell 56). A Chaucer critic wrote on the subject of his style: “Everything that is well defined, sharply cut, strongly outlined, instantly comprehended” (Brewer 121), and one of Morris’s critics described his style as having: “singular purity, terseness, and vigour” (*London Review*:16 “Earthly Paradise” 545). On the subject of Chaucer’s self-mastery: “it is difficult to define Chaucer’s charm. He does not indulge in fine sentiment; he has no bravura passages; he is ever the master of himself and his subject” (Brewer 125). And Morris’s: “He has been so completely the maker of his own verse, and of his own fame in verse” (Alford 633). And on the subject of nature and objectivity in Chaucer’s writing: “wherever he goes, by brook or through meadow, he throws himself with simple but passionate feeling into the life of all things; never, as our modern poets do, confusing himself with nature, or imputing to her his feelings” (Brewer 159). And here were Morris’s critics on his writing: “There’s no English poet of this time, nor perhaps of any other, who has so possessed this excellent gift of looking freshly and simply on external nature in all her many colours” (“The Earthly Paradise” 714).

It was presumably these similarities that reviewers had in mind when they repeatedly and explicitly compared Morris and *The Earthly Paradise* to Chaucer and his work. A critic for *London Quarterly Review* looking to classify *The Earthly Paradise* discovered that there was “no intelligible class-label to affix to the works except ‘Chaucerian’, inasmuch as tried by either the idyllic or the psychological standard (the only standard essentially of our own day) these works would be ‘nowhere’” (“Morris’s Poetry” 330). The May 1868 *Saturday Review* greeted the poem as a welcome alternative that was different to the extent that it was not modern: “in these days, when the poetry most in vogue is such as is one man’s business to write and another’s to interpret, it is refreshing to the spirit to meet with a modern poem of the Chaucerian type” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 730). *New Monthly Magazine* carried a whole article comparing Chaucer and Morris, calling Morris “the least *modern* [poet] in sentiment and style” (“G. Chaucer and W. Morris” 281 emphasis in original).

Reading The Age: Negotiating epic responses to *The Earthly Paradise*

As these responses to *The Earthly Paradise* demonstrate, by the mid-nineteenth century, those people who concerned themselves with keeping up with a debate about the nature of poetry often believed that contemporary poetry was more psychological, more subjective, and more introspective. To some, the emphasis in contemporary poetry on this subjective introspection and psychological depth made it more complex, more honest, and more authentic. To others, its navel-gazing musings made it ineffectual and weak. William Morris was himself consistently described as a thoroughly un-modern poet in part because of his perceived lack of interest in these contemporary postures. *The Earthly Paradise* is praised on the grounds that it is

objective and active, and that it appears to turn its back on the contemporary—which is to say psychological and subjective—world. Critics placed Morris, at least stylistically and aspirationally, in the company of his forebears. His poem was understood to employ this earlier poetic methodology because it depended on establishing a correlation to an objective, external world; it was not ironic, dialectical, or language bound, all charges (or praise) leveled at poets writing in the mid-nineteenth century. This formulation of the nature of poetry raises interesting questions about the role of audience, and how readers of poetry are addressed in, or are meant to relate to, contemporary poetry.

One implication of the new poetry was that epic, and the grand heroism that epic both valued and depicted, was considered by many to be difficult if not impossible. The argument has become more entrenched since the nineteenth century, so that Herbert Tucker's prodigiously long 2009 book *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* took as its task to prove that the epic even existed in the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ The rise of the novel is credited in part with the declining fortunes of the epic. E. M. W. Tillyard's classic mid-twentieth century account *The English Epic and its Background*, argued that in the eighteenth century the epic tradition quitted the poem in favour of the novel. Arguments for this migration often address the very ethics of epic. Both Mikail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács, in their respective treatises on the novel, unfavourably contrasted what they saw as the epic's univocal, and subsequently dictatorial stance against the sprawling, polyvocal, and multi-faceted character of the novel. The novel, in these arguments, is the genre more suited to the

⁴⁷ It seems as if the strong emulative stance of the secondary or literary epic at least since Homer suggests that it has always been conceived of nostalgically, as a genre that used to come naturally. As a result of this anxiety, the epic is perhaps unique as the genre whose production is in some important ways simply ineffable to both critic and poet. This explains how it is possible for Tucker to find hundreds of epics where others have found none.

challenges of representing the increasingly fragmented, democratic modern world emerging out of the Industrial Revolution. The epic, in these arguments, is undemocratic; they imagine it as privileging not the multiple voices of dialogue and difference, by the single voice of the exemplary figure. The epic's ties to both martial and imperial values reinforce such skepticisms.⁴⁸

Still, Victorian Britain's imperial successes, its monumental achievements of various kinds, and its tendency to think of itself historically, all suggest the epic as a genre that would both appeal to Victorians' own sense of themselves, and be an appropriate medium to express their condition. As we have seen, the critical engagements with the source materials of *The Earthly Paradise* was often above all a discussion regarding how these story materials could be called upon to illuminate something about contemporary English life. In the mid-Victorian period, such preoccupations with epic concerns manifested themselves in particular in an ongoing reassessment of the relationship between myth and history.⁴⁹ As we have seen, old Northernists George Dasent and Samuel Laing, among others, made a bid for the importance of old Northern texts in part because of what they could reveal of the history of a real people in general, but also of the ancestry of the British Isles in particular. Newly invigorated arguments in favour of the ability of early English manuscripts to articulate truths about English people, demonstrated first in more arcane manuscript societies such as the Roxburghe Club, but expanding eventually outward to Furnivall's more democratic Early English Texts Society, and even

⁴⁸ See Edward Adams. *Liberal Epic: The Victorian Practice of History from Gibbon to Churchill*, for an argument about the persistent martial fixation at the core of the liberal epic.

⁴⁹ Tucker in *Epic*, identifies the 1860s as the decade of the "mythological epic" (385), as writers reconsidered the communal relationship to the stories that came before. In her article "Epic Narrative," Amanda Hodgson argues that one of "the efforts of scholarship in the eighteen-sixties [was] to redefine the nature of myth, and to unpick that knitting together of history and myth which is a prerequisite for epic" (348).

skepticism about the relevance of the study of the Greek and Roman language and literature for contemporary Britons, all speak to these issues.

In the late 1860s, the epic was making appearances in the periodical press. While no mention appears to have been made about *The Earthly Paradise* as epic, Tennyson's *Holy Grail* installment of *Idylls of the King* proclaimed an epic apparatus to the work, while Browning's *Ring and the Book* appeared to some to offer a contemporary take on the epic genre. A critic for *The Saturday Review* revealed the ubiquity of the claim for the death of the epic while simultaneously making a bid for its existence: "we saw the other day, in a paper set at one of our public schools, this question asked—'why are epic poems not written nowadays? The questioner, if he had seen Mr. Browning's poem, would surely have thought his enquiry somewhat premature'" ("Ring and the Book" 833). *The British Quarterly Review* (January 1869) called Tennyson's *Idylls* "our great national epic poem" ("Genius of Gustave Doré" 63). Most reviewers, however, were less certain, and shared some sympathy with the exam paper of *The Saturday Review*'s description. *The Contemporary Review*, having suggested that contemporary readers "have no belief in Arthur" (Cheetham 514) "doubted whether our age had produced an epic at all" (514). *The Academy* called Tennyson's *Idylls* "less than epic" (Lawrenny 92), but not disparagingly. It argued that Tennyson had piled "layer of legend" (Lawrenny 92) upon layer, and that "the task of the poet in approaching the accumulation, with less than an epic to dispose of it in, is not a light one" (Lawrenny 92). These pronouncements are either on the defensive, or identify something like an epic impulse in these contemporary poets, while withholding the possibility of actually producing the epic.

Other critics appeared to negotiate, wondering if the epic might be in need of revision to accommodate the contemporary sensibility. Henry Alford, also for *The*

Contemporary Review, wrote that “Mr. Tennyson has done better than construct an epic” (“Idylls of the King” 104) of the Arthurian stories. He wondered, “whether this or any succeeding age would tolerate the epic” (“Idylls of the King” 104), but that what was needed instead, in “these introspective days” (“Idylls of the King” 105) was a “whole, composed of parts which can justify their own separate existence” (“Idylls of the King” 105). Although in doubt over the fortunes of the epic, he suggested renegotiating its generic expectations: “casting off the artificial requirements of the epic, we ask no more than that those parts should be connected by a great central interest, and by their common assumptions and allusions should recognize and presuppose one another” (“Idylls of the King” 105). Buxton-Foreman made a similar appeal, in *The London Quarterly Review*, to reconsider the generic requirements of the epic. He wrote: “the idea that epics have ‘died out with Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods’ is one which is obviously absurd, even without practical evidence to the contrary, and has arisen from the false notion that ‘heroic’ is a term applicable only to wars and large actions” (“Robert Browning and the Epic of Psychology” 357). These reflections demonstrate both that the epic’s status was under review, and that it was part of a larger conversation about the role of poetry to reflect what was understood to be a changing world. They also indicate a similar anxiety about the monolithic tendencies of the epic that Bakhtin and Lukács were later to describe. Unlike these later critics, however, who responded to these concerns by turning to the strengths of the novel, these contemporary critics seek to negotiate what revisions might be possible to make to epic poetry in order to keep both its value and its relevance in these latter days.

Was *The Earthly Paradise* an epic? As Amanda Hodgson writes: “a narrative poem in twenty-four books looks like an epic” (“Epic Narrative” 241). In *Epic*

Grandeur: Towards a Comparative Poetics of the Epic, Masaki Mori identifies three “thematic essentials” for an epic. These are “coping with one’s mortality, communal responsibility, and the double extension of time and space” (x). According to this definition, *The Earthly Paradise* more than meets the requirements. An epic is linear, with narrative coherence. David Quint emphasizes this narrative coherence, in contrast to romance, which progresses only through “random or circular wandering” (9), whilst the epic depicts history presented as a “coherent, end-directed story” told through the community’s “own power” (9). The relationship, in *The Earthly Paradise*, between the failed quest of the Wanderers’ journey and the new quest, such as it is, to gather each month to tell tales seems at first like a denial of this epic linearity that by all rights ought to have belonged to the Wanderers’ tale. The remnant frame’s year of stories, however, offers a challenge to the doomed resistance to human mortality depicted in the Wanderers’ tale; it replaces that fantasy with the most fundamental of “end-directed” stories, the human imperative that we shall all die. Finally, *The Earthly Paradise* tells this story through, to, and for a community.

The move from the grand quest narrative of the Wanderers’ tale to the compensatory year of tale telling demonstrates an imaginative working out of a worry at the heart of the Victorian epic. In the midst of these investigations into stories, their histories, and the roles they play, Victorians were aware also of a related contemporary epic problem. If modern theorists have found the epic inappropriate to convey the meaning of experience in the nineteenth century, Victorians themselves appeared to have been more concerned they were unworthy of it; they were doubtful of their age’s capacity for epic grandeur. If they lived in an age of great achievement, their very fascination with history highlighted a sense of their own belatedness. This sense—at least for poetry critics—endorsed the view that the age was unpoetic,

analytic, scientific, small, mercantile, and uninspired. Contemporary poetry reviews made reference to this commonplace, with no one feeling the need to strain one's eloquence to bring readers on side. When poetry was found to be alive and well, however, it was often defensively so. To the extent that epic was, in its most reductive definition, simply the greatest poetry that could be written, it was particularly unavailable to an age that understood itself as unpoetic.

These anxieties get an epic treatment in *The Earthly Paradise*; it is the poem's ability to unite its readers through the shared recognition of what it means to suffer through their own belated contemporaneity that is the unusual source of the poem's epic affect. Victorian concerns over the small and uninspired age are of course the very concerns that shape *The Earthly Paradise*; they are the shared source of heavy-heartedness at the "empty day" that the Idle Singer acknowledges in the opening Apology. The ubiquitous quotation of these opening lines, for decades after, was a poignant illustration of their resonance; out of all the critics who reviewed *The Earthly Paradise*, only one asked "and why is it an empty day?" ("Earthly Paradise: Part III" *Athenaeum* 797). S. Cheetham, writing for *The Contemporary Review*, offered a definition of "true epic" as the embodiment of the national belief in national heroes" (Cheetham 513). His point was that "national belief" of this sort was not a feeling often aroused in the contemporary breast. Unlike the "tale of Troy" which when sung, "woke responsive chords in the breast of every Greek," "we"—contemporary readers—"have no belief in Arthur" (Cheetham 514). Indeed, it "may well be doubted whether our age has produced an epic at all" (Cheetham 514). The worry of these suspicions is recast in *The Earthly Paradise* as its own national belief: not that people were without belief in Arthur, but that they were capable of bonding

through an imagined experience of their own real listlessness born of that retreating belief.

Northrop Frye offers a distinction between romance and epic in terms of their mimetic function, differing according to the extent to which they correspond to some more objective reality. The hero of romance is fantastical; he is not significantly subject to the exigencies of his environment. The hero of epic, however, is “superior in degree to other men, but not his environment” (*Anatomy* 33). Thomas M. Greene elaborates on this distinction in *The Descent from Heaven*, observing, “the epic sacrifices the pleasure of pure fantasy in the name of reason or realism or something else” (14). The pleasure of *The Earthly Paradise* is not the pleasure of pure fantasy. It is in fact the pleasure of having made that sacrifice. This sacrifice creates the stalwart abyss-ward gaze of the poem. The stance is precisely that of the epic hero who is a figure defined, finally, by his own human limitations. “He is denied something,” writes Greene, “particularly those things which would render him a god. He acquires an austerity which is particularly human” (14). This denial, moving from Rolf outward to the Elders, and then, finally to the readers of *The Earthly Paradise*, is the subject of the poem.

Morris, Tennyson, and Browning

During the same years that *The Earthly Paradise* was being published, Browning and Tennyson also published new poetry. These poems are all in different ways attempts to engage with the epic mode of poetry, and critics’ responses to these three very different poets, their relationship to their readers, the response to their verse, and their attitudes to the past, help to clarify the reception of *The Earthly Paradise*. The reaction to Tennyson as both tamed and special, and the reaction to

Browning as unique and rebellious differ in kind from the reaction to Morris as universal, authentic and representative. This account of Morris helps us to understand the reception of the epic qualities of *The Earthly Paradise*, as the epic is the most communal of genres. The reception of Morris's long poem, similar to the account of reception identified within the poem, imagines the poet as a spokesperson for a shared sense of human experience. Contemporary human experience, according to the account of contemporary critics, was unpoetic, unheroic, and uninspired. Of the three poets and their attempts at epic, it is only William Morris who offers the solution of an epic account of contemporary readers' sense of themselves to themselves.

Morris's personality was discovered in his verses. *The Earthly Paradise's* straightforward style and its anachronistic perspective were conflated in the minds of critics, and Morris's commitment to both of these aspects of his writing placed him in a singular category. In these readings, it was not that *The Earthly Paradise* adopted historical modes and styles in a contemporary, self-aware way, but rather that Morris simply disregarded the contemporary world altogether, in both subject and style. Such a tactic appeared very different from Tennyson's, or for example, Swinburne's approaches to working with historical themes. Alfred Austin in *Temple Bar*, for example, called Swinburne⁵⁰ "in turns coldly classical and effusively and erotically modern" ("Poetry of the Period: Morris" 46). Although Tennyson worked with historical themes, he was above all the poet who reflected the contemporary world to itself, a role that yoked his appeal not, as with Morris, to the past, but to the present.

⁵⁰ Unlike Morris, who was largely perceived to be forging ahead, and keeping his own council, Swinburne was occasionally accused of dubious adherence to contemporary trends, as here in *Cornhill Magazine*: "Mr. Swinburne's success may be significant of the coming mode, especially as he dazzles most the younger mind; though to our sight it is nothing more than the trembling of the needle, now more sensitive than usual to polar influence. Mr. Morris has elicited sympathies equally strong in a different direction; and he *is* a poet—another name which we may write at once in the noble role of English-men of genius" ("Browning in 1869" 251).

Cheetham in *The Contemporary Review* is representative here: “Mr. Tennyson would not have been the great poet that he is if he had not shared the spirit of his own age” (Cheetham 505). Here Swinburne was critiqued for failing to hold one or the other perspective, while Tennyson was praised for making the past relevant for, and speak about, the contemporary world. Morris, meanwhile was far away: “his mind seems to have travelled in paths remote from the turgid complexities of a day of spiritual transition” wrote John Morley (“The Earthly Paradise” 713-714). This psychic distance set him apart, in the critical literature, from other contemporary poets. Morris’s ability to turn his back entirely on the present was seen as a personal strength, and he was applauded for his sincerity and his authenticity. In this way, he was aligned with Browning, whom critics similarly praised in terms of his ability to keep his own counsel, and not to pander to the public—a strength they did not attribute to Tennyson. In the case of Browning, however, such personal conviction made him above all the poet of introspective individuality, so that he was a marvel, but as such always appeared to be at arm’s length from readers.

If Tennyson was seen as the most representative poet of the age, this association was not always a positive one. During the course of the critical response to *The Holy Grail* in 1869, and in Tennyson’s reception around that time, Tennyson’s very popularity often stood as a critique of the age. *The Sphinx*, for example, had this to say about the relationship between Tennyson and the superficial atmosphere of contemporary experience:

Alfred Tennyson; the luckiest man of letters in this very lucky age, this day of small things, this money-seeking, veneer-loving time. ‘Sir,’ said a gentleman in the stalls at the Olympic, ‘I can’t understand *Little Em’ly* at all.’ ‘You seldom can comprehend a dramatized novel,’ said we. ‘Have you not read *David Copperfield*?’ ‘Why, no; we young fellows’—he was about ten years younger than his collocutor—‘have not time for *deep reading*; we are engaged in *picking up the sixpences!*’ An age that calls Dickens *deep reading*, and picks

up the sixpences, will appreciate Alfred Tennyson. (“Mr. Alfred Tennyson” 245)

The Quarterly Review (April 1869) argued that Tennyson had hitherto been falsely praised, in part because of some false assumptions about the role of poetry: “men have come to look upon poetry (what now-a-days it too often is) as merely an ornament and a pleasure and not a task that ennobles and invigorates both writer and reader, and spreads itself in sympathy” (“Poems” 332). *Idylls of the King*—in its 1869 permutation—demonstrated, for *The Quarterly Review* critic, Tennyson’s “inability to embrace a subject of any large compass” (“Poems” 336), and criticized its poor engagement of the past. When Tennyson, “living in a peaceful age” described the battles of knights of old, for example, “his heart is manifestly not in the telling” (“Poems” 336).

In these evaluations of Tennyson’s poetry, and responses to it, critics sometimes noted the lack of the expansive, “ennobling” power of poetry. There was something nearly suspect in the ease with which Tennyson moved through the age. Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Belgravia* called Tennyson, in an 1867 article entitled “Studies in Tennyson,” an “accessory to life” (217). This article offered an arch—although certainly not satiric—primer on Tennyson, in order that readers could have the superficial knowledge of the poet needed to not embarrass oneself socially. Here Tennyson was made into a question of etiquette, and this was only the most elaborate example of the phenomenon, during this period, of associating Tennyson with those superficial social spaces of the drawing room, or the dinner table. The *Belgravia* article understood that Tennyson had taken on the symbolic value of fashion and urged the importance of recognizing Tennyson quotations—not poems—and to know when and how to mobilize those quotations oneself. “Tennyson’s is the poetry of the age,” declared *Belgravia*. “It reflects its views, its aims, its aspirations. It expresses

what we think and feel, and in the happiest manner—tersely, elegantly, with exquisite simplicity” (217). This happy simplicity was different from uses of the same terms in Morris’s poetry, as they demonstrated here above all a feeling that Tennyson was at home, comfortable, thriving in the age in which he wrote, while Morris was praised for drawing attention to a feeling that the age was lacking in something essential.

In Alfred Austin’s series of “poetry of the period” articles, he reviewed Morris, Tennyson, and Browning. In his Tennyson article, Austin was suspicious of the laureate’s popularity. His chief concern was that Tennyson was a minor poet of pretty, domesticated verse who had been erroneously placed amongst the sublime poets of greatness—Wordsworth, for example, and Shakespeare. Tennyson flourished in part because of his inferiority, argued Austin. This argument was the implication of a number of critics. In an 1871 article, *The North British Review* (January 1871) wrote that Tennyson’s poems “express, in language refined and artistic, but not unfamiliar, a large segment of the popular thought of the period over which they range” (“Mr. Tennyson’s Poetry” 378), but concluded ultimately that Tennyson wore on one and further, that he “will hardly stand the test of too much repetition, and, still less, of comparison with profounder poets” (“Mr. Tennyson” 425). The problem was in part a lack of authenticity, as “his characters come out not as real men, but as boys and girls acting the parts of men and women in their Christmas games” (“Mr. Tennyson” 425). *The North British Review* described Tennyson’s poetry as capturing “popular thought” “not unfamiliar” (“Mr. Tennyson” 425) to many people. It also remarked that poetry, which ought to describe life in “myriad-sided completeness,” in this case only managed a “narrow segment of that humanity” (“Mr. Tennyson” 425). Tennyson’s poetry was familiar to his readers, but not revelatory. *The Athenaeum* (27 June 1868) suggested something similar when it wrote: “It is by no means to be

wondered at that [Tennyson] is more popular than [Browning] with average men and women. The middle-class world particularly finds its culture and temper admirably represented in Tennyson's best poems" ("Essays on Robert Browning" 891).⁵¹ Interestingly, these criticisms are similar to those later critics have for *The Earthly Paradise*, but during this period, it was Tennyson, and not Morris, that was seen to gently reflect the views of the self-satisfied middle classes.

In Austin's review, it was by virtue of Tennyson's smallness that he was in "harmony" with the age, and was therefore able to "produce more valuable work" ("Poetry of the Period: Tennyson" 192) under its conditions. There was, it was intimated, something of the opportunist in Tennyson. Echoing the sentiments of the author of the *Belgravia* article, Austin described Tennyson as "sweet, tender, touching, polished" ("Poetry of the Period: Tennyson" 184), and wrote that he "speaks [the age's] mind for it more efficiently than anybody else" ("Poetry of the Period: Tennyson" 193). These reactions to Tennyson all make use of him to represent both the shortcomings of the age, and a shared sense of complicit complacency regarding these shortcomings. The relationship between audience and Tennyson here is at least partially one of a shared limitation, which is tacitly

⁵¹ See also: "Mr. Tennyson's New Volume". *Saturday Review of politics, literature, science and art*. 28. 739 (Dec 25, 1869). "This sympathy between the present and the past is most generally an unconscious and uninformed feeling, but it lies at the foundation of Mr. Tennyson's present popularity. We say uninformed; for, of people who read Tennyson, how many (for example) have ever even dipped into the laboured collection of Sir Thomas Malory, Knt.? . . . The sympathy with the past has not been an informed sympathy, as we have said, but it is strong and real; and no one has stirred it with more insight than Mr. Tennyson. Another, here and there, may have struck home with more direct force upon the foundations of our intellectual and social life. Others may have satisfied with more ready facility the prevailing taste for what is exciting or (as the phrase goes) sensational. He has been faithful alike to nature and to art; and if his work is not unmarked by blemishes, partly due to the age, partly to himself, it is nevertheless work that is deservedly welcome, and will be permanent" (828-829)

indicative of a shared culpability. If Tennyson is to be found in the drawing room or the dining room, the tamed spaces of light entertainment, so too are his readers, for better or worse. And if Tennyson provides, as the *Belgravia* article suggests, a shared discourse, it is one that resists the richness of communication, opting instead for the exchange of statements of status.

In his review of Morris's work, Austin conceived of the relationship between the poet and the age differently, and revealingly. Reading Morris appears to entail acknowledging the shortcomings of the contemporary moment. If reading Tennyson places readers in the drawing room, aligned with the frivolity of the age, reading Morris is in part to be infected with dissatisfaction. Unlike Tennyson, who appeared to thrive in the age, Morris

cut himself off from all [the age's] active influences, compounded of disgust, sanguineness, impatience, and despondency, and has surrendered himself wholly to the retrospective tendency of his time, which, when taken by itself, is the most pathetic and poetical proclivity of which the time is capable. He ignores the present, and his eyelids close with a quiet sadness if you bid him explore the future. He has no power, he says, to sing of heaven and hell. ("Poetry of the Period: Morris" 46-47)

Austin called Morris a "martyr" ("Poetry of the Period: Morris" 51) to the age. The suffering borne of the awareness of the age's limitations constituted a special sort of "freedom" ("Poetry of the Period: Morris" 51) that made Morris great. John Morley suggested something similar in his review of *The Earthly Paradise* calling it "full of that reposeful serenity, purity, freshness, and vivid objectivity which the mind loves always, but which it yearns for thirstily in turbid and broken times like these" ("Earthly Paradise" 715).

Compared to the suspicion with which Tennyson is met for so thriving in the age, Morris's critique of it starts to seem like resistance. Moreover, in these responses, critics shared in Morris's tacit criticisms of the age through the very act of

recognizing those criticisms. The comments on Tennyson and the age are static: they are self satisfied when they celebrate Tennyson's sympathy with the age or, when they are critical, they leave Tennyson's poetry behind. The responses to Morris, meanwhile, make subtle references to a shared sense of struggle and of suffering. Morley's reference to "turbid and broken times like these" ("Earthly Paradise" 715) offers to share Morris's viewpoint, and offers it as well to his readers.

Such reactions reveal Morris as both contemporary and pan-historical. We have seen the depth and conviction with which Morris was compared to Chaucer, but it was insofar as Morris broke with Chaucer that he was inescapably of his age. Critics' comparisons between the two poets reveal a complex understanding of Morris's dual position. This position is a source of credibility, and the location of the understanding that drives his implied critique of contemporary life. G. W. Cox, in *The Edinburgh Review* noted that Morris's renditions of the tales gave an "impression of a faith altogether less hopeful than that of the poets who told these tales long ago in their own land" (Cox 247). "No poet can altogether escape from his own age," wrote the critic for *New Monthly Magazine*. In his comparison of Morris and Chaucer, the critic remarked: "Mr. Morris has not escaped the sorrowful perplexities of this time by leaving out all consideration of, or allusion to, those problems that produce them; for their result remains, in an irrepressible note of sadness, through his entire writings" ("G. Chaucer and W. Morris" 282). While "Chaucer's style is fresh and sparkling . . . the style of his modern pupil is sad and solemn" ("G. Chaucer and W. Morris" 282). Hasell, in her own comparison of the two poets, wondered why, of all the "gifts" Morris inherited from Chaucer, "cheerfulness" was not one of them. She offered this answer: "while as an artist Mr. Morris is not of our time, as a man he feels its manifold complexities . . . The England to which Chaucer sang had more just causes

of complaint than the England of our own day; but it was merry, and ours is not” (Hasell 72-73).

If Tennyson was fashionably appropriate, and Browning was a beacon of individual genius, Morris was an everyman, in everytime, drawing on a national poetic heritage for his resolve. In the reviews, the language moves fluidly between descriptions of Morris’s personal authenticity, linked so frequently to his commitment to characteristics of objectivity, love of nature, love of story, and simplicity and his position in the Chaucerian school of poetry. An 1870 *London Quarterly Review* article that looked to classify the poem discovered that there was “no intelligible class-label to fix to his works except ‘Chaucerian’, inasmuch as tried by either the idyllic or the psychological standard (the only standards essentially of our own day) these works would be ‘nowhere’” (“Life and Death of Jason” 330). *The Saturday Review* (May 1868) greeted *The Earthly Paradise* as a welcome alternative that was different to the extent that it was not modern: “in these days, when the poetry most in vogue is such as is one man’s business to write and another’s to interpret, it is refreshing to the spirit to meet with a modern poem of the Chaucerian type” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 730). *Blackwood’s* observed “the gift of relating a story well, is . . . a rare gift in these days” (Hasell 57) while *The New Monthly Magazine’s* article comparing Chaucer and Morris, the author called Morris “the least *modern* in sentiment and style” (“G. Chaucer and W. Morris” 281). Morris is celebrated for having turned his back on the present, of having embraced sometimes the past and sometimes an eternal, through-the-ages perspective. Nevertheless, he is also identified as one-of-us. He is decidedly of his time. It was the union of these opposing impulses that set Morris apart from Tennyson and made his perspective so valuable, and so attractive.

Meanwhile, critics associated the ease with which Morris seems to be able to imaginatively access the past, and to depict it with emotional immediacy, with a sense of his personal authenticity, so that Morris is applauded at once for having stayed true to himself, and for being at ease with some sense of the past. These two qualities are received as mutually reinforcing. Unlike Tennyson, whose depictions of the past were largely praised for their symbolic relevance to contemporary readers, Morris's use of the past was understood to be for its own sake, and so part of a more general dedication, on the part of his poetry, to a sort of straight-forward sincerity. For Morris's use of the past, and for the qualities of his poetry more generally, critics used the same vocabulary: strength, objectivity, manliness, conviction, and so conflated his personal authenticity with his ability to access the past.

Tinsley's summarized the sentiment best in an October 1868 article, which argued:

Morris has disencumbered himself of all the complications which have entered into the fabric of modern poetry, and has told his good old story in a good old fashion; and he deserves all praise for this—not for being old fashioned, but for being thoroughly genuine when he found himself old fashioned.
 (“Criticisms of Contemporaries” 266)

The May 1868 *London Review* also applauded Morris for the authenticity of his depiction of the past: “instead of breathing the new spirit of this century, into the old types, he has studiously confined himself to a reproduction of the form and sentiment of the times of which he treats” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 545). Critics repeatedly argued that Morris had done right by them, that he had been an authentic, honest man of conviction. The *London Review* critic further compared Morris's style favourably to the “splutter of cheap fireworks” and “Byronic self-confidence” of other poets. In the place of such characteristics, Morris was applauded as a “man of real ability” who did “his work in his own way” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 542). Henry Alford, in *The*

Contemporary Review declared: “he has been so completely the maker of his own verse and of his own fame in verse” (Alford 633). Hasell, in *Blackwood’s*, described the work as one of “considerable power employed precisely in the way most suitable to it” (Hasell 56), and that Morris had “dared to be himself” (Hasell 56).

Like Morris, Robert Browning dares to be himself and like Morris, Browning resists Tennyson’s easy equivalence between the age and his verse. Unlike Morris however, this tension, and this self-assuredness, are both more fraught qualities of Browning’s reception. In an anonymous article in *The British Quarterly Review* (March 1869), the reviewer acknowledged that through time, it had been the “position of the greater poets” to be representative and natural leader[s]”. This had so far not been Browning’s lot, in part because he was “especially unsuited to the time” (“Poetical Works” 435). The age was “an era of luxury, of easy entertainment” (“Poetical Works” 435); it was a “self-centered age” (“Poetical Works” 436); it had an education system that failed its students: “although this is the day of competitive examinations, it is also the day of smatterers; we have scholars of high attainment, but we also have an outer host of persons whose learning is merely superficial” (“Poetical Works” 436). In his defense of *The Ring and the Book* in *The Fortnightly Review*, John Morley took to task those critics and segments of the public who thought—wrongly—that poetry could be equated with the “little ethics of the rectory parlour set to music” (“On *The Ring and the Book*” 331). This reference to the parlour brings to mind Tennyson, who as we have seen was often associated with these polite, social rooms. Morley challenged those of that school to imagine that something might exist beyond the “superficial probabilities of life and manners within a ten-mile radius of Charing Cross” (“On *The Ring and the Book*” 331). As with the critical response to

Morris, and unlike the response to Tennyson, Browning represents a challenge to the age, not a celebration of it. Unlike Morris, however, Browning stands quite alone.

When Browning was praised, it was always in the language of individual achievement. His intellect was the subject of his reviews. It was the thing reviewers grappled with, and either came to admire, sometimes in spite of frustration or confusion, or to dismiss it as not poetry, also because of those frustrations. Browning's achievement was his singularity. Buxton-Foreman offered a standard comparison between Browning and Tennyson: "Mr. Browning never puts down on paper an idea that could possibly have occurred to any man but himself. Mr. Tennyson is always trying to assimilate and adapt himself to others" ("Robert Browning and the Epic of Psychology" 340). The difference between the two poets was that Tennyson's "whole effort" was to "obtain a mastery over common things" while that of Browning was "to discover things that are not common" ("Robert Browning and the Epic of Psychology" 341). Browning's large humanity was, however, undermined by this individuality that, as Buxton-Foreman wrote was: "too peculiar for it not often to obtrude in his representation of others" ("Robert Browning and the Epic of Psychology" 346). In his review of Browning, Skelton offered a description, by way of an anecdote of an embodied experience, of what Browning's singularity meant to him:

I saw, one spring evening, a wonderful dome in heaven, lighted up by a strange fire. We gaze at such a phenomenon as we never gaze on the high serenity, the luminous majesty of the night. There is a picturesqueness, and exceptional and curious grace, a determinate individual character, in the one that elicits more immediate interest than the immortal simplicity, the heaven-wide expanse of the other. The latter fills the soul, but there in no quaint, brilliant unusual light to arrest the attention and excite surprise. ("Poetry of the Year" 671)

Browning's poetry was remarkable, surprising, exciting, but just missed the "wide expanse" of something less individual. Browning and his *Ring and the Book* were

praised largely through these surprising achievements of the intellect—both Browning’s and that of and that of anyone who could happily read him. Feelings, in particular feelings of frustration, were things that must be overcome. Reading Browning was hard work, and its rewards were distinctly not pleasure. The reader could expect to be impressed, or challenged, but the distance between Browning and his audiences was always very clear.

These positions in relation to the contemporary age imply a relationship to their contemporaries. When Morris was identified as the poet of incident, and of objective action, he was also being identified as the poet of a broad collective. Browning was decidedly not such a poet, both resisting and being resisted by an easy identification with other subjectivities. Morris’s pan-historical perspective placed him in a different category to Tennyson who, as we have seen, was understood as determined by the contemporary moment. While this close association allowed him the authority to speak for Victorian audiences, there is something static, even diminishing about both the ease of Tennyson’s identification, and his eagerness to assimilate. The language critics used to describe Morris’s relationship to Victorian audiences revealed something of the special case of *The Earthly Paradise*. John Morley called *The Earthly Paradise* “less marked than any other with the accidental and transient moods of this time,” and that it was instead “most strongly marked with those broad and unsophisticated moods that enchant men for all time” (“The Earthly Paradise: Part I” 715). Such reactions unite Victorian audiences to a larger, pan-historical affect, and as a result circumvent the smallness of Tennyson’s more static contemporary perspective. The communal aspects of *The Earthly Paradise* were noted as well in an 1870 *Blackwood’s* notice, which summarized the world view of the poem as one that looked to share experience and form communities: “Life is as a

tale told. The misery and the delight are not altogether for their own sakes, as if any man could appropriate his fate to himself, but also for the use of others, all the world sharing in the profit and the pain” (“New Books” 644).

Epic Affect

Such expansive, communal, representative receptions suggest the inclusive, identity-confirming activity of epic poetry. In *The Earthly Paradise*, the relationship implied in Morris’s address to his contemporaries, and his invitation to find themselves engaged in a poetic battle against the unpoetic tendencies of the age are a version of Victorian epic. Although one might expect to see a conflation of pagan (read secular) elements of the poem with its dreary (read non-redemptive) outlook this does not appear to be the case. Critics noted that the despair of the poem was an effect of its contemporaneity while simultaneously applauding the poem for its disregard for modern postures. This combination forms a sort of dissent entirely missing from Tennyson’s poetry, and unlike the dissenting voice of Browning’s poetry, Morris’s contained an invitation to share in it, to allow it to speak for one. Conflating Morris’s personal voice—strong, authentic, sincere—with the national voice of Chaucer, and locating the mood of the poem in a human desire for story, and a human experience of sadness identified as universal, left contemporary readers with a sense of having been represented in the poem. Moreover, it offered to readers an account of their daily experience as the stuff of poetry by forcing first a recognition of the smallness of the age before then celebrating the emotional strength required to withstand that smallness.

What *The Earthly Paradise* appears to be missing is the sense of epic expanse and awe present in some epic poetry. In their respective readings of Morris’s next

attempt at epic, *Sigurd the Volsung*, both Herbert Tucker and Simon Dentith argue that it is that poem's relentlessly alien verse, and its resistance to the address to and inclusion of contemporaries, that makes it an epic. Unlike *The Earthly Paradise*, which explicitly includes, even within the verse itself, his contemporary audience, *Sigurd* is above all resistant to this audience. As Tucker puts it, "Morris's macropoetic refusal to accommodate his contemporaries" ("All for the Tale" 389) in a text that is so thoroughly other to them, "throw[s] into grim contrast the commodified rootlessness of modern experience" ("All for the Tale" 388). Dentith argues that *Sigurd* is a contemporary poem that manages to resist all contemporary associations, even in its similes, and that the contemporary-yet-antique poem is "spun out of this impossibility" ("All for the Tale" 248).⁵² It is through this othering stance, argue both Dentith and Tucker, that *Sigurd the Volsung* achieves the grand awe of epic poetry. This epic perspective, they also argue, is where *The Earthly Paradise* falls short.

Both Tucker and Dentith privilege, in their definitions of epic, the grand (and sometimes monolithic) awe that epic embodies. Certainly *The Earthly Paradise* misses that epic awe of other poetry; the magisterial alien power of *Sigurd the Volsung* is a more recognizable epic attempt. It is, however, precisely these limitations in the scope of *The Earthly Paradise*, and its embrace of all the stories that made up its heritage, that articulated to its readers what the age felt like, and what living in it felt like, while simultaneously releasing readers from the Tennysonian

⁵² Tucker and Dentith are both interested in *Sigurd's* relationship to Morris's later socialism (his "conversion" was still some years away when *Sigurd* was published in 1876). Tucker writes: "Morris's epic may be the stronger for the disenchanted and preliminary poise that let him make it that precious thing, the unbeholden testament of a believer without a creed" (389). Dentith writes: "After the conversion to socialism in the early 1880s, Morris was able to give a different kind of answer to the question of the meaning of Barbarism, since he was able more confidently to relate it to his sense of past and possible future social transformations" ("Great Story of the North" 249).

sense of being bound to the contemporary moment. The stoic recognition of this lack of greatness, of grandness, is repositioned in *The Earthly Paradise* as itself worthy of awe. While not offering the all-consuming strangeness of an alien world, as he will shortly do with *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris nevertheless makes strange the contemporary world, by inviting readers to consider it slant. Morley wrote that Morris “seems to have traveled in paths remote from the turgid perplexities of a day of spiritual transition” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 714). He considered this a strength, elaborating: “we nowhere see the enfeebling influences of the little doubtings, and little believings, and little wonderings, whose thin wail sounds in a conventional manner through so much of our current writing” (“Earthly Paradise: Part I” 714). Such assessments possess their own form of epic awe.

This form of epic awe is what C.S. Lewis has described as Morris’s ability to “face the facts” (48), a stance that Lewis argues in his essay on William Morris is the poet’s greatest strength. This stance is one that readers of *The Earthly Paradise* are invited to adopt. This is best illustrated through the poem itself. In the poem, each tale’s ending leaves the group introspective and contemplative, laid bare. The narrative interlude after “Atalanta’s Race” brings “pain half sweet” (I: 11) and leaves the audience ambivalently energized, “ready now to play their parts, / And take what feeble joy might yet remain / In place of all they once had hoped to gain” (I.18-20). After “The Man Born to be King” some (presumably of the Wanderers) “half dreamed they were at home” (I: 2197) and talked among themselves with “the ghosts / Of old desires in their wasted eyes” (I: 2218). “Old desires” and “bittersweet feelings” dominate these receptive summaries, as after the conclusion of “The Love of Alcestis” when the gathered audience seems unable, or at least uninterested, in distinguishing between the story just told and their own lives “bitter and sweet so

mingled in them both” (I: 19). This prompts a complex response which, once the tally is in, leaves them “loth, / Perchance, to have them told another way” (I: 20-21).

Frequently tales leave the auditors—in particular the Wanderers—with less ambivalent feelings of hope, as after “The Doom of King Acrisius” when their hearts were “softened” to think of all that was achieved in the tale, and give themselves the space to imagine that this world just described “might not be an empty dream, / But dim foreshadowings of what yet might come” (I: 28-29). After “The Lady of the Land,” the Wanderers even imagine they might want to make a similar new journey, east this time (I: 7-14). These interludes reveal first principles: desires, hopes, and sadnesses on which their actions and their lives have rested. These introspections, a mix of troubling and pleasurable, are ponderous. They loom over the lines of the text.

These interludes become more complex as the year goes on. August and September’s reflections, for example, are nuanced, more compromised; they are also longer and denser. In September, following the short but dark Classical tale “The Death of Paris,” the Elders are angry. They are angry at God, who “makes equal Eld and Youth, / Tormenting Youth with lies and Eld with truth” (II: 7-8). Their crisis of faith extends to the storyteller with whom they are also angry for “draw[ing] pleasure from men’s misery” (II: 10). Reception becomes more embedded, as affective responses to life and to the story just told become more and more blurred. In the same narrative interlude, the Elders sit reflecting on the meaning of narrative, which makes a “melody of grief” (II: 13). The simpler correlation between tale and life that marked earlier understandings of their mandate still exists, but it is now complicated by a series of self-conscious reflections on the ethics of receptive pleasure. These reactions, and the very real questions they raise, are shared by contemporary readers who often remark on the equilibrium between charm and despair in the work.

Throughout, Morris's characters raise but do not answer these difficult queries. Because they are not resolved they stand, and therefore exist as part of the complexity of human experience, which must of course not be resolved, but rather borne, as *The Earthly Paradise* repeatedly tells us. "Facing the facts" is the bearing of this complexity, and it is the difficult task of both the characters within the text as well as its external readers.

The affective toll of this stance is registered in a number of ways, but it is in the monthly lyrics that external readers' participation in the activity of facing the facts is most explicitly narrated. The lyric for November, arguably the most beautiful of the sequence, offers a complete account of this form of heroism. This lyric is one of the rare lyrics to imagine its action inside a building, in this case "these four walls, hung with pain and dreams" (II: 7). Being inside is here equated with stagnation and despair. Morris pits this image of inside against the outdoors, called the "real world" by the lyric speaker, which he bids us to "look out upon." In the first verse, "doubt and thought" (II: 2) create a "formless veil" which "draws darkening now and thick / Across thee" (II: 3-4). This figurative fog parallels the smoke tinged mist" (II: 4) outside. As ever with the pathetic fallacy in these lyrics, the identification goes awry, yet the lyric for November is the most human-centric of the lyrics; it is marked by a sublime moment in which the human subject encounters something infinite, powerful, and beyond all human scope. Here the singer looks out on the "Dread eternity" against which his human heart and hand are impossibly small and ineffectual, and under threat of being subsumed into something inconceivably larger, as "November" is a "bright sign of loneliness too great for me" (II: 18).

In the experience of the sublime, the subject encounters his or her own human limitation; pitting "dread eternity" against a human hand and heart presents a

spectrum in which the human experience is under threat of being subsumed into something inconceivably larger. For Kant, however, the final stage of the sublime moment sees human reason conquer this inconceivability because, in the very act of conceiving the infinite—here the “dread eternity” of November—which exceeds the human—here the “feverish hands” and “restless heart”—human reason manages finally to contain it. The Elders’ earlier worry that narrative makes a “melody of grief” (II: 13) is here re-imagined, so that the human imagination that is capable of making compositions out of an undifferentiated mass of human experience, finds itself radically in control. In the lyric for November, that human imagination becomes the auteur and interpreter of that “dread eternity.”

It is this gesture of rational control that creates the solemnity that distinguishes, for Kant, between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful in nature is experienced as “play” (268) while the experience of the sublime manifests itself as a law governed *task*” (268 emphasis in original). The domination of “sensibility” by “reason” is in the case of the sublime an act of the imagination, operating as what Kant calls an “instrument of reason” (269) managing to make in the mind a comprehensive whole of the vision of the sublimely incomprehensible. According to this logic, the sense of awe that ends the November lyric is ultimately a feeling of the mind triumphing over “dread eternity” through the very act of conceiving of it.

If *The Earthly Paradise* is missing the strange epic awe of something like *Sigurd*, as Tucker and Dentith argue, it still deals in awesome affect, albeit on a different canvas. Because the experience of the sublime is ultimately an activity that requires the exercise of human reason, it is an activity that is not merely pleasing or charming, but instead subordinates these in favour of “respect.” Plato makes a similar move in his hierarchy of human faculties when he privileges reason over passion as

the faculty for achieving the good. The consequence of this affect is to elevate the anxiety of the lyrics to the level of a “task” as Kant calls it. The Idle Singer makes workers of his audience as they exercise the strength of their rational faculties to organize and contain the despair of the text. The lyric for November offers a condensed and more explicit version of an affective posture maintained throughout, one which calls upon readers and characters to complete acts of heroism by facing the dread eternity, acts that are rewarded by reminding us of the consolation—and the power—of the human imagination.

The expanse is picked up again in “December,” in which “pale stars, bright moon, swift cloud, make heaven so vast / That earth is left silent by the wind of night / Seems shrunken ‘neath the grey unmeasured height” (II: 5-7). The second verse offers the typical *Earthly Paradise* sentiment of “despairing sweetness” (II: 13), and moves outwards, addressing an external audience that it identified as sharing the emotions of the lyric poems:

O thou who clingest still to life and love,
 Though nought of good, no God mayst thou discern,
 Though no soul known wherewith thine heart did yearn,
 Yet since thy weary lips no curse can learn,
 Cast no least thing thou lovest once away,
 Since yet perchance thine eyes shall see the day. (II: 15-21)

If this verse addresses the beloved, it equally addresses the community of like-minded souls always potentially open to include all of humanity. It also imagines love as not cyclical, but evolving and shifting as in a narrative, a structure that offers the strongest chance for hope.

The monthly lyrics’ effects work through a mechanism of recognition between the speaker and his audience that compels each reader to find him or herself accounted for, not through a sense of intimacy from shared alienation or a sense of being misunderstood, or feeling exceptional, but through a sense of being represented,

and therefore representative. Having formed this communally oriented reception, these readers are also brought further into the frames of *The Earthly Paradise* so that they are, in their way, equally participating audience members alongside the remnant group. It is not simply because both the lyrics and the remnant frame contain the same themes of mortality, death, and the natural world, but rather because both frames are concerned specifically with a shared human response to this central element of the human condition. Morris is particularly interested in how human communities form through the recognition of a shared and universal plight.

The full power of *The Earthly Paradise* is thus revealed, and it is a power sourced from the acknowledgement of the universal relationship to story, demonstrated through the layered and polyvocal source material that make up its storytelling position. The critical response to Morris's poem revealed preoccupations with the relationship between these different stories and questions of identity. Morris's poetic voice, compared to his contemporaries Browning and Tennyson, seemed to be a special case, and his address included his readers in a special way, inviting them to reflect on the full weight of their belatedness, its challenges, and their gifts as participants in this pan-historical discursive activity of storytelling. Moreover, in his acknowledgement of the empty day his readers occupy, Morris invited his readers to reimagine their occupation of that empty day as the work of heroes, and provided them with the affective vocabulary to reframe that work as epic.

Chapter Three

“Tales Feigned and True”:

Negotiating Reception in the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*

Introduction

As we have seen in part one of this project, throughout *The Earthly Paradise* external readers are reminded to always be self-aware of themselves as participants in the poem. Readers are invited to find themselves accounted for in the text as audience members alongside the book’s main character groups—the Elders and the Wanderers—who themselves exist in order to fulfill the role of audience for one another. The Elders and the Wanderers tell stories, listen to them, and reflect on their emotional landscape through the course of these tales, while the shared experience of the tale telling forms a community from, and through, that discourse. In between, the Idle Singer returns to the contemporary frame to similarly offer an affective snapshot in the form of a monthly lyric. These monthly lyrics, which seem to be so private and introspective, are in fact as much about shared emotions as about private ones, and speak on behalf of the contemporary, external audience of the work.

The dynamics of these relationships and their inter-connections work together to define the audience of *The Earthly Paradise*. This community is one entirely constructed through text and speech, and relies on a mutually inclusive relationship between the two; texts come to life, books become subjects, and people become “living chronicles” (I: Prologue 2751) Oral storytellers narrate versions of tales that they describe as having encountered first in text, whilst the characters within these tales are often seized by the impulse to record a written version of their life story. Sometimes written versions exist within the logic of the tale itself to guide a

storytelling character in the tale. Such nesting accounts, textual, vocal, and textual again, are all presented in *The Earthly Paradise*, itself a text, but one that begins by greeting its readers with the direct address of speech, a form of address that it privileges throughout, and that ends with an extended address to itself as a book, an address which includes the imagined speech of the book itself.

The tales themselves sit at the centre of this complex interplay between these different forms of address, and the ways they interact with the audiences of and in *The Earthly Paradise*. They present an opportunity to imaginatively work through the themes raised by the form of the poem itself, and by the work it suggests it is doing. The ethical project of *The Earthly Paradise* is to query the role of the story; it invites us to consider when and how reception is an enriching experience, how story motivates human action, and what work it undertakes to unite, describe, or identify human communities. The first tale told in *The Earthly Paradise* is Rolf's narration of The Wanderers' Tale, his account of the doomed search for an earthly paradise, a search inspired by a false promise, delivered in the form of a tale, that such a space exists. During the course of The Wanderers' Tale, which is above all a story about a failed storytelling experience, Rolf demonstrates what solace is required from this year of stories about to begin, and so tacitly sets the agenda for the reception of the tales themselves. The Wanderers' Tale is about the failed search for an earthly paradise, but it is equally about the failed relationship between story, community formation, and the desire that prompted that quest.

Of course the task of the year's project of story telling is also consolatory and restorative in a broad sense. The Elders see that the Wanderers need, in some essential way, resurrecting, and the tales provide entertainment, the opportunity for reflection, and the chance to come together. More than this, however, the tales themselves work

at correcting the problem set forth in that preliminary Wanderers' Tale by revising the assumptions on which its fatal action rests. There are certain recurring elements in the tales which, read against Rolf's confession in his first tale, demonstrate a preoccupation with recuperating both the concept of community and the role of story within it. The community of Wanderers, as it is described in *The Wanderers' Tale*, had a number of problems, but fundamental to these concerns are failures of sincerity in tellings of its core story—that of the Earthly Paradise—and the resulting disasters when this “feigned” (I: 388) account is called upon to foster bonds and mobilize action. The failures of this community are ones that are broadly capable of correction through reimagining the connections between people, texts, and speech in terms of the activity what Habermas first identified as the “public sphere” and which has been revised and reimagined by subsequent critics as a “public.” The concept of a public articulated throughout *The Earthly Paradise* emerges as a corrective to the failed community narrated by Rolf in *The Wanderers' Tale*.

The problem of the Wanderers' Tale

Morris's title, *The Earthly Paradise*, is both straightforward and puzzling. This is not a work in which an earthly paradise is found to exist. The first several thousand lines of the poem in fact set out to firmly and finally state that there is no such space. To what, then, does Morris's title refer? It refers to the book as a whole, which as we shall see, is in the Envoi invited, in a rather post-modern gesture, to take its place a character within the text. It refers as well to the tale, or canon of tales, first shared between Rolf and Nicholas at the beginning of the Wanderers' Tale, that galvanizes their desire to leave Norway, and prompts their own quest narrative, a decision that causes *their* tale to itself become yet another earthly paradise tale. It also

identifies the absence at the heart of the Wanderers' quest, as the earthly paradise described within the tales that so ensnares Rolf and the other wanderers is nowhere to be found. Morris's title leaves the reference uncontextualised, and so includes all of these possibilities. As throughout Morris's poem, story is a dynamic, discursive field that gestures at its different forms, inviting participation, addition, and interpretation. The problem of the Wanderers' Tale is that it posits a false relation to the title, disregarding this whole discursive field and taking the earthly paradise not as story, but as fact. The rest of the poem works at reinterpreting that context.

The Wanderers' Tale is in fact bookended by two problematic recitations of an earthly paradise tale. At the beginning of the tale, Rolf describes meeting the other two named wanderers—Nicholas, the Breton squire and Lawrence, the Swabian priest. It is Nicholas that first mentions the earthly paradise tale. Consuming fever and illness make up the ominous backdrop of the early part of the Wanderers' Tale, as the Plague overwhelms Norway, but the first mention of plague-like symptoms is here, in Rolf's reaction to Nicholas's tale, which appears above all to infect Rolf: "so much of this and that he said / That in my heart the sharp barb entered, / and like real life would empty stories seem, / And life from day to day an empty dream (I: 149-152). When Nicholas's sway over Rolf begins to intensify, the epistemological status of the tales shifts, textually paralleled with that other, more physical, sickness: "while our longing for such things so grew / And ever more and more we deemed them true, / Upon the land a pestilence there fell" (I: 167-169). The deepening of their thrall coincides with the arrival of the plague, introduced as a narrative novelty. The "pestilence" (I: 169) was "unheard of yet in any chronicle" (I: 170), recalls Rolf. These dissolutions between the symptoms of fever and the symptoms of reception demonstrate that, from the beginning, the storytelling scene is wrong here.

Unlike the enriching reception repeatedly described in the narrative interludes between tales, the reception of this tale is stultifying and draining. To listen to these tales is to give and not receive. The reception of them is also isolating. When Rolf, Nicholas, and Lawrence are roused to action, it is in part because the world is itself confused. Rolf has lost the ability to properly decipher the world of story from an external reality, whilst the external reality is a Plague-ridden fever dream. In the midst of such confusion, real world action responds to story, further blurring that already confused line that began to dissolve as Rolf became infected by Nicholas's account of the earthly paradise. This iteration of the earthly paradise quest is suspicious from the start. What is drastically missing from this narration of story-telling is the sense of reaction, and of dialogue, elements that mark reception throughout *The Earthly Paradise*. As the quest gets under way, Rolf's "joy" (I: 290; 307) is too singular, too isolated. As he leaves Norway, he happily watches the shrinking shoreline, in the process describing a newly emerging bondless version of his self. The land "might have been to me / A kindly giver of wife, child, and friend" (I: 308-309), and leaving it leaves him alone. This symbolic sacrifice of the possible human connections a life in Norway might have provided is not replaced with a sense of fellowship on board the ship. Tellingly, he meets the newly collected fellow adventurers "with little sound" (I: 291), a detail repeated several lines later, when he observes: "Again betwixt us was there little speech" (I: 299). For Morris, a writer who so values the bonds of dialogue and fellowship, bonds which the rest of his poem will painstakingly resurrect, such beginnings are not auspicious, and they continue to cast doubt on the relationship between audience and tale.

Such doubts are confirmed several lines later when Nicholas goes amongst the newly formed band, convincing each of them in turn to join him. "Midst such of these

/ As knew not of our quest, with promises / Went Nicholas dealing florins round about, / With still a fresh tale for each man's doubt / Till all were fairly won or seemed to be / To that strange desperate voyage o'er the sea" (I: 317-322). This comingling of money and story compromises the audience and renders the tale a commodity. Up until this point in the narrative, Rolf believes that the aim of this voyage is adventure in some general sense. With Norway facing sickness and sorrow, the idea of a journey was attractive for its own sake. Nicholas then tells Rolf and Laurence a tale of their own, and it is not until this exchange, right on the heels of the scene of Nicholas sweetening each tale with a florin, that we first explicitly here that this journey is in search of the Earthly Paradise. When Nicholas initially suggested the journey, he makes reference to the "long-desired quest" (I: 201) but it seems nothing has been made clear, because when Nicholas speaks of the search for the earthly paradise, Rolf listens "agape"(I: 333). The positioning of this reveal places Rolf along side those problematically persuaded wanderers, who react equally to money and story, and highlights as well the flaws in Nicholas as a storyteller, who supplements, even replaces, story with money.

This is not the first time speech and money conflate in this way to manipulate action. When Rolf initially voices his desire to leave Norway, the discussion is an economic one. They cannot possibly afford it, he says. It is Nicholas who offers to pay for the journey from his newly revealed personal wealth. He has an "iron chest" (213) of riches and a stocked ship at his disposal. "My gold shall buy us Bordeaux swords / And Bordeaux wine as we go oceanwards" (I: 225-226) he promises. To confuse story with money is to diminish the receptive, generative, reciprocal powers of storytelling as they exist at the centre of the discursive field that *The Earthly Paradise* so values.

Accepting money as exchangeable for tale curtails the circulation of text and telling that makes up the value system of the whole poem.

Equally telling, when Nicholas reintroduces the notion of the earthly paradise to Rolf and Lawrence it is once again an instance when such tale telling is not generative of dialogue or connection. The reception is off. Instead, tales are evaluated according to their veracity, an evaluation only Nicholas appears able to conduct. Rolf has listened “agape”(I: 333), which is to say, mutely, to Nicholas’s stories. There is a distinct barrier between Nicholas, who alone knows how to interpret these tales, and the rest of the band, who are very much at the mercy of his ability to decipher text. As a result, although these tales are central to Rolf’s experience, desires, and future plans, his relationship with them is marked by confusion. His stance is not participatory: he knew “nought but old tales, nor aught of false and true / Midst these, for all of one kind [they] seemed to be” (I: 334-335). Nicholas, by contrast, had read widely, knew much, and “idle tales from true report he knew”(I: 341). Such references to a distinction between truth and falsity in tales mark the Wanderers’ Tale.

When Rolf describes the expanded recruitment after the Wanderers change vessels, switching from the small *Fighting Man* to the much larger *Rose-Garland* he describes that these new men where also “gained / . . . by stories true and feigned” (I: 387-388). Such a distinction is not one that needs making anywhere else in *The Earthly Paradise* and moreover, it is a false distinction when it does occur here. The wiser narrating Rolf knows this of course, but at this stage in the narrative such distinctions seem reasonable, and they are symptomatic of the improper relationship between tale and audience in the Wanderers’ Tale. The problem is both that listeners seek to find some unproblematic, factual correlation between the content of the tale and the content of the world, and as a result, false tellers such as Nicholas are able to

corrupt the properly reciprocal, discursive activity of storytelling in order to manipulate people. All of the values by which *The Earthly Paradise* conducts itself, sincerity, sympathetic address, dialogue, and community, are not possible when the criterion for assessing a story is, as Nicholas would have them believe, whether or not it is true.

What is more, several thousand lines later, it is not clear that the surviving wanderers have learned a better relation to the stories feigned and true. Once again in despair and stagnant, Rolf and Nicholas are in conversation; having again reached the emotional state where they have nothing to lose, they begin to resurrect their yearning after the earthly paradise. When a stranger approaches Rolf with his earthly paradise hustle, once again offering a feigned tale of immortality, Rolf is easily duped. When the old man confirms the young stranger's claims, Rolf, in spite of some lingering doubt, believes the duo: "what could it avail / Unto these men, to make a feignèd tale?" (I: 2211-2212) he asks. The spectre of the feignèd tale, but also the sense of being a potential (and indeed an actual) victim of such tales, still overshadows the atmosphere of the Wanderers' tale. Of course the tale is not true, as Rolf and the rest will find out to their peril. Because Rolf and the others still do not understand what it is that stories are for, they are still made to suffer by them.

Nowhere in the text does Rolf blame Nicholas for what transpires, and the Idle Singer narrator is equally laconic about blaming the Breton squire. This is because the most significant thing about Nicholas is his role in overseeing the failure of a community. It is precisely that Nicholas is so central to the mobilization of that doomed earthly paradise tale, and for insisting on a hermeneutics of truth and falsity, that the remaining wanderers end up in the despairing situation in which they find themselves. *The Earthly Paradise* is not a text that is very interested in individual

characters, but rather the bonds between them, and in the Wanderers' tale, these bonds are corrupt. Nicholas is symptomatic of a situation in which dialogue, response, speech, and text all fail to circulate in a public. He represents the real limitations of hierarchical, closed speech, but also its dangerous draw. The resolution of Nicholas's role in the tale is not, therefore, to blame him, but instead to outgrow him. He dies, finally, as a result of the last misplaced credulity, and his death is the logical end to his failure to respect the power of tales, and for the promotion of a false belief in tale telling as an activity that maps itself onto the world of things, not words.

Rolf's fixation throughout the Wanderers' Tale, on tales and their uses is revealed throughout to be feverish, problematic, full of false hope. This representation is largely a relational one. The problems that arise here are all related to the improper circulation and assessment of tales, the actions they prompt, and the violence they do to human choices. The preliminary lessons of the Wanderers' tale appear to be just of the Icarus sort for which *The Earthly Paradise* is famous: don't aim too high, don't exceed your portion. In addition, however, the Wanderers' tale seems to say do not listen to tall tales. It is this that needs correcting by what follows. It justifies the need for the corrective year of tale telling that is about to start. At the end of the Wanderers' tale, the group has been left with no consolation. Having been thusly mistreated by the realms of story-telling, they are without the strengths provided by a healthy life of the imagination. The tale-telling year that follows aims to recuperate the tale, to bring it back to life, and to situate it in its rightful context of a functioning community. The type of community in question is a public, because it is precisely the characteristics of such a relationship to the combined forces of speech and text that require care.

In a public, the equal requirement of both text and speech resists the commodification of text of the sort Benjamin is so wary of, and of the sort Rolf has already demonstrated as problematic at the beginning of the Wanderers' Tale when Nicholas uses money and tales as interchangeable currencies. As we have seen in the first part of this project, the structural task of the framing narratives establishes the inclusion of the external audiences who are, alongside the audiences of the Remnant frame, called upon to participate is a public formed from the circulating discourse, both textual and vocal. The Wanderers' tale demonstrates what happens when this open-ended, public speech is replaced with something closed, hierarchical, and unchallenged. The story-cycle that makes up the core of *The Earthly Paradise* offers a scenario that is more fully public. It is discursive, reactive and responsive. It depends on the interaction of speech and text, an interaction that allows texts to stay alive, and to resist the stasis that would enable them to be misused.

Moreover, the Wanderers' tale has set the agenda for the tales of the inner frame. The problems set out in the Wanderers' tale—problems of evaluating truth and sincerity, of appropriate desires, and of the relationship between people—are all imaginatively worked through in the content of the inner tales. Some of these engagements are relatively straightforward. A number of the tales, “The Son of Croesus,” “The Man Born to be King,” and “The Doom of King Acrisius,” for example, take as their themes the inability to escape one's fate. This serves as admonishment for the arrogance of the Wanderers' quest. “The Watching of the Falcon,” “The Lady of the Land,” and “The Ring Given to Venus” also engage in a critique of the Wanderers' search, as they all take as their aim to define the appropriate limits of desire. In “The Watching of the Falcon” the appropriate quest, and the one to be rewarded, is the search for contentment. This is made clear through

the falcon's proclamation that he is only addressing those people who are genuinely seeking this, and not riches, supernatural solutions, and so on who will be rewarded.

Tales about tales: alternative accounts of the earthly paradise story

Other engagements seem more pointed. There are two tales that deal explicitly with an earthly paradise: "Ogier the Dane" and "Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon."⁵³ These tales are fundamentally preoccupied with reminding us that the tales pre-dates these particular tellings, that they exist in a number of different iterations, and that they exist in both speech and print. They reimagine the earthly paradise story not in the feverish, stultifying, and isolating presentation outlined in the Wanderers' Tale, a presentation supervised by Nicholas's dominant and dominating voice, but instead by taking pains to highlight the tale as discursive activity. As is often the case in *The Earthly Paradise* this takes on both textual and vocal forms, brought together as shared participants. The chronicle of Ogier even appears, in textual form, within the story, when Ogier encounters the tale of his own life. It is also referenced throughout Rolf's narration, in which the sense of this telling as one of many is palpable throughout. This is in part through extraneous reference to details left out of this iteration, for example the narrative mention of the killing of "Charlot" (I: 612), an event that is often included in versions of "Ogier the Dane," but which has been left out of this one. This otherwise un-glossed character is clarified in Boos' edition of *The Earthly Paradise* by a footnote, but is free standing in the text, participating as a marker and a reminder of other versions. The dynamic discursive activity is highlighted in other ways as well. In one narrative intervention, Rolf explains: "now

⁵³ In "Cupid and Psyche" Psyche does gain immortality, but it is the immortality of the gods, and not the more human and earth bound immortality sought by the wanderers and depicted in these two tales.

ye shall know that the old chronicle, / Wherein I read all this, doth duly tell / Of all the gallant deeds that Ogier did; / There may ye read them; nor let me be chid / If I therefore say little of these things” (I: 1305-1309). Rolf cannot bear to tell these parts “because the thought of Avallon still clings / Unto my heart” (I: 1310-1311). Rolf’s version of “Ogier the Dane” is marked as his own, in this case by what he omits from it. Moreover, his invitation to his audience to supplement this storytelling experience by consulting other texts, an instruction equally applicable to Morris’s external readers, makes of “Ogier the Dane” a discursive activity that overflows the boundaries of this iteration, includes other tellings and writings, and above all defines the story as existing through the combined efforts of all of these forms of its telling.

The frame structure of “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” the other tale that directly engages with an earthly paradise, is the most direct comment on this relationship between tale and person, and the dissolving boundaries between the two. The hero Gregory falls asleep and dreams he is at a feast where a stranger, who Gregory recognizes as his own, second self, begins to tell a story about a shepherd named John who falls in love with an other-worldly fairy woman. Twice during the tale Gregory wakes up and the story of the inner frame is interrupted. Each time Gregory falls back asleep the distance between the frames diminishes. He begins by observing a version of himself, other to him, telling the story. In the first return to the tale, it is Gregory himself telling the tale, without the subtle division of selves. In the second return to the tale, the mediating frame of Magnus’s court disappears altogether, John the shepherd seems to disappear as the story—now not a recitation by a third party, but an immediate experience—becomes about Gregory himself. This is an imaginative engagement with recognition and address as they come to shape the relationship between a participating audience and a teller. Here Gregory moves

through the positions, listener, teller, and subject, highlight their interconnections that story make possible by figuratively embodying them here.

In this tale, one of John/Gregory's journeys of self-discovery is likewise a coming-to-know of the shared circulation of stories like his. After losing his beloved and wandering aimlessly, he arrives at St. Alban's monastery where he tells his story only to be told it already belongs to a discourse. A "little dry old monk" (II: 2449) invites John/Gregory's tale to participate: "thy tale, / Fair son, shall much my need avail, / For I have many such-like things / Writ out for sport of lords and kings" (II: 2451-2454). What follows is the public circulation of tale, as John/Gregory is introduced to several of these tales, hearing "many a history / Like to his own" (II: 2464-2465). His participation is at this point however still stilted, problematic. "Scarce the old man's speech he heard, / Or any speech of men" (II: 2460-2461). At the end of the tale, Gregory wakes up, and suddenly desires to write out all that has just transpired: "w[eaving] all into verses smooth" (II: 3356). Here again part of the tale is the experience of its many forms, and the contribution of a new form to the tradition, marking both Rolf and Gregory as new participants in the discursive activity. The proliferating, communal, and dynamic activity that marks both these performances of the earthly paradise tale both serve as correctives to Nicholas's own dangerous and limiting version, which did not take place in the context of a discursive activity, but rather sought to be the privileged and only version, and Nicholas's the only voice.

Reading each other

In the Wanderers' tale, the threat of feigned tales looms throughout, weighing, as we have seen, on Rolf's mind. Rolf and others' inability to properly read or assess

the performance of a tale is a failure of interpretation, in particular a failure to properly interpret and identify authenticity and sincerity. Nicholas's motivations are demonstrated to be problematic because they induce sickness, because they preclude engagement, reception, affinity, response, and because his tales are exchangeable with other forms of currency, indiscriminately. Such encounters with the related themes of sincerity, reality, and motivation play out in a number of the inner tales. "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" also deals explicitly with Rolf's worry of "feigned tales." It is one of only three tales to pass the 3000 line mark;⁵⁴ the sparseness of the plot is remarkable, given its unusual length. In the first thousand lines of this tale, the most pressing plot point is the interaction, spanning many pages, between John and the swan fairy. During the course of this exchange the two simply dissect the minutia of their motivations, their sincerity, and their conviction. Such singular and protracted focus on the authenticity of characters that are after all thrice removed from the 'reality' frame of the story helps to situate what is meant, in *The Earthly Paradise*, by 'feigned'. It is not a category that separates truth from fiction, although it can do that. Rather is a category that is meant to locate motivation. Feigned is less in opposition to truth than it is to sincerity. The emphasis, in "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," in anchoring such motivations, and their sincerity, is one that resonates throughout *The Earthly Paradise*. To feign is to pretend, to put on a false appearance, while to be sincere is to be desirous of human connection and communication. Encounters that are marked by these characteristics in the poem are ones in which speakers are not attempting, as Nicholas did, to call the shots. The distinction between feigned and true is in part, for Morris, a distinction

⁵⁴ "Lovers of Gudrun is just over 4900 lines, and "Bellerophon in Lycia" is just over 3545 lines.

between the despotic and the democratic, and between the individual and the communal.

In “The Man Born to be King,” the medieval tale for March, the unnamed King character offers up a feigned tale to a woodsman, and the ways in which the narrative deals with the King’s falsity demonstrates what it values. In this tale, a sage arrives to prophesy that the local King’s line will end with him, and that he will be succeeded by someone low-born. Later, while hunting in the forest, the King gets lost, and is taken in by a poor woodsman whose wife is dying in childbirth. A voice tells the King that the newborn will be the next king; hearing this, the King offers to adopt the newly motherless infant, all the while secretly planning to have him murdered. The rest of the tale is taken up with three failed attempts over the years to murder the boy, called Michael. The tale is resolved when the King’s daughter Cecily falls in love with Michael and forges a royal order for their wedding, after which the King, in an unexplained turn of events, is suddenly content, and offers to share his throne with his new son in law.

“The Man Born to be King” is bookended by two falsehoods, and the distance between the two is marked by the motivations in each case. Florence Boos points out that Morris’s version of this tale in fact collates three different sources, and contains much that is original: most notably, Morris “expands considerably his sources’ descriptions of medieval town and country life, deepens the internal reflections of several characters, and adds emotional resonance to their reactions” (*EP* I. 191). In particular, Boos observes, Morris contributes a series of scenes that highlight the subjectivity of his characters, including the king’s exchange with the sage that opens the tale, and the poignant deathbed scene in the woodsman’s cottage. Morris also adds the speech in which Michael’s foster mother says goodbye to him, and the scene in

which Michael discusses his fondness for his foster parents. In Morris's version it is various henchmen—characters Morris himself creates—rather than the King, who try to stab Michael. Morris also expands the role of Agnes, Princess Cecily's companion, in the drama. In Morris's version, Agnes finds the sleeping Michael, reads the death order, and suggests that Cecily sabotage the King's plans (*EP* I. 191-192). These additions of detailed, introspective, and richly humanized characters are all implicated in a tale that wends its way through an exploration between the private bonds of kinship, friendship, and personal loyalty, and the actions such bonds foster and value, against the actions of a King who believes he can manipulate and disregard these bonds.

After the King's initial encounter with the sage who both challenges his authority and foresees its end, he rides into the forest,⁵⁵ in the process riding into an entirely different tale. There are two story spaces in this first act of "The Proud King." The first is the King's city of which he is a benevolent dictator. Everything runs smoothly and well, but the King is the centre of all interactions. Knowledge, creativity and industry are all directed to and nurtured for the King. This is made clear when what might seem like civic bliss is interrupted and so challenged by a stranger who tries to add a free second voice to the status quo of the royal city. The second story-space is the intimate domestic space of the woodsman cottage where the King is shortly to find himself. Throughout this first act, Morris contrasts the King's experience of what this story is about with poignant, intimate portraits of grief that cannot fail to recruit readers to this seemingly secondary aspect of the plot. As a

⁵⁵ Movements in and out of towns and forest or countryside are significant in *The Earthly Paradise*, and are often associated with characters' shifting identities. Milanion's desire to leave the forest in "Atalanta's Race" begins the action of that tale. In "The Proud King," the medieval tale for April, another King—King Jovinian—goes for a ride into the country and there has his robes stolen and his role usurped by an angel who pretends to be him.

result, the King's power, even over what ought to have been his own story, is undermined by the affective intimacy of the universal experience of familial pain that overwhelms the more particular story of one man's struggles to maintain power. As the forest finally leads the King to a hut, for the first time in *The Earthly Paradise* we arrive at the private space of the home. In their book *The Spectacle of Intimacy*, Karen Chase and Michael Levenson discuss the public bond over the experience of a private life in Victorian Britain, in which paradoxically the domestic ideal of hearth and home manifested itself through its constant exposure in public, so that people never tired of stories of domestic life. "In the endless search for stories," write Chase and Levenson, "the information producers plucked at the secrets of domesticity. Scandal was a perpetual resource, but so too were the ordinary incidents of daily housekeeping" (7). The shared experience of a private, in this case domestic life, formed the basis of a shared public bond so that the "congregation of families in their sacred separate spaces was identified as the paradoxical foundation of sociality. The delight in being happily apart offered itself as the basis of community" (8).

The scene in the woodsman's hut, during which there is a growing and powerful disconnect between the king's falsity and the intimacy of the narrator's description of a family's grief, plays with just such a shared experience of familial space. The king enters the hut, and the following scene is worth sharing in full:⁵⁶

Him he found kneeling down, and bent,
 In moody grief above a bed,
 Whereon his wife lay, stark and dead,
 Whose soul near morn had passed away;
 And 'twixt the dead and living lay
 A new-born man-child, fair and great.
 So in the door the King did wait

⁵⁶ Contemporary critics of *The Earthly Paradise* frequently commented on the impossibility of quoting from the work in such a way as could convey their point, as the Morris's length and prolixity made it difficult to offer representative small excerpts. This continues to be a challenge for modern writers.

To watch the man, who had no heed
 Of this or that, so sore did bleed
 The new-made wound within his heart.
 But as the King gazed, for his part
 He did but see his threatened foe,
 And ever hard his heart did grow
 With deadly hate and willfulness:
 And sight of that poor man's distress
 Made it the harder, as of nought
 But that unbroken line he thought
 Of which he was the last. (I: 310-327)

The implication of the narrative structure is that the scene will be described as the King experiences it, whose “scornful troubled eyes did fall / Upon that nest of tragedy” (I: 328-329). The implication is undermined by what follows, which is imbued with pathos and tragedy not at all fitting with the King's state of mind. The episode is bookended by two accounts of the King's lack of empathy, which is here a failure of interpretation. He cannot read the scene properly, as he is occupying a different, competing narrative; he remains “unsoftened” (I: 335).

When the woodsman accepts the King's duplicitous offer to care for the infant, he refuses either to be impressed by the King or in awe of his own good luck, and in so resisting the story-space that reveals this portrait of intimate subjectivity also resists immersion into the King's narrative. The woodsman says to the King: “forgive it me if little thanks I give to thee / Who scarce can thank great God in heaven / For what is left of what was taken” (I: 397-400). The narrative lingers with the woodsman, even after the principal characters have left the page. Once again, the scene requires a complete quotation:

“so did all men mount /
 And turning round into the wood
 Forgat him and his drearihood,
 And soon were far off from the hut.
 Then coming out, the door he shut
 Behind him, and adown a glade,
 Towards a rude hermitage he made
 To fetch the priest unto his need,

To bury her and say her bede:
 So when all things that he might do
 Were done aright, heavy with woe,
 He left the woodland hut behind
 To take such chance as he might find
 In other lands, forgetting all
 That in that forest did befall. (I: 420-434)

This intimate grief, and its human toll, insists on being the point of this section of the tale. As the King is pushed to the margins of the narrative his kingdom had begun by dominating, the King's power is already undermined by the overriding affective power of this secondary narrative.

The King's tale here is feigned because it is manipulative and insincere, and because it does not generate bonds. In fact, it does violence to them by offering connections he has no intention of fostering. This falsehood is contrasted by the falsehood that ends this tale, when his daughter Cecily forges a marriage order. Morris takes pains to establish this as an act of writing, and in particular as an act of story-telling. Boos' footnote (*EP* II: 247n89) tells us that this version alone includes the whole letter. When the letter begins to serve its purpose, the moment is explicitly determined a story-telling moment, and one in which a number of people are involved in its performance and reception. Cecily's companion Agnes "heard the sound / Of folk who through the mazes wound / Bearing the message; then she said: / Be strong, pluck up thine hardihead, / Speak little, so shall all be well, / For now our little tale will they tell" (I: 1936-1941). This also remarks the return of the sage's prophesy, and of polyvocality and imaginative textuality. Cecily's companion faintly remembers hearing about the sage's prophesy, and Cecily agrees "such fables I have heard" (I: 1929). These circulating tales justify, for the two women, the forged document they have just set in motion. It also contextualizes their activity in one of those discursive spaces that *The Earthly Paradise* so values, situating their tale-telling activity

alongside other voices and other accounts. As a result, their falsehood fares better than the King's more selfish, isolated and uncreative one, and Cecily and Michael marry.

“The Proud King,” the medieval tale for April, also begins with a King, this time named Jovinian, and his kingly city that he rules without threat. He is isolated and untouchable, and there exists no public discourse. The King “knew that none durst say when he did wrong/ No man now could give him dread or doubt, / The land was ‘neath his sceptre far and wide” (I: 21-23). So far are his people from free discourse that Jovinian controls all the voices: “at his beck would well-armed myriads shout” (I: 24). In “The Proud King,” King Jovinian's mistake is to think that he is outside the aim of the circulating stories of *The Earthly Paradise*. He begins to imagine he is safe from suffering, and he looks to situate his success in terms of a different, private relationship to story: “there are tales of people who have won / A life enduring, without care or pain, / Or any man to make their wishes vain; / Perchance this prize unwitting now I hold” (I: 45-48). This is a tale of Nicholas's sort, one that seems to both promise and justify special favour. It is the wrong sort of tale.

The central problem of “The Proud King” is one of believability. King Jovinian, having taken off his kingly robes to go bathing, finds them stolen. He thus loses the outward signs of his reign, which is, in the meantime, usurped by an imposter (who will turn out to be an angel). The short tale then enacts a series of encounters in which the real King—always identified as such by the narrator to the readers—meets people who do not believe he is who he says he is. This story is about the failures of believability. By the end of the story, when all is right with the world again, King Jovinian decides to write down his tale—to try to share the experience of his private life with the King who will come next, but we are quickly told that “little

heed the new King took of it” (I: 810). So the narrator tries one more time by appealing to us, the most outward audience: “but ye, O Kings, think all that ye have got / To be but gawds cast out upon some heap, / And stolen while the Master was asleep” (I: 817-819). During the story, Jovinian’s failure to account for dialogue and connection, his failure to realize that his position as a King is dependent on the communal recognition of his power—if not their consent—results in the loss of that position. Because he does not respect the communal context through which the reception of an account is validated, his “true” tale is received as feigned.

Uniting Subjectivities: Atalanta, Alcestis, Psyche

The central organizing relationship in the Wanderers’ tale is between Rolf and Nicholas. The hold the false earthly paradise tale has on Rolf is co-extensive with the problematic intimacy between these two travelers. The sickness at the heart of their connection spreads outward. As we have seen, the beginning of their journey is marked above all by Rolf’s resistance to connect with other members of the quest. Habermas situates the beginning of the public sphere in “experiments with the subjectivity discovered in the close relationships of the conjugal family” (49) as he speaks of “the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one’s self and the other” (49). In this formulation he describes the process by which private individuals try out versions of themselves as performances for an imagined other: “the diary became a letter addressed to the sender, and the first person narrative became a conversation with one’s self addressed to another person” (49). Habermas calls the public sphere a creation determined by “fictive identi[ies]” (56). The concept of the public, then, requires the foundation of an intimate relationship.

In “Atalanta’s Race,”⁵⁷ the very first tale of *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris tells the story of uniting two subjectivities, and in the process offers a sketch of the private connections upon which a healthy public identity functions. Morris tells the story of the hunter Milanion’s successful courtship of Atalanta, daughter of King Schoneus. Exposed at birth, Atalanta is first brought up by a bear, then by some forest dwellers; once grown, she returns to the city of her birth, where her father reclaims her. She vows she will only marry the man who can beat her at a foot race, and have killed any man who cannot. This process, often repeated, forms the main plot of the story. The tale begins with the hunter Milanion, who lives in the forest when he is suddenly seized by “some new fleeting thought” (I: 16) that arouses a vague, unfocused longing in him, causing him to go to King Schoneus’s city where he sees, and is ultimately enraptured by, Atalanta. By the end of the tale, after a successful supplication to Venus, who provides him with the *deus ex machina* of three golden apples, Milanion will beat the suddenly acquiescent Atalanta. In this tale, Morris emphasizes Milanion’s movements from country to city, to the liminal space of the sea surrounding Venus’s temple, and back to the city. These movements mark, in Milanion’s character, the development of a public identity, as he moves from the solitary, pre-lapsarian forest space to the challenges of the civic space in which he must negotiate other people, and learn how to act in front of them. Milanion’s interiority is countered by Atalanta’s inscrutable publicity, as she re-enacts a public ritual in front of the citizens of her city. The central action of “Atalanta’s Race” is to

⁵⁷ Casual twentieth century disregard for *The Earthly Paradise* crops up in various places, and in a printed version of a Chicago Art Institute’s Centennial Lecture on representations of Atalanta, John Boardman dismisses “Atalanta’s Race,” during the course of a passing reference, as of “extremely slight merit” (15), although he is at least as disparaging of Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon*, which he calls “unmemorable” (3).

tell the story of a correction, in which Atalanta's poisonous, inappropriate publicity is replaced by the well-negotiated public identity of the private subject Milanion.

Milanion's solitude, and his lack of public identity, are both established from the tale's opening sequence in which he is contextualised within the harmonious natural world. The "echoes of his lone voice cling / About the cliffs and through the beech-trees ring" (I: 6-7). In place of the discourse of the public sphere, Milanion is surrounded by the sounds of nature, the "day-long noises of the wood" (I: 10), the "pattering" (I: 12) feet and "heavy breathing" (I: 13) of his hounds. The "new fleeting thought" (I: 16) that introduces a sudden longing is itself the first step of his departure from the state of nature, as it implies an unaccountable lack that cannot be accounted for in a harmonious natural setting, in which each thing has its place. The "shadow across his sun-burnt face" (I: 17) that announces the new sensation is already the shadow of the city.

When Milanion goes to the "gleaming of Schoneus' town" (I: 28), in search of the object of his "vague sweet longing" (I: 20), the narrator switches to a more inclusive pronoun: "and now *our* hunter looked for something new" (I: 54, emphasis added). Depositing Milanion in an urban space, Morris gives Milanion an urban taste for novelty, and he is already placing Milanion in a peopled context. As "our" hunter his identity is becoming socially determined. This social context is made explicit as Milanion literally takes his seat amongst the citizens of the town: "the high seats were, with eager people filled. / There with the others to a seat he gat" (I: 56-57). This is the first of Milanion's three attempts to assimilate with the space of the city. This first one is interrupted by the arrival of Atalanta, who is described as "like Diana clad / When in the woods she lists her bow to bend" (I: 79-80). This description enacts a private textual bond between the two, who have now both been introduced as hunters

in the woods. Milanion's notice of her returns him to the space of the countryside and interrupts his affiliation with the space of the city, as the scene turns intimate.

Atalanta, after her initial introduction, is described through a series of dangerous excesses; she is "too fair to look upon and be glad" (I: 81), and "too fair to let the world live free from war" (I: 84). She is also the organizing principle of the city. The townspeople call Atalanta "that which still makes our city's name accurst" (I: 234). Her very presence in the public arena, and the identification of her with the city, is already problematic. King Schoeneus's attempt to expose his daughter at birth was an action undertaken precisely because an infant female could not grow up to be a citizen. She was a burden that would never yield a civically useful adult, and Florence Boos' footnote reminds us that this is understood to have been relatively common practice in ancient Greece (I:169n15). It is the impossibility of Atalanta ever participating in the public sphere that justifies, to her father, her exposure. From the beginning, her continued survival is a refusal of that sentence. In living, she claims for herself the very things that her father (and everyone else) thought impossible. This ancient Greek distinction between the *oikos* (house) and the *polis*⁵⁸ (city) is of course similar to the concept of the separate spheres, and this distinction is also one that formed the basis of the definition of the bourgeois public sphere. Geoff Eley, along with others, argues that the "new category of the 'public' man' and his 'virtue' was constructed via a series of oppositions to 'femininity,' which both mobilized older conceptions of domesticity and women's place and rationalized them into a formal claim concerning women's 'nature'" (309). Atalanta's refusal to embody her side in that "series of oppositions" here holds an entire public hostage.

⁵⁸ See Habermas 3-4 for his discussion on the interplay between *oikos* and *polis*.

Each of Milanion's visits to the city involves him interacting with its citizens. After Milanion's first race viewing, Morris takes pains to narrate the rather anti-climactic chatter of the dispersing audience: "so was the pageant ended, and all folk, / Talking of this and that familiar thing / In little groups from that sad concourse broke" (I: 134-136). Milanion makes his way amongst these groups, approaching an old man to help him interpret what he has just seen. The old man addresses him as "stranger" (I: 148), an interim name Milanion is often given throughout the tale. These interactions with strangers in a social context occur throughout the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, and often in scenes like this one, where individuals are trying to find ways to act publicly.

Milanion hears the story of Atalanta, and returns to the woods, where he tries to live as before, but finds himself restless, so he leaves for the city once more, this time he to "Argive cities came, / And in the lists with valiant men he stood, / And by great deeds he won him praise and fame" (I: 211-213). This is one way of gaining a public name, and he succeeds at it well. Thus bolstered, he returns to King Schoeneus's town to attempt great feats as he had in other towns, to build his renown. The problem that marks this second visit is that he is still at odds with himself, denying his actions the authenticity of conviction. When he arrives, he pretends this town is like any of the others he has visited: "to his beating heart his lips did lie, / That owning not victorious love and fate, / Said, half aloud: And here too must I try, / To win of alien men the mastery, / And gather for my head fresh meed of fame / And cast new glory on my father's name" (I: 225-231). He petitions the king to race his daughter, but the king rejects his claim, inviting him instead to "be thou my guest" (I: 337). Here Milanion's failure to get the results he wants through his actions is linked

to his inability to be honest about his reasons. He remains a “guest” in the town, and is denied the chance to act.

The next section of the tale is one of Morris’s own invention, and it makes “Atalanta’s Race” a story about Milanion’s own fight with his private self and its actions in a public space. Milanion leaves the city and goes to the sea to Venus’s temple. In a tale so concerned with Milanion’s movements between the city and the country, this removal, between the second and the third acts, to the liminal space of the sea is a telling one. It is not, then, within the space of either the city or the country that Milanion will find his way to be a public participant, but it is instead by removing himself from the either / or distinction in order to reflect on the connections between the private self and the public world. In his supplication to Venus, Milanion accuses his (failed) rival suitors for Atalanta’s hand of having not succeeded because of the disconnect between their will and their actions. Here he reveals that he has learned something about appropriate public action; it is precisely such a self-deceit Milanion committed when to his “beating heart his lips did lie,” as he arrived back in Schoneus’s town. The other suitors’ transgression was greater than his, because their deceitful public actions tried to cloak what was in fact a simple desire for power.

Milanion explains his new insight to Venus:

They who died before
Not single hearted as I deem came here,
Therefore unthanked they laid their gifts before
Thy stainless feat, still shivering with their fear,
Lest in their eyes their true thought might appear,
Who sought to be lords of that fair town. (I: 414-419)

Milanion is “single-hearted” where the other men were duplicitous, desiring one thing and presenting another, all the while giving themselves away. Milanion’s case to Venus is one based on an evaluation of a performance, he argues the others failed to

perform their proper characters to her, and to make them believable. Milanion completes his supplication by simply standing, open to her scrutinizing gaze, for days.

Having completed the test, Milanion returns to the King Schoeneus's town for the third and final time. Morris once again emphasizes the aspects of publicity and display in the race, calling in a "dismal pageantry" (I: 563), and drawing attention to Milanion's "face . . . beheld by all" (I: 564-566). In Morris's version of the tale, Atalanta is already taken with Milanion before the race ever begins, and it is because she reads in his public face, "beheld by all" a sign of authenticity. "What change is this that holds the maid" (I: 568) asks the narrator. "Does she indeed see in his glittering eye / More than disdain of the sharp shearing blade, / Some happy hope of help and victory" (I: 569-571). Suddenly, Atalanta's performance retreats from pure outward action. Atalanta "drops her lids before his gaze" (I: 582) and feels "sudden languor [and] contempt of fame" (I: 591). Atalanta is called back to her performance by the trumpets announcing the race's beginning, when "she must play her part" (I: 598). When she finally does lose to Milanion, the victory is phrased in terms of the passing of her public role: "she weeps glad tears for all her glory done" (I: 658). In the narrative interlude at the close of the tale, the Elders and Wanderers are themselves reminded of the public aspects of human life, and the importance of an appropriate performance: "the friends of this or that man, rose and fawned / On hands they knew; withal once more there dawned / The light of common day on those old hearts, / And all were ready now to play their parts" (I: 15-19).

The tale's conclusion highlights the co-dependent relationship between public and private, as the union of these two newly adjusted subjects—Milanion having recently understood how to properly perform himself publically, and Atalanta having

recently assented to the imperatives of an interiority—is immediately placed in the context of the larger public, who all benefit:

Shatter the trumpet, hew adown the posts!
 Upon the brazen altar break the sword,
 And scatter incense to appease the ghosts
 Of those who died here by their own award.
 . . .
 Here are the gathered folk; make no delay,
 Open King Schoeneus' well-filled treasury,
 Bring out the gifts long hid from light of day. (I: 659-668)

The happy ending of “Atalanta’s Race,” one of the few happy endings in *The Earthly Paradise*, is one in which the newly restored civic health of the town is at least as much a cause for joy as the romantic union of a couple. What is more, they are symbiotic results, as private conviction requires a public performance, in the case of Milanion who must interact with people, and learn how to act with them, while pursuing his own will, by leaving the pure solitude and privacy of the forest, while Atalanta’s purely public conviction has no interiority. She began as an entirely inscrutable public act, repeated, and finds her resolution in the dropped gaze of the private thought.⁵⁹

In “Atalanta’s Race” Morris uses an inflated version of a public woman to demark interiority in need of recuperation. Morris argues for a classic Habermasian public/ private relationship as Milanion earns his place in a public context by learning how to master an intimate relationship, while Atalanta learns how to anchor public performance in shared interiority. In both “The Love of Alcestis” and “Cupid and Psyche” this mutually upholding definition is undermined by radically privileging the

⁵⁹ These are of course highly traditional gendered roles. If it is one of Morris’s only happy tales, it is not one in which female identity is celebrated for being particularly complex. In her article “Oedipus is Burning: Fate, Desire, and Masochism in Algernon Charles Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon*,” Elizabeth A. Gusynski argues “the end of *Atalanta* certainly makes every attempt to rediscover that paternal, normative order” (228).

private sphere of shared interiority, while also making it the sphere of action. As with “The Man Born to be King,” “The Love of Alcestis” begins with the arrival of a stranger at the court of a king, and as with “The Man Born to be King” it is also another tale in which the primary narrative is subverted by an intimate private space of interiority within the text, although here it is a more gendered phenomenon. In this tale, the god Apollo arrives in human disguise at the court of King Admetus. He presents himself to the King, and joins his service, helping him in many things, chief amongst them, King Admetus’s courtship of King Pelias’s daughter Alcestis, whom he eventually marries. When Apollo finally reveals his true identity to King Admetus, the god gives him three arrows, with the instruction to burn them if he is ever in danger. After a number of happy years with his wife and prosperous kingdom, the King falls ill and burns the arrows, an act which conjures up a voice that explains that if someone volunteers to die in his place, Admetus will recover from his illness. Admetus resigns himself to death while, unbeknownst to him, Alcestis makes the decision to die in his place.

Admetus’s courtship of Alcestis is performed through a series of public acts. Alcestis’s father Pelias asks Admetus to endure a number of trials, whose pure outward meaning are meant to demonstrate his worthiness of Alcestis. The value of these presentations of publically evaluated worth is threatened from Admetus and Alcestis’s first eye contact, when Alcestis introduces private, silent communication:

So did she raise her grey eyes to her love.
 But to her brow the blood rose therewithal,
 And she must tremble, such a look did fall
 Upon her faithful eyes, that none the less
 Would falter aught, for all her shamefastness:
 But rather to her lover’s hungry eyes
 Gave back a tender look of surprise,
 Wherein love’s flame began to flicker now. (I: 569-576)

This is an interruption in a tale which has hitherto been marked by public actions in public courts, and by the friendship of Admetus and Apollo-in-disguise. As with the intrusion of the woodsman's grief in "The Man Born to be King," Alcestis's look briefly shifts the scope of the tale, then retreats as the status quo of the narrative returns, and the prospering of Admetus's kingdom, and his happiness, are entirely the subject of external effects. Admetus is more properly at home in that world of external action, his willingness to largely ignore his inklings that Apollo-in-disguise is not as he seems demonstrates this tendency, but it is his entire failure to account for Alcestis's interiority that really clarifies this distinction. In Euripides' version, upon hearing the prophecy about the possibility of his salvation, Admetus asks everyone to take his place: "One by one he asked them all, / all those who were bound to him by ties of love, / but no one would. / His father and mother were old, and he was theirs, / but even they refused. Everyone refused. / All but one: his wife Alcestis" (26-31).⁶⁰ Florence Boos points out that in Euripides' version, Admetus is selfish, a characteristic displayed in a number of different ways, but in particular when he focuses on the pain it would cause him, if Alcestis should die. In Euripides' version, we are also told what will happen from the opening lines, when Apollo himself addresses the audience. Finally, in Euripides' version, Alcestis is in fact brought back to life. In Apollodorus's version, which Morris follows more faithfully, it reads simply: "when the day appointed for his death came, since neither his father nor his mother wished to die for him, Alcestis died in his stead" (qtd in Faulkner, "Morris and Hughes" 72).

⁶⁰ In Ted Hughes' translation of *Alcestis*, he has Apollo do the asking, and not Ademetus and, as with Morris, has Alcestis herself volunteer: "I was shameless. I asked everybody / Who boasted sharing the slightest family link / . . . / Only one person I did not ask: Alcestis. His wife" (3).

Most critics agree that Morris's version⁶¹ of the tale drastically privileges Alcestis, and that the tale celebrates her self-sacrifice, and her love that, after all, lends itself to the title of the tale. What is striking about this version, however, is Alcestis's occluded presence in the tale, her brief interruption in the public games, and Admetus's assumption that he is in control of the narrative, but also that he knows what sort of narrative it is. When he hears the prophecy, he "peacefully turned round unto the wall" (1140), and resigned himself to his fate:

For in his heart he thought: Indeed too well
I know what men are, this strange tale to tell
To those that live with me: yea they will weep,
And o'er my tomb most solemn days will keep,
And in great chronicles will write my name,
Telling to many an age my deeds and fame. (I: 1141-1148)

But none will die for him, because at the moment of reckoning, when death comes, "how can we then have wish for anything, / But unto life that gives us all to cling?" (I: 1152-1153). When he falls asleep, Alcestis speaks for the first time in the tale, and delivers a forty line, heartbroken monologue. In his ending, Morris highlights both the strangeness, and the strength, of Alcestis's intervention into a world dominated by public behaviour with her private will, here her will to love. Admetus's own lack of realization, in Morris's version, of the possibility of such an intervention, is an implicit critique of disconnecting public action with private desire.

⁶¹ For a thorough overview of the history of the Alcestis story from its origins in folktales, to Ted Hughes modern translation see Parker, L. P. E. "Alcestis: Euripides to Ted Hughes". *Greece and Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 50, No. 1 (April 2003), 1-30. Parker offers a brief summary of Morris's version, but appears not to value it: "Browning's private judgment on *The Earthly Paradise* in general is harsh, but not without justice: 'Morris is sweet, pictorial, clever always—but a weariness to me by this time.' There is, he says, no 'body' in the work" (18). See Peter Faulkner. "The Story of Alcestis in William Morris and Ted Hughes". *Journal of William Morris Studies*. Summer & Winter (2005) 56-79. For a more focused treatment. Faulkner contrasts Morris's version with Ted Hughes' 2000 translation of Euripides' play. Faulkner concludes they are radically different versions, and argues that Morris's omission of Herakles and the resurrection of Alcestis is in keeping with the larger themes of *The Earthly Paradise*, in which no one is allowed to outwit death.

In “The Story of Cupid and Psyche,” the classical tale for May, the heroine Psyche is forced into a world of public action when it is decided that she must be sacrificed to a sea monster in order to save the kingdom from a devastating plague. The sacrifice is forestalled, however, by Love, Venus’s son, who has fallen in love with Psyche’s beauty. He saves her by taking her to an Edenic love nest that includes beautiful gardens and a stylish, decadent house. Love, without revealing precisely who he is, tells Psyche that she is now his wife, and mistress of the beautiful house and gardens. What follows is an interval in which Psyche spends all day at home alone, and all night in blissful conjugal union with Love, at whom she is forbidden to look. When Psyche’s jealous sisters come visit, they introduce doubt into Psyche’s newly-wedded bliss, convincing her that she must be bedding a demon since her husband is so reluctant to let her see him. Now frightened and suspicious, she sneaks a look at him, only to discover that he is a god, and that he has god-like wrath. He casts her out. The rest of the narrative is organized around the conflict between Psyche and Venus, who is jealous of her beauty and keen to see her suffer. Venus forces her to complete several seemingly impossible tasks, culminating to a trip to the underworld. Happily, Love finally relents, saves and forgives her, and the tale ends with Psyche gaining immortality.

At the beginning of the tale, Morris undermines a standard fantasy of domestic bliss, in which the husband is powerful, the woman is beautiful, and the house is perfect. He makes strange domestic space. When Love deposits Psyche in her new home, she walks through the rooms “trembling” (539). The strangeness of the place alienates her from herself: “she gaze[d] upon the wonders of the place, / And in the silver mirrors saw her face, / Grown strange to her amidst that loneliness” (I: 542-544). Later, bathing, she “played / Till of herself at last she grew afraid” (I: 665-66).

As the tale continues, Psyche, exiled from her home, moves into the space of action, which Love, when casting her out, associates with the world of public life, calling it “the cruel world” (I: 1268) with “mocking, curious faces bent on thee” (I: 1268). Here Morris once again emphasizes the impersonal public gaze as a recurring element in public space. She must do battle with authority—in this case Venus—in order to enact, in public, her private desire for her husband. The tasks she is given are all deeds that are purely outwardly oriented. They have no meaning in themselves, but are meant purely as performances of submission to Venus. Witnessed by Love, they become private acts of devotion. In “The Story of Cupid and Psyche,” Morris undermines the traditional representation of the private sphere as it exists in the service of a public sphere, by challenging the possibility of a union of equals in that conceptual space. In its place, he puts Psyche in a testing ground that is indeterminate, in which public acts have private motivations, and in which traditionally female qualities of subservience and obedience—those qualities which Psyche displays for Venus—become acts of resistance and public conviction.

The Urban Gaze: Bharam, Pygmalion, Rhodope

Among the tales of *The Earthly Paradise*, there is a preoccupation with public performance and public assessment of performance in a way that is depicted as urban. In particular, several of the tales work out ideas of the consequences of a public, urban gaze on a conflicted private subjectivity. *The Earthly Paradise* begins by addressing a communal context. The space of the city, which occupies the very first line of The Prologue, forms the subject of an anti-invocation: “Forget six counties overhung with smoke” (I: Prologue 1). The story of London’s expansion in the nineteenth century is a familiar one. Britain was the first country to become

industrialized, and though London itself was never an industrial city in the way of, for example, Birmingham or Manchester, it bore the effects of national industrial achievement. Descriptions of nineteenth-century London often include a barrage of statistical wonders, for example: “in 1801 there were 394 square yards per person; in 1851 there were 160 square yards per person. In 1801 the average distance between houses was 57 yards; in 1851 it was 38 yards” (Hansen 73). London was the first modern city to reach a population of a million (Plotz 1), and by 1861 the population had nearly reached three million; two decades later it was almost five million (Sennett 132). When William Morris begins *The Earthly Paradise* with the invitation to “forget six counties overhung with smoke,” it is these quickly expanding developments, occurring within living memory, and the shared contemporary experience of their marvels, but mostly their pitfalls, that he was referencing to his readers. It is an invitation in which an anti-urban stance seems easy to read. It is not difficult to take the interpretive leap from Morris’s “hatred of modern civilization” to a hatred of the city, of London in particular, whose exponential growth in population, consequence, and power was surely the great manifestation of the Industrial Revolution that so marked “modern civilization” for Morris. The Prologue’s invocation of cities, however, reveals not a hatred of them, but rather identifies its audience as city-dwellers, sharing certain concerns.

It would be a mistake to read Morris’s criticisms of nineteenth-century London as an invective against the city *in toto*. A few lines later he invites readers to dream, not of the countryside, or of the wilderness, but simply of another sort of city: “London, small and white and clean” (I: Prologue 5). From this imagined city-space, readers are then whisked away to yet another one, the “nameless city by the sea” (I: Prologue 17) where the Elders live. From here, the Wanderers and the Elders will

conduct their year of tale-telling. *The Earthly Paradise*, from its very beginning, is a work that takes its pains to establish this social context. Morris's interpellation of his audience as inhabitants of a city has consequences for the larger work, as cities are spaces where people who may not know each other meet. Habermas, in his first account of the public sphere, identified it as a phenomenon born out of the increasing urbanization of the population, of the new coffee houses, journals, and newspapers that organized the discursive activities of that population's experience of the public sphere. Michael Warner's definition of a public as that which must always be potentially addressing strangers ("Publics" 59) who are united by virtue of their shared discourse, and Richard Sennett's definition of the city as a place where strangers are likely to meet (39) both invite us to consider the ways in which strangers address each other, interpret each other, and come (or fail to come) to have shared stakes in each other as fellow citizens.

The Idle Singer sets this as one of his themes when he addresses his readers as city-dwellers. The city of Elders also makes possible the year of tale-telling between the Wanderers and the Elders. The inclusion, in the narrative interludes, of other city dwellers, of visitors, of groups of laughing youths, of merchants and mariners, and beautiful women, help to remind readers of the urban, populated, and above all the *public* character of this discourse. Several tales demonstrate marked preoccupations with the intersection of the individual into just such an urban space. "The Man who Never Laughed Again," "Pygmalion and the Image" and "The Story of Rhodope" all use just such incursions to diagnose and display characters who are emotionally damaged, and whose relationships to their own imaginative worlds are out of balance. In the process, these tales engage with human sadness understood as crises of the imaginative faculty, and imagine how these characters in crisis intersect register with

the larger human community. These tales consider the consequences of urban alienation, and offer a series of different resolutions to such alienation.

The medieval tale for October, “The Man who Never Laughed Again,” is the only tale not taken from European source materials; it is a significantly revised version of a tale from *Thousand and One Nights*.⁶² Although it also contains movements between the city and the countryside, it is perhaps the most intensely urban tale of the cycle. The story is about the mysteriously despairing Firuz, who comes upon his old friend Bharam in the city streets. Bharam is also depressed, but for more obvious reasons; his recent loss of fortune has left him destitute. Firuz offers him a sort of valet job at his palace, which he shares with six friends, all of whom seem to display the same abject unhappiness as Firuz, the cause of which they all refuse to share to the perplexed and curious Bharam. Each of the six companions dies in turn. When Firuz is about to die himself, he begins to reveal to Bharam the source of their melancholy, but dies before he can, although Firuz does give him a key which he says will help to reveal “the story of our foolish sin” (II: 504). Bharam returns to the city for a time, where he is quite happy, having taken some riches from Firuz’s palace. Eventually, however, nagging curiosity comes to mar his contentment, and he returns to the palace, uses the key, encounters a Queen with whom, in a dream-like sequence, he makes love, before being expelled from the palace. When he awakes from his dream state he discovers Firuz’s palace in ruin. He returns once again to the city, where he becomes a sort of omnipresent urban legend, the object of street-level spectacle, and the tale ends with the name by which he is now known by staring strangers: “THE MAN WHO NEVER LAUGHED AGAIN” (II: 1585, capitalization in original).

⁶² Boos lists the version Morris would have consulted as the three volume Charles Knight & Co. edition, published in 1841 and translated by Edward Lane.

This tale is ultimately a nightmarish vision about the anxieties of public performance and inscrutability, and the dramatic trajectory of Bharam's falling, rising, and falling fortunes is recorded in a series of carefully described scenes of gazing strangers and passersby. Such spectatorship is minutely brought richly to life, as in the passage near the beginning when Firuz recognizes Bharam on the street: "A lonely man, who by the poor wretch passed, / And passing, on his face a side-glance cast, / Then o'er his shoulder eyed him, then drew rein / And turned about, and came to him again" (II: 53-56). In the original tale, called in translation "The Man who never Laughed for the Rest of his Days," there is no such movement between the city and the countryside. The Bharam character leaves the city for the palace at the beginning and does not return. Morris's addition of the space of the city as a litmus test for Bharam's emotional state emphasizes the extent to which Morris is interested in Bharam's struggles as a form of *social* sickness. He uses the space of the city street, and the reactions of its onlookers, to register Bharam's emotional life. The result is a tale about the city, about strangers' potentially incomprehensible actions within the space of the city, and about the repulsion/compulsion to identify with those strangers. Bharam's relationship with the city, in particular the city street as the place of the crowd, is a recurring emphasis of the narrative, which above all seeks to locate Bharam's emotional state by situating it in the context of the public gaze.

In the first instance, Bharam is introduced as the object of the spectator's gaze. The tale opens with the introduction of a Gatsby-esque house in the middle of town. This house, another of Morris's inventions (II:173n3), is the nexus of the town, providing it with conviviality and pleasure. People are always coming in and out; it is full of singers and dancers, and action. The original tale contains a similar description, but its subject is the Bharam character—simply called "the son"—and its aim is to

describe how he squandered his inheritance: “and when the son grew up, he took to eating and drinking, and the hearing of instruments of music, and songs, and was liberal, and gave gifts, and expended the riches that his father had left to him until all the wealth was gone” (III.155). Here, in the Edward Lane translation, there are no other people in this description, and the son is as if alone in the middle of his own excess. In Morris’s version, this description of music, dancing, and pleasure is recast more positively, and is situated in a social context, including many people, who come in and out of “a stately house.” The narrative gaze is outside, and at street-level, acting as another passer-by: “through the doorway you might see within / The glittering robes of minstrel-men that sung, / And resting dancing-girls in raiment thin” (II: 23-25). In the midst of all this joviality:

A man leaned, gazing at the passers-by,
 Who, young, was clad in wretched clothes and poor,
 And whose pale face, grown thin with misery,
 Told truthful tales of his end anigh,
 For such a one was he as rich men fear,
 Friendless and poor, not taught hard toil to bear. (II: 36-42)

This man is Bharam, who is about to be recognized by the passing Firuz. His very presence serves as a check to the townspeople, who fear him for his very desperation. They almost give him alms, “but all passed on again as if afraid / That e’en in giving thanks for unasked gift, / His dolorous voice the veil of joy would lift” (II: 47-49). These feelings of trepidation from these passersby are imaginative acts of withheld identification. The fear Bharam inspires is beyond what he himself could possibly conjure, and the townspeople’s reaction is the result of the small but significant act of recasting his simple presence as foreboding, as threatening and dangerous, which is to say, as something more than himself. Bharam also causes them, for a moment, to imagine their own unhappiness. The result is to further isolate him from participating in the life of the town by insisting that he is other to them.

This practice continues on each subsequent occasion that Bharam returns from Firuz's palace. When Firuz dies, and Bharam first thinks about the move back to the city, he fears becoming a stranger again, as he considers the city primarily as a space of alienation: "Ah must I go? he said; / Have I no heart to meet that unknown fate? / And must I lead the life that once I led, / Midst folk who will rejoice when I am dead, / Even as if they had not shared with me / The fear and longing of felicity" (II: 583-585). Bharam's worried vision is telling; he restates what the narrative has already revealed, that the city is an unbearable place for an individual who though "midst folk" does not feel included in the shared concerns of that city. Yet when Bharam returns, he feels joy again at life, and it is precisely as an urban dweller that he feels joy. Morris's rapturous description of city life is his own addition; so too, then, is the emphasis on its concomitant joys:

Surely if any man was blithe and glad
 Within that city, when the morrow's sun
 Beheld it, he at least the first place had,
 And midst of glad folk was the happiest one:
 So much to do, that was not e'en begun;
 So much to hope for, that he could not see;
 So much to win, so many things to be! (II: 673-679)

If Bharam had worried that the city would be a space where no one knows him, its sense of possibilities wins him over. As a result, he is now both "midst folk" and the same as them. He revels in the presence of strangers: "he could turn himself to nought / For many days, but wandered aimlessly / Wherever men together might be brought; / That he once more their daily life might see" (II: 680-683). In this middle section of the text, Bharam is celebrated as an urban creature, a *flâneur*.

When he begins to sicken, his illness presents as an inability to see the city properly, or to find a place within it. Finally, the city becomes "that world of lies" (II: 720) and he fully breaks with it, refusing to engage and to identify imaginatively with

the lives of other urbanites: “But all the folk he saw there were strange to him, / And, for all heed that unto them he gave, / Might have been nought” (II: 757-759). The city’s inhabitants, described by the narrator, now pass “like empty shadows” (II: 762), as “the world was narrowed to his heart at last” (II: 763). Bharam’s subjectivity here contracts, unhealthily, back on itself, and leaves him without a stake in the space of the street. Having rejected all connection, when Bharam comes back to the city a second time, the narrative circles back to its own beginning, presenting Bharam once again as a stranger who is the object of speculation in the streets of the city. Unlike the middle city section of the tale, in which such street level gazing was a participatory activity, with Bharam gazing and gazed upon in equal measure, in his final iteration, he has lost his subjectivity, and so has lost his ability to enter into the speculative pleasure of the city. The closing passage, which begins “but now and then men saw him on the quays” (II: 1579) emphasizes other men’s gazing activities, while Bharam is as if blind, “gazing on busy scenes he heeded nought” (II: 1580), with a “changeless face, drawn with that hidden pain” (II: 1584).

This tale equates healthy subjectivity with having a stake in the public world of the city. The urban gaze is mobilized in two contrasting ways; when Bharam feels himself capable of participating in civic life, of at least potentially identifying with the experiences of other citizens, that gaze is a form of silent communication. In such scenarios, the gaze is reciprocal, and it identifies Bharam as capable of participation in public life. When Bharam becomes melancholy, this gaze loses its reciprocity. Participation becomes impossible, and Bharam becomes the wrong sort of stranger. Rather than being able to contribute to a public life in a way that is potentially relevant, he becomes pure object, to be gazed upon but not addressed and therefore not included.

In “Pygmalion and the Image,” the classical tale for August, Morris’s Pygmalion is marked by ennui that is once again recorded through his unsatisfying interactions on the public street. In Ovid’s version in Book X of *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion’s motivation for his actions, and the source of his implied solitude, is attributed simply to the wickedness of women: “horrified / At all the countless vices nature gives / To womankind lived celibate and long” (232), this motivation is entirely missing from Morris’s version. Morris’s Pygmalion is a celebrated man, who has made a name for himself; he is “known to the island-dwellers” (I: 4) and “day by day still greater honour won” (I: 6) Like Bharam, his dissatisfaction takes the form of a refusal to participate in the reciprocal street level ritual of watching and being watched: “yet in the praise of men small joy he had, but walked abroad with downcast brooding face” (I: 8-9). Later, when he is in a fog after having sculpted his creation, which is not yet alive, he returns to the city streets. Morris conjures up the street level activity and sociability, as Pygmalion tries to interact with the public world:⁶³ “Mid the many noises of the street, / Made himself brave the eyes of men to meet” (I: 412-413). It does not work, however: “he turned his eyes from face to face, / Nor noted them, as at a lagging pace / He gat towards home, and still was murmuring: Ah life, sweet life! The only godlike thing!” (I: 431-434). Unlike other unsatisfying and alienating interactions between the individual and the crowd in *The Earthly Paradise*, however, here the hero’s journey is not completed by reconciling himself to a public

⁶³ In Stephen Guy-Bray’s article “Beddoes, Pygmalion, and the Art of Onanism,” he performs a reading of Thomas Lovell Beddoes’s 1825 poem “Pygmalion,” one of the first nineteenth-century versions of the myth. Beddoes’ Pygmalion, like Morris’s, is one marked by his alienation from society: “the tragedy of the poem comes from the fact that it is the artist’s works that affect society: the man himself is unable to make any social and sexual connection with his people” (460). Beddoes’ version of the poem, however, is a much more negative interpretation of the act of creation. He tacitly associates Pygmalion’s creation with masturbation, the death of the artist, and the “drying up” (465) of the male artist’s inspiration.

role—as with Milanion—or the evidence of an incurable sickness—as with Bharam. In this case, Pygmalion’s lack is corrected when his entire life’s value is demonstrated to be within the private space of his domestic workshop, where Pygmalion’s image has come to life. It is the richness of private union that here shifts the value of life away from the public world.⁶⁴ Such a withdrawal from the public world, however, requires the intervention of the gods. The lack that makes him unable to engage in reciprocal public life is here corrected through the perfect artifice of his statue, granted to him by Venus. In the context of a book that is largely pessimistic about the happy endings available to couples, and emphasizes versions of the source tales that privilege human agency over supernatural intervention, this resolution is clearly marked as in the realm of fantasy.

Boos remarks, in her edition of *The Earthly Paradise*, that “Pygmalion and the Image” is peculiar in its “unproblematically happy” (II: 605) outcome. A more representative and complex account of isolation in the midst of a crowd can be found in “The Story of Rhodope,” the classical tale for November; it is another tale that depicts a private self in crisis in a public space, and that features an object shot through with creative weight. The tale tells the story of Rhodope, a daughter of a Greek farmer who comes into possession of beautiful, jeweled clothes and shoes from

⁶⁴ In Martin A. Danahay’s article “Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation,” he argues that in the Nineteenth-century, Pygmalion’s creation was often a failed projection of masculine identification and desire, and that “Nineteenth-century retellings of the Pygmalion myth have an unhappy ending, as Galatea refuses to meet the expectations of her male creator” (49). J Hillis Miller argues something similar in *Versions of Pygmalion*. Both Miller and Stephen Guy-Bray, in “Beddoes, Pygmalion, and the Art of Onanism” In Jane M. Miller’s article “Some versions of Pygmalion” in *Ovid Renewed*, she argues that Morris’s version takes great pains to normalize the interactions between Pygmalion and the statue, so that when she comes to life, Pygmalion’s “unnatural obsession” can be “replaced by normal human life” (212), as a result, Morris’s version is most interested in celebrating genuine life, at the expense of immortality: “it is preferable to be human and mortal rather than exist as an inanimate object” (212).

the shipwreck of a pirate vessel. After Rhodope, a preternaturally unruffleable character, refuses the proposal of the son of a high-priest, predicting that their marriage would be an unhappy one, one of her jeweled pirate shoes is stolen by an eagle while she bathes. A year passes and she meets royal emissaries at the temple who are searching for the owner of the jeweled shoe. Discovering that Rhodope is this owner, they propose on behalf of the king, a proposal that she reluctantly accepts.

As with Cinderella, Rhodope's remaining shoe here is a prop in need of a tale. The pair arrives on the scene silently overburdened with meaning, and with past action. Like so much adventure in *The Earthly Paradise*, these shoes arrived by ship. The shoe is jeweled, not practical, it has witnessed excitement; it gestures to a different world, and so invites its new bearer to imagine that world. Rhodope's despair at losing the shoe is despair over the loss of a world of the imagination. Robbed of the shoe, life lacked the possibility of new stories: "empty of deeds [life] seemed, / A dragging dullness changed by here a pain, / and there a hope, waking or sleeping, dreamed; / But, waking still or sleeping, dreamed in vain; / For how could anything be loss or gain" (II: 855-859). Rhodope's prosaic mother eventually urges Rhodope to pry the jewels from the shoe to at least profit from the thing. In a characteristic gesture of *The Earthly Paradise*, while the woman makes her case, glances and watchful eyes demonstrate the emotional imbalance between what is said and what is felt. Such glances in the midst of talk—Atalanta and Milanion's; or Alcestis and Admetus's, for example—help to demonstrate when speech is not communication. In this case, Rhodope's mother makes the wrong call, and watches that play out between her husband and their daughter: "with querulous voice she spake, because she saw / Her husband eye Rhodope's face" (II: 904-905) while Rhodope "seemed not to heed what all the talk might be" (II: 908). "Talk," as

opposed to the more communicative speech, is all this is. Rhodope does not listen, and her father “answered not” (II: 909) even as his wife “laid hard word on word” (II: 911). Finally exhausted and angry at being thus ignored, Rhodope’s mother storms out, leaving Rhodope and her father to communicate properly. The shoe should not be sold, he says to her, though “our needs are much and sore, / And . . . those gems would help us plenteously” (II: 925-926). His reasoning, predictably, comes as a tale, introduced through acknowledging its circulation, asking “didst thou ever hear folk tell / Of the strange dream that at thy birth befell” (II: 930-931). Rhodope confirms the circulating speech, saying it is familiar to her, and so her father responds that “no need there is to tell the tale” (II: 939). This tale is of course already found in the early verses of the tale now being told. Like “Ogier the Dane” and “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” the tale itself appears in the telling of the tale, embedding iterations within iterations, calling attention to the particular utterance and its context, reminding readers and auditors of the polyvocal interpretations that make up the discursive life of this tale. In this instance, this tale, and the equally important reminder of its discursive power, counteracts Rhodope’s mother’s desire to curtail the imaginative powers of the shoe by turning it into money, as Nicholas has before her in the Wanderers’ Tale. This interlude is above all one that resists the equivalence between the value of speech and money.

After a year passes, Rhodope goes into the town, an experience that is once again narrated in terms of the gaze of crowds of strangers:

Therewith a knot of folk she had just passed
 Passed her in turn; maidens and youths they were,
 Blithe with their life and youth; on her they cast
 Such looks as if they had a mind to jeer,
 Yet held back, some by wonder, some by fear,
 Went on a space until they deemed them free,
 Then through the summer day outburst their glee. (II: 1009-1015)

This exchange—such as it is—is framed by another, silent, exchange of glances. An old shepherd “whose deep-sunk eyes her eyes unwitting met” (II:1008) watches the group react to Rhodope. Then he watches her as “her deep eyes followed them, and yet, indeed, / As images she saw them; there a space / Musing she stood, then turned, and at slow speed / Went back again to her abiding-place, / Just as the old man moved his puckered face / To speak some word to her” (II: 1016-1021). This small, silent scene is full of gazes, missed connections, communal contexts, and shared and isolated affect. Morris’s painstakingly tiered record of this moment sets the scene for this exchange, which also diagnoses the problem to be solved.

Rhodope cannot engage properly with the world around her and so retreats back to her home, where she retrieves the shoe from its hiding place. It makes Rhodope grow “dreamy” (II: 1027) and she clutches it to her like a talisman, reminding us of its symbolic value in this tale as a story-bearing object. Unlike Bharam, she will find a way to resolve her social sickness. Like Pygmalion, this resolution takes the form of a creative act, but rather than retreat to the private space of the home to enjoy the gift granted him by the gods, Rhodope bears the shoe into the public gaze. Its power allows her to infiltrate the communal space of the town, a space now not just depicted through assessing glances, but instead by the swirling talk which now “reach[es] her ear” (II: 1031). This talk, of some newly arrived men in town, raises “new and wild hopes in her” (II: 1038). This is galvanizing, inspiring talk. In the centre of the town, in the temple, she sees her shoe’s mate on a pedestal, and inserts herself into the workings of the town when, in the most public way available, she “mounted up the steps, and spake out clear” (II: 1087) that she had the other shoe.

The tale here finds its resolution. The shoe finds its mate, Rhodope re-enters the world and also marries. In “The Story of Rhodope” the shoe, symbolizing the imaginative power of story, is the mechanism by which Rhodope is able to take part in the reciprocal participation of the life of the city. Moreover, the shoe’s incorruptibility within the story keeps pace with the value of such participation even while Rhodope falters and retreats. By agreeing to insist that the shoe be kept as it is, and not exchanged for gold, Rhodope and her father protect that life of the imagination, and the circulating tales that result. By successfully navigating the social world of the city, and by performing publically, through the talismanic power of this shoe, connections between stories, imagination, the individual and the other people are all highlighted, demonstrating the sort of reception scenario *The Earthly Paradise* as a whole both requires and provides.

Envoi

In the first part of this project, we considered the ways in which *The Earthly Paradise* represents the storytelling scene in terms of a continuum of text and speech; The representation of this interplay is above all concerned with address and reciprocity, and privileges text and speech working together in the discursive space of a public, rather than the material product of a book. We saw, as well, how contemporary readers and critics accepted this portrait of themselves as readers (and listeners) inscribed in the book to inform the reception practices of their own reading experiences. In the second part of this project, we looked more closely at the affective responses such reading practices encouraged by continuing to consider the relationship Victorian readers had to stories, in particular the stories making up the occasionally competing traditions of Chaucerian poetry, early English texts, old

Northernism, and the Classical Tradition that form the mixed source for the materials of *The Earthly Paradise*. The response to these stories demonstrated a willingness on the part of readers to look to them to articulate, and to interpret, truths about national and communal identities. In the latter section of part two, we considered that relationship, between stories and the communities they form and reflect, as it pertained to Victorian receptions of the epic, where *The Earthly Paradise* stood out as an instance in which contemporary anxieties about the age—about its lack of poetry, of heroism, of inspiration—found creative and energizing expression, making of that anxiety a newly reinterpreted form of epic affect. In this final chapter, we considered more fully the problems set up in the Wanderers' Tale, in particular Rolf's account of the broken relationship to story, and the false public arising out of that broken relationship, and traced the different ways the tales engaged in acts of reparation, offering accounts that reimagine the failures of the intertwined themes of authenticity, conviction and their interpretation, and of reciprocity, public accountability and participation.

The Envoi that ends *The Earthly Paradise* speaks to these assembled concerns. It depicts a world composed of speech, but which nevertheless addresses a book, a book which then speaks itself. It values private subjectivity as it sits at the core of the motivation to public action, it presents speech as always potentially directed as a stranger whom the speaker may never know, and it demands participation in the form of genuine engagement with the circulating speech in order to belong to the public. At the same time, however, the Envoi embeds the book as at the heart of this dynamic, inclusive, reciprocal space, and imagines that this circulating reciprocity of speech and feeling takes its place alongside textual forms that are equal participants.

At the start of the Envoi, one more journey is about to begin. The Idle Singer addresses his personified Book as they sit “face to face” (II: 1) one last time before it leaves on its “perilous journey” (II: 3) to the “Land of Matters Unforgot” (II: 33). The Idle Singer reveals that this journey is the Book’s reason for existing; in its “pilgrim’s weed” (II: 4) it has become figurative flesh, and is out to do the two things everyone in *The Earthly Paradise* attempts: find a community and live forever. At the helm of this sought-for community is Chaucer. Having achieved literary immortality, he is certain to be flourishing in the land for which the Book is itself searching. There are elements here of the hero’s quest. The book-as-hero seeks a great trophy, the journey will be “perilous,” and it shall meet helpful figures along the way. In Morris’s universe, however, there is no battle or physical trial, and the hero is not searching for fame or glory. Although the object of the quest is “The Land of Matters Unforgot,” what is at stake in the Envoi is Chaucer’s understanding and acceptance. The two senses of *reception* combine in relationships throughout *The Earthly Paradise*. A story well told meets a sympathetic audience that recognizes itself addressed by it, and a community expands. Reception of a tale begets reception amongst the other participating members in the storytelling project. Believably represented subjectivity, as is demonstrated through the telling of a meaningful story, is always explicitly audience oriented in *The Earthly Paradise*, and is mobilised in order to achieve communal, public effects; this phenomenon occurs, as we have seen, in every frame of the narrative.

The Idle Singer has prepared a speech for the Book to deliver when it meets Chaucer, and it is the most candid he, here voiced by his own creation, has been with his readers. Addressing Chaucer, the Book is to assure him both of the Idle Singer’s personal authenticity in his writing, and in the power of the Book to foster that

writing. It is a showing of credentials to another who is going to understand. It is also a celebration of the union of teller and tale. The Book says:

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:
 And never did he fail to let me see
 His love, his folly, and faithlessness, maybe;
 And still in turn I gave him voice to pray
 Such prayers as cling about an empty day. (II: 64-70)

This speech is revealing and intimate; it describes the private bond of the Idle Singer and his Book, here seemingly his conscience and his confidant. The very next line, however, reveals a more populated reception scenario: “thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him through” (II: 71). “Thou” is equally Chaucer and us, holding the book, and the shift reveals a subjectivity already directed towards an audience, potentially of strangers. Chaucer himself turns out to be a stand-in for a public, identified by extent to which they have understood, and therefore participate: “Thou mayst toil in vain, / And never draw the House of Fame anigh” (II: 101-102), the Idle Singer admits to his Book, “yet he and his shall know whereof we cry” (II: 103). The union, born of emotional affinity, established first between Book and Singer, and expanded to include Chaucer, extends outwards once again in a gesture to a reading, speaking, listening, writing community, identified in the phrase “He and his.” It might be possible in some cases to dismiss this as a mere way of talking, but in the case of *The Earthly Paradise*, “he and his shall know whereof we cry” is simply the most important thing one can say.

The confusion between pronouns, so that the Book’s grammatical subject is sometimes “I,” sometimes “we,” and sometimes “he,” reflects another aspect of the recognitions between audiences, storytellers, and the stories that most need telling, and privileges above all the moments of connection that result from this shared

understanding. In *The Earthly Paradise*, when people speak, they speak on behalf of a group, and they also speak to a group. Speech implicates identification. The slippage, in this section, between a book and a personal identity, between an author or teller and a reader or listener, and indeed between a reader and another reader, goes to the heart of how *The Earthly Paradise* constructs its meaning. The importance of a public made possible through these blurred distinctions, as they foster recognition, is the consolation the poem offers. Moreover, it is central to the way external readers of *The Earthly Paradise* are themselves invited to participate in, and to find themselves represented, in a book that promises to speak not only to, but also for them.⁶⁵

This promise is freely given in *The Earthly Paradise*, and there is some suggestion that it may be taken or left, because the Envoi, having established a private/public bond between teller, tale, and readers, offers a consolation prize as well. The penultimate verse, in which the Idle Singer assures the Book that “he and his shall know whereof we cry” (II: 103) then concludes that these assembled audience members, “shall call it not ill done to strive to lay / The ghosts that crowd about life’s empty day” (II: 104-105). The final verse begins “then let the others go!” (II: 106). Contrasted with the “he and his” that were the subject of the previous verse, this final comment circumscribes the membership of the community of *The Earthly*

⁶⁵ Isolde Karen Herbert, in her article “‘A Strange Diagonal’: Ideology and Enclosure in the Framing Sections of ‘The Princess’ and ‘The Earthly Paradise’” offers a similar argument, writing that the external reader “mov[es] toward integration with the community” (155) constituted by the Elders and the Wanderers. Herbert emphasizes that the frame enables communal identification in the text. Somewhat begrudgingly, Hodgson similarly acknowledges that *The Earthly Paradise* “goes some way to validate itself as an epic: although fragmented and lacking authority, it is still capable of performing its function, of forging a cohesive community from the wanderers and exiles to whom it is told” (highest poetry 352). She allows also that the external reader—the one who reads both frame and tale—is also “implicated in the listening community” (352). She does not, however, appear to be much interested in this final observation.

Paradise. It limits it to those who are willing to participate in the version of this discourse that Chaucer and “he and his” understand. To these others, the Idle Singer predicts a more restive reading program, in which there are no ghosts that crowd, but rather the “flowers” of nostalgic reminiscences. The Idle Singer “made fresh flowers spring up from hoarded seed, / And fragrance of old days and deeds have brought / Back to folk weary” (II: 108-110). The first sentiment is active, and generative, the second reflective and passive. Both have value, as this last verse still concludes: it was “no little part it was for me to play, / The idle singer of an empty day” (II: 111-112). This gentle gesture of exclusion emphasizes the active role of the projected audiences of *The Earthly Paradise* as a public that need to participate in this world of text and speech if not, as in the case of the external audience, through active tale-telling themselves, then at least through sympathetic engagement.

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