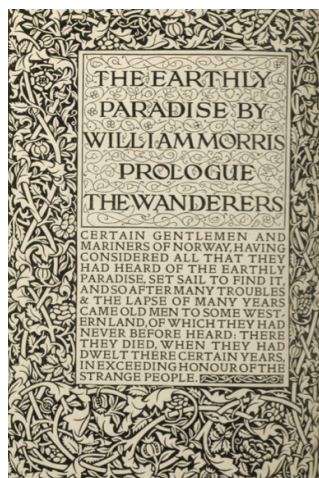


**William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*:
what it means to be 'the idle singer of an empty day'**

Lilah Grace Canevaro



'Morris was nearly unique among Victorian poets in his view of the *poet as historian*: not a romantic individual, but one among a *community* of artists, living and dead, who have borne the immense responsibility of narration and creation'

(F. Boos (1984) 'Victorian responses to *Earthly Paradise* tales',
Journal of the William Morris Society 5.4: 16-29, p.26.)

William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* is an epic poem. Composed on a vast scale, telling tall tales in indefatigable metre and immortalising the acts of protagonists through the medium of poetry, it embodies the very essence of epic as we know it from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* through Apollonius' *Argonautica* and Virgil's *Aeneid* to Chaucer and beyond. However, it is more specifically a *Victorian* epic poem. Grand in scale is not only the composition, but also its richly allusive and intertextual character. Apollonius responded to Homer, and Virgil to both, along the generic chain – Morris, at a distance of time and space and with a wealth of scholarship in between, had more predecessors than he could shake his pen at. In this short paper I would like to discuss the nature of poetry as it is portrayed by Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*: as a string of sources into which the poet subsumes himself. Furthermore, in light of Maurer's observation that Morris had a 'preoccupation with the stories and indifference to the historical backgrounds and ethical overtones usually associated with them',¹ I would like to examine what exactly it meant to historically-disinterested Morris to be a historian-poet.

The Earthly Paradise is the longest narrative poem in the English language, and was originally published in three volumes between 1868 and 1870. It is made up of layers upon layers of framing narratives and inset stories, presented by an initial narrator who then makes way for the Wanderers and the Elders of the City, two sets of storytellers. The strong hand that holds together such a sprawling composition belies the (emphatically *not* omniscient, omnipotent or omni- anything else) narrator's opening apology:

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,

¹ O. Maurer (1954) 'Morris's treatment of Greek legend in 'The Earthly Paradise'', *The University*

I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,
Or bring again the pleasure of past years,
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,
Or hope again for aught that I can say,
The idle singer of an empty day.

But if these are not his powers, what does it mean to be the idle singer? First, let us tackle head-on the formulation itself, usually dismissed as simply ironic. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* (582-4), the song of the cicadas heralds the summer festival season, the annual hiatus in labour. The poetic tradition has the cicada as proverbial both for singing and for idleness, and in the context it introduces the moment in the agricultural calendar perfectly suited to the creation of poetry. In Plato's *Phaedrus* (258e-259b), Socrates too proposes a moment of leisure, in the stifling heat with the cicadas chirping overhead, as the time for dialogue, his own special brand of intellectual activity. *Otium*, leisure, appears as a prerequisite for poetry in Virgil, Ovid, Horace and Catullus.² The idle singer, then, is the poet perfectly poised to pontificate.

So he has the opportunity. What about motive and means? The material is not new. The songs' provenance is emphasised, with several narrators beginning by explaining where their tale comes from. The idle singer is not an inventor but a historian, collating and preserving. This does not mean to say, however, that he keeps stories as static and unchanging. Morris treats stories as epic gifts: just like the Homeric heroes insert themselves into the legacy of a great object by entering into gift exchange, so Morris' narrators incorporate themselves into the continuum of a story through the telling of it. Stories are recast in a new context, retaining their previous authority, the memory of their previous owners, and yet absorbing a further instalment. Narrators are immortalised by their narrations. They become a chapter in the life of something whose longevity far outlasts their own. Just so is the poet immortalised by, and even subsumed into, his poem. In the Epilogue the poet addresses his personified poem, and imagines that it, upon encountering 'Master' Chaucer, might say:

Thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him through,
For surely little is there left behind.

The poet has put his entire self into his work, and can now be 'read' just like the characters he once created. By the end of the poem the reader has nothing but respect for this immense endeavour (whether one appreciates Morris' style or not, one cannot help but be impressed by his sheer stamina) and the narrator is more than justified in reformulating:

—No little part it was for me to play—
The idle singer of an empty day.

In envisaging this encounter with Chaucer, Morris makes explicit his debt to medieval sources. Certainly, the structure of *The Earthly Paradise* owes much to *The Canterbury Tales*. However, this is only the tip of the intertextual iceberg. Classical stories are juxtaposed with folklore from medieval England, Germany, Brittany,

² See C. Segal (1970) 'Catullan 'Otiosi': The Lover and the Poet', *Greece and Rome* 17.1: 25-31.

Scandinavia and Persia. Morris brings together a band of Norsemen and a group of Ionians in a medieval setting, creating his own poetic 'Dream Team' in a brazen feat of artistic self-indulgence. Yet the juxtaposition is not pure chance: throughout his poem, Morris draws out parallels between the groups and thus the traditions. For example, both groups are perfectly at home in a framework of guest-friendship, because of their comparable societal norms of hospitality. They are united in religion, both preserving their polytheistic past despite a Christianised medieval setting: the 'nameless city in a distant sea' inhabited by the descendants of the Greeks is described in terms of its ancient gods:

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

And the Wanderers assert their constancy:

For ye shall know that though we worshipped God,
And heard mass duly, still of Swithiod
The Greater, Odin and his house of gold,
The noble stories ceased not to be told.

Just as Homeric epic professes to preserve the glorious deeds not only of men but also of gods (κλέα ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε), so here Morris recognises that the survival of the gods is dependent on the stories told about them. Such is the power of poetry.

Hodgson observes that 'All narrators and listeners in *The Earthly Paradise* are exiles':³ the Greeks and the Norsemen are far from their homes, the frame narrator is disembodied, and in such a convoluted poetic labyrinth the reader is pretty much lost most of the time. However, the traditional theme of *nostos*, homecoming, which we might expect in such a context is subverted:

We fear not you and yours to bear us war,
And scarce can think that ye will try again
Across the perils of the shifting plain
To seek your own land whereso that may be:
For folk of ours bearing the memory
Of our old land, in days past oft have striven
To reach it, unto none of whom was given
To come again and tell us of the tale,
Therefore our ships are now content to sail,
About these happy islands that we know.

This particular band of Greeks is fed up with all that *nostos*. They suspect that it hasn't gone well for many of their comrades (Agamemnon would second that), and are content to abandon their homeland. They are no longer sprightly young heroes, but Elders of the City who 'lean with pain upon their spears'.

³ A. Hodgson (1996) "The highest poetry": epic narrative in 'The Earthly Paradise' and 'Idylls of the King', *Victorian Poetry* 34.3: 340-54, p.345.

Morris describes his narrators as a 'living chronicle', a paradoxical formulation through which he reflects on the interaction in storytelling between orality and literature. The narrators perpetuate the living oral tradition by telling stories (indeed in some cases 'No written record was there of the tale'), whilst ultimately their own story is embedded in a written epic poem. This tension between orality and writing is something common to both the Greek and the Old Norse traditions, as both were at some stage affected by the advent of writing to their cultures. Ashurst writes of Morris' *The Story of Sigurd and the Fall of the Niblungs*: 'Sigurd, with its length and complex nature, has the quality of all great poems: although the printed text is fixed, the telling is made new every time it is read.'⁴ Epic poetry itself, even epic poetry in the literate age, is a living chronicle, preserving heroic deeds and bringing them back to life with every reading.

Tied up with the issue of orality and writing is that of truth: what – to the Greeks, to the Norsemen, to Morris – makes a story true? In archaic Greek epic, truth is not absolute, but aesthetic. It is the rhapsode who delivers it, and the Muses who guarantee it. In Hesiod's *Theogony* (27-8), the Muses reflect on their special power when they taunt 'We know how to say many falsehoods similar to truths, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things'. In the *Odyssey* (11.363-9), the stories Odysseus tells are ratified by the skilled way he tells them:

Odysseus, looking at you we in no way think
that you are an impostor or a cheat, like many
whom the dark earth breeds, men spread far and wide,
who make up lies from that which no one can test.
But you have eloquence and sound judgement,
and you have told us your story as skilfully as a bard,
the wretched cares of all the Argives and yourself too.⁵

To the Elders in *The Earthly Paradise*, too, the capacity for storytelling is an automatic guarantee of their visitors' good character:

No barbarous race, as these our peasants say,
But learned in memories of a long-past day,

For Morris, 'rhyme hath little skill to lie'. Poetry is invested with truth by its very virtue of being poetry. In an oral culture, it is not by any definitive version but by form and by skill that poetic truth is ratified. In much the same way, before the arrival of writing in Iceland the law code was preserved orally, recited once a year at the Althing and memorised by the lawspeaker. The oral law code had little in the way of mnemonic devices – the role of lawspeaker was one of great skill and great learning. The authority of the law, its truth, was in its recitation, so the lawspeaker had the power to add to or change the law while reciting it. However, in a literate society the balance of power shifts:

But Nicholas o'er many books had pored

⁴ D. Ashurst (2007) 'William Morris and the Volsungs', in *Old Norse made new*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 43-61, p.60.

⁵ Translations from Greek texts are my own.

And this and that thing in his mind had stored,
And idle tales from true report he knew.
— Would he were living now, to tell to you
This story that my feeble lips must tell!

Morris sets up the authoritative written record in antithesis to the 'feeble' oral tradition, channelling the anxiety of a culture at a transitional point on the oral/literate continuum.

Maurer argues that almost all the Classical tales retold by Morris in *The Earthly Paradise* could have been sourced from John Lempriere's *Bibliotheca Classica* rather than from the Greek or Latin originals, and Ashurst points out that when Morris began work on his epic poem 'he still had to rely on secondhand accounts for his northern stories' (p.45). As a Classicist, I have been trained to mistrust second hand sources, to take translations with a pinch of salt, to head straight to the original without a backward glance. But I am disinclined to see Morris as a lazy Classicist or a lapsed philologist. Morris' teacher in Icelandic, Eiríkr Magnússon, describes how his pupil was averse to memorising grammatical paradigms (aren't we all?) – because his interest lay elsewhere. 'I must have the story', Morris said to his instructor. To Morris, being a historian-poet meant collating not dates or facts, not vocabulary or grammar, but the very essence of a tradition: its stories. As Ashurst notes, for Morris 'the act of literary creation was primarily and unabashedly one of re-creation, of refashioning received material' (p.43). In producing verse translations of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*, and basing *The Song of Sigurd and the Fall of the Nibelungs* closely on the *Volsunga saga* (with parts of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Nibelungenlied* thrown in for good measure), Morris proved beyond doubt his grasp of his sources. From this solid, scholarly, very Victorian basis, he could then give artistic license free reign. *The Earthly Paradise* is a book clothed 'in raiment rent of stories oft besung'.

In the quotation with which I began, the landscape of poetry is made up of a community of artists. By having the Wanderers and the Elders spend a whole year exchanging stories, Morris is 'fain to put before your eyes' this community in microcosm. Come the end of the year, that year itself has become its own story, and Morris has presented a synopsis of the very mechanism of poetic production and collective memory (three volumes might not seem synoptic, but given that the historian-poet is self-consciously operating in a community spanning millennia, we might forgive him for being a little wordy). Morris and Eiríkr in the preface to one of their joint ventures, a translation of the *Volsunga saga*, proclaim:

This is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks – to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been – a story too – then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.

To preserve a great story and, more than that, to become *part* of a great story – that is what it means to William Morris to write poetry.