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William Morris as a Storyteller: His Position in the Aesthetic Movement

Yoshiko SEKI

1. Introduction

When the first volume of William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* was published in 1868, Walter Pater contributed an unsigned review of it to the *Westminster Review*. This article ironically became more famous than Morris's poems because of the complicated history of its republication. The last quarter of Pater's "Poetry by William Morris" reappeared as the provocative "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (1873), and the rest of the review was later revised and published as a new essay entitled "Æsthetic Poetry" in *Appreciations* (1889).¹⁾ Moreover, having called forth many comments of disapproval, Pater once omitted the "Conclusion" from the second edition of *The Renaissance* as he had conceived that "it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall" (C 217n); but it was restored on the occasion of the third edition published in 1888, "with some slight changes which bring it closer to [his] original meaning" (C 217n). "Æsthetic Poetry" in the first edition of *Appreciations* has disappeared from later editions since 1890.

These two essays, along with their controversial republication, have been symbolically regarded as a manifesto of the Aesthetic Movement. They include some important Paterian concepts such as "the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death" (WM 89; AP 528) or his famous maxim: "To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (WM 91; C 219). The original connection of the essays with Morris's poetry, however, has sunk into oblivion.

This paper aims to examine the Morris-Pater connection firstly by reading Pater's essays in the original circumstance as a review of Morris's poetry, and secondly by juxtaposing them with the reviewed item, Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*. The cause for the deletion of Morris's poetics from Paterian

aestheticism is partly attributed to the author himself. When Pater divided the review to reproduce it as two new essays, he put Morris's figure in the shade. He omitted many quotations from Morris's poems in his new essay, "Æsthetic Poetry." Small modifications of words have also changed what was once peculiar to Morris's poetry into general comments about aesthetic poetry. Furthermore, there is no allusion to Morris's poems at all in the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. Tracing his way of reproducing the essay, we can see that Pater intentionally "used" Morris's poems in order to demonstrate his own idea of art rather than he carefully analysed Morris's poetry in the review. But it is worth paying attention to the reason why Pater found Morris's poetry "useful" for his argument. The first purpose of this paper is to show how Pater used Morris's poetry in his discussion.

Next I will focus more on Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* and try to uncover the text characteristics which are common to Pater's idea of "Art for Art's Sake." What I should like to highlight here is the peculiarity of Morris's storytelling. His talent as a storyteller has been appreciated both by his contemporaries and by modern researchers. Many writers in periodicals acclaimed Morris as an unprecedented storyteller. *Pall Mall Gazette* for example praised: "Mr. Morris's work is remarkable for [. . .] the especial gift of the story-teller" ("Tributes" 20). Comparing him with Geoffrey Chaucer, Amy Sharp called him "the prince of modern storytellers" (173), or George Saintsbury, "a real trouvère of the first class" (196). Modern researchers also have no objection to the point. Fiona MacCarthy finds the key to the success of Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* in "a matter of timing" (204). She explains that at the time when "Tennyson was out of fashion, beginning to sound empty, and the public had got tired of Tennysonian imitators," it was impossible for anybody "not to recognize that here was 'an entirely new fashion of telling a story in verse'" (204). Many critics also remarked that during the interval of publication between *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) and *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) Morris's concern shifted from dramatic writing to storytelling in verse. Strangely, however, the discussion has never been fully extended to what exactly was "new" in Morris's storytelling. It is as

if his genius for storytelling were so self-evident that no further analysis should be necessary; just as C. S. Lewis plainly said: "It is better to say simply that he [Morris] is a good story-teller" (52). Here in this paper, I should like to focus on the way how Morris sets a unique community of storytellers in *The Earthly Paradise*. The connection with Pater's aestheticism will be found in the relationship between the storytellers and their subjects.

2. Pater's Reading of Morris's Poetry

There are two aspects that Pater focused on in Morris's poetry: the development of medievalism and a characteristic of the pagan spirit. His "Poems by William Morris" opens with the following introduction of *The Earthly Paradise*.

This poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or mediæval life or poetry, nor a disguised reflex of modern sentiment. The atmosphere on which its effect depends belongs to no actual form of life or simple form of poetry. Greek poetry, mediæval or modern poetry, projects above its time a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or "earthly paradise." (WM 79-80)²⁹

To explain such mixture of the Greek, medieval, and modern sentiment, he traces Morris's poems from *The Defence of Guenevere* to *The Earthly Paradise* and finds in them the development of the idea of medievalism.

His consideration starts from a brief comment on the writings of the romantic school which, he says, "mark a transition [...] from a lower to a higher degree of passion in literature" (WM 80; AP 520). While "this mediævalism was superficial," *The Defence of Guenevere* added "a refinement upon this later, profounder mediævalism" (WM 80; AP 521). What is unique in Pater's argument is that he finds a medievalistic tint even in *Jason*, whose motif is taken from the Greek myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece. He considers that the classical story treated in the work "comes very near, if not to the Hellenism of Homer, yet to that of the

middle age, the Hellenism of Chaucer" (WM 87; AP 526), and defines such medievalism as "delicate inconsistencies which, coming in a Greek poem, bring into this white dawn thoughts of the delirious night just over and make one's sense of relief deeper" (WM 87; AP 527). This new medievalism comes to its highest level in *The Earthly Paradise*, in which, taking its setting in the community of the middle age, classical tales and medieval tales are narrated alternately. Pater continues his explanation:

It is precisely this effect, this grace of Hellenism relieved against the sorrow of the middle age, which forms the chief motive of *The Earthly Paradise*, with an exquisite dexterity the two threads of sentiment are here interwoven and contrasted. (WM 88; AP 527)

It is remarkable that under his definition medievalism stands not just for the adoption of medieval subjects; he appreciates in it the mixture of medieval passion with classical passion. He regards *The Earthly Paradise* highly because there "the two worlds of sentiment are confronted" (WM 88; AP 528).

Another element which struck Pater in Morris's poetry is its pagan spirit. In concluding his argument of *The Earthly Paradise*, he points out:

One characteristic of the pagan spirit these new poems have which is on their surface – the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life; this is contrasted with the bloom of the world and gives new seduction to it; the sense of death and the desire of beauty; the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death. (WM 89; AP 528)

This leads the discussion to the famous "hard gem-like flame"; but here Pater deliberately interrupts his own argument with a supposed voice of his opponent:

"*Arrière!*" you say, "here in a tangible form we have the defect of all poetry like this. The modern world is in possession of truths; what but a passing smile can it have for a kind of poetry which, assuming artistic beauty of form to be an end in itself, passes by those truths

and the living interests which are connected with them, to spend a thousand cares in telling once more these pagan fables as if it had but to choose between a more and a less beautiful shadow?" It is a strange transition from the earthly paradise to the sad-coloured world of abstract philosophy. But let us accept the challenge; let us see what modern philosophy, when it is sincere, really does say about human life and the truth we can attain in it, and the relation of this to the desire of beauty. (WM 89)

The long quotation above is the intermediate part between what later became "Æsthetic Poetry" and the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*. Though the sentences are excluded from both essays and now forgotten, it is worth paying attention to this part for our purpose of interpreting Pater's aesthetic discussion in its original context. Let us now listen to the voice of Pater's supposed opponent. He blames the poet who does not concern the "truths and the living interests" in the modern world but contents himself with "telling once more these pagan fables." It reminds us of the opinion of "an intelligent critic" against whom Matthew Arnold raised his voice in the Preface of his 1853 *Poems*. He confuted the critic who insisted that the poet should "leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import," by pronouncing: "this view I believe to be completely false" (Arnold 656). Here we can see clearly Pater's purpose of writing the provocative essay.

It is crucial to understand that Pater's dogma of the "hard gem-like flame" and the discussion of "the love of art for art's sake" (WM 92; C 220) was originally written under these circumstances. The review was written as a defense of Morris's poetics against such critics who demand that poetry should have practical purposes. Also it is noteworthy that Pater used the term "art for art's sake" for the first time in the review of Morris's poems. The germ of Paterian aestheticism was certainly discovered in what he had described with small letters, "the earthly paradise" (WM 80, 89; AP 520)

Pater's aestheticism was provoked by his reading of Morris's poetry and by his desire to vindicate Morris's poetics. Then what elements in

The Earthly Paradise exactly corresponded to Paterian aestheticism? Let us now turn to Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* and seek for them.

3. Storyteller's Community in *The Earthly Paradise*

The narrative of *The Earthly Paradise*³⁾ takes place at a medieval northern island. Fleeing from the threat of the plague, the Wanderers set out from their homeland Norway to find the "Earthly Paradise," which they heard in legends. After a long and dreadful voyage they drift ashore on some western land where the Elders – descendants of the ancient Greeks – live. Welcoming the unexpected guests, the Elders make the following offer to the Wanderers in early March:

[. . .] "Dear guests, the year begins to-day,
 And fain are we, before it pass away,
 To hear some tales of that now altered world,
 Wherefrom our fathers in old time were hurled
 By the hard hands of fate and destiny.
 Nor would ye hear perchance unwillingly
 How we have dealt with stories of the land
 Wherein the tombs of our forefathers stand;
 Wherefore henceforth two solemn feasts shall be
 In every month, at which some history
 Shall crown our joyance; ["] (EP 3:84)

Then they agree to tell each other stories of their own heritage, and twelve ancient tales and twelve medieval tales come forth one after the other.

Because of this framing narrative, many scholars pointed out that the work is indebted to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (e.g. Gardner 35-38) or Boccaccio's *Decameron* (e.g. Boos *Design* 375-78). But we should not ignore the fact that Morris's work is peculiar in the introduction of the storytellers of the forthcoming tales. E. P. Thompson judged that

The resemblance to the method and plan of *The Canterbury Tales* [. . .] is only superficial, and the comparison much to Morris's disadvantage.

While Chaucer's plan is dynamic the framework of *The Earthly Paradise* is entirely static. (114)

There is, however, an advantage in Morris's static framework which is brought differently from Chaucer's profound characterisation of the storytellers. In Morris's narrative, the storytellers are divided into two types – the Elder and the Wanderer. These two correspond to what Walter Benjamin defined as the prototypes of the storyteller. He explains:

[Among storytellers] there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. [...] If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. (84-85)

He develops this model to the artisan milieu of the Middle Age, where “[t]he resident master craftsman and the traveling journeymen worked together in the same rooms” (85).

If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place. (85)

It is precisely the same in the community of storytellers that Morris sets in his framing narrative. As I quoted before, the Elder and the Wanderer make an agreement to exchange stories: the former, as a resident master, tells the lore of “the land / Wherein the tombs of [their] forefathers stand” while the latter, as a much-travelled man, talks of faraway places, “now altered world” (EP 3:84).

This community of storytellers achieves what Pater appreciated as the highest mode of medievalism; because in such “artisan class” of storytelling the classical tales told by the Elder and the medieval tales told by the Wanderer are intertwined. Here “the two worlds of sentiment are confronted” (WM 88; AP 528).

Benjamin's theory of storytellers and storytelling also makes it easier for us to understand another element in *The Earthly Paradise* which struck Pater: that is, the pagan spirit which comes to the surface of the work as "the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death." Benjamin explains that storytelling is an act of altering one's experience into that "of those who are listening to the tale" (87) and declares: "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death" (94).

At the beginning of *The Earthly Paradise*, the sense of death is only an obsession with the Wanderers, and therefore it is only they that are given the sanction of storytelling. Urged by the Elder to "Speak out and fear not" (EP 3:5), the Wanderer begins to tell the story of their dreadful voyage in the "Prologue," in which their encounter with Edward III is recounted. One of the Wanderers explained to the King:

"I say, my Lord, that arrow-flight now seems
The first thing rising clear from feeble dreams,
And that was death; and the next thing was death,
For through our house all spoke with bated breath
And wore black clothes; [...] [.....]
[.....]

"Lo death again, and if the time served now
Full many another picture could I show
Of death and death, and men who ever strive
Through every misery at least to live. ["]
(EP 3:19-20; emphasis added)

The Wanderers, who were always obsessed by the fear of death, cannot be free from the sense of death even after they come ashore; for they have taken "this death-bound life in hand" (EP 3:20).

After this story of the Wanderers' adventure has been told, the sense of death is shared with the Elders as their own experience. The narrator explains that both of them are

The remnant of that once aspiring band,

With all hopes fallen away, but such as light
 The sons of men to that unfailing night,
 That death they needs must look on face to face. (EP 3:82)

The narrative now begins to progress with this shared experience in the community of storytellers. Their monthly storytelling is more than pastime, as Northrop Frye points out:

[T]hey are fighting a battle against death, with some dim understanding that the telling and retelling of the great stories, in the face of the accusing memory, is a central part of the only battle that there is any point in fighting. (83-84)

The sense of death spreads all over the work, so much so that even the story itself finally shows this sense of death in the “Epilogue” of the work because, as the poet affirms, “each tale’s ending needs must be the same: / And we men call it Death.” (EP 6:327).

Although the “Epilogue” I mentioned above had not been published when Pater wrote the review of *The Earthly Paradise*, it is certain that, reading the “Prologue” and succeeding stories, he found this sense of death throughout the work. The sense of death, therefore, is surely in the foreground of *The Earthly Paradise*. Then what about “the sense of beauty”? We now need to find what Pater called “the desire of beauty” which is accompanied by death. This should be related to another enigmatic concept – the “hard gem-like flame.”

4. The Earthly Bliss and the Gem-Like Flame

Benjamin explains the peculiarity of the storytelling as follows:

It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (91-92)

Morris’s storytellers also reflect their own lives on the stories they tell.

Because of this, the stories sometimes remind the Wanderers of their unaccomplished journey. Having heard an ancient tale, they felt strange, “for now / Their old desires it seemed once more to show / Unto their altered hearts” (EP 4:125). The Elder and the Wanderer find the sources of their stories in Greek myths or medieval folktales; but what is common in them is that they deal with the people who are looking for the “earthly bliss,” just as the storytellers themselves had once set sail to find the Earthly Paradise. Here I shall choose some of the tales in the first volume of *The Earthly Paradise* and discuss them in detail for the purpose of distilling the idea of the “earthly bliss” which lurks in the work.

First, the earthly bliss means a blissful marriage. “Atalanta’s Race,” the first classical tale told in March for example, is a story in which Milanion took a risk to compete in a race with Atalanta, staking his life “to win to earthly bliss / The lonely maid” (EP 3:93). “The Man Born to Be King,” the medieval tale of March, is the story of how a king struggles in vain to avoid his fate that the throne should be inherited by a low-born man, and how Michael, a son raised by a miller, finally gets married with Cecily, the king’s daughter. Their wedding is described in the poem: “they gained their earthly bliss” (EP 3:165).

In “The Doom of King Acrisius,” the classical tale of April, the earthly bliss assumes another meaning. The episode of the love between Perseus and Andromeda told in it is another way of recounting the earthly bliss. On the first encounter with Perseus, Andromeda speaks a monologue:

[“] Alas! thy lips were warm upon my brow,
What good deed will it be to leave me now!
“Oh, yet I feel thy kind and tender hand
On my chained wrist [. . .] (EP 3:212)

and the narrator describes:

Then as she might she hung adown her head
Her bosom heaved with sobs, and from her eyes,
Long dried amidst those hopeless miseries,

Unchecked the salt tears o'er her bosom ran
 As love and shame their varying strife began. (EP 3:212)

The vivid and sensuous description of Andromeda's body here tells us how her life, which was once all "but dead" (EP 3:212), revives through the love of Perseus. The earthly bliss here means the resuscitation of human nature through love.

"The Story of Cupid and Psyche," the classical tale in May, is a story of earthly bliss once lost and eternal bliss regained. Because Psyche has broken the taboo on seeing Cupid's face, she once loses his love, which he describes as "what would have been delight, / Untasted yet amidst immortal bliss" (EP 4:39). It is noteworthy that, contrasted with "immortal bliss," the earthly bliss here designates delight that only humans can receive. Though the story moves toward immortality which Psyche finally gains after a series of ordeals and the reunion with Cupid, the most striking in the poem is how Psyche struggles to endure the trials, continuing to say:

["] Behold, O Love [i.e. Cupid], because of thee I live,
 Because of thee, with these things still I strive." (EP 4:60)

It is in "The Watching of the Falcon," the medieval tale in July, that Morris's unique philosophy of life and death is fully expounded, and here the earthly bliss comes much closer to Pater's epicurean ideas. At the opening of the poem, the storyteller invites the listener softly to the site of the story:

ACROSS the sea a land there is,
 Where, if Fate will, may men have bliss,
 For it is fair as any land: (EP 4:161)

Then he advances his philosophy of life and death. The earthly bliss given by Fate is brought together with "the gift of Death":

For on them [men] God is pleased to send
 The gift of Death down from above,

That envy, hatred and hot love,
 Knowledge with hunger by his side,
 And avarice and deadly pride,
 There may have end like everything
 Both to the shepherd and the king:
 Lest this green earth become but hell
 If folk for ever there should dwell. (EP 4:161-62)

The storyteller deplores that most people do not consider this.

There smoothly men were loth to die,
 Though sometimes in his misery
 A man would say: "Would I were dead!"
 Alas! full little likelihead
 That he should live for ever there. (EP 4:162)

Because of this philosophy, he allows the characters in his story to enjoy the bliss they can only attain on earth.

The setting of "The Watching of the Falcon" is at a deserted castle, where a falcon is tied unto a pillar of the hall. A king comes to the hall, hearing a legend that if someone can watch the falcon without sleeping for a week, he will have "his first wish granted him by a fay lady, that appear[s] to him thereon" (EP 4:161). Having succeeded in the adventure, the king wishes "for nought but the love of that fay" although the wish is to bring ruin upon him (EP 4:161). In spite of her admonition that "Not till next morning shalt thou die / Or fall into thy misery" (EP 4:175), he repeats the request, finds fulfilment, and finally arrives in a consciousness of "this one short night / Worth years of other men's delight" (EP 4:175). "BUT end comes to all earthly bliss" (EP 4:176).

Florence Boos judges that the "insistent preoccupation with the inevitability of death" in this tale is "characteristic of Morris's earliest drafts for *Earthly Paradise*" (*Earthly Paradise* 1:572). The king's strong wish for earthly bliss heedless of his fate accords closely with Pater's philosophy: "To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." This tenet of earthly bliss also appears in many

other tales such as “Pygmalion and the Image” or “Ogier the Dane.” Pater might well grasp in Morris’s stories of *The Earthly Paradise* a philosophy which is to be developed into his own aestheticism of “Art for Art’s Sake.”

5. Beyond the Earthly Paradise toward Aestheticism: A Conclusion

The stories in Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise* reflect the life of the storytellers, and their obsessed sense of death. Because of it, their stories have life and the sense of death, and consequently shows the sense of beauty. This fact has a strong connection with the birth of Paterian idea of the “hard gem-like flame.” In “The Author to the Reader” following the “Prologue,” Morris compares the stories he is about to tell to some blossoms he plucked. He further likens those blossoms, which “once did flame” (EP 3:81) in the poet’s favourite land, to

[. . .] the gems for summer’s show,
Or gold and pearls for fresh green-coated spring,
Or rich adornment for the flickering wing
Of fleeting autumn [. . .]. (EP 3:81)

Although it is too hasty to say that Pater found here a hint for his idea of the “gem-like flame,” it should be possible that Pater felt empathy with Morris’s poetics which is indicated in “The Author to the Reader,” one of the few sections which, he judged, “detach themselves by their concentrated sweetness from the rest of the book” (WM 88-89). Pater had got a strong impression from Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise*. That was why he used Morris’s poetry as a good example in discussing his own idea of aestheticism.

In explaining the genius of Morris’s storytelling, I often referred to Benjamin’s theory of the storyteller. While the affinity between Morris’s storytellers and Benjamin’s models may seem just accidental, the comparison will be validated by the following affirmation by Benjamin. He explains: “A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsman” (101). The time when Morris was composing *The Earthly Paradise* corresponds to the period when he established Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., his own guild of craftsman. The stories

of *The Earthly Paradise* were written under such conditions. We can see here that their models of storytellers are logically connected together by their same concerns for craftsmanship. It is one of the great wonders why Morris could write such a grand narrative in verse as well as work assiduously for the Arts and Crafts Movement; but such storytelling would not have been possible for anyone but William Morris, who had a strong attachment to medieval craftsmanship. It was in the milieu of craftsman that he could obtain his own way of retelling old romances.

Notes

- 1) The titles of Walter Pater's essays are abbreviated as follows: "Poems by William Morris," WM; "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*, C; "Æsthetic Poetry," AP.
- 2) In "Æsthetic Poetry," the opening line is revised as follows: "The 'æsthetic' poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or medieval poetry, nor only an idealisation of modern life and sentiment" (AP 520). It is remarkable that this small modification of words broadened the peculiarity of Morris's poetry into the character of aesthetic poetry in general. Similar modifications are scattered in the essay.
- 3) Quotations from William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* are indicated with the abbreviation "EP," volume number, and page number.

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