

THE SHADOW ON THE TAPESTRY:
 IRONY IN WILLIAM MORRIS' THE EARTHLY PARADISE

A review of the critics' reception of The Earthly Paradise shows that they have identified it with the trend toward escapist art which flourished in the late nineteenth century. Oscar Maurer's study of the work's original reviewers confirms this. Critics did not question Morris' escapism because it seemed easily proven by a literal reading of such passages in the "Apology" as "Dreamer of dreams, born out of my time, / Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?"¹ Commentators after the turn of the century² agreed with the reviewers of Morris' time. Paul Elmer More, typical of these, writes that Morris' "aim was to waft the reader into a 'shadowy isle of bliss' which is... the world's refuge of romance." Early modern critics³ have generally followed this line of criticism. F. L. Lucas based his critique on the assumption that poets are "poor masters of the art of living," and concluded that the realities of the Victorian age drove Morris to escape via an art that reflected "the happiness of a day-dream." Holbrook Jackson, more sympathetic in view of Morris' later political activity, suggested that the period of the poem's composition reflected Morris' "retreatist (not 'escapist') attitude towards affairs." The idea that social criticism was alive but dormant in Morris while The Earthly Paradise was being written recurs time and again. One finds it early in Mackail's Studies of English Poets: the opening lines of the poem were Morris' "last cry out of the darkness before he reached the light" of socialist fellowship. Few modern critics⁴ make any such attempt to evade the blatant escapist statements in the work. Northrop Frye categorizes it as "cuddle fiction: the romance that is physically associated with comfortable beds or chairs around fireplaces and warm spots generally."

Many of the critics who see the poem as escapist focus on the "Apology." (Oscar Maurer describes the "Apology" as a 'manifesto of 'escapism.'") The voice we hear at the opening of the poem is that of the poet in the guise of an "idle singer of an empty day":

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