The material of myth lies at the heart of Morris's imagination and his writing: not only in areas where one might expect to encounter it, in the would-be Pre-Raphaelite painter, or the successful author of *The Earthly Paradise*, but also in the work of the political revolutionary that Morris became in his later years. It has long been clear that the embryo Communist can be seen in the youthful Romantic; it is equally true that the Romantic artist remains potent in the committed Communist. To trace the patterns of myth in both is to add another facet to the argument of E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. For it is the myth of romance that matters most to Morris. He is, as Thompson shows, persistently and pervasively a Romantic: not merely a poet with the trappings of an exhausted and decadent Romanticism as his stock-in-trade, but a Romantic thinker, in a creative and ineradicable sense. His use of myth is part of that Romantic identity.

The work that comes most readily to mind in thinking of Morris's myths of romance is his giant *The Earthly Paradise*, a poem that enjoyed more contemporary success than any other of his writings, and has probably earned him more critical upbraiding since. Opinion has indeed always been deeply divided over *The Earthly Paradise*. In January 1870, having just received the third volume, John Ruskin wrote to his cousin Joan Agnew: 'I can't understand how a man who, on the whole, enjoys dinner—and breakfast—and supper—to that extent of fat—can write such lovely poems about Misery . . . . There's such lovely, lovely misery in this Paradise. In fact, I think it's—the other place—made pretty.' Yet Yeats, whose work is deeply coloured by Morris's influence, speaks of him as 'The Happiest of the Poets'. In an essay of this title, he writes of Morris as 'the one perfectly happy and fortunate poet of modern times'. His is 'a dream of natural happiness, and all the people of all his poems and stories, from the confused beginnings of his art in *The Hollow Land* to its end in *The Sundering Flood*, are full of the heavy sweetness of this dream'. Lovely misery, or the happiness of dream? It is a familiar Romantic paradox, finding its most haunting voice in Keats, the poet who formed Morris as Morris was to form Yeats. Keats's *Ode on Melancholy* provides a way of fusing Ruskin's reading of *The Earthly Paradise* with that of Yeats:

Aye, in the very temple of delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.

Not all modern readers, however, have been satisfied with this view of counterpoised melancholy and delight in Morris's poetry. E. P. Thompson is inclined to see progress rather than Romantic paradox as the key to the matter. His response to *The Earthly Paradise* echoes that of Ruskin: he speaks of the work as 'the poetry of despair'. But
he sees the path of Morris's life moving away from this 'lovely misery', which he sees as 'a stage in the degeneration of the English Romantic movement'. For Thompson, socialism reclaims Morris's imagination from defeat, enabling him to transform Romanticism into a potential for joy. 'Only when Morris became a Communist did he become (as W. B. Yeats was to describe him) the "Happiest of the Poets". But the impulse to despair cannot easily be disentangled from Morris's sturdy belief in the possibility of happiness. Each implies the other, and a sustained tension between the two is one of the sources of Morris's preternatural energy. The language of myth helped Morris to express and to use the divisions of his own nature throughout his life.

Myth is one of the most elusive of the chameleon words of our century: it can be made to mean almost anything. What did it mean to Morris? Not least among its attractions for him was its narrative structure. Myths tell stories. This may, of course, be seen to have a negative side: if myths tell stories, they might also tell lies. This suggestion directs one level of response to Morris's use of myth. A myth is not true, and can therefore be used as a means of escape, of disguise, of deception or self-deception. But there is another way of looking at the matter, for myth has repeatedly been claimed as a source of truth other than the factual. Truths of popular memory, or of the imagination, have been sought and discovered in the forms of mythical narrative. It has become a resource of those who are sceptical of the triumph of logic in a rational culture.

Myth has grown from idea into ideology. The roots of this growth lie deep in the nineteenth century, and earlier: it is inextricably interwoven with the expansion of Romanticism. Myth-making was, for Morris, in part simply Romantic story-telling; a species of engagingly narrative entertainment with a serious point. More specifically, myths provided Morris with stories of a particular kind. They were, to begin with, anonymous. A myth is the product of no named individual; it seems to grow spontaneously from the consciousness of a people. Secondly, myths do not take any place in historical time. The time of myth may be unimaginably distant, or it may be omnipresent; it is not the time of everyday existence. Thirdly, myth is to some extent removed from the natural world. It is concerned with gods, with heroes and heroines, with magical or supernatural events. Myths may, or may not, involve the actions of men: if they do, the focus is usually on the interaction of the human and the divine. In other words, myth involves what anthropologists have called the sacred. These three fundamental characteristics of myth—its anonymity, its ahistoricism, its concern with the sacred—have much to do with its magnetic attraction for Morris. And for Morris, as for his Romantic predecessors, these were not purely aesthetic concerns. They had a political point. Blake, Shelley, and Keats had all been especially drawn to the concept of myth's popular origin, seeing it as evidence of ancient wisdom untainted by the modern vices of materialism and mechanism. This sacred wisdom had found natural expression in narrative, free from the restrictive teachings of philosopher or priest. Myth could be read as a form of communal literature; and this, for the Romantics and for Morris, was an important reason for valuing it. Still more crucial was the fact that myth was religious without being Christian. Here again, Morris shared a common concern, for one of the central characteristics of myth as it had been perceived in the early years of the nineteenth century was its apparent freedom from the restrictions of Christian theology.
John Ruskin was, like Keats, a fundamental influence on the growth of Morris's thinking. Ruskin shared with Keats an initial impulse to turn to myth on the grounds of its not being Christian. Brought up as a devoted Evangelical Christian, he had in his youth dismissed myths as the products of pagan cultures exiled from revealed religious truth. But towards the end of the 1850's he lost his faith. Like many Victorians deprived of Christian belief, he was driven to seek elsewhere for spiritual support. One of the places in which he found it was in the non-Christian myths of the classical age. Like other comparative mythologists of his day, he looked for, and discovered, parallels between the supposedly heathen myths and the tenets of the faith in which he had been trained; and, true to his Romantic identity, he viewed these parallels in terms of a direct relationship with the natural world. It was in painting, rather than in poetry, that Ruskin found this mythical relationship most powerfully expressed. More specifically, it was in the work of England's greatest Romantic painter, Turner. In the fifth and final volume of Modern Painters (1860), Ruskin recreates in words two of Turner's great mythological pictures: The Garden of the Hesperides, and Apollo and the Python. The myths which inspired these pictures are, for Ruskin, manifestations of an ancient and deep understanding of nature. Thus their meaning is as moral and spiritual as it is physical. This meaning, though supportive, is also dark. For Ruskin, Greek myths speak of mortality. In losing his Christian convictions, Ruskin had lost his faith in a life after death. This loss caused him the keenest suffering during his years in a spiritual wilderness. But the Greek myths had never been underpinned by a belief in personal immortality. Recognising the beauty of nature, they also acknowledged its decay. It was in these terms that Ruskin spoke of the conflict of the god Apollo with the mythical Python. "It was a far greater contest than that of Hercules with Ladon. Fraud and avarice might be overcome with frankness and force; but this Python was a darker enemy, and could not be subdued but by a greater god... Apollo's contest with him is the strife of purity with pollution; of life with forgetfulness; of love, with the grave."8 Turner, greatest of modern painters, demonstrates ancient truths, and he is able to do so because he is alert to the unchanging truths of nature. For Apollo is god of the sun, and in Apollo and the Python Turner is painting "the loveliness and light of the creation."9 Such light cannot be divided from accompanying shadow. Ruskin insists on the inseparability of light and shade in Turner's art: "He is distinctively, as he rises into his own peculiar strength, separating himself from all men who had painted forms of the physical world before,—the painter of the loveliness of nature, with the worm at its root: rose and cankerworm,—both with his utmost strength; the one never separate from the other."10 Here Ruskin restates the insight of Keats's Ode on Melancholy. Mortality is for Keats, as for Turner and Ruskin, central to the meaning of myth. In his last major work, the incomplete poem The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream, Keats works with the dream framework that was to become essential to Morris's patterns of writing. The poet dreams of the fall of the Titans: that is to say, he dreams of the end of the age of gold, ruled over by the god Saturn. He envisages the coming of change and pain and death, as Hyperion, the first simple god of the sun, is usurped by Apollo, who was for Keats as for Turner the god whose sunshine is tempered by shadow. This Apollo, a more complex, conscious, and melancholy god than Hyperion, becomes for Keats the god of poetry.
It is in this context that Morris may be seen, in his turn, as a poet of myth. Like Keats, he writes of a lost golden age, changed by old age and sorrow, and shadowed by inevitable mortality; and he shares with Keats an endeavour to recreate an ancient happiness through the active reverence of nature: what Yeats was to call ‘a dream of natural happiness’. It is this basis in the abundance and vitality of nature that Ruskin was to admire in Morris’s work, as he had previously celebrated it in the art of Turner. In 1869, the year after the publication of the first book of The Earthly Paradise, Ruskin wrote his strangest and most far-reaching study of mythology: The Queen of the Air, an interpretation of the myths surrounding the Greek goddess Athena. He pays a generous tribute to the poetry of Morris, telling his readers that ‘you may obtain a more truthful idea of the nature of Greek religion and legend from the poems of Keats, and the nearly as beautiful, and, in general grasp of subject, far more powerful, recent work of Morris, than from frigid scholarship, however extensive. Not that the poet’s impressions or renderings of things are wholly true, but their truth is vital, not formal.’11 The assumptions underlying Ruskin’s praise are those which are essential to Romantic thinking: that the most valuable truth is vital rather than formal, that the poet’s understanding may outweigh that of ‘frigid scholarship’, and that ancient legend may be the vehicle for such vital truth. Ruskin is among those who see more than logical meaning in the material of myth.

For all that Morris learned from the Romantics, and from Keats in particular, and for all that he had in common with them, he did take some fundamentally different paths in the pursuit of truth in myth. Turner, Keats, and Ruskin had each in different ways seen a quality of stasis in myth; something statuesque and fixed. The sad strength of this immoveability of the gods, to be changed only by death, is at the heart of The Fall of Hyperion. The poet approaches the still figures of the fallen gods Thea and Saturn:

Long, long these two were postured motionless,
Like sculpture builded-up upon the grave
Of their own power. A long awful time
I looked upon them: still they were the same;
The frozen god still bending to the earth,
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet,
Moneta silent.12

Ruskin had gone on to claim a quality of moral fixity in myth: the point for him was that the meaning of myth does not change with its changing forms. He explains in The Queen of the Air: ‘The first of requirements, then, for the right reading of myths, is the understanding of the nature of all true vision by noble persons; namely, that it is founded on constant laws common to all human nature; that it perceives, however darkly, things which are for all ages true;—that we can only understand it so far as we have some perception of the same truth’.13 Keats and Ruskin had thus been chiefly concerned with the myths of divinity; stories clustering round the gods, and the significance of their various divine attributes. But Morris’s restless mind threw the emphasis differently. He was hardly interested in the gods, for humanity concerned him more urgently. Morris was most moved by tales of the heroes; those mythical figures with one human parent, one divine—half-mortal, half-immortal. He saw no stasis in myth. For him, its most enduring quality was also its most obvious; his sense
of its narrative identity was always at the heart of Morris’s relations with myth. Those which concern searching and quest most often engage his attention. It is characteristic of his work that his first major mythological poem should have been The Life and Death of Jason, that great Greek story of quest. But what Morris’s questers are most often seeking is victory over death: here he is very much the inheritor of Keats and of Ruskin. Morris’s mythical narratives are not static, and they are not concessions of imaginative defeat: but they do engage with the overwhelming question that follows the loss of Christian faith. Walter Pater wrote of their engagement with mortality in his seminal review of The Earthly Paradise in The Westminster Review, published in 1868: ‘One characteristic of the pagan spirit these new poems have which is on their surface—their continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life; this is contrasted with the bloom of the world and gives new seductions to it; the sense of death and the desire of beauty; the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death.’

These are conflicts which we can only dream of resolving. And for Morris there is a close relation between the qualities of myth and the nature of dream, a relation which had previously motivated the work of Keats. For Morris, as for Keats, the association between dreams, myths, and the bleaker waking world was not only direct, but also instructive and helpful. He underlines the point in the closing lines of his treatment of the myths of Troy in ‘The Death of Paris’, from The Earthly Paradise:

A dream it is, friends, and no history
Of men who ever lived; so blame me nought
If wondrous things together there are brought,
Strange to our waking world—yet as in dreams
Of known things still we dream, whatever gleams
Of unknown light may make them strange, so here
Our dreamland story holdeth such things dear
And such things loathed, as we do; else indeed,
Were all its marvels nought to help our need.

Here Morris’s position is not only close to Keats, but also recalls what Ruskin had said in The Queen of the Air: that myths, those ‘dreamland stories’, are founded on ‘constant laws common to all human nature’; that they express ‘things which are for all ages true’.

Morris, however, had different priorities in his view of the ‘things which are for all ages true’. Like all artists, he imprinted his own interests on the malleable material that myth provided. His primary interest in the myths of heroes like Achilles or Jason was associated with a concern with companies of men, communities or groups, like the Wanderers of The Earthly Paradise, rather than the solitary questers that haunt the poetry of earlier Romantics. It is also important to notice that he was very much less willing to give the priority that other Romantics, and indeed Ruskin, had given to the myths of Greece. He was to find much of the material that interested him in Northern cycles of myth, which had held little interest for his Romantic predecessor. This departure marks one of the most interesting ways in which Morris built on his Romantic inheritance.
Greek myth had held what amounted to a monopoly over the literary imagination for centuries. Myths of Greek heroes and nymphs, gods and goddesses, had accumulated the rich resonances of generations of poetic transformations; this added to their attraction for each new generation. But it was this very tradition that made it rather less attractive than might have been expected in the eyes of Morris. For the Greek literature that was the central source for Greek myths had acquired a kind of social status to which Morris was less and less warmly inclined: a knowledge of Greek literature had, in fact, become the mark of a gentleman. No working class man—still less a working class woman—could be expected to have had the education that bestowed an expertise in Greek: such skill was a traditional and tested method of proclaiming membership of more privileged classes. It is of course true that the working classes were even less likely to have the knowledge of Icelandic that Morris valiantly gathered in order to tackle the sagas; nevertheless, the myths of the North had none of the elitist implications that had come to attach themselves to the more familiar classical myths of Greece. No-one could accuse the old sagas of being gentlemanly: but, in terms of nineteenth-century culture at least, that is exactly what the myths of Greece were—exactly, in other words, what Morris did not want to be.

The Northern myths emphasized courage, endurance, and martial valour to a very much greater extent than the myths of Greece. This too won Morris’s favour. Their war-like glamour brought them closer to the stories that had first inflamed his imagination; the stories of medieval literature, invested with all of the power and many of the characteristics of myth in Morris’s mind. Though his work might seem to have little in common with the scholarly labours of the comparative mythologists who were publishing newly-discovered associations between the mythological traditions of different nations in different ages, there is a sense in which Morris himself became a comparative mythologist, albeit of an idiosyncratic kind. His syncretic thought enabled him to blur the edges of differing bodies of myth: classical, Icelandic, Christian—taking what he needed and making it his own. Again and again that lost golden age, the dream-land of Saturn, returns to haunt Morris’s writing; but any sense of drooping dejection is overwhelmed by the energy of the quest, the other mythological motif that repeatedly recurs in Morris’s work; the search for what can never be wholly reclaimed. It is a quest both saddened and enriched by the fact that for Morris it must inevitably take place within the natural world. Morris’s seeking should also of course be seen within a Socialist context: the ideologies of Morris’s writing are never apolitical. But the terms in which they are presented are pervasively those of myth, enabling him to unite Yeats’s ‘dream of natural happiness’ with a Keatsian melancholy, without being drowned by either. Those apparently other-worldly tales of gods and heroes and magical journeys were among the resources that enabled him to cope with the complex pressures within his own personality. They helped him to achieve what mattered to him in this world.
NOTES

3 Ibid., p. 53.
6 Ibid., p. 114.
7 Ibid., p. 115.
9 Ibid., p. 410.
10 Ibid., pp. 421–22.
11 Ibid., Vol. 11, p. 309.