“Earth’s Voices As They Are Indeed”

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The heart of *News from Nowhere* is its portrayal of pastoral virtues: classless society content with “unsophisticated” achievements and experiences highlighting its integration with the natural environment. Morris in fact had presaged this well before he wrote *News from Nowhere*. Some thirty-five years earlier he wrote from France of “the hedgeless fields of grain, and beautiful herbs ... looking as if they belonged to no man, ... that they might grow always among the trees, mingled with the flowers, purple thistles, and blue corn-flowers, and red poppies”.1 And in 1879, in the lecture ‘Making the Best of It’, he stated that “the real meaning of the arts” was “the expression of reverence for nature, and the crown of nature, the life of man upon the earth”.2

Morris never advocated “pastoral” living in isolation. He accepted “town” and “country” as entities, but expected “the town to be impregnated with the beauty of the country, and the country with the intelligence and vivid life of the town”. The country should present “a lovely house surrounded by acres and acres of garden”, the town “a garden with beautiful houses in it”.3 To decorate those houses, he insisted on patterns with “plenty of meaning”, with

... unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields and strange trees, boughs and tendrils ... Take heed ... that the lines do not get thready or flabby or too far from their stock to sprout firmly and vigorously; even where a line ends it should look as if it had plenty of capacity for more growth if so it would.4

Using such vital images in a natural cyclical pattern, Morris expounded his idea of artistic development:

This was the growth of art: like all growth, it was good and fruitful for a while; like all fruitful growth, it grew into decay; like all decay of what was once fruitful, it will grow into something new.5

This cyclical model, employed throughout the lectures, referred not only to the arts but also to society. In the “decay” phase, while man’s skill might be at a “dead stop”, Nature will continue “her eternal recurrence of lovely changes – spring, summer, autumn, and winter; sunshine, rain, and snow; storm and fair weather; dawn, noon, and sunset; day and night”, testimony to man’s considered selection of “ugliness instead of beauty” and life “where he is strongest amidst squalor or blank emptiness.”6 In the capitalist community, Morris would rather that the earth should have “the wheat” than it “rot in the miser’s granary” because then it “might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark.”7 Out of the prospective “blank space ... and amidst its darkness the new seed must sprout”,8 to be followed naturally by harvest. This new growth would only be achieved by allowing the dissolution of civilisation as it then stood: “it will be but a burning up of the gathered weeds, so that the field may bear more abundantly.”9
In *The Earthly Paradise*, employing a calendar structure in seasonal order, Morris portrayed clearly mankind’s closeness to nature’s flow, and highlighted natural and human life-rhythms in the ‘July’ poem:

E’en now the west grows clear of storm and threat,
But midst the lightning did the fair sun die —
Ah, he shall rise again for ages yet,
He cannot waste his life — but thou and I —

In *News from Nowhere* he summarises this adroitly when Guest questions the inhabitants’ “quite exaggerated interest in the weather, a fine day, a dark night, or a brilliant one, and the like.” In reply Dick asks: “Is it strange to sympathise with the year and its gains and losses?” (Ch. XXXII). In letters throughout his entire life Morris expounded this sympathy for and interest in matters natural: a yellow blight which was “depressing even at Kelmscott”; a morning “especially beautiful & soft” with no mist so that “one must hope for the best as to the harvest weather”; a “most splendid but very stormy sunrise” and nights which are “fine” with the moon rising “her old way from behind the great barn”; a day which “has been March all over; rain-showers, hail, wind, dead calm, thunder, finishing with a calm frosty evening sky”; a “miracle” day “when you really can do nothing but stand and stare at it”; a freezing night followed by “a sharp shower in the morning” then a “cold rather windy day” which nonetheless was “brilliantly sunny at first” then “cloudy with gleams of sun at times”; and despite “lots of sun” a preference for alternation with “a few warm showers instead of the veil of cold cloud which has no promise of rain in it ... and withering wind with it.” Was Morris questioning, in *News from Nowhere*, his own “exaggerated interest”? 

May Morris pointed out that the lecture ‘Labour and Pleasure versus Labour and Sorrow’ contained passages where Morris’s feelings against the disorder and tyranny of his times were mitigated by “the gravely, simply expressed sense of the continuity of life and of art – the budding, the blossoming-time, the decay and the new birth”. What recurs and thus remains in existence is not the individual but the characteristic experience of earthly being. He thought it a rare holiday “to feel ourselves a part of Nature”, considerately and contentedly to mark “the course of our lives amidst all the little links of events which connect them with the lives of others, and build up the great whole of humanity.” In ‘Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper’ in *Poems by the Way* he expressed the concept thus:

Thy soul and life shall perish,
And thy name as last night’s wind;
But Earth the deed shall cherish
That thou to-day shalt find.

Of this, Kelmscott Manor stood as a figure, having “grown up out of the soil & the lives of those that lived on it”, built with “some thin thread of tradition, a half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river; a certain amount ... of common sense, a liking for making materials serve one’s turn, & perhaps at bottom some little grain of sentiment.”

Morris often wrote of spring in sober, meditative terms. On one visit to Kelmscott “for a fortnight to see spring beginning” he found himself “writing among the gables
and rook-haunted trees, with a sense of the place being almost too beautiful to live in", and in London he reflected on the killing frost and “poor old Matthews” who was “very slow”. He also mused on the fate of “some beautiful willows at Eaton Hastings”, untouched during the seventeen years he had lived at Hammersmith, which “the idiot Parson” had polled “into wretched stumps”: “I should like to cut off the beggar’s legs and have wooden ones made for him out of the willow timber, the value of which is about 7s. 6d.” Notwithstanding disappointments, spring still remained the season of expectation. The ‘April’ visions from The Earthly Paradise, with “breezes soft/That o’er the blossoms of the orchard blow” and the “thousand things that ‘neath the young leaves grow”, were transposed some twenty years later to Kelmscott Manor. With the countryside some six weeks backward, the large trees except chestnuts and apple trees showing no indication of life and the garden with barely any blossoms except primroses, there was nonetheless “such beautiful promise of buds and things just out of the ground that it makes amends for all.”

Summer in The Earthly Paradise presents not only “little sounds made musical and clear” in the ‘August’ poem, but also intoxicating odours and exciting sights: young leaves (grey aspen-boughs, glittering poplar leaves) rustled by the “gentle breath” of the “balmy odorous wind” while “some blossom burst his sheath” to add “unnoticed fragrance to the night”; “soft breezes” carrying the sweet scent of honied beanfields”, the “murmur” of stream and “pink-foot dove” and “brown bee”, the “twitter” of birds and “chattering” of restless magpie and “quivering song” of “brown birds”; the “blossom’s scent” floating across fresh grass and bees whirring and drifting from “rose to lily” with “low vexed song”, a roving rook “lazily croaking” in flight; a kingfisher gleaming in the low sun “twixt bank and alder”, restless grebe stealing “from out the high sedge” to dive and rise again, the “fleer” swallow chasing “circling gnats”, a “splashing chub” breaking the serenity of a “shaded dusky pool”, the cool “ripple” of “some distant” and “restless changing” weir and the “changing rush” of a “swift stream”. Likewise sights, sounds and odours were also most often recorded in Morris’s “summer” letters: from the “lonely and dismal” beech woods with their brilliant red-lead-coloured slugs, some “like bad veal with a shell on their backs”, and the rustling of dry leaves caused by the wriggling of a yellowish-olive-coloured adder, to haymaking “going on like a house afire” with the countryside “one big nosegay, the scents wonderful, really that is the word; the life of us holiday-makers luxurious to the extent of making one feel wicked, at least in the old sense of bewitched”, and in the twilight the stint or summer snipe “crying about us and flitting from under the bank and across the stream: such a clean-made, neat-feathered, light grey little chap he is, with a wild musical little note like all the moor-haunting birds.”

While autumn and winter in The Earthly Paradise deal with dissolution and death, one should keep in mind Morris’s words in the poem ‘Of the Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong’ from Poems by the Way:

So many times over comes summer again,

What healing in summer if winter be vain?

Sense stimuli remain simplified, but are more sombre: still the brook babbles and the “beech-leaves stir”; however “the grey-winged bird” now moans “o’er his forgotten nest” and “the south wind’s breath” ruffles the stream and trees foretelling of “rain
beyond the hills”, in ‘The Death of Paris’. This is clear in a fragment abandoned from ‘The Man who never laughed again’:

... now they ceased, the happy notes of men:
The reed-chat’s warble and the late bee’s drone
The chuckle of the light-foot water-hen
But made the lonely river yet more lone
When the sweet cheery music was all done;20

May Morris quoted some interesting “old reviews” of The Earthly Paradise which indicate well Morris’s outlook as expressed in ‘the Wooing of Hallbiorn’. While one critic had objected to the “dread of death” attached to the work, another had recognised this outlook as “part of life”. He added that “there is a mood of mind which is sorrowful in form and yet in substance is hardly so. It is the mood of a man who recognizes the tragic conditions and limitations of human life, but who recognizes them as inevitable, universal, not to be subdued nor escaped from, but to be accepted and made the best of”.

21 That mood is expressed in such lines as:

Yea, so things come and go and come again,
And if one root within the hazelwood
Dies off for ever, then with little pain
Another grows up where the lost one stood.
And so in April all seems fair and good
And with the sight thereof our eyes we please:
Now unto someone may we be as these.22

Morris’s letters of autumn and winter also exhibit the “storm and fair weather” facets of these seasons. In autumn months he wrote of the death in the previous winter of many small birds, however there were “plenty of rooks” who had “just left off making the parliament-noise they began about six this morning”; the Kelmscott House garden while “going the way of all London autumn gardens” nonetheless still had “a sort of pale prettiness about it”; there were days at Kelmscott Manor where he had “that delightful quickening of perception by which everything gets emphasized and brightened, and the commonest landscape looks lovely: anxieties and worrits, though remembered, yet no weight on one’s spirits – Heaven in short”; and again at Kelmscott House, when the tulip-tree changed to its autumn colours, it “almost looks like as if the sunlight were come into the garden this dull day.” In winter a weather change from “a bright beautiful day” to one of “cold; rainy, sleety, but not frosty” would not have worried him if he had been at Kelmscott, but bad weather “especially fog, does make London wretched”; Kelmscott’s beauty was its “promise of things pushing up through the clean un-sooty soil”.23

A society holding to a “garden” framework harmonises the confusion of rudimentary culture and intricate civilisation; a society which denies such a constitution corrupts both Nature and fellowship. For Morris in ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, modern society had “submitted to live ... a mean, shabby, dirty life”, driven to such simply by “the hunting of profit”. This accounted for the “enormous unmanageable aggregations called towns” supplying “quarters without gardens or open spaces” and lacking “the most ordinary precautions against wrapping a whole district in a cloud of sulphurous smoke”, thus turning “beautiful rivers into
Morris advocated as a necessity “decency of surroundings” which incorporated “well built, clean and healthy” houses “ornamented duly”, “abundant garden space” in towns which “must not eat up” the countryside, fields “for cultivation” but not “spoilt by it any more than a garden is spoilt”. In particular, trees, the loss of which would “spoil a landscape”, should not be allowed to be cut down “for mere profit”, and under no circumstances “should people be allowed to darken the daylight with smoke, to befoul rivers, or to degrade any spot of earth with squalid litter and brutal wasteful disorder.”

The arrangement of a “garden” society presents in concrete form agreement between mankind and nature, and between individuals. In News from Nowhere Guest questions Old Hammond concerning the “wastes and forests” which the people have retained: “Why do you keep such things in a garden? and isn’t it very wasteful to do so?” asks Guest. Besides simply liking “these pieces of wild nature” or “natural rockeries” (as opposed to the artificial shrubberies and rockeries of the past) Old Hammond points out that “you will see some sheep feeding, so that they are not so wasteful as you think; not so wasteful as forcing-grounds for fruit out of season, I think.” (Ch.X) Later, on the upper reaches of the Thames, Ellen relates her difficulty in imagining “times when this little pretty country was treated by its folk as if it had been an ugly characterless waste, with no delicate beauty to be guarded, with no heed taken of the ever fresh pleasure of the recurring seasons, and changeful weather, and diverse quality of the soil, and so forth... How could people be so cruel to themselves?”

– Guest’s reply: “And to each other”. (Ch. XXVIII) News from Nowhere acknowledges variations of seasonal nature and human nature, acknowledges aging and death. The haysel festival Dick thinks “the cheerfulness”, reflecting that the feast at corn-harvest occurs when “the year is beginning to fail, and one cannot help having a feeling behind all the gaiety, of the coming of the dark days, and the shorn fields and empty gardens; and the spring is almost too far off to look forward to. It is, then, in the autumn, when one almost believes in death.” (Ch. XXXII) Yet still the book manages to force forward its motif of life; in Ellen’s words: “The earth and the growth of it and the life of it!” (Ch. XXXI); and in Old Hammond’s explanation of the “spirit” of the times: “intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves”. (Ch. XVIII) That ‘motif of life’ adhered also to Kelmscott Manor. For Morris, “as others love the race of men through their lovers or their children, so I love the earth through that small space of it.”

Looking at Morris’s “gardens” one is conscious of an innate harmony in nature and of a gregarious construction. At the age of twenty-two, his garden description in ‘The Unknown Church’ had shown already his amazing ability to recall nature’s variety: the “great-leaved fiery nasturtium” and “deep crimson roses”; the hollyhocks, “great spires of pink, and orange, and red, and white, with their soft, downy leaves”; the “lush green briony, with green-white blossoms” and the “red berry and purple, yellow-spiked flower, and deadly, cruel-looking, dark green leaf, all growing together”. Thirteen years later from near Ems he wrote of the roads with “jolly fruit-trees each side of them and every good exposure has a vineyard looking very neat and shipshape, for they are just pruning them”; and four years on when “coming down into the plain of Piedmont out of the Alps” he travelled “through a country like a garden: green grass and feathery poplars, and abundance of pink blossomed
leafless peach and almond trees." A constituent of each example is order, its derivation and restrictions being human.

The Merton Abbey works afforded an excellent instance. Standing on some seven acres, they encompassed a large meadow, orchard, vegetable garden; the riverside and mill pond which were “thickly set with willows and large poplars” and a house with flower garden “soon restored to beauty when it came into Morris’s hands”. On acquiring the property, according to Mackail, one of Morris’s first tasks “when the season allowed was to plant poplars round the meadow”. When writing his Life of Morris, Mackail described the remarkable situation of the works:

... The old-fashioned garden is gay with irises and daffodils in spring, with hollyhocks and sunflowers in autumn, and full, summer by summer, of the fragrant flowering shrubs that make a London suburb into a brief June Paradise. It rambles away towards the mill pond with its fringe of tall poplars; the cottons lie bleaching on grass thickly set with buttercups; ... even upon the great sunk dye-vats the sun flickers through leaves, and trout leap outside the windows of the long cheerful room where the carpet-looms are built.

Merton Abbey was a reflection of England itself, where “all is measured, mingled, varied, gliding easily one thing into another”. Kelmscott Manor provided the ultimate model.

Nature does not furnish mankind with its resources gratuitously, she “gives us nothing for nothing”. Certainly for Morris “the race of man must either labour or perish. Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree.” In fact, “Nature wills all men either work or starve.” Indeed the “end of labour is the end of life.” The practical aspect of unity between Nature and humanity is well described in the hero’s dream of “some golden life” in The House of the Wolfings: “There he was between the plough-stilts in the acres of the kindred when the west wind was blowing over the promise of early spring; or smiting down the ripe wheat in the hot afternoon amidst the laughter and merry talk of man and maid”.

According to Morris human labour “must be organized” in order to avoid “relapsing into the condition of the savage”. To accomplish this there must be “only one enemy to contend with” and that is Nature, urging mankind into “conflict against herself” and thankful to be overcome – “a friend in the guise of an enemy.” Such are the circumstances in News from Nowhere where the fields are planted with fruit trees and “there was none of the niggardly begrudging of space to a handsome tree”, and the willows were polled with “a thoughtful sequence in the cutting”; in fact “the fields were everywhere treated as a garden made for the pleasure as well as the livelihood of all”. And new dwellings therein “had a sort of natural elegance, like that of the trees themselves.” (Ch. XXIX)

Not only do the arrangements of Nature animate the human soul – as Roderick Marshall pointed out: “growth of the soil’ is often used as synonymous with ‘growth of the soul’” – they reveal a human impression. In News from Nowhere when the boating group first came upon the house where Ellen lives, Guest noted how they could “see even under the doubtful light of the moon and the last of the western glow that the garden was stuffed full of flowers; and the fragrance it gave out in the gathering coolness was so wonderfully sweet, that it seemed the very heart of the delight of the June dusk”. They then approached the house “up a paved path between the roses”. (Ch. XXII)
The active concurrence of mankind and nature is complementary: “everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be ... beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her; it cannot be indifferent”. Likewise does Nature unite the useful and ornamental. As a standard, human achievements should exist “amidst the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part”; there should be “a full sympathy between the works of man and the land they were made for”, they should be “in harmony with nature” and fundamentally “simple and inspiriting”. Morris first attempted to achieve this concord when he built Red House at Upton. The house itself was built amongst the existing orchard “so that it should have apple and cherry trees all round it from the first” and the garden “with its long grass walks, its mid-summer lilac and autumn sunflowers, its wattled rose-trellises inclosing richly-flowered square garden plots, was then as unique as the house it surrounded”.

However, Morris was certainly aware that this harmony was often not the case in modern civilisation. A business trip to “the wilds of Surrey” presented “quite a desert: brake, whortle berries, Scotch fir” and indeed “it is well as a desert but when you complicate the matter by sticking horrible Cockney villas about it and attempting gardens, apparently for the sake of exhibiting specimens of the mange, and rail in your acres of whortle berries with iron railings of singular hideousness why then indeed you are a fool”. The situation is remedied in News from Nowhere where the Thames “came down through a wide meadow” grey with “the ripened seeding grasses”. Between hawthorn and wild rose could be seen the river flats running into what “might be called hills with a look of sheep-pastures about them”. At the river banks elms “still hid most of what houses there might be in this river-side dwelling of men”. (Ch. XXX) For Morris wondered how his time should account to future generations “of our dealings with the earth” which had been delivered “still beautiful, in spite of all the thousands of years of strife and carelessness and selfishness”. One such example of “dealings” Morris outlined in ‘Making the Best of It’. He was dismayed by the lack of “mercy” for a necessity of “decent life in a town, its trees”. Until such might be found “one trembles at the very sound of an axe”. And later in ‘Art and Democracy’, he vividly portrayed his terror of the “sordidness, filth, and squalor, embroidered with patches of pompous and vulgar hideousness” represented by the “great commercial cities”, of the “crust of unutterable grime” hanging over much of England, and of the “wretched suburbs that sprawl round our fairest and most ancient cities”.

Landscape should counterpoise symmetry and wildness. Morris found this in Epping Forest. The uncommon pollarded hornbeams interspersed by holly thickets resulted in “a very curious and characteristic wood, such as can be seen nowhere else.” But Morris feared for the survival of “its native trees” by replacement with “vile weeds like deodars and outlandish conifers”. The counterpoise is contingent upon the diversity and sustenance of life within; it is imaged in the relationship of fauna and flora, and is allied to the energies of Nature and man at work. Morris's letters are full of such observations: robins “hopping and singing all about the garden”, fieldfares “chattering all about the berry trees”, starlings collecting “in great flocks about sunset” and making “such a noise before they go off to roost”, the “music” of rooks and blackbirds which was “a great consolation”; the “pleasingest surprise” of
Giles neatly trellising the raspberry canes “so that they look like a mediaeval garden” and Hobbs “re-thatching a lot of his sheds and barns”. In ‘The Story of Cupid and Psyche’:

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\begin{align*}
\text{The dace pushed 'gainst the stream, the dragon-fly,} \\
\text{With its green-painted wing, went flickering by;} \\
\text{The water-hen, the lustrred kingfisher,} \\
\text{Went on their ways and took no heed of her;} \\
\text{The little reed birds never ceased to sing,} \\
\text{And still the eddy, like a living thing,} \\
\text{Broke into sudden gurgles at her feet.}
\end{align*}
\]

While later among the “yellow cornfields”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The lark sung over them, the butterfly} \\
\text{Fllickered from ear to ear distractedly,} \\
\text{The kestrel hung above, the weasel peered} \\
\text{From out the wheat-stalks on her una feared,} \\
\text{Along the road the trembling poppies shed} \\
\text{On the burnt grass their crumpled leaves and red.}
\end{align*}
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Agreeable sounds, sights, odours, well-disposed and coherent with the seasons. The glory of all this permeates News from Nowhere where houses “stood in a garden carefully cultivated, and running over with flowers”, where blackbirds sung “their best amidst the garden-trees”, where one could be assailed by a “great wave of fragrance, amidst which the lime-tree blossom was clearly to be distinguished”, where one could “lie under an elm-tree on the borders of a wheat-field, with the bees humming about ... and the corn-crake crying from furrow to furrow”, where “reed sparrows and warblers were delightfully restless, twittering and chuckling as the wash of the boats stirred the reeds from the water upwards in the still, hot morning”, where the human inhabitants mingled “their kind voices with the cuckoo’s song, the sweet strong whistle of the blackbirds, and the ceaseless note of the corn-crake as he crept through the long grass of the mowing-field; whence came waves of fragrance from the flowering clover amidst of the ripe grass”, and where roses rolled “over one another with that delicious super-abundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty.” (Chs. VII, XXII, XXVII, XXX, XXXI)

May Morris highlighted Morris’s adoption for one of his Kelmscott Press watermarks of “a Perch with a branch in its mouth”, with the implication that it may well stand as “a hieroglyph of the Manor-garden and the riverside and their delights.” Likewise “pleasant memories” were also suggested by watermarks of “the Primrose, the Perch, the Apple: Spring, Summer, Autumn – each well-loved season brought its joys in orchard and river-meadow, sights and sounds and perfume not to be entirely put out of memory amid the anxieties of London life.” And it was May who summarised best Morris’s contribution to “garden” philosophy:

... to live in the thought, in the work of a new generation, to have planted that others may tend and gather the fruit – what greater gift than this could be given at the entry into life upon our earth?
NOTES


6 Ibid., pp.38–39.

7 Ibid., p.54.

8 Ibid., p.40.

9 Ibid., p.39.


13 ‘Gossip about an Old House on the Upper Thames’.

14 *Letters*, p.46.

15 Ibid., p.147.

16 Ibid., p.311.

17 Ibid., p.310.


20 May Morris, p.127.

21 Ibid., pp.81–2.

22 Ibid., p.172.


24 *Signs of Change*: ‘How we live and how we might live’, p.29.

25 Morton, p.128.

26 Mackail, I, p.225.


28 Ibid., p.55.

29 Mackail, II, p.35.

30 Ibid., p.36.

31 Ibid., pp.58–9.

32 Morton, p.46.


34 Ibid., ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’, p.141.

35 Ibid., p.159.

36 May Morris, p.1717.
40 Morton, p.33.
41 Ibid., pp.45–6, 55.
42 Mackail, I, pp. 140, 143.
43 Letters, p.302.
44 Morton, p.58.
45 Henderson, p.245.
46 Ibid., pp.301–2.
48 Ibid., pp.49, 382.
49 May Morris, pp.712–5.
50 Ibid., p.464.