II

The Defence

of Nature
1. The crown of memory

In her consideration of 'Morris as a Writer', May Morris argued that her father had been 'peculiarly fortunate' that the 'background' to his 'schoolboy wanderings' was one

of noble sweeps of down and forest country, full of snatches of history, of legend that touched and set in motion the sympathy with wood and upland and with the stock of his forbears which lies deep below the day-to-day consciousness of the native of the soil.¹

May often 'romances' our imagination of Morris; her work is itself a 'noble sweep' over the 'legend' of her father, a reconstruction that sets our sympathy 'in motion' for this hero of her work. Nevertheless, Morris scholars ignore May at their peril, and certainly her observation, in this instance, underlined important aspects of Morris's early experience of nature: its regional, historical, cultural and national specificity. Each of these are key determining factors which influence the way Morris represents nature. It is important to keep them in mind because it has been argued that 'Morris remembered a childhood Eden that was refracted throughout his work'.² This thesis does not argue with this assessment. Certainly many aspects of Morris's relationship to the concept of nature were established in his youth. What is of central concern here is the recognition that this relationship is culturally mediated, that it is both the historical or biographical, as well as physical, circumstances of Morris’s childhood that influence how nature enters into his thought and art and becomes a 'crown' of memory.

Even before he engaged in 'schoolboy wanderings', Morris developed sympathies with his immediate environment. As an adult, Morris's feelings for his birth place at Elm House on Clay Hill in Walthamstow, Essex, were partly distorted by the urban sprawl that had destroyed the playground of his youth. In a letter of 1883, he wrote: 'I was born at Walthamstow, in Essex, a suburban village on the edge of Epping Forest, and once a pleasant place enough, but now terribly cocknified and

choked up by the jerry builder'. In a later work, he de-urbanises and reforests the area and is then able to 're-member' it as: 'A pretty place ... a very jolly place, now that the trees have had time to grow again since the great clearing of houses'.

Morris only lived at Elm House until he was six, but remembered the house and grounds well enough to use them as the basis for Parson Risley's rectory in The Novel on Blue Paper, an unfinished story written early in 1872. The novel describes an 'old-fashioned flower garden with its terrace and mulberry tree, and straight-cut flower borders, and the great row of full-foliaged elms that cut it off from the fields without'. This description is partly borne out by an 1891 sale catalogue and plan of the property in which Elm House is described as a 'delightful, old-fashioned family abode', with 'pleasure grounds' that are 'well established and delightfully shaded', and 'extensive Lawns, adorned and flanked with clumps of choice Rhododendrons and Shrubs, Roses, and Ornamental Trees' (figs. i–ii). In this garden, one of the characters of Morris's novel feels a 'pang compounded of the memory of hopes and fears, pleasures and pains of many past years' as the 'scent of the summer evening ... somehow mingled with thoughts' and made him remember

what he might have been, rather than what he was. Old aspirations, old enthusiasms, the kindling of what he thought true love—and the slaking of it... He turned back again into the house, feeling that less of a prison than the sweet summer garden that led into the fields, that led into other fields

Here Morris admits that these 'sweet summer gardens' remained with him for the rest of his life as vistas of promise and change. But although Morris expressed nostalgia for his birth place, it was another home in the same area that was the site of Morris's true 'childhood Eden'.

The Morris family moved to Woodford Hall, Walthamstow, in 1840 when Morris was six years old. A Palladian mansion set in fifty acres of park, one hundred acres of farmland and bordering Epping Forest, the landscape around the new home

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4 Morris, News from Nowhere, p. 16.  
5 Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p. 6. MacCarthy (A Life for Our Time, p. 5) has read this work as 'a fable on the moral power of beauty to transform'.
PARTICULARS.

LOT ONE.

[Ceremonial Print in Italic]

THE VALUABLE FREEHOLD

Residential & Building Estate,  

COMPRISED

THE DELIGHTFUL, OLD-FASHIONED

FAMILY ABODE,

Erected at

"Elm House;"

Situated in the

FOREST ROAD, the Main Thoroughfare between Tottenham and Epping Forest.

10 minutes' walk from Elstree Street and Elstree Street Station, and within about distance of a proposed station on the Tottenham and Walthamstow Railway, shortly to be commenced.

The Residence, which is charmingly placed on the summit of a Hill, is approached by a Carriage Drive with Lodge at Entrance, and affords the following accommodation:

On the FIRST FLOOR—Appended to two Drawing-rooms, 3 Principle and 8 Servants' Residences, Hall Rooms with Stair 3th, having hot and cold supplies, Stores Rooms, Linen-wash, Cupboard, etc., etc.

On the GROUND FLOOR—Entrance Hall, 40 ft. by 17 ft., entered through a Stone Staircase, Drawing Room, 28 ft. 6 in. by 20 ft. 8 in., having French Casement opening to Porch, Dining Room, 30 ft. by 18 ft. 6 in., with Casement opening to Garden, Servants' Room, 18 ft. by 17 ft., with small Library and Shopping adjoining, Staircase, Boot Room, with Plate Cupboards, Servants' Hall, Scullery, Pantry, Dairy, Coal House and Larder House, with capital Wine and Beer Cellars beneath; also a W.C.

NEARLY ADJOINS THE

STABLES,

Enlarged by a Rear Range.

Compriased: 4 Stalls & 8 Loose Boxes, Coach-house, Harness Room with loft over, and Coachman's Cottage.

THE PLEASURE GROUNDS

Which are well established and delightfully shaded, include extensive Lawns, shrubberies and pleasure grounds with masses of choice Rhododendron and Shrubs, Roses, and Ornamental Trees.

KITCHEN GARDEN

Abundantly supplied with choice Fruit Trees and root-crops by Walls.

ALSO THE TWO VALUABLE ENCLOSURES OF

MEADOW LAND,

Having Extensive Frontages of about 182 feet to

PALMERSTON ROAD.

In all comprising an area of upwards of

10 Acres 2 Roods 3 Poles.

The Residence and Pleasure Grounds are let to W. E. Pryce, Esq., an Importing Merchant, who enjoys the 4th. June, 1891, at a Rental of £150 per annum, and vacant possession will be given on completion of the premises.

The Meadow Land is occupied by Mr. E. W. Peto, Dairyman, at a Rental of £105 £5. per annum, including the cost of £100 per annum, and is subject of right annuities. The larger portion of the Land is available for development for

BUILDING PURPOSES

Without depleting the Residential Character of the House and Grounds, which are surrounded by a High Brick Wall.

Subsoil is believed to be Gravel and Sand.

P.S. — The Residence and Grounds may be viewed between 3 and 5 on any week day.

Fig. 1

Description of Elm House, Walthamstow, for a sale catalogue of 17 June 1891.
Fig. ii
Plan of Elm House and its gardens made for a sale catalogue of 17 June 1891.
made a great impression on the young Morris (see fig. iii). It was the place in which he learned most about nature and ‘natural lore’. It also provided the basis for many of the nature and landscape descriptions that featured throughout Morris’s works.

Unusually, perhaps, the fifty acres of parkland attached to Woodford Hall barely feature in Morris’s remembrances. One would like to imagine that this early lack of interest in these pleasure grounds linked to the processes of enclosure, marks an early sensitivity to, and rejection of, the signification of nature as a sign of property (and indeed property as a sign of nature). This would, of course, be stretching interpretation, not to mention a six year old’s powers of perception, rather too far. It is not too far-fetched to suggest, however, that the young Morris found more to interest him in the functional and productive kitchen garden, the ‘enveloping’ forest, or life-filled meadows, than in an idealised, recreated nature ‘unencumbered’ by the sight of rural labour. What is significant to our attempt to understand Morris’s nature, however, is that landscaped gardens have often been interpreted as a fusion of nature and art, which, in the process, conflates nature and the natural with the tastes of a particular social order. While not suggesting that Morris understood this appropriation at such an early age, it is nevertheless notable that Morris opted to spend more time in landscapes that were either not obviously marked (Epping Forest), or were purposely so (the kitchen garden); Morris’s was never a parkland aesthetic.

When Mackail sought out the landscape of Morris’s youth at Woodford, he observed that: ‘From the Hall, the course of the Thames might be traced winding through the marshes, with white and ruddy-brown sails moving among cornfields and pastures’. Many have noted the similarity of this view to ‘the wide green sea of

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7 See Berrington’s discussion of ‘The Landscape Garden’, Landscape and Ideology, pp. 11–14.
8 ‘By means of an “art that masks art”, the landscape garden collapsed the opposition between nature and the cultural (social, aesthetic) processes that appropriated [and marked] it.’ Berrington, Landscape and Ideology, p. 14.
9 In a letter to the Daily Chronicle (22 April 1895, in Letters, vol. IV, pp. 268–9), Morris argued that the business of a ‘landscape-gardener’ is “to vulgarise a garden or landscape to the utmost extent that his patron’s purse will allow of”.
10 Mackail, Life, vol. I, pp. 1–2. This option is no longer available to those interested in seeking out Morris’s early landscapes; both Woodford Hall and Elm House have been demolished.
Fig. iii
Detail from 1863 Ordnance Survey map showing location of Woodford Hall, Essex.
Essex marshland' presented in *News from Nowhere*, but watery landscapes appear frequently in Morris's work. In 'Frank's Sealed Letter', published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856, Morris recalled 'that spreading of the broad marsh lands round the river Lea' (see fig. iv), and 'the faint sound of the swirls of the lowland river'; an early poem, 'The Fen River', noted the 'white marsh-air' and 'brimming water'; and, at the very end of his life, Morris perhaps recalled these landscapes in the 'pleasant up-country places' referred to in *The Sundering Flood*. Morris returned again and again to landscapes similar to this 'sad lowland country' within reach of Woodford Hall, both physically and imaginatively. Morris's beloved Kelmscott Manor, purchased as a holiday retreat, is on flat land near the Thames and surrounded by low, easily floodable meadows.

In some respects one can read these returns as a recovery of the landscape of youth, with Morris fusing past and present, memory and experience, emotion and sensation, in the way that Wordsworth did in parts of *The Prelude*. In 'Frank's Sealed Letter', a highly personal and revealing interior monologue, the central character 'Hugh' goes into this riverside country and recovers his memory:

> All the songs of birds ringing through the hedges and about the willows, all the sweet colours of the sky, and of the clouds that floated in the blue of it, of the tender fresh grass and the sweet young shoots of flowering things, were very pensive to me; pleasantly so at first perhaps; but soon they were lying heavy on me with all the rest of things created, for within my heart rose memory green and fresh as the young spring leaves. Ah! such thoughts of the old times came about me thronging that they almost made me faint. I tried hard to shake them off; I noticed every turn of the banks of the little brook, every ripple of its waters over the brown stones, every line of the broad-leaved water-flowers. I went down towards the brook, and stooping down gathered a knot of lush marsh-marigolds; then kneeling on both knees, bent over the water with my arm stretched into it, till both my hand and the yellow flowers were making the swift-running little stream bubble about them. And even as I did so, still stronger and

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14 Morris, *The Sundering Flood*, in *CW*, vol. XXI, p. 1. This story was based on an Icelandic tale, and also drew heavily on Morris's memories of Iceland. See May Morris, 'Introduction', in *CW*, vol. XXI, p. xi.
15 For further discussion of Kelmscott Manor, see Chapter 4 of Section III below.
Fig. iv
The River Lea at Ford’s Ferry near Walthamstow, c. 1880, showing the flat lands around the river.
stronger came the memories, till they came quite clear at last, those shapes 
and words of the past days.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, in this landscape, Morris describes not only the nature of place itself, but the 
relationship of the perceiving subject to that environment. In this respect (and this is 
even more apparent in passages of The Earthly Paradise),\textsuperscript{17} his landscapes are rarely 
escapist because they are no refuge from the self. Morris ends the story with the 
injunction: ‘Lord, keep my memory green!’\textsuperscript{18}

This early introduction to the waterways around Woodford Hall was also the 
start of a lifelong passion for the River Thames. Not only did the Thames become a 
‘living vein’ for Morris in the ‘brick and mortar desert’ of London, a connection to the 
countryside and to Kelmscott Manor,\textsuperscript{19} but its tributaries also inspired his pattern-
making and design work. Yet perhaps the most frequently ‘refracted’ landscape of 
youth was the wooded landscape around Woodford. The house bordered on Epping 
Forest, a domain that stood as the archetypical ‘enchanted wood’ for Morris from his 
early prose and poetry to the late prose romances. In ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’ it is 
‘under the hornbeam trees’ of this forest, that ‘Hugh’ finally succumbs to memory,\textsuperscript{20} 
and at many other places in Morris’s work we find the characteristic features of the 
Forest at this time: banks of ancient beech, huge ‘historic’ oaks, thickets of holly and 
bracken, and, in particular, tall, knobblly hornbeams.\textsuperscript{21} In Epping Forest Morris learned 
about the types and forms of trees, shrubs, animals and especially birds.\textsuperscript{22} Later in life, 
he claimed to have known the Forest ‘yard by yard from Wanstead to the Theydons, 
and from Hale End to the Fairlop Oak’.\textsuperscript{23} In the 1890s, when the Forest was

\textsuperscript{17} See Chapter 2 of Section III below.
\textsuperscript{18} Morris, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’, p. 325.
\textsuperscript{19} This connection was made most famously in News from Nowhere, where ‘William Guest’ journeyed 
up the river from Hammersmith to the ‘many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the 
long-past times’ (p. 201). To a certain extent, Morris based this tale on two river trips from 
Hammersmith to Kelmscott, made in 1881 and 1882.
\textsuperscript{20} Morris, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’, p. 323.
\textsuperscript{21} See Chapter 4 below for more examples.
\textsuperscript{22} Mackail wrote that '[n]one who shared this outdoor life at Woodford with Morris told me ... that as a 
boy he “knew the names of birds”’ (Life, vol. I, p. 10); and Cornell Price, a friend from his days at 
Oxford, recorded in his diary that Morris could ‘go on for hours about their habits: but especially
about their form’ (from the Price family collection of letters and diaries; quoted by MacCarthy, A Life 
for Our Time, p. 16).
\textsuperscript{23} Morris to the Daily Chronicle, 22 April 1895, in Letters, vol. IV, p. 268.
threatened by ‘development’, Morris wrote three letters to the Daily Chronicle in an attempt to preserve the extent and ‘integrity’ of the Forest. Again seeking to ‘keep his memory green’, Morris not only referred to his knowledge of the area gained during childhood, but also revisited the Forest and recommended ‘[a] very moderate amount of thinning’ in order to avoid destroying ‘the pleasure which I well remember enjoying in my young days, of adventurous rambling in the hornbeam and holly thickets’. 24

This letter campaign reflected the dual values the Forest held for him as a boy: as a natural specimen of ‘special character ... derived from the fact that by far the greater part was a wood of hornbeams’, and as ‘a thicket, not a park’, a place of semi-mystical wildness. 25 For Morris, forests were complex, mysterious places in which he discovered natural history and indulged his sense of adventure. Jack Lindsay has argued that a central feature of Morris’s childhood was a turning in towards a private sphere of independence which was also the world of nature: that Morris discovered at Woodford the ‘forest of independence’. And perhaps Morris’s solitary withdrawals into the forest indicate his covert dissent from the values of his family, from the ‘interfering hand’ of maternal or paternal authority. 26 But while the retreat into nature may have been a retreat to a self-rulled world, it was also the beginning of a journey out into the world, even if this journey was first proscribed by the conventions of romance. With the ‘beech boughs’ hanging over head, Morris nurtured his ‘love of all fair things that be’, 27 as well as his power to observe and describe them. 28 The ‘magical realism’ of many of the poems featured in Boos’s collection of Morris’s juvenilia often heighten

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25 Morris to the Daily Chronicle, 22 April 1895, in Letters, vol. IV, p. 269. See also Chapter 4 of the Appendix.
26 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 8.
28 May Morris (AWS, vol. I, pp. 382–3) stated that ‘remembering those long days of his spent in roaming the great forest ..., we felt how large a part of that early familiarity with wild life and solitude played in the development of his natural bent’.
the sense of natural detail. The 'embowered consciousness' of youth could look out as well as in.  

It was not simply the landscape which provided Morris with experience of nature in his youth. He was also able to involve himself in the countless activities of a country estate. Morris's biographers have remarked upon the curiously medieval manner in which the virtually self-sufficient Morris household was managed. May Morris recalls her father's stories 'of the customs and doings of his boyhood ... told with a certain wistfulness and regret as well as with amusement'. \[30\] It seems that Morris spent a great deal of his childhood with 'grooms and gardeners' as they worked on the land around the Hall, \[31\] watching and learning a great deal about their work and environment (see fig. v). In _The Novel on Blue Paper_ Morris described in semi-autobiographical fashion, the 'constant society of the footman, gardener, and cook', the 'sweet-smelling abundant' kitchen garden, and 'the mixed scent of a tool house, with its bast mats and earthy roots and herbs'. \[32\] Over forty years later he still remembered 'the plant that I used to call balm: its strong sweet smell brought back to my mind my very early days in the kitchen-garden at Woodford, and the large blue plums which grew on the wall beyond the sweet-herb patch'. \[33\] Human proximity to seasonal rhythms in the country around Walthamstow inculcated a love of what he would later designate as a 'real' type of 'country life'. At a later stage, this would help Morris to imagine and recreate an alternative working world.

Another important aspect of Morris's life at Woodford Hall, and of his childhood in general, was the company of women. Morris's relationship with a father who commuted to the City on a daily basis was cordial rather than close, and, although Mackail recorded that Morris enjoyed riding, fishing and 'rambling with his brothers',

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\[29\] See, for example, 'The Ruined Castle' and the less 'magical' 'Blackbird' (Juvenilia, pp. 42-4, 55); and also the discussion of Morris's early published poetry in Chapter 4 below.

\[30\] Both May and Mackail record that Woodford Hall baked its own bread, brewed its own beer, and made its own cream and butter. May (AWS, vol. II, pp. 15-16) writes of 'well-stocked gardens and orchards, horses and cows and pigs and poultry', and also of 'the creams and wine-jellies and syllabubs, the pleasant home-made wines, the sweet-cured hams, the fine desserts of peaches from sunny walls and filiberts from the nut-walks'. Mackail (Life, vol. I, p. 10) also records that the household observed many of the old English traditional festivals.


\[32\] Morris, _The Novel on Blue Paper_, pp. 18, 22-3.
Fig. v

Gardeners at work at Cleveland House, Walthamstow, c. 1860. Morris recalled that he spent much of his time at Woodford Hall in the company of 'grooms and gardeners'.
Morris's closest companions were his two elder sisters, Emma and Henrietta. His earliest education was at their side, and, as Spear has noted, 'his first rebellious flights from the schoolroom into nature were conducted in their company'. As a result, from an early age Morris associated women with nature. This mental connection, in some ways conventional and in others subversive, surfaced most obviously in later works such as News from Nowhere. It is possible to make some observations about this association, however, from early poetry, much of which can be read as reflecting his life at Woodford, and also his relationship with his sister Emma.

In an unpublished thesis of 1971, John Le Bourgeois argued that Morris's relationship with Emma, the oldest of the Morris children, was a crucial component of his 'psychic life'. Le Bourgeois interpreted a number of Morris's early works as a response to Emma's engagement to Joseph Oldham, and argued that they revealed Morris's anguish at the loss of his sister. An early poem such as 'The Three Flowers' can be read in this way. It describes the rupture of a sister and brother's 'child love' when the sister takes another man as her lover. Here the poem is significant both because of its intense floral imagery, which indicates one of the ways Morris 'read' and represented natural images at an early age, and because of his association of women with nature:

Now the crocus is beside me
In the sweet spring-tide of year,
And the hazelboughs they hide me,
Daffodillies grow anear.

Long ago sweet daffodillies
With their yellow crowned my brow,
That was where the sunny hill is,

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34 Morris, News from Nowhere, p. 17.
35 Mackail, Life, vol. 1, p. 7. Further light on Morris's relationship with his father is shed in The Novel on Blue Paper in which Parson Risley's role as a parent is generally disparaged (see p. 18 in particular). Morris's relationship with his mother was 'attentive' rather than close (see Kelvin, 'Introduction', in Letters, vol. IV, p. xxii-iii). When she died in 1894 (only two years before Morris's own death) Morris wrote of the funeral: 'Altogether my old and callous heart was touched by the absence of what had been so kind to me and fond of me' (Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, 14 December 1894, in Letters, vol. IV, pp. 240-1).
36 Spear, Dreams of an English Eden, p. 204.
In the sun I see them now.

We were children then together
When we sat upon that hill,
In the sunny April weather,
On the flower-covered hill.

There, three flowers grew for ever
On the flower-covered hill;
But two flowers grow together
One, groweth lovely still.

Tiger lilies, tall white lilies,
In the summer grow together;
Gorgeous golden daffodillies
In the spring grow lovely ever.

Yet the daffodils clung round me
Yet she hung them round my brow;
Yet a child she said she loved me,
Yet I know she loves me now.

...

Then she rose up in her pity,
While the wind about her played,
In her hand a tiger-lily,
Very lovingly she said:

"Sweet friend do you not remember,
In the summer long ago,
How we children played together
On as sweet a day as now?"

"How you played at swearing fealty
To a Queen of beauty bright,
Of your vows of love and fealty
In that sunset’s golden light?"

"How you crowned me with white lilies
White as ever snow doth fall,
And three spotted tiger-lilies
Did my royal sceptre call?"

...

Last year did I see her lying
Crown of lilies on her head;
Hold his hand as he lay dying
Kissed him, as he lay there dead:

There they lay, lay dead together
With their hands clasped each in each,
As they sat in summer weather
While above them was the beech.

Around her head a crown of lilies
And a lily in her hand;
Fair white lilies: tiger lilies
Round his head and in his hand. 38

As Lindsay has argued, in this poem ‘[c]hildhood memories and a splendour of flowers are entangled with the love-theme, [and] with the consummation of love (here in death)’. 39 Certainly the piece tells us that Morris considered flowers as ‘true emblems of significant human experience’. 40 All the flowers used in this poem are part of a wider Victorian ‘vocabulary’ of flowers: the crocus beside the narrator in the first line can be seen as indicative of cheerfulness (as he has now achieved an equanimity whereby the events can be pleasantly remembered); daffodils can be signs both of deceitful hope, and of chivalry (the daffodils that ‘crown’ the brow of the narrator can thus be seen as indicative of his fate and role); white lilies are emblems of purity, sweetness and candour (reflecting the essential goodness of the sister); and daisies can signify sadness, patience, innocence and ‘I will think of it’ (all of which are appropriate to the narrator when, as he hears of this ‘earthly’ love and knows he will have to wait until they are in ‘heaven together’ to be reunited, his tears water the daisies on the ground). 41

What the poem also tells us is that this sister was perhaps the prototype for the many garlanded women that appear in Morris’s writing. These ‘May Queens’ are often figures of great, though not always benevolent, power. They often have the ability to bestow happiness and to take it away; they can ‘crown’ the hero or deny him entirely; they control the gates to paradise. Morris’s emotional attachment to his sister during childhood, her important influence at play in the garden of youth, meant that to a certain extent Morris depended on ‘queens of spring’ to resurrect paradise. Women

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38 The poem does not appear in either the Collected Works, or in May’s later volumes, thus I have reproduced a lengthy sample of the text (British Library, MS 45298A, pp. 30–1). May dates the poem as 1854–55, though it seems likely that it was written much earlier. See also Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 32.
39 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 29.
40 Boos, Juvenilia, p. 16.
with the power to do this appear in ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’, *The Earthly Paradise*, socialist pamphlets, *News from Nowhere*, and *The Wood Beyond the World*. Lindsay’s interpretation, that Morris rejected his mother, turned to Emma as ‘a doublet of the mother’, and then ‘to Nature, to the Earth-Mother’ as ‘a new, and yet more consoling and protective surrogate for the actual mother’, is thus a little misleading, though not without insight. As Morris’s early world of female nurture is transformed by the social convention of marriage, he perhaps retreated further into forest and marshland. Nevertheless, these natural features were still associated with women. Nature is remembered as a place where they have power: nature could be a bower of love, but it could also be a deathbed. Though this early combination of intimacy and adventure with women also laid the foundation for Morris’s later ‘hard-running and fast-shooting’ heroines, Morris’s association of women and nature was always bound up with their power to nurture.

Other kinds of nurture also affected Morris’s experience of nature around Woodford. Morris read about nature in the library at Woodford. Here there was a copy of John Gerard’s *Historie of Plants*, which not only helped Morris identify the plants and trees around him in youth, but became an important source of knowledge and inspiration for his later artistic endeavours. Beyond field guides, however, a large part of the pleasure of outdoor activity was derived from the sense that the natural world was the site of a culture represented in fiction. From all accounts, Morris learned to read at a very early age and formed ‘the habit of reading with extraordinary snwiniss, only equalled by the prodigious grasp of his memory’. Mackail asserted that ‘[a]t four years old he was already deep in the Waverley novels’, and Morris claimed to have read all thirty-nine of Walter Scott’s stories by

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41 See Seaton’s Appendix, ‘A Combined Vocabulary’, in *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 168–97. See also Chapter 2 of Section I above, and Chapter 3 of Section III below.
42 Lindsay, *Life and Work*, pp. 38–9, 8–9.
45 See Chapter 3 of Section III below.
46 Mackail, *Life*, vol. 1, p. 5.
47 Mackail, *Life*, vol. 1, p. 5. However ‘prodigious’, one suspects that it was Emma who was relating the substance of these stories at such a young age.
the time he was seven. It is these novels, more than any other, which affected the way Morris experienced nature as a child.48

Scott’s influence was ubiquitous in the nineteenth century, and thus it should not surprise us that Morris was influenced by the romantic landscapes of someone who, to the Victorians, was a ‘luminary of the first magnitude’.49 Scott’s impact on Morris’s view of nature is best understood in terms of a tension he created between the romantic and the real, and the way in which he described landscapes ‘not as set pieces, but particularised and integrated fully into the fabric of the novel’.50 Victorians found an ‘extraordinary feeling of reality’51 in novels such as Waverley, The Antiquary and The Heart of Midlothian. It was felt that Scott affected the imagination ‘by a vivid representation of all the outward circumstances as they unitedly offer themselves to the sense’.52 Carlyle, who criticised Scott for having ‘nothing spiritual in him’, found his work ‘economical, material, of the earth, earthy’.53 In this respect, more recent critics have argued that Scott’s work was a crucial step towards the emergence, later in the century, of those novels more conventionally understood as ‘realist’.54

Morris was of a similar mind. As an adult he described The Heart of Midlothian as ‘wholly unlettered naturalism’.55 Maybe this is how he was able to transfer the detail and circumstance of these stories into the glades and thickets of

48 Morris frequently acknowledged this influence of Scott. In a letter of 1881 (Morris to Thomas Coglan Horsfall, 7 April 1881, in Letters, vol. II, p. 41) he wrote that Scott’s were novels he would ‘read and re-read forever’; and in 1886, he asserted (Morris to the Pall Mall Gazette, 2 February 1886, in Letters, vol. II, p. 517), ‘I yield to no one, not even Ruskin, in my love and admiration for Scott’.
49 Leslie Stephen, ‘Sir Walter Scott’ (1871); quoted by John Henry Raleigh who, in an exploration of ‘What Scott meant to the Victorians’ (Victorian Studies, vol. VII, no. 1, September 1963, p. 10), also concluded: ‘To have been alive and literate in the nineteenth century was to have been affected in some way by the Waverley novels’.
53 This assessment is reprinted in the introduction to volume thirty-five of Scott’s works, and is quoted by Stone, The Romantic Impulse, p. 19.
54 In fact, Joan Williams and Duncan Forbes (The Realist Novel in England, pp. 11, 25, 40) have argued that the Waverley novels can be described as ‘the triumph of Romanticism’ because they show a ‘unique blend of sociology and romance, of “philosophical” history ... of the general and the particular’.
55 Vaillancourt, Art, Writings and Public Life, p. 4.
Epping Forest: both May Morris and Mackail tell us that Morris had a toy suit of armour in which he used to ride his pony around Woodford, recreating and inhabiting Scott’s world. At times his ardent childhood imagination even blunted the distinction between art and nature. Morris’s sister, Emma, told Mackail that they ‘used to read The Old English Baron together in the rabbit warren at Woodford poring, over the enthralling pages till both were wrought up to a state of mind that made them afraid to cross the park to reach home’.  

Similarly, a character in Morris’s semi-autobiographical Novel on Blue Paper explains that when he ‘looks up and down the field, or sees the road slowly winding along’, he ‘can’t help thinking of tales going on amongst it all’.  

This description points, however, to the tension between realism and romance. Though Scott’s intentions were to ‘take his leaves from “the great book of Nature”’, he imbued history and nature with as much romance and mystery as he provided a realistic account of ‘sixty years hence’. A more accurate assessment of the meaning and influence of Scott’s Waverley novels is prefigured in an appraisal of his poetry by Coleridge, who considered him:

[he] habitually conversant with the antiquities of his country, and of all Europe during the ruder periods of Society, living as it were, in whatever is found in them imposing either to the Fancy or interesting to the Feelings, passionately fond of natural Scenery, abundant in local Anecdote, and besides learned in
All the Antique Scrolls of Faery Land,
And all the thrilling Tales of Chivalry
Processions, Tournaments, Spells, Chivalry.  

Morris did not deny this tendency. In 1882 he recalled a visit to ‘a room hung with faded greenery at Queen Elizabeth’s Lodge, by Chingford Hatch, in Epping Forest’ (see figs. vi–viii), and particularly

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50 Mackail, Life, vol. I, p. 8. The Old English Baron was written by Clara Reeve, not Scott.
52 Scott announced these intentions in the first chapter of Waverley; quoted by Raleigh, ‘What Scott meant to the Victorians’, p. 12.
53 ‘Or ‘tis Sixty Years Hence’ is the subtitle to Waverley.
Fig. vi–vii
Queen Elizabeth's Hunting Lodge (Royal Forest Hotel)
in 1849 and 1885.
Fig. viii
The 'impression of romance'. The banqueting room of the Royal Forest Hotel in 1893, possibly the room referred to by Morris as 'hung with faded greenery'.

the impression of romance that it made upon me: a feeling that always comes back on me when I read, as I often do, Sir Walter Scott's *Antiquary*, and come to the description of the green room at Monkbar, amongst which the novelist has with such exquisite cunning of art bedded the fresh and glittering verses of the summer poet Chaucer...  

This would suggest that Morris conflated, or at least harnessed together, natural and romantic worlds. These sensibilities reverberated throughout his life, developing into an understanding that romance incisively informed Victorian relationships with nature, but had "real" value all the same:

With that literature in which romance, that is to say humanity, was re-born, there sprang up also a feeling for the romance of external nature, which is surely strong in us now, joined with a longing to know something real of the lives of those who have gone before us; of these feelings united you will find the broadest expression in the pages of Walter Scott.  

And it is precisely this sense in which Scott's work is absolutely central to Morris's and the more general Victorian experience of romanticism, helping to condition and transform reaction to it. Thus, although Scott was among the first to introduce vast "spatial panoramas" to English fiction (anticipating the nineteenth-century interest in the sublimities of landscape), it is "the common sense and ordinariness of the lowlands and of the ideal of quiet domesticity" that is ultimately celebrated. This may go some of the way to explaining the predominance of a "lowland aesthetic" in Morris's work: the love of the populated valley, rather than the isolated heights. From Scott, Morris ultimately learned that "civilisation needs the picturesque, but the picturesque is not enough".

Nevertheless, from a very early age Morris romanced the natural world, imbuing landscape, flora and fauna with the values and meanings of an aesthetic

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64 For example: "the snow-covered mountains of northern Scotland in *A Legend of Montrose*; in *Old Mortality*, a castle tower commanding two immense panoramas; one wasted and dreary, the other cultivated and beautiful; then through the trees of the cultivated one comes a troop of soldiers, half-seen, half-hidden, winding their way to the castle; in *Rob Roy*, a huge lake in the northern Highlands"; Raleigh, "What Scott meant to the Victorians", p. 13.
literary imagination. A crucial outcome of this association was the development of Morris’s sense of aesthetics: what was beautiful was closely associated with nature and with the imagination. E.P. Thompson traced the Morrisian meaning of the words ‘beauty’ and ‘work of art’ to the abstract passions of the artist as expressed by Keats. He asserted that the world of art Morris turned to in his youth was a ‘dream-world’, ‘a palace of refuge and a castle in revolt against the philistines’, a world which excluded action and social reality. But, although there is an element of escapism in Morris’s youthful flights into nature, his adventures in the fields and forests surrounding Woodford Hall can also be seen as instilling a different kind of realism: an awareness that human culture and history were inextricably bound up with the natural world. Riding through Epping Forest in a suit of armour was undoubtedly more real to Morris than the bill-broking activities of his father.

This childhood Eden was diminished by the death of Morris’s father in the autumn of 1847. In the following year Morris was sent away to school at Marlborough in Wiltshire and the family moved to the smaller Water House in Walthamstow. College life was not particularly arduous for Morris. He missed the company of his sisters but was able to explore a new landscape and invent new adventures. He had time to wander through the Savernake Forest and the Wiltshire Downs, and to soak up the unique combinations of nature and history in the stone circles of Avebury, ‘the huge barrow of Silbury, the hills all dotted with graves of the early chieftains; the mysterious Wansdyke drawn across the downs at the back’ (see fig. ix). Not much missed Morris’s eye. In a letter to his sister Emma, he carefully described both the natural and historic features of a visit to Avebury:

there is a Druidical circle and a Roman entrenchment... I think the biggest stone I could see was about 16 feet out of the ground in height and about 10 feet thick and 12 feet broad, the circle and entrenchment altogether is about half a mile... for your edification, I will tell you what a delectable affair a water meadow is to go through; in the first place you must fancy a

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68 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 20.
69 Morris to Andrew Scheu, 15 September 1883, in *Letters*, vol. II, pp. 225–31. Though heavily farmed and visited frequently by tourists, one can still experience and understand the power of this historic landscape.
Fig. ix
The 'huge barrow' of Neolithic Silbury Hill, Wiltshire.
field cut through with an infinity of small streams say about four feet wide each the people to whom the meadow belongs can turn on and off when they like and at this time of year they are on just before they put the fields up for mowing the grass being very long you cannot see the water till you are in the water and floundering in it.70

Through these explorations Morris formed the connection that often what was seen as natural was quite human made or moulded. In 1883 he recalled that his school stood ‘in very beautiful country, thickly scattered over with prehistoric monuments’, which encouraged his eager pursuit of studying nature ‘and everything else that had history in it’.71 Thus very early in life Morris identified with an interpretation of nature that had human history linked to it. Later in his life, this was developed into a conviction that architecture should be an extension of nature, that it should grow from the organic relations of the surrounding environment.

The country around Marlborough was not only filled with historical meaning but also fed Morris’s imagination. Mackail recorded that ‘on his walks he invented and poured forth endless stories, vaguely described as “about knights and fairies”, in which one adventure arose out of another, and the tale flowered on from day to day over a whole term’.72 Thus literature and romance continued to be fuelled by the natural world, they grew out of nature in the same way he observed human history had done.

Morris went home to the new house at Walthamstow in the holidays and when he left Marlborough College in 1851. Water House was itself a pleasantly rural retreat, which derived its name from the forty foot ‘moat’ in its grounds, which contained an island of aspen, holly, hawthorn and chestnut trees.73 A sale catalogue and plan issued while the Morris family was still in possession of the property, highlights this ‘LARGE SHEET OF WATER with ISLAND’, and also describes: the ‘Pleasure Grounds’ with ‘broad gravelled Walks’, ‘Shrubberies’, ‘Plantation and Rustic Bridge’, ‘Green House’, ‘Lawn’, and ‘American Shrubbery’; the ‘Large Enclosed Yard, with

70 Morris to Emma Morris, 13 April 1849, in Letters, vol. I, p. 3.
73 Water House still stands on Forest Road, Walthamstow, and since 1950 has housed the William Morris Gallery. Though the fields are built over and the ‘pleasure grounds’ are now the municipal ‘Lloyd Park’, the ‘moat’ still remains.
Fowl-houses, Wood-house, Piggeries, Bake-house, and Laundry, Walled Kitchen Garden, Tool-house, Larder & Potatoe-house, Melon Ground'; as well as a 'Small Paddock, and Pasture Field in the rear. The Whole Containing Twenty-Two Acres, Two Roods & Six Perches' (see figs. x–xi). Thus, while the house was not on quite the same grand scale as Woodford Hall, there was still plenty of land and garden to explore. Not far from Woodford, it is likely that many of the descriptions of gardens and landscape in Morris's writing could just as likely have been made while living at Water House as at Woodford. The kitchen garden described in The Novel on Blue Paper, for example, is most likely a compound of remembrances.74 Certainly Morris's observation and interest in water imagery was continued and strengthened. Both the description of the bottom of a river in 'Drowned'—'green ... with swinging weeds', 'yellow with bright gravel'—and the observation of the action of oars on quivering water in the last lines of 'The Fen River'—'Sweeping past the willows / Sweeping 'twixt the shores'—probably refer to time spent on the 'moat' at Water House.75 The reference to willows in the latter verse should also be noted as another important natural image that imprinted itself on Morris's mind at this time. Willow trees, leaves and boughs become a familiar motif in his work. Not only do they feature in much other written work, including 'The Willow and the Red Cliff', but they also appear in many of his patterns.

Morris spent over a year in Walthamstow studying for the matriculation exam for Exeter College, Oxford. Mackail recorded that Morris was 'more of an expert in silkworms' eggs and old churches than in exact scholarship'.76 A student who shared the same tutor as Morris during this period, recalled chasing swans and fishing for perch at Water House, walking and riding through Epping Forest on almost a daily basis, and Morris's intense love of nature. Morris also preferred visits to the Forest to the trips to London made by some of the other students. In 1852 he chose to ride

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74 The Novel mentions a 'walled kitchen garden', 'melon ground' and 'tool house' (pp. 22–3), all of which are mentioned on the sale catalogue for Water House.
75 Both of these are early poems which survive in the same 'adolescent hand' discussed above. Both are also reprinted by May Morris in AWS, vol. I, pp. 529–31.
LUT 3.

(AUCTION TAKEN UP UP)

A VALUABLE FREEHOLD ESTATE,

Situated adjoining the preceding Lot, in

CLAY STREET, in the Parish of WALTHAMSTOW,

containing

A CAPITAL BRICK-BUILT MANSION,

Known as WINN'S,

With Servants Entrance, approached from the Road by Quarter Share, with回回 Hall and Four Buildings.

THE RESIDENCE IS DETACHED, and comprises

On the Upper Floor,

Three First Bed Rooms, each Dressing Room, small Chaise, Two small Bed Rooms, and Water Closet.

First Floor,

Library, with circular Roof, Walls panelled, and finished with Mahogany Floor; Dressing Room, and Steel doors affixed.

Panorama, Hall Room, with mahogany Parquet, communicating by small Doors with a back Bed Chamber, and rich Landing.

Ground Floor.

Main Entrance Hall, panelled with Mahogany, Walls panelled, and finished with mahogany Corners, Revolving, with Oak Hall Ball and Staircase.

DRAWING ROOM WITH CIRCULAR FRONT, 28 ft. by 18 ft.

The Walls elegantly panelled, and finished with gilt Moulding, revolved Corners, and Swept Marble Chimney Piece.

ANOTHER DRAWING ROOM, 22 ft. 6 in. by 20 ft., Walls panelled, revolved Corners, and upholstered Swept Marble Chimney Piece.

DINING ROOM, Walls panelled, and finished with Mahogany Floor; Scrolls with back Closet; Swept, having in Two Bed Rooms, in Passage leading to Offices; Dressing Room, Butler's Pantry, Kitchen, with back Rooms over, Staircase, and Two Servants' Rooms over, with Offices in the Basement.

Caroboom on both, with southlake sight of Stage to Gates.

THE OFFICES ARE DETACHED, and comprise

Brick-built Stable, Harness Room, Coach House with Loft over, and a Double Carriage House.

Large Outside Yard, with Post-house, Woodhouse, Piggery, Stable-house, and Laundry.

WALLING KITCHEN GARDEN, Pot-house, Pottery, & Pottage House, NELSON GROUND,

PLEASURE GROUNDS,

With broad gravelled Walks, Ornamental, LARGE SHEET OF WATER, an ISLAND, Plantations and Rustic Bridge, Green House, Lacs, Arched Porch.

SMALL PADDOCK, AND PASTURE FIELD IN THE NEAR.

TWENTY-TWO ACRES, TWO ROODS & SIX PERCHES

Be he more or less, as per Plan, et c.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Acres</th>
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<td>Residence, Premises</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Groundwork, Pond</td>
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<td>Lane, Field, or Nine Acres</td>
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<td>Coach House Field</td>
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<td>Thirty Acres, more or less</td>
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The Residence and Grounds, No. 3 in Plan, are in Mr. Molesworth for one year, ending Michaelmas 1855, at the annual Rent of ONE HUNDRED POUNDS per annum. Nos. 4 and 5 in Plan are in lease, out of which Mr. Molesworth will be relieved.

The Purchaser is to take the Precautions necessary to keep the Residence and Office in a Vaisselle, and the Four Paddocks and Gardens.

The Title in this Lot have been reduced at the rate of 3½%, which amounts to be paid by the Purchaser in addition to the Purchase-money.

Fig. x

Details of Water House, Walthamstow, from a sale catalogue of 1847.
Fig. xi
Plan of Water House, Walthamstow, made for a title deed of 1847.
through the Forest to Waltham Abbey rather than journey to the city for the national
day of mourning for the Duke of Wellington. 77

Morris's childhood 'apprenticeship' to nature was brought to a close when he
went up to Exeter College in the Lent term of 1853. The legacy of this apprenticeship
meant that Morris entered university life already sympathetic to the naturalism and
medievalism that played such an important role in the ideas he encountered at Oxford.
He had developed an eye that keenly observed the details of the world around him, had
experienced and enjoyed life in a rural environment, and had invested landscape with
mystery and romance. Most important of all, he had not drawn a fundamental
distinction between his studies of human and natural history. In so doing Morris had
already opened a huge place for a cultural nature in his imagination.

2. Against the age against nature

Morris's years at Oxford extended and reinforced his appreciation of the place of nature in culture but disturbed the Arcadian experience of youth. In his rooms at Exeter College, on the streets of the medieval university town, and in the surrounding countryside, Morris was able to indulge his taste 'for things holy and beautiful and true'.¹ But even Morris's vivid imagination could not ignore that the old market and county town was beginning to feel the effects of a new era. As an undergraduate, Morris's reaction to the arrival of a railway, replete with the baggage of Victorian 'progress', was to retreat into the world of Malory and Froissart. Lured by the emotional and aesthetic attractions of High Anglicanism, Morris and his circle of friends planned to establish a monastic 'Brotherhood' to carry on a 'Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age'.² Over the years, this crusade would change, both in form and direction, but 'hatred of modern civilization' remained a primary motivation throughout Morris's life,³ and a significant determining factor in his conceptualisation of nature.

Of course Morris and his 'set' at Oxford were by no means the first or only ones to rebel 'against the age'. Their predominantly aesthetic reaction was part and product of a more general rejection of the dominant social and economic paradigms of the nineteenth century. The two most prominent critics to help Morris and his friends frame and address their critique of contemporary society were Ruskin and Carlyle, and both attacked the age primarily on the grounds that it was against nature. Ruskin showed the would-be knights one arena in which they could take up weapons, and his influence will be explored in the next chapter. Carlyle did more to identify the enemy and it is with his incisive analysis of the 'Age of Machinery' that we need to begin. Carlyle's influence upon Morris's conception of 'the beauty of the earth' must be sought in the tensions between Carlyle's juxtaposition of an organic/natural and a mechanic/unnatural world.

¹ Edward Burne-Jones, quoted in Memorials, vol. 1, p. 96.
It is frequently argued that what impressed Morris most about Carlyle was his virulent moral critique of industrial capitalism, especially in *Past and Present* (1843).\(^4\) Certainly Carlyle's comparison of the modern industrial era with life in a twelfth-century monastery had a profound impact on the young Oxford student.\(^5\) Carlyle's idyllic portrayal of medieval monasticism, of the Middle Ages as an organic, pre-capitalist, natural society, influenced Morris's early imagining of possible alternative landscapes and communities. Part of the Victorian quest for a pre-industrial era in which nature was unspoilt,\(^6\) *Past and Present* privileged past over present in its opposition to the industrial, commercial and unnatural modern age. No doubt it was this element that appealed to the largely poetic and aesthetic tastes and concerns of Morris and his group of friends.

Though this observation is crucial, Morris read much more than *Past and Present*, and the possible impact of Carlyle's other works also needs to be considered.\(^7\) Moreover, Morris's reading of Carlyle was also influenced by a less affluent and more socially aware group who had come to Oxford from Birmingham, mostly friends of Morris's closest companion Edward Burne-Jones (or Ned Jones as he was known at this time). When Morris visited Burne-Jones in Birmingham in the summer vacation of 1855, this group discussed Carlyle's account of the French Revolution as well as *Past and Present*, and it is recorded that "Morris and Cormell [Price] talked long together of 'the organisation of labour'".\(^8\) Later they made Carlyle an honorary member of their Hogarth Club, though it is reported that Carlyle found this 'an afflictive phenomenon'.\(^9\)

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\(^4\) See, for example, Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, pp. 29–32.

\(^5\) A copy of *Past and Present* is among the belongings of Morris still kept at Exeter College.

\(^6\) Louis James, 'Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Literature', in *The Victorian Countryside*, vol. 1, p. 160.

\(^7\) Morris included Carlyle's 'Works' in his list of favourite books published by the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 2 February 1886 (in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 517), and his continuing interest is also reflected in his reading of various biographical works such as J.A. Froude's *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years, 1795–1835* (1882), and also Carlyle's *Reminiscences*, edited by Froude and published in 1881. In a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones of 6 July 1881 (in *Letters*, vol. II, pp. 52–3), Morris wrote that though he was surprised at the 'ferocity of gloom' expressed in the *Reminiscences*, 'the moral from it all is the excellence of art, its truth, and its power of expression. Set 'Sartor Resartus' by all this, and what a difference!'!


It is apparent when Carlyle's work as a whole is considered, that at the heart of his criticism of an unnatural age lies an ambivalent attitude towards nature. On the one hand, Carlyle's study of German transcendentalists had imbued him with a profound reverence for the natural world as 'the veil and mysterious Garment of the Unseen'. In works like *Sartor Resartus* nature can be 'read' for God’s meaning and 'reveals Him to the wise, hides Him from the foolish'. His early work, in particular, strikes nearly all the notes of the romantic philosophy of nature. In the early stages of his wanderings, Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, for example, climbs a mountain and undergoes a Wordsworthian revelation of community with the landscape:

A hundred and a hundred savage peaks, in the last light of Day; all glowing, of gold and amethyst, like giant spirits of the wilderness... Beautiful, nay solemn, was the sudden aspect to our Wanderer. He gazed over these stupendous masses with wonder, almost with longing desire; never till this hour had he known Nature, that she was One, that she was his Mother and divine. And as the ruddy glow was fading into clearness in the sky, and the Sun had now departed, a murmur of Eternity and Immensity, of Death and of Life, stole through his soul; and he felt as if Death and Life were one, as if the Earth were not dead, as if the Spirit of the Earth had its throne in that splendour, and his own spirit were therewith holding communion.  

This feeling was reasserted in the chapter ‘Natural Supernaturalism’ where Carlyle emphasised that every part of the universe is a miracle, and stressed the ‘wonder’ of nature. Though Morris rarely ascended to such solitary or sublime heights, this sense of wonder in face of the natural world was also expressed in his work. Nature is full of signs and mystery in his later prose romances. There is a sense in these last works that he mourns with Carlyle the fact that '[w]onder ... is, on all hands, dying out; it is the sign of uncultivation to wonder'.

Equally apparent in the above quote is a romantic organismic, also central to *Past and Present*:

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For the Present holds in it both the whole Past and the whole Future:—as
the LIFE-TREE ICÍRASIL, wide-waving, many-toned, has its roots down
depth, many of the oldest dead dust of men, and with
its boughs reaches always beyond the stars; and in all times and places is
one and the same Life-tree!\textsuperscript{15}

The image of the linking, integrating ‘life-tree’ was one Morris was drawn to again and
again. It rose through the floor and supported the roof of the Hall of the Kings in The
Story of Sigurd the Volsung, it was drawn by Edward Burne-Jones for the Kelmscott
Press, and was perhaps the impulse behind the images that dominate tapestries such as
‘Woodpecker’. Of greater significance, however, was the organic quality of these
images, which became what one might call a ‘socio-aesthetic’ model for Morris.
Carlyle’s use of language, which worked ‘a thought of the whole earth and of all living
things ... more intimately ... into the texture of the argument’,\textsuperscript{16} deeply affected Morris.
John Holloway has argued that, at the most basic level, ‘a wild, passionate energy runs
through [Carlyle’s language,] disorderly and even chaotic, but leaving an indelible
impression of life, force, vitality’:

these passages set every immediate and restricted topic in a wider context,
in the context of the whole earth, or indeed the whole universe; and they
modify the reader’s attitude until he tends to think of any small thing as
like the grandest and most beautiful and most alive things he knows, and
as influenced by them through a direct and genuine continuity.\textsuperscript{17}

This essentially romantic attitude, however, existed alongside a Calvinist
inheritance that pitted spirit against matter and understood nature as ‘a grim Desert’, a
‘huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine’,\textsuperscript{18} and even ‘a frightful Machine of Death’:

everywhere monstrous revolution, inexplicable vortices of movement; a
kingdom of Devouring, of the maddest tyranny; a baleful Immense: the few
light-points disclose but a so much the more appalling Night, and terrors
of all sorts must palsy every observer.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15} Carlyle, Past and Present, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{17} Holloway, The Victorian Sage, pp. 26, 32.
\textsuperscript{18} Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, pp. 130, 133.
\textsuperscript{19} Carlyle, ‘Novalis’, p. 33 (Carlyle is quoting from Novalis’s Lehrlinge zu Sätzen).
Often, these feelings were expressed as criticisms of, or quotations from, other authors, or as attitudes he wished to censure in his own characters. Nevertheless, this sense of the hostility of nature was powerfully expressed, and was partially repeated when Carlyle argued in *Past and Present* that nature was ‘but partially for’ the ‘modern worker’, and would ‘be wholly against him, if he constrain her not’. Thus, though Carlyle intended it as a criticism, there is a sense in which he celebrated the fact that: ‘We war with rude Nature; and, by our restless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils’. Furthermore, while Carlyle invoked ‘wonder’ as an appropriate reaction to natural phenomena, one of the striking features of his work is a sense of awe at the power of technology to ‘master’ nature, to ‘remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway’. His description of his first train journey is a literary equivalent of Turner’s *Rain, Steam and Speed*, a blurred vision of the mechanical sublime. Herbert Sussman has observed that ‘when praised by Carlyle, the machine is no longer inert matter but takes on the qualities of life; it becomes spiritualised’. This was an attitude that allowed Carlyle to find aesthetic pleasure in the industrial landscape as ‘the embodiment of the sacrament of productive labour’. Sussman’s conclusion, that ‘stripped of their spiritual clothing, his attitudes toward mechanisation differ little from the most common Victorian defences of the machine’, highlights, in the context of his ‘organicism’, the duality of Carlyle’s thought. Sussman convincingly argues that: ‘The trope of technology as a victory of the higher reason over the enslaving phenomenal world merely spiritualises the Baconian praise of the technological conquest of nature’. To a certain extent, this duality is assimilated by Morris, and is reflected in his later, socio-ethical critique of work.

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20 See the chapters ‘Sorrows of Teufelsdröckh’ and ‘The Everlasting No’ in *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 119-35.
22 Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, p. 60.
23 Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, p. 60.
Nevertheless, while Carlyle appreciated, even celebrated, the technological subjugation of nature, he shrank from coterminous ‘Signs of the Times’. In this essay, first published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829, Carlyle assumed the mantle of a prophet, and distilled what he believed to be the essence of Victorian society:

> Were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word.\(^2^8\)

What Carlyle objected to was the ‘inward sense’ of mechanisation, rather than the ‘outward’, the ‘habit [which] regulates, not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling’. ‘Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart’, he complained, ‘as well as in hand’. ‘They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind’:

> No Newton, by silent meditation, now discovers the system of the world from the falling of an apple; but some quite other than Newton stands in his Museum, his Scientific Institution, and behind whole batteries of retorts, digesters, and galvanic piles imperatively ‘interrogates Nature’, — who, however, shows no haste to answer.\(^2^9\)

Carlyle was particularly opposed to the application of mechanistic, or rationalistic, patterns to social organisation. He wanted the machine age to be rid of the ‘dismal science’ of Benthamite political economy and to become instead ‘an organic era, informed by the principles of an ethical industrialism’.\(^3^0\) According to Carlyle, *laissez faire* capitalist democracy could not provide the individual with a necessary sense of place and order; ‘institutions and establishments and well-arranged systems of mechanism’ could never be, and had never ‘been the chief source of ... worth or happiness’.\(^3^1\) Arguing that society would only be able to rule ‘the infinitudes of man’s soul ... by checks, and valves, and balances’ when it was possible to ‘drain the Ocean into mill-ponds, and bottle-up the Force of Gravity, to be sold by retail, in

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\(^2^8\) Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, p. 59.
\(^2^9\) Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, pp. 60–3.
\(^3^0\) Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, p. 38.
\(^3^1\) Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, p. 69.
gas-jars',\textsuperscript{32} Carlyle instead used the model of nature—'the complete Statute-Book of Nature', 'the order of Nature', 'her everlasting unerring Laws', 'Nature's regulations'\textsuperscript{33}—as a key term in his criticism of political, economic and social institutions.

Thus Carlyle believed that: 'This deep, paralysed subjection to physical objects comes not from Nature, but from our own unwise mode of viewing nature'.\textsuperscript{34} Neither science or art were 'planted or grafted'; both were rather 'the free gift of Nature' that could only be perceived through non-empirical and intuitive modes.\textsuperscript{35} Following Goethe, he argued 'that there was another way of representing Nature, not separated and disunited, but active and alive, and expanding from the whole into parts'.\textsuperscript{36} He believed that nature decreed: 'We are all bound together, for mutual good or else for mutual misery, as living nerves in the same body'.\textsuperscript{37} Thus as an alternative to the 'juggernaut' of mechanistic society, Carlyle offered the rural community of St. Edmondsbury, attempting to outline a dynamically whole society capable of fostering the 'natural growth' of each individual. E.P. Thompson argued that this vision of twelfth-century community life reconstructed the medieval era

neither as a grotesque nor as a faery world, but as a real community of human beings—an organic pre-capitalist community with values and an art of its own, sharply contrasted with those of Victorian England.\textsuperscript{38}

Thompson appropriately stressed that '[]however much this reconstruction may have been modified by twentieth-century scholars, it was an influence of the very first importance in liberating Morris's mind from the categories of bourgeois thought'.\textsuperscript{39} Morris inherited many of the features of Carlyle's disgust with the Victorian age, including the reduction by capitalism of all human values to cash values, and of society to a state of war disguised as 'fair competition'. Like Carlyle, Morris emphasised that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', p. 70.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Carlyle, Scarrtor Resarius, p. 204; and Past and Present, pp. 137, 158.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', pp. 80–1.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', p. 70.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Carlyle, The Life of Schiller, in Works, vol. XXV, p. 316.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Carlyle to John Carlyle, quoted in Bernard N. Schilling, Human Dignity and the Great Victorians, Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1972, p. 78.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 28.
\end{itemize}
feudal bonds were ‘theoretically at least, personal rights and personal duties’, and
distinguished between ‘true’ society—

of loved and lover, parent and child, friend and friend, the society of well-
wishers, of reasonable people conscious of the aspirations of humanity and
of the duties we owe to it through one another

—and a ‘false’ society held together by property relations and laws.\(^{40}\) Carlyle’s model
of St. Edmondshbury enabled Morris to imagine stable societies in which the cash-nexus
was replaced with non-hierarchical forms of community. Although Carlyle would
eventually advocate greater social control, order is not an end in itself in \textit{Past and
Present} but a means of developing an ethical society complete with discipline and self-
sacrifice. Thus although Carlyle’s final authoritarian position was very different to the
one Morris adopted and reworked, these eventual differences do not disguise their
common emphasis on the interdependence of all living things, the fact that life ‘is all a
tree, circulation of sap and influences, mutual communication of every minutest leaf
with the lowest talon of a root, with every other greatest and minutest portion of the
whole’.\(^{41}\)

The crucial nexus upon which Carlyle, and subsequently Morris, focused was
the relationships formed in the process of work. In \textit{Past and Present} Carlyle argued
that work was about ‘communication with Nature’. Claiming that there was ‘a
perennial nobleness, and even sacredness in Work’, he stressed over and over that ‘the
real desire to get Work done will itself lead one more and more to truth, to Nature’s
appointments and regulation, which are truth’. In later years Morris would frequently
rephrase Carlyle’s eulogy:

Blessed is he who has found his work... He has a work, a life-purpose; he
has found it, and will follow it! How, as a free-flowing channel, dug and
torn by noble force through the sour mud-swamp of one’s existence, like
an ever-deepening river there, it runs and flows;—draining-off the sour
festering water, gradually from the root of the remotest grass-blade;
making, instead of pestilential swamp, a green fruitful meadow with its
clear-flowing stream... Labour is Life... The knowledge that will hold

\(^{40}\) Morris, ‘True and False Society’, in \textit{Lectures on Socialism}, p. 237. See also the articles published
\(^{41}\) Carlyle, quoted in Schilling, \textit{Human Dignity and the Great Victorians}, p. 88.
good in working, cleave thou to that; for Nature herself accredits that, says
Yea to that.\footnote{42}

Again, this issue was couched in terms that juxtaposed natural and unnatural modes of existence. In *Chartism* (1840) Carlyle asked whether the rural labourer's England was 'a green flowery world, with azure everlasting sky stretched over it . . . or a murky-simmering Tophet, of copperas-fumes, cotton fuzz, gin-riot, wrath and toil'.\footnote{43} Carlyle worried about the loss of self-reliance experienced by workers through their submergence in a large organisation and their dependence on machinery. His main concern, however, was not the alienated position of the worker, but how mechanisation could be controlled and how the ethical values 'inherent to industrialism could be enhanced and developed. Carlyle's belief in work as a duty, and his ability to find nobility even in industrial toil, led him to perceive mechanised work as a 'binding spiritual purpose' for the nineteenth century, similar to the religious faith of the twelfth century. As Sussman has argued, Carlyle's monastic motto *Labore est orare* was to operate in the factory as well.\footnote{44}

In many respects, Morris assimilated Carlyle's emphasis on the value of labour. In his lectures on art and socialism, Morris discussed work as the most crucial facet or expression of life. Like Carlyle, he believed that 'Nature compels us to work', that '[w]ealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use'.\footnote{45} Morris's qualifying 'reasonable', however, indicates his departure and ultimate distance from Carlyle. Whereas for Carlyle all work was worship, Morris distinguished between 'useful work' and 'useless toil'. According to Morris, all work should be sensuous, pleasurable and creative, and have an inherent sense of connection to the natural world. Morris reasoned that if this pleasure and connection were lost, if the ethical value of work was no longer self-evident, it could do little to create a humane industrialised society. Thus, while Carlyle celebrated the power and potential of technology, Morris objected to its capitalist

\footnote{43} Carlyle, 'Chartism', in *Works*, vol. XXIX, p. 144.
\footnote{45} Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', p. 103.
usage, its thwarting of ‘natural energies’ and its ‘psychic destructiveness’. What Morris borrowed from Carlyle, even though he was more interested in halting the division of labour than eliminating machinery, was the use of machines as destructive symbol; mechanism corrupts what should be an organically unified process of creation:

Whereas under the eighteenth-century division of labour system, a man was compelled to work for ever at a trifling piece of work in a base mechanical way, which, also, in that base way he understood, under the system of the factory and almost automatic machine under which we now live, he may change his work often enough, may be shifted from machine to machine, and scarcely know that he is producing anything at all: in other words, under the eighteenth-century system he was reduced to a machine; under that of the present day he is the slave to a machine.47

Morris believed that, above all else, machine work must be made satisfying for the worker.

This concern would eventually move Morris to call for improvements in the working environment, including increased access to the remedial and inspirational effects of nature. To some extent, this call was also anticipated by Carlyle, who asked for ‘a hundred acres or so of free greenfield, with trees on it’ for ‘[e]very toiling Manchester’.48 In Past and Present St. Edmondsbury, ‘looking out right pleasantly, from its hill-slope, towards the rising Sun’,49 stood as a rebuke to ‘dingy Manufacturing Towns’ that should be ordered ‘to cease from their soot and darkness; to let in the blessed sunlight, the blue of Heaven, and become clear and clean’.50 Moreover both Morris and Carlyle were angered by the pollution of England’s rivers, the contamination of the air by industrial waste and the destruction of ‘noble Forests’.51 Nevertheless, Carlyle’s solutions for the ‘little Isle ... grown too narrow

46 Sussman uses these terms in his excellent discussion of Morris’s response to technology. Though I do not think that ‘the desire to find for the machine its proper function’ was ‘the central theme of his career, in his designing as in his writing’ (my emphasis), Sussman’s analysis is, nevertheless, appropriate. See, especially, pp. 110–1, 130–1, 134 in his Victorians and the Machine.
48 Carlyle, Past and Present, p. 265.
49 Carlyle, Past and Present, p. 46.
50 Carlyle (Past and Present, p. 265) suggested that ‘[h]aths, free air, a wholesome temperature, ceilings twenty feet high, might be ordained, by Act of Parliament, in all establishments licensed as Mills’.
51 See, for example, Carlyle’s lament for the ‘sorrowful waste of noble wood and umbrage’ in Past and Present, pp. 98–9.
for us', bear little resemblance to those Morris eventually sought to effect. While Carlyle advocated emigration as a remedy for overpopulation and unemployment, Morris explicitly rejected this option and chose rather to attack what he saw as the root of repressed life in a mechanised society. Thus Morris utilised but moved on from Carlyle by attacking the idea of work as duty: freeing nature, work and even the machine to become a means of possible psychic richness.

When Morris read J.A. Froude's study of Carlyle in 1882, however, he was moved to concede: 'I fare to feel as if he were on the right side in spite of all faults'. Though he scorned the 'outrageous blues' in his later works, when the 'sage' died he felt 'a kind of a miss of him'. Works like *Past and Present* and *Sartor Resartus* acknowledged loss, isolation, indifference and destruction, but had striven to rekindle optimism and faith. This was a major part of their significance for Morris. Later in life, Morris was able to draw on such analyses in order to move beyond the experience of a universe 'void of Life, Purpose, of Volition', and experience the 'organic filaments' perceived and expressed by Teufelsdröckh: 'Yes, truly, if Nature is one, and a living indivisible whole, much more is Mankind, the Image that reflects and creates Nature, without which Nature were not'. Thus, even though Carlyle affirmed nature's 'readability', his insistence on the divinity of nature was frequently not so much an endorsement of the Christian dispensation, as a refusal of self-sufficient naturalism. Furthermore, as Joseph Beach has argued, Carlyle's work furnished a screen behind which the scattered forces of naturalism might reassemble; it satisfied the demands for religious sentiment at the same time as it sapped the foundations of religious dogma ... [it] helped to 'ease a severe transition'—to make possible the passage from a supernatural to a natural view of the world.

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53 See, for example, pamphlets published by the Socialist League such as 'Why be “transported”?' (n.d.), and 'Are we over-populated?' (1890), in William Morris, Part 3 of the Archives of the Socialist League 1884–91 (hereafter referred to as Socialist League Archives), Research Publications, Reading, 1989, microfilm, L. 3343, 3347.
57 Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, p. 133.
In Carlyle’s work, nature remained ‘ever a frightful Machine of Death’, but, even when reduced to ‘dead, hostile Matter’, it could be restored by the moral faculty of ‘man’.60 To a certain extent, therefore, Morris’s ‘social-natural’ forces uniting past, present and future in works such as *A Dream of John Ball*, are developed with the help of Carlyle.61

E.P. Thompson has stated that it was from the vantage point of Carlyle’s reconstructed medieval era that Morris first assessed his own age.62 In this regard, Morris joined and eventually extended a tradition of idealising and ‘naturalising’ England’s medieval landscape. Nevertheless, while reverence was one dimension of Carlyle’s attitude to nature, the dualistic element in his thought also constructed it as matter to be mastered. By opposing spirit to matter (and privileging spirit) Carlyle set up a dialectic of progress over nature in an attempt to reconcile mechanisation with transcendentalism. Morris would eventually reject and reassess much of this thought, but there is an extent to which we might consider that this privileging of humanity over nature prepared him for Marx. Certainly his reading of Carlyle’s work left him with a group of foundational values from which he could launch his own attack against the age. In 1893 he recalled:

> Before the uprising of modern Socialism almost all intelligent people either were, or professed themselves to be, quite contented with the civilization of this century... To be short, this was the Whig frame of mind, natural to the modern prosperous middle-class men, who, in fact, as far as mechanical progress is concerned, have nothing to ask for... But besides these contented ones there were others who were not really contented, but had a vague sentiment of repulsion to the triumph of civilization, but were coerced into silence by the measureless power of Whiggery. Lastly, there were a few who were in open rebellion against the said Whiggery—a few, say two, Carlyle and Ruskin.63

60 Beach, *The Concept of Nature*, p. 304.
62 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 27.
In an age against nature, Morris considered himself on the side of Carlyle and nature in rebellion against this world.
3. The nature of beauty and truth

In notes made later in life, Morris's friend Burne-Jones indicated that both he and Morris were deeply affected by the physical beauty of Oxford:

It was a different Oxford in those days... On all sides, except where it touched the railway, the city ended abruptly, as if a wall had been about it, and you came suddenly upon the meadows. There was little brick in the city, it was either grey with stone or yellow with the wash of the pebble-dash in the poorer streets. It was an endless delight to us to wander about the streets, where were still many old houses with wood carving and a little sculpture here and there. The Chapel of Merton College had been lately renovated by Butterfield... Many an afternoon we spent in that chapel. Indeed I think the buildings of Merton and the Cloisters of New College were our chief shrines in Oxford.¹

Other 'shrines' included the countryside around Oxford, and villages such as those inhabited by their fencing instructor, Mr. MacLaren.² For Morris, at least, these explorations were of a different nature than those undertaken as a child. In and around Oxford, Morris discovered new ways of seeing and understanding the beauty of the natural world. During his university years he was introduced to an ethical aesthetic that developed his fledgling emotional responses to the natural world into moral and intellectual convictions. The arena for much of this development was the world of art, but the ramifications went far beyond the achievement of a new aesthetic.

Ruskin, more than any other, was the source and inspiration of Morris's and Burne-Jones's mature culture of nature. He equipped the Oxford undergraduates with a preliminary understanding of the conditions and consequences of the human place in nature, and the organic relationship of art, nature and society. Morris frequently acknowledged the influence of Ruskin, who was held in high regard by many of his friends at Oxford. One of those friends recalled:

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² Georgiana Burne-Jones noted that MacLaren's 'home at Summertown, then a small village separated by a stretch of country road from Oxford, was a sanctuary seldom opened to the outer world' and described it as a 'low white house with its rose-covered veranda and a garden like a small Paradise shut in with white walls' (Memorials, vol. I, pp. 80–1).
It was when the Exeter men, Burne-Jones and he [Morris], got at Ruskin, that strong direction was given to a true vocation—The Seven Lamps, Modern Painters, and The Stones of Venice ... we soon saw the greatness and importance of it. Morris would often read Ruskin aloud. He had a mighty singing voice, and chanted rather than read those weltering oceans of eloquence... The description of the 'Slave Ship' or of Turner's skies, with the burden, 'Has Claude given this?' was declaimed by him in a manner that made them seem as if they had been written for no end but that he should hurl them in thunder on the head of the base criminal who had never seen what Turner saw in the sky.3

Acknowledging his debt, nearly forty years later Morris printed 'The Nature of Gothic' at the Kelmscott Press. In the preface he stated that this chapter of The Stones of Venice had been 'one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century', and 'seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel'.4

So many and various were the strains and tensions within Ruskin's work, however, that it is not easy to map this road. And perhaps we would miss the significance of Ruskin, and Morris, if we were to attempt to reduce their critique to one clear socio-aesthetic project. Instead it is necessary to be aware of a similar aesthetic impulse and sympathy, a continuum of ethical concern that resonated through their perception and recreation of nature. In this way we can begin to establish how Morris assimilated the meaning and form, the social and artistic consequences, of Ruskin's view of the natural world.

Ruskin's idea of nature has been described as a 'middle-class Victorian compromise between romantic aesthetics and classical-medieval Christian hermeneutics'.5 Ruskin proclaimed the sanctity both of nature as the revelation of God, and of 'man' as the interpreter of God in nature. This dual perception, that nature had meaning both in and outside itself, resulted in the identification of nature with both beauty and truth. Thus, although Ruskin realised that 'reading' nature was more often reading into nature,6 he still argued that it was necessary to 'commune' with nature, to study its immanent divinity in clouds, leaves and pebbles.7 It was this

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5 Todorov, Theories of the Symbol, pp. 161–4.
earlier position, and not his later perception of the ‘failure of nature’, that was the greatest influence on Morris. Of principal importance was the idea that the ethics and aesthetics of nature were not separable. Thus, while Ruskin believed it was the duty of the artist to glorify God’s creation by revealing aspects of divine beauty and truth, an equally fundamental element of his understanding of nature was the idea of ‘human choice in what is morally derived from the environment’ (my emphasis).

Yet although Ruskin’s ‘discourse of natural beauty’ was often complex and contradictory, it is possible to apprehend how his natural aesthetic affected Morris, both as a youth at Oxford and throughout his life. Very generally, one can see how the kinds of landscape Ruskin championed were those Morris came to value. Thus, although Ruskin was a great admirer of the mountains, his eventual emphasis on the social and moral rectitude of the inhabited landscape, is reflected in Morris’s work. Both praised the landscape around the ‘Valley of the Lune at Kirkby’: Ruskin as ‘one of the loveliest scenes in England’, and Morris as ‘the pick of all England for beauty’.

Ruskin’s work helped Morris to appreciate the apparent harmony of human and natural life in this valley, or rather human life as part of nature: ‘the gentle upland, browned by the bending furrows of the plough, and the fresh sweep of the chalk down, and the narrow winding of the copse-clad dingle’. In particular, Morris’s reading of Ruskin reinforced his sympathy for northern European, ‘Gothic’ landscapes. In a poem written during his years at Oxford, ‘The Dedication of the Temple’, there are distinct echoes of Ruskin’s comparison of north and south in the recently published Stones of Venice. As Boos has argued, ‘the landscape descriptions—hills, flowers, trees, shadows, waves—echo those of the other juvenilia’, but they also evince a Ruskinian passion for the ‘nature of Gothic’:

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8 For Ruskin’s sense that nature had failed, a view he expressed throughout the 1860s, see Fuller, Theoria, pp. 113–29.
10 ‘The Discourse of Natural Beauty’ is the title of Keith Hanley’s essay on Ruskin’s historically determined view of the physical environment; in Ruskin and Environment, pp. 10–37.

192
I cannot love thee South, for all thy sun,  
For all thy scarlet flowers or thy palms;  
But in the north for ever dwells my heart.  
The north with all its human sympathies,  
The glorious north, where all amidst the sleet  
Warm hearts do dwell, warm hearts sing out with joy.  
The north that ever loves the poet well,  
The north where in the spring the primrose lies  
So thick amongst the moss and hazel roots;  
The North, where all the purple clouds do course  
From out the north-west making green the trees;  
Shout for the North, O! brothers shout with me,  
Pray for the North, O brothers pray with me.  

Still, if clouds, moss and trees were a means of revealing the truths of God, then the artist’s task was to perceive the ways in which these natural forms ‘composed’ themselves, by finer laws than any known of men’. Ruskin adjured:

go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remembering her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.

He emphasised a Wordsworthian ‘passive attention’ to the details of nature, and his fascination with form and colour, often expressed in vivid and effusive prose, had a lasting effect upon Morris. Ruskin spoke of ‘the sacredness of colour, and its necessary connection with all pure and noble feeling’. Thus when Morris visited the recently renovated chapel of Merton College, he looked with Ruskinian admiration upon the newly painted roof executed by Hungerford Pollen. Nevertheless, though Ruskin emphasised the importance of such study, and considered that ‘[e]very class of rock, earth and cloud must be known by the painter with geologic and meteorologic accuracy’, he was not a champion of the kind of naturalism with which we would be

15 Boox, Juvenilia, p. 21.  
17 Fuller, Theorica, pp. 10–11.  
20 See Mackail, Life, vol. I, p. 40. At that time, as Mackail noted, the application of colour to architecture in this way was considered a ‘startling novelty’.
familiar today. In ‘The Lamp of Beauty’ Ruskin wrote that ‘forms are not beautiful because they are copied from Nature; only it is out of the power of man to conceive beauty without her aid’. Ruskin considered nature essential to the inception of art and Morris developed this view in his own ‘conventionalisation’ of the shapes and patterns of natural forms.

Ruskin explained how the artist’s observation of the composition of natural forms should be applied through his critique of architecture (a broad category under which he subsumed all the decorative arts), and it was Ruskin’s discussion of architectural form that most profoundly influenced Morris. As with art in general, Ruskin believed that architectural form should be inspired by the handiwork of the supreme artist and follow the shapes of nature. His defence of ‘Gothic’ was based upon his observation that if one gathered ‘a branch from any of the trees or flowers to which the earth owes its principal beauty’, one would ‘find that every one of its leaves is terminated, more or less, in the form of the pointed arch’. Thus Ruskin wrote ‘Of [the] Truth of Vegetation’, and of the importance to ornamentation of the organisation and form of foliage. He particularly admired the Gothic churches and palaces of Verona and Venice because their window lights, traceries and trefoils followed the sinuous curves of foliage and other natural forms. Believing nature to be neither inert nor external to human endeavour, he demanded that it be included in any concept of living space. Thus he argued:

We are forced ... to live in cities; but such advantage as we have in association with each other is in great part counterbalanced by our loss of fellowship with Nature... Then the function of our architecture is, as far as may be, to replace these; to tell us about Nature; to possess us with memories of her quietness; to be solemn and full of tenderness, like her, and rich in portraiture of her; full of delicate imagery of the flowers we

21 Fuller (Theoria, pp. 29–30) observes that Ruskin’s defence of Turner was not couched in terms that we would understand as ‘naturalist’. ‘In a wildly magnificent enthusiasm’, Ruskin wrote, ‘[Turner] rushes through the astral dominions of the world of his own mind,—a place inhabited by the spirits of things’ (quoted pp. 29–30).
23 See Chapter 3 of Section III below.
24 Ruskin, Lectures on Architecture and Painting, p. 25.
can no more gather, and of the living creatures now far away from us in their own solitude.  

Ruskin believed that the nearest humans had come to representing the ‘true’ relationship of art, nature and society had been in the European medieval era that had produced Gothic architecture. In Chapter IV of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin delineated ‘The Nature of Gothic’, for Morris, as mentioned above, one of the ‘necessary and inevitable utterances of the century’. One of the chief characteristics of Gothic which Ruskin emphasised in this chapter was ‘the love of natural objects for their own sake, and the effort to represent them frankly, unconstrained by artistical laws’.  

For Ruskin, the Gothic style was most importantly ‘an expression of the felt religion of its sculptor’, who carefully watched ‘the wandering of the tendril, and the budding of the flower’. ‘Savage’, ‘changeful’, ‘natural’, ‘grotesque’, ‘rigid’ and ‘redundant’, Gothic style also marked different ‘means and habits of life’:

The affectionate observation of the grace and outward character of vegetation is the sure sign of a more tranquil and gentle existence, sustained by the gifts, and gladdened by the splendour, of the earth. In that careful distinction of species, and richness of delicate and undisturbed organisation, which characterise the Gothic design, there is the history of rural and thoughtful life, influenced by habitual tenderness, and devoted to subtle inquiry...

Thus Ruskin’s critique not only suggested the sense of growth and life important to aesthetic production, but also the organisation and connection of human life in an ‘organic’ society.

The initial results of Morris’s reading of ‘The Nature of Gothic’ appear to have been more aesthetic than social, with Morris paying particular attention to the graduation from nature to architecture. In their cloistered ‘shrine’ at New College, Morris and Burne-Jones studied the foliated Gothic forms, ‘the radiated leaves of

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28 Sussman, *Victorians and the Machine*, p. 84.
vegetation’, in the tracery of the fourteenth-century arches (see figs. xii–xiii). The companionship of Burne-Jones, already moving away from theological and towards artistic studies, was also significant. Mackail wrote that Burne-Jones spent ‘whole days in Bagley Wood making minute and elaborate studies of flower and foliage’, while Morris ‘was constantly drawing windows, arches, and gables in his books’ and ‘half unconscious scribble[s] of floriated ornament’ in his letters.

Of particular significance at this time was their tour of the churches of northern France, following very much in the footsteps of Ruskin. Morris calculated that on this journey, undertaken in 1855, they visited nine cathedrals and twenty-four churches, including Amiens, Beauvais, Chartres, and Rouen. Indeed the ‘disciples’ of Gothic were so impressed by the beauty of medieval art and architecture that at the end of their trip Burne-Jones resolved to dedicate his life to art, and Morris decided to become an architect. The impression made by this tour is reflected in some of the stories and essays subsequently produced for The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, including the particularly Ruskinian ‘Shadows of Amiens’ (1856). Other fictional accounts provide striking images of Gothic churches rising from up from the surrounding landscape. In ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’ (1856), Morris wrote:

The Abbey where we built the Church was not girt by stone walls, but by a circle of poplar trees, and whenever a wind passed over them ... it set them all a-ripple; and when the wind was high, they bowed and swayed very low, and the wind, as it lifted the leaves, and showed their silvery white sides ... kept on changing the trees from green to white, and white to green; moreover, through the boughs and trunks of the poplars we caught glimpses of the great golden corn sea, waving, waving, waving for leagues and leagues; and among the corn grew burning scarlet poppies, and blue corn-flowers; and the corn-flowers were so blue, that they gleamed, and seemed to burn with a steady light, as they grew beside the poppies among the gold of the wheat. Through the corn sea ran a blue river, & always green meadows and lines of tall poplars followed its windings.

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34 Morris, ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, in CW, vol. I, p. 150. MacCarthy (A Life for Our Time, p. 93) has suggested that the influence of this visit to northern France, and of Ruskin, can also be read in the description of churches in stories such as ‘Gertha’s Lovers’ (1856), and even the much later Well at the World’s End.
Fig. xii
'The Nature of Gothic': Ruskin's 'radiated leaves of vegetation'; and an 1848 study for Gothic window tracery.

Fig. xiii
The fourteenth-century cloisters of New College: one of Morris and Burne-Jones's Ruskinian-Gothic 'shrines' at Oxford.
MacCarthy argues that the emphasis on the place of 'buildings in the landscape' in these pieces shows Morris 'breaking free from Ruskin's influence'.\textsuperscript{35} And, perhaps, Morris's expansive 'looking out' over landscape (rather than 'concentrating in') does indicate a change in emphasis of what is signified by nature.\textsuperscript{36} They are still, however, observations derived from, and based within, a fundamentally Ruskinian concern with organicism.

Another important element of Ruskin's organicism was the emphasis he placed on 'the impression it receives from human power'.\textsuperscript{37} Ruskin defined art as 'human labour regulated by human design',\textsuperscript{38} stating that the ability to design was a product of general culture and traditional skill, 'the felicitous fulfilment of function in living things'.\textsuperscript{39} Later in life, Morris believed that this was the most fundamental lesson in 'The Nature of Gothic',

that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life, and that the social life of the Middle Ages allowed the workman freedom of individual expression, which on the other hand our social life forbids him.\textsuperscript{40}

This assertion was anticipated in some of his university writings, where he referred to the building of cathedrals by a whole community. In 'The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens' Morris prefaced his consideration of the architecture itself by considering 'the upraising of the great Cathedral front, with its beating heart of the thoughts of men wrought into the leaves and flowers of the fair earth';\textsuperscript{41} while in 'The Story of the Unknown Church', the 'master-mason' recalls the sense of community felt

\textsuperscript{35} MacCarthy, \textit{A Life for Our Time}, pp. 84-5.
\textsuperscript{36} See, for example, Morris's rhapsodic letter to Cornell Price (10 August 1855, in \textit{Letters}, vol. I, p. 20) in which he describes 'the graceful poplars and aspens, of all kinds; and the hedgeless fields of grain, and beautiful herbs that they grow for forage ... the most beautiful fields I ever saw yet, looking as if they belonged to no man, as if they were planted not to be cut down in the end'. The passage goes on to encompass 'the flowers, purple thistles, and blue corn-flowers, and red poppies, growing together with the corn round the roots of the fruit trees, in their shadows, and sweeping up to the brows of the long low hills till they reached the sky, changing sometimes into long fields of violets, or delicate lush green forage; and they all looked as they would grow there for ever, as if they had always grown there, without change of seasons, knowing no other time than the early August'.
\textsuperscript{37} Ruskin, \textit{The Seven Lamps of Architecture}, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{38} Ruskin, \textit{Lectures on Art}, in \textit{Works}, vol. XX, p. 165.
\textsuperscript{39} Ruskin, \textit{Modern Painters}, vol. II, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{40} Morris, 'Preface to The Nature of Gothic by John Ruskin', p. 292.
by the carvers, and his own enjoyment of working with his sister on the west front of the building.\footnote{Morris, ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, pp. 149, 152.} Thus we can see Morris adopting, even at this early stage, Ruskin’s emphasis on ‘the right kind of labour’, and the idea that each human being possesses an innate creative power. ‘What is meant by art’, Morris eventually argued in ‘The Beauty of Life’, ‘is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life, if we are to live as nature meant us to’.\footnote{Morris, ‘The Beauty of Life’, p. 53.} Substituting nature for God, Morris eventually broadened Ruskin’s formulation that art must follow nature by insisting more fully that art is the expression of nature through the individuality of a human producer. Nevertheless, his contention that individual expression, or ‘rudeness’, reflected the artist’s pleasure in labour, and therefore his or her humanity, was a substantially Ruskinian distinction.\footnote{One of Morris’s most erudite expressions of this belief was in a lecture delivered at Oxford in 1883 with Ruskin in the chair. See Morris, ‘Art under Plutocracy’, pp. 164–91.} Ultimately it would lead Morris to imagine a working environment that fostered such pleasurable labour. In some respects, his establishment of the Merton Abbey workshop along the banks of the River Wandle in 1881 can be seen as in a fundamentally Ruskinian venture.\footnote{See ‘John Ruskin and the Ethical Foundations of Morris & Company’, in Charles Harvey and Jon Press, Art, Enterprise and Ethics: The Life and Work of William Morris, Frank Cass, London, 1996, pp. 194–217. See also Chapter 1 of Section IV below.}

Another outcome of Morris’s attention to Ruskin’s discussion of work was the development of a sense of the socio-aesthetic limitations of machine production. Ruskin proclaimed that ‘[n]o machine yet contrived, or hereafter contrivable, will ever equal the fine machinery of the human fingers’.\footnote{Ruskin, The Two Paths, in Works, vol. XVI, p. 295.} He believed that the machine was incapable of reproducing the irregularity and variety of the ever varying forms of nature; arguing that ‘[n]ature is never mechanical in her arrangements; she never allows two members of a composition exactly to correspond’.\footnote{Ruskin, ‘Whether Works of Art may, with Propriety, be combined with the Sublimity of Nature…’, in Early Prose Writings, in Works, vol. I, p. 256.} Thus he rejected geometrical forms, not only because their production suppressed the imaginative power of the worker, but also because they were not ‘true’ to nature. He argued that
‘evidence of active intellect in choice and arrangement’ was an ‘essential’ feature of art, and that this would ‘be replaceable by no mechanism’. ⁴⁸

Morris’s attitude to mechanical production would eventually develop beyond Ruskin’s rejection into an appreciation of its power to relieve the worker from physically arduous or mentally unrewarding work. Nevertheless, throughout his life, Morris maintained that if the aim of art was to increase the happiness of the people, and if all things made should be symbolic of joyful work, then the contemporary ubiquity of machine production made such ideals impossible. ⁴⁹ He argued that commercialisation and standardisation, whether in the factory or the studio, had entailed the destruction of human individuality and of nature. Moreover, his early artistic venture, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., placed a great deal of emphasis on the fact that ‘Fine Art Workmen’ would produce ‘work of a genuine and beautiful character’ ⁵⁰ executed ‘in the best and most workmanlike manner’. ⁵¹ Eventually, however, Morris came to believe that it was the system of production for profit which produced shoddy goods and miserable lives, a conviction also fostered by Ruskin. In his 1892 preface to ‘The Nature of Gothic’ Morris stated that it was Ruskin who had convinced him that the conditions of modern production resulted in neither a just nor a beautiful world, leading him to question the benefit of a ‘mechanical victory over nature’ when humanity was ‘starving amidst of it’. ⁵² Morris was also affected by some of Ruskin’s ‘solutions’ to the problems of modern commercial and industrial society. In News From Nowhere, Morris’s locks and ‘force barges’ on the Thames recall Ruskin’s proposition that ‘[a]ll machinery needful in modern life to supplement human or animal labour may be moved by wind or water’. ⁵³

Ruskin’s objection to technology formed part of a more general attack on scientific culture. Again, this was not a uncomplicated or merely dismissive attack. Modern Painters can be read as a valiant struggle to reconcile scientific consciousness

⁴⁸ Ruskin, Lectures on Art, p. 165.
⁵¹ Morris to Frederick R. Leach, late June 1866, in Letters, vol. I, p. 44.
⁵² Morris, Preface to the Nature of Gothic by John Ruskin, p. 293.
and fidelity to ‘fact’, with the ‘individual vision and mystery’ of art.\textsuperscript{54} Furthermore, though it attempted to thwart the new ‘sciences’ of the Victorian age, particularly the ‘dismal science’ of economics, it can also be argued that Ruskin’s work represented a heroic attempt to sustain the moral order implicit in the child’s and in pre-capitalist conceptions of human relations with the land and nature against the economic order of industrial capitalism while deploying in his favour the findings of a science that for the most part were being used to legitimate that order.\textsuperscript{55}

Perhaps of greatest influence on Morris was Ruskin’s provision of ‘a science against sciences’, which had as its end ‘neither man’s intellectual dominance over the natural world nor his own submission to the dominance of natural law’ but ‘a “virtuous relation” between equals’.\textsuperscript{56} Ruskin’s rejection of the atomistic physics of Newton, and his advice to scientists to temper their activities by ‘love of beauty and ... tenderness of emotion’, to work in the belief that it was natural for humanity to live in harmony with nature,\textsuperscript{57} made Morris understand that science needed ‘humility to temper the insolence of her triumph which has taught us everything except how to be happy’.\textsuperscript{58}

This criticism of the methodology of science was itself related to the wider issue of the use of the intellect in social life. Ruskin held that atomistic thinkers falsely applied the machine metaphor to organic processes, believing that it was the forces of the intellect and the city which were destroying morality and nature.\textsuperscript{59} His own historical analysis pointed to capitalist industrialism as one facet of this reductive reasoning, an element that had destroyed the convictions, talents and values of the culture of Gothic:

\textsuperscript{54} Thus House (‘Man and Nature’, p. 226) argued that ‘its concern with Locke’s theory of primary and secondary qualities, with the theory of light, with the structure of clouds and so on marks an attempt to incorporate within the world of Nature with which the artist deals the world of Nature with which the scientist deals’.
\textsuperscript{55} Cosgrove, \textit{Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape}, p. 252.
\textsuperscript{58} Morris, ‘Preface to \textit{The Nature of Gothic}’, p. 293.
and fidelity to ‘fact’, with the ‘individual vision and mystery’ of art. Furthermore, though it attempted to thwart the new ‘sciences’ of the Victorian age, particularly the ‘dismal science’ of economics, it can also be argued that Ruskin’s work represented a heroic attempt to sustain the moral order implicit in the child’s and in pre-capitalist conceptions of human relations with the land and nature against the economic order of industrial capitalism while deploying in his favour the findings of a science that for the most part were being used to legitimate that order.

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55 Creagh, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, p. 252.


And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this—that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel, and refine sugar, and shape pottery, but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine or to form a single living spirit, never enters into our estimate of advantages.  

Thus Ruskin arrived at his unique contribution to social analysis: the transformation of the common nineteenth-century understanding of machine work as unnatural into the assertion that it is immoral.  

Society had to establish, he argued, 'a right understanding on the part of all classes ... of what kinds of labour are good for men, raising them, and making them happy'.  

Firmly convinced that there was a link between the laws of nature and of ethical conduct, he believed in the possibility of establishing justice through a fusion of natural and human order.  

Ruskin became increasingly convinced that harmony between humanity and nature had become impossible in nineteenth-century society because people were not free to work 'naturally'. Thus he developed a critique of political economy, founded on opposition to the idea that harmony or value could be found in the market, and stressing the expression through labour of human free will.

By attacking the 'mechanistic' philosophies of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, and by underlining the distinction between these and the 'organic' values of medieval society, Ruskin also shaped Morris's later political development. Though made explicit only in later work, and thus not available to Morris at Oxford, much of Ruskin's socio-political critique was implicit in his earlier discussions of the relationship between art, labour and society. On the one hand, these works led Morris to a truly radical estimation of what was worth having in life. They emphasised that true wealth derived only from the natural, or the organic: 'THERE IS', Ruskin

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59 See Sussman, Victorians and the Machine, p. 87; and also Williams, The Country and the City, pp. 142-52.  
61 Sussman, Victorians and the Machine, p. 84.  
63 See Spear, Dreams of an English Eden, pp. 41-2. As Spear observes, Ruskin's early reading of Pope and Wordsworth led him to posit a harmony between conduct and nature, encouraging him to find correspondences to emotional and moral states in landscape. Deeply concerned with the moral effects of the visual environment, Ruskin's 'tendency to equate inner states with the landscape' can be seen as a romantic version of the 'ancient correspondence' believed to exist 'between the individual microcosm, its collective extension (society), and the macrocosm' (p. 41).
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emphatically claimed, ‘NO WEALTH BUT LIFE’. What Ruskin meant by life in this equation was meaningful labour and the enjoyment of the natural world, which, as Sussman has pointed out, were ‘just those simple sensual delights no longer possible in a blackened countryside’. Thus, although Morris did not believe with Ruskin that the solution to nineteenth-century social ills lay in an immediate return to the land, the older writer’s call for pre-industrial, ‘Arcadian simplicity’ and self-sufficiency was echoed in Morris’s vision of a truly healthy and wealthy England. Ruskin pointed to ‘the true ideal of a full and reasonable life’.

Yet more than anything else he read in Ruskin, Morris responded to the emphasis he found in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ upon art as the creation of the worker and the expression of an entire social order; in other words, to Ruskin’s damning, humanist critique of a society that could no longer produce ‘Gothic’. Indeed Ruskin’s delineation of the way fragmentary labour was produced, and his advocacy of an alternative organic society, was the basis of much criticism of industrial capitalism, and of the limitations of middle-class liberalism. In ‘The Nature of Gothic’ Ruskin stressed interrelation and interdependence—‘wholeness’—as the principal element lacking in a divisive, segmented world:

We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilised invention of the division of labour; only we have given it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men:—Divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life...

It is verily this degradation of the operative into a machine, which, more than any other evil of the times, is leading the mass of the nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves.

Thus Williams argued that Ruskin’s analysis and critique, and the idea of an organic society were

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64 Ruskin, Unto This Last, in Works, vol. XVII, p. 105.
65 Sussman, Victorians and the Machine, pp. 89–90.
68 Williams, Culture and Society, pp. 139–41.
an essential preparation for socialist theory, and for the more general
time to a ‘whole way of life’, in opposition to theories which
continuously reduce social to individual questions, and which support
legislation of an individualist as opposed to a collectivist kind.70

One can argue, therefore, that Morris’s understanding of Ruskin facilitated and
directed his reading of Marx. Jack Lindsay observed that it was because of this
grounding in Ruskin that Morris was

one of the few Marxists who have understood, as Marx did, that in
political economy we deal not only with forces outside men’s control—the
exploiting side of production, in which alienation and reification are
concentrated—but also with the very life process of men, in which what is
produced and reproduced is not merely commodities, but is men
themselves and nature.71

Back in Oxford in 1883, with Ruskin also on the platform, Morris expressed this
continuity, moving from art to labour to society. Arguing that art should be applied to
‘all the externals of life’, Morris defined art as ‘man’s expression of his joy in labour’
and acknowledged his mentor: ‘If those are not Professor Ruskin’s words they embody
at least his teaching on this subject’.72 In this talk Morris passionately condemned the
‘love of dirt and ugliness’ spreading ‘all over the country’, and proceeded to pour
scorn on the ‘present system of society’ and its ‘great commercial cities mere masses
of sordidness, filth and squalor, embroidered with patches of pompous and vulgar
hideousness, no less revolting to the eye and the mind when one knows what it means’:

not only are the minds of great artists narrowed and their sympathies
frozen by their isolation, not only has co-operative art come to a standstill,
but the very food on which both the greater and the lesser art subsists is
being destroyed; the well of art is poisoned at its spring.71

It was at this lecture that Morris announced, ‘I am “one of the people called
Socialists”’, and moved, with a Ruskinian anger (though perhaps with greater
perspicacity), to a violent denunciation of competitive commerce, describing it as the

70 Williams, Culture and Society, p. 139.
71 Lindsay, Life and Works, p. 310.
'mask that lies before the ruined cornfield and the burning cottage, the mangled bodies, the untimely death of worthy men, the desolated home'. 74

Ruined cornfields, burning cottages, and the idea of art 'poisoned at its spring', are all linked in this lecture because of Morris's 'thinking with' Ruskin. Morris's concern regarding the destruction of the natural and more apparently human or historical environment can also be traced back to his reading of works such as Modern Painters. Keith Hanley has written that Ruskin wanted 'the holy wells of natural beauty to form the basis of an alternative national culture', and that works such as The Seven Lamps of Architecture 'echoed the great Burkean image of the country, in both senses, as a national inheritance'. 75 Certainly it is through Ruskin that Morris first developed his concern for, and sense of the necessity of, moves to conserve buildings and landscape. In forming the S.P.A.B. in 1876, Morris echoed Ruskin's argument that the preservation of Britain's historic landscape was a 'great entail':

It is ... no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. 76

Morris's idea of a 'watchdog body' to scrutinise the treatment of the country's historic buildings comes straight from The Seven Lamps of Architecture, 77 a work Morris first read at Oxford. Both Morris and Ruskin extended their concern to the natural as well as the built environment. Yet, as Hanley has argued, Ruskin was always much more of a 'conservationist' than 'environmentalist', and was 'distinctly not an ecologist, if that is taken to mean, someone for whom human culture is secondary to the dictates of purely physical laws'. 78 Much the same could be said of Morris. It was because of

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74 Morris, 'Art under Plutocracy', p. 186.
75 Hanley, 'The Discourse of Natural Beauty', p. 19.
76 Ruskin, The Seven Lamps of Architecture, pp. 233, 245. In this respect, Ruskin also echoed Carlyle in Past and Present: 'Land ... is not the property of any generation, we say, but that of all the past generations that have worked on it, and of all the future ones that shall work on it' (p. 175).
77 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 376.
78 Hanley, 'The Discourse of Natural Beauty', p. 18. Michael Wheeler ('Introduction', in Ruskin and Environment, p. 3) has also observed that although Ruskin has been described as 'the first Green man in England', it is necessary to ask whether 'his work on botany and ornithology, on rivers and glaciation, on geology and meteorology' can be read 'as in any sense "ecological", when he was always so markedly anthropocentric in his reading of "nature".'
Ruskin’s primary concern with conserving the evidence of human life in the landscape, that Morris paid particular attention to its ‘cultural significance’. Thus Morris supported Ruskin in his opposition to the spread of railways into areas such as the Lake District, based partially on an aversion to railways that had developed from his reading of Ruskin’s works at Oxford. In particularly Ruskinian fashion, Morris wrote back from his tour of northern France in 1855, describing the scenery outside Rouen as ‘like the country in a beautiful poem, in a beautiful Romance such as might make a background to Chaucer’s Palamon and Arcite’, but then complained:

we had to leave it and go to Rouen by a nasty, brimstone, noisy, shrieking railway train that cares not twopence for hill or valley, poplar tree or lime tree, corn-poppies or blue cornflower, or purple thistle and purple vetch, white convolvulus, white elmatis, or golden S. John’s wort; that cares not twopence either for tower, or spire, or apse or dome, till it will be as noisy and obtrusive under the spires of Chartres or the towers of Rouen, as it is Versailles or the Dome of the Invalides; verily railways are ABOMINATIONS.

Similarly, Ruskin’s concern with ‘Pure Air, Water and Earth’, as well as ‘untroubled’ skies—again couched in terms of their benefit to humanity—also affected Morris. Though Morris’s arguments condemning pollution was couched in less apocalyptic terms, his claim that ‘the cleaning of England’ was ‘the first and most necessary’ step towards the rejuvenation of ’popular art in England’ sprung from his comprehension of the links Ruskin drew between nature and society, and were not based on the idea of nature having a separate, intrinsic value.

79 See Gill Chitty, ‘“A Great Entail”: the Historic Environment’, in Ruskin and Environment, pp. 102–22.
80 The Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter, Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites, 1981) defines ‘cultural significance’ as: ‘A concept which helps in estimating the value of places. The places likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which we believe will be of value to future generations’ (p. 4).
82 See, for example, Fors Clavigera, vol. II, pp. 91–2, and The Two Paths, pp. 339–40.
There were many differences between the social and political vision of the mature Morris and his 'master', Ruskin. As Spear has noted, while Morris eventually supported 'liberty, equality, and fraternity', Ruskin 'could only endorse fraternity, which to him always implied paternity, benevolent authority'.⁵⁵ Thus, in many ways, Morris's eventual leap from Ruskin to Marx was not unproblematic. Morris's adoption of a Marxist historical analysis did not sit easily with his Ruskinian reverence for the nature whose subjection to human will Marx identified with the emancipation of humanity.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, as has just been noted, Ruskin's nature also derived ultimate value from its use by humankind, and his work certainly eased Morris's 'conversion'. Morris's Ruskinian inheritance was not simply wiped out by Marx, and it is in the space between the two that Morris's work derived its value. Certainly there is a significant extent to which Morris's work became the embodiment of a Ruskinian 'dream of Eden'. In 1894 he acknowledged this quest, exclaiming: 'How deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin! It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent'. Indeed in this discussion of how he 'became a socialist', Morris declaimed with typical Ruskinian vigour his developed Ruskinian 'hatred of modern civilization':

What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organisation—for the misery of life! Its contempt of simple pleasures, which everyone could enjoy but for its folly! Its eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour?

He asked himself why the 'struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion', and confessed that at this stage in his life 'the immediate future seemed ... likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world':

This was a bad look-out indeed, and ... especially so to a man of my disposition, careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion

⁶⁶ Fuller, Theoria, p. 130.
for the history of the past of mankind. Think of it! Was it all to end in a
counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room
in the offing, and a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and
margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make all
men contented together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the
world, and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley.  

Morris's dialogue with Ruskin produced this horror vision of a blackened world and a
passionate love of the time 'before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on
the world'. More importantly, this 'passion for the history of the past of mankind'
produced a desire to look with new eyes at the world around him.

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87 Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', p. 279.
4. Naturalism?

There was one further, crucial experience that determined Morris's ideas about nature during these formative years at Oxford, and this experience was also partially mediated by Ruskin. In 1854 Morris read Ruskin's Edinburgh lectures to Burne-Jones, and in these pages the Oxford undergraduates first heard of a group of painters who styled themselves 'Pre-Raphaelite'. Ruskin used words of highest praise for this group of artists, describing their work as 'of absolute, uncompromising truth ... obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only'. Soon after, Morris and Burne-Jones were able to see an example of this 'naturalism': John Everett Millais's The Return of the Dove to the Ark was displayed at James Wyatt's picture dealers on the Oxford High Street. The picture must have had a significant impact, for Burne-Jones later recalled that it was 'then' that they 'knew'. Subsequently, what they 'knew' was reinforced when they saw other works by Millais, and also by Charles Collins and William Holman Hunt at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855, and also at the Royal Academy in London in 1856. What Morris 'knew' when he saw these paintings is harder to determine. Unfortunately, very few letters or memoirs survive from this period of his life. In 1891, however, he was invited to open an exhibition featuring Pre-Raphaelite work at the Municipal Art Gallery in Birmingham. On this occasion he described the 'special and particular standpoint' of the Pre-Raphaelites as, 'in one word, Naturalism'. Morris was quite emphatic about this. He stated that the Pre-Raphaelites 'started by saying, "You have Nature before you, what you have to do is to copy Nature and you will produce something which ... is worth people's attention"'. Thus we can assume that when Morris was most under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites in the late 1850s, he believed he was engaging with a form of 'naturalism'. Nevertheless, while the Pre-Raphaelites, and especially Rossetti, were important purveyors of the technical and

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1 Ruskin, Lectures on Architecture and Painting, p. 157. Ruskin first championed the work of the Pre-Raphaelites in two influential letters to The Times of 1851. Later that same year he published a pamphlet, 'Pre-Raphaelitism', and in 1854 again wrote to The Times in praise of their work. See Lectures on Architecture and Painting, pp. 318–93.
emotional intensity that directed Morris's feelings about nature, the particular quality of this naturalism requires further investigation.

The 'naturalism' of the Pre-Raphaelites, and especially Rossetti, was not 'naturalistic' in the sense of being 'realistic' or 'photographic'. Nevertheless, in 1848 Rossetti, Hunt and Millais stressed that the 'office of the artist should be looked upon as a priest's service in the temple of Nature'. Rejecting the 'grand manner' of the Royal Academicians, they advocated adherence to the 'simplicity' of nature, and subtitled their journal *The Germ*: 'Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art'. William Michael Rossetti, the editor of this short-lived but influential magazine, recalled their desire 'to have no master except their own powers of mind and hand, and their own first-hand study of Nature'. While '[t]heir minds were to furnish them with subjects for works of art', he argued, 'Nature was to be their one or their paramount storehouse of materials for objects to be represented; the study of her was to be deep, and the presentation ... in the highest exact degree'. Thus it was not unusual for Hunt or Millais to spend months in the open air perfecting landscape or foliage.

The trouble with this kind and amount of detail was that unlike Wordsworth, who had seen everything 'distinct' in nature 'yet nothing defined into absolute independent singleness', Pre-Raphaelite paintings tended to define every leaf, pebble and petal into singleness. The work of Hunt and Millais, in particular, forces the viewer to perceive nature 'bit by bit' such that it appears both fragmentary and 'limitless'. Robin Ironside has argued that their works look as if they were painted 'without eyelids', while others have described the myopic or hallucinatory quality of

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4 Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitiand and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, vol. 1, p. xvi.
6 W.M. Rossetti, 'The Brotherhood in a Nutshell', p. 16.
7 This helpful comparison is drawn by Woodring in *Nature into Art*, p. 150.
much Pre-Raphaelite work. Thus while their artistic creed took them out of the studio into specific landscapes (and thus participated in a Victorian concern with the regional), their treatment of nature was often remarkably similar.

Another, broader, tension arising from and within Pre-Raphaelite art was the implied inadequacy of art when set in the light of nature, and more broadly in the perspectives of life and truth. Martin Meisel clearly outlines this tension ‘coiled in the unelaborated complementarity of the terms “Art” and “Nature”’:

If all is Nature, then good and bad art are equally natural. On the other hand, if Nature and Art are alternative realms, if ... Nature is God’s creation, Art is man’s, then where the two realms overlap, art is the sophistication or adulteration of Nature.

The problem for the Pre-Raphaelites was that it was exactly the ‘sophistication and adulteration’ of nature that they aimed to avoid. As Meisel indicates, by positing nature as the goal of art, their work both implied a hierarchy and a guarantee of failure. Furthermore it problematised the entire artistic venture ‘about the distance between reflecting and participating in the realm of Nature’. John Stuart Mill was also grappling with this problem around mid-century and had recognised that ‘Art is as much Nature as anything else: and everything which is artificial is natural—Art has no independent powers of its own; Art is but the employment of the powers of Nature for an end’.

The prescriptions of The Germ, however, placed almost equal emphasis on the ‘powers of mind’, and there was another strain of Pre-Raphaelite thinking that

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11 James, ‘Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Literature’, p. 160. Birmingham (Landscape and Ideology, pp. 157–93) has suggested that such effects were also partly due to a more general suburban, as well as scientific, experience of nature and landscape.


acknowledged the crucial role of imagination in their work.\textsuperscript{15} The paintings of Ford Madox Brown are often 'a conjunction both of the minutely observed with the general impression and of the mundane with the extraordinary', resulting in the transformation of ordinary landscape into 'vibrant vision'.\textsuperscript{16} Brown’s work is particularly significant to this discussion, because, as noted above, \textit{The Hayfield} was purchased by Morris in 1856. The painting depicts an artist surveying the work of harvesters late on an autumn evening (fig. xiv). Brown spent almost three months on \textit{The Hayfield}, watching the effects of rain on the colour of uncut grass and harvested hay,\textsuperscript{17} but 'the results', as Allen Staley has observed, 'do not seem very natural': 'Details which we might expect to stand out ... appear to be deliberately unemphasised, even left unfinished, so as not to contradict the pattern'.\textsuperscript{18} This is a tendency expressed by Morris in his later designs for wallpaper, textiles and stained glass.\textsuperscript{19} More importantly perhaps, the painting presented Morris with a scene that was no longer part of the everyday experience of life: 'no longer a place where one sought oneself ... but where one sought to lose oneself'.\textsuperscript{20} It was an image the urban, Pre-Raphaelite Brown had to seek out and 'work up' into a painting.\textsuperscript{21} His representation is ultimately a sensual response which responded 'to the almost unrepresentable aspects of the scene'.\textsuperscript{22} In particular Brown’s use of vivid, intense colour and narrow tonal range means that one almost senses rather than sees \textit{The Hayfield}: the deep green of the grass under moonlight; the weary relief at the end of a day.\textsuperscript{23} It captures, also, a 'still moment' in

\textsuperscript{15} Looking back in 1905, Hunt (\textit{Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood}, vol. 1, p. 150) denied that the Pre-Raphaelites had been 'realists' at all; W.M. Rossetti (\textit{Fine Art, Chiefly Contemporary: Notices Re-printed, with Revisions}, AMS, New York, 1970 (1867), p. 147) claimed that the movement's 'essence' had been 'to assert that there is no necessary antagonism between the most pictorial conception of a thing and the thing itself'. As Staley (\textit{The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape}, p. 182) has observed, however, Hunt and other Pre-Raphaelites spent months on end painting directly from nature with the most scrupulous care.

\textsuperscript{16} Bermingham, \textit{Landscape and Ideology}, p. 175.

\textsuperscript{17} Ford Madox Brown, \textit{The Exhibition of Work and Other Paintings by Ford Madox Brown at the Gallery, 191 Piccadilly} (exhibition catalogue), London, 1865, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{18} Staley, \textit{The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape}, pp. 40–1.

\textsuperscript{19} See Chapter 3 of Section III below.

\textsuperscript{20} Bermingham, \textit{Landscape and Ideology}, p. 178.

\textsuperscript{21} Brown (\textit{The Diary of Ford Madox Brown}, p. 145) complained about how difficult it was to 'work up' landscape in his diary entry for 21 July 1855.

\textsuperscript{22} Bermingham, \textit{Landscape and Ideology}, p. 178.

\textsuperscript{23} The Pre-Raphaelites achieved such vibrant colours by glazing over a wet white background, a technique developed in the 1820s and 1830s by artists such as David Wilkie and William Dyce. See Axton, 'Victorian Landscape Painting', p. 296.
Fig. xiv
‘Vibrant vision’: Ford Madox Brown’s *The Hayfield* (1855), purchased by Morris in 1856.
nature,24 similar to the countryside figured in Millais’s The Blind Girl or Brown’s Pretty Baa Lambs. This quivering stillness is also a feature of Arthur Hughes’s April Love (1856). Purchased by Morris in 1856,25 Hughes’s composition shows a young woman enclosed by nature and, in the words of Ruskin, ‘hesitating back into peace’26 (fig. xv).

Detailed, colourful, sensual and ‘still’ are words that can also be used to describe the work of Rossetti, whose influence on Morris during the late 1850s eclipsed that of Ruskin. Almost from the first, Morris had set Rossetti’s work above the rest of the Pre-Raphaelites. Georgiana Burne-Jones recalled that at the exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1855, their ‘greatest wonder and delight was reserved for a water-colour of Rossetti’s … and at once he seemed to us the chief figure in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’.27 Thus, although Morris gave tangible proof of his admiration for Pre-Raphaelite ‘nature study’ by purchasing Brown’s Hayfield and Hughes’s April Love, it is necessary to give greater emphasis to the ‘poetic’ or ‘aesthetic’ nature of Rossetti.

Morris was introduced to Rossetti by Burne-Jones in 1856 and almost immediately became a close friend and ‘disciple’ of the charismatic painter and poet. Both Morris and Burne-Jones began to paint under Rossetti’s direction, and, as a result of his influence, Morris abandoned architecture for painting later that year, wrote and published his first volume of poetry in 1858, and generally eschewed the socio-political dimension of art he had so admired in Ruskin. In a letter to Cornell Price of July 1856, he wrote: ‘Rossetti says I ought to paint, he says I shall be able; now as he is a very great man, and speaks with authority … I must try’. In the same letter, he continues:

I can’t enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I can see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to

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26 Ruskin, Academy Notes, in Works, vol. XIV, p. 68.
Enclosing nature: Arthur Hughes’s *April Love* (1856). Morris asked Edward Burne-Jones to purchase this painting on his behalf in 1856.
set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of
dreams in one form or another...28

Initially, in true Pre-Raphaelite fashion, Rossetti started Morris working
‘direct from nature’. He wrote to William Bell Scott that Morris’s first picture, Sir
Tristram after His Illness in the Garden of King Mark’s Palace, Recognised by the
Dog He Had Given Iseult, ‘is being done all from nature of course’.29 Georgiana
Burne-Jones also remembers Morris working ‘from nature’, recalling that in 1857: ‘We
found Morris painting a tree in MacLaren’s beautiful garden with such energy that it
was long before the grass grew again on the spot where his chair had stood’.30 This
painting has not survived, though a later drawing for stained glass may replicate some
of the elements of the earlier scheme (fig. xvi).

Morris’s only remaining easel painting, La Belle Iseult (1858), has an interior
setting that is much more characteristic of Rossetti’s own work of this time. The only
‘piece of nature’ in this painting is the rosemary (for remembrance) that crowns
Iseult’s head. In a similar fashion, Burne-Jones’s depiction of nature and landscape
also increasingly relied on art rather than his own immediate response to nature.31
Works such as Going to Battle (1858) show Burne-Jones influenced by the
watercolours, illustrations and pen drawings of Rossetti. As Staley has observed,
‘[n]atural details are used, but naturalism is no longer important’.32

In fact, by the time Morris became acquainted with Rossetti, this founder
member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was already moving away from the
naturalistic style and religious subject matter of his earlier work. Instead, Rossetti had

31 Burne-Jones (quoted in Memorials, vol. II, p. 261) later belittled attempts to ‘transcribe’ directly
from nature: ‘I suppose by the time the “photographic artist” can give us all the colours as correctly as
the shapes, people will begin to find out that the realism they talk about isn’t art at all but science;
interesting, no doubt, as a scientific achievement but nothing more. Some one will have succeeded in
making a reflection in a looking-glass permanent under certain conditions. What has that to do with
art?’.
32 Staley, The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape, p. 94.
Fig. xvi
Done from nature? Drawing by Morris for stained glass that may have developed from an earlier painting which has not survived. This painting is referred to as ‘Sir Tristram after His Illness in the Garden of King Mark’s Palace, Recognised by the Dog He Had Given Iscuit’.
begun to treat ‘ultra-medieval’, ‘chivalric Froissartian themes’, and to paint them ‘with an almost forced intensity of feeling, achieved by the use of much quaint detail, an emphasis on two-dimensional pattern, and bright, heraldic colours’. The ‘medieval’ and ‘chivalric’ nature of Rossetti’s work had great appeal to Morris at this time. Both he and Burne-Jones had been disappointed that the religious tensions that rent Oxford during the 1830s were largely dispelled by the time they arrived. They remained drawn to the High Church, and especially to its aesthetic, emotional and historical attractions. Immersed in the chronicles of medieval Europe, especially the works of Malory and Froissart, they found, as E.P. Thompson has argued, ‘a spiritual refuge free from the taint of commerce’. It was this sensibility to which Rossetti’s work directly appealed. Paintings such as Arthur’s Tomb (1854), Dante’s Dream (1856) and The Wedding of St George and Princess Sabra (1857) offered a tempting vision of ‘dreamland’: a retreat from the utilitarian and industrial landscape (see fig. xvii).

It was Rossetti’s ‘aestheticism’ rather than ‘naturalism’, therefore, which most deeply affected Morris. The place of nature in this ‘aestheticism’ is often extremely marginal. Rossetti painted no ‘pure’ landscapes and when nature figures in his work it usually acts as little more than motif: a mere story telling device contributing to the narrative poignancy of the painting. In The Tune of the Seven Towers (1857), for example, an orange branch, symbolic of marriage, is placed on a bed and tells the viewer about the relationship of the figures in the foreground. This watercolour was purchased by Morris and inspired him to write a poem of the same name. In The Blue Closet (1856–57) also (fig. xviii), Rossetti places a red lily in the foreground which Morris, in his ‘Blue Closet’, links with death: ‘Through the floor shot up a lily red, / With a patch of earth from the land of the dead’. Moreover, like the lily in this picture and poem, Rossetti frequently brought nature inside in his paintings: roses and ivy grow on inside walls, and there are only limited views of out-of-doors’ scenery.

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35 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 24.
Fig. xvii
Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Arthur’s Tomb, detail (1854): both medieval and ‘embowered’.

Fig. xviii
Nature as motif: Rossetti’s The Blue Closet (1856–57), which inspired a poem by Morris of the same name.
In fact Rossetti’s work shows very little evidence of the naturalistic orientation of other Pre-Raphaelites. Even though his work is often characterised by ‘bold surface patterns of closely knit details and bright colours’, the overall impulse is fanciful and decorative. It is also frequently ‘literary’ or, more specifically, ‘poetic’. Apart from Malory and Froissart, Rossetti’s work was also ‘embroidered’ with references to the works of Tennyson and Keats. Pauline Fletcher has discussed, for example, how the description of the bower of Adonis in ‘Endymion’, with its ‘tendrils green, of every bloom and hue’ finds expression in Rossetti’s work. There is also a Blakean ‘connection between symbolism and mythology’ in much of his art; like Blake, Rossetti often used detailed representations of objects as visions or suggestions of greater things. The same applied to his poetry. W.M. Rossetti wrote that ‘My Sister’s Sleep’, first published in *The Germ*, demonstrates ‘the intimate intertexture of a spiritual sense with a material form; small actualities made vocal of lofty meanings’.

The ‘actualities’ expressed in Rossetti’s depiction of nature, however, did not always refer to ‘lofty meanings’. Very often the story Rossetti’s nature is made to tell is one that refers to romantic sexual love. In some instances his work can suggest a positive link between human sexuality and the productive vitality or fecundity of nature. More often, however, his romantic bowers are constructed out of ‘indoor inklings’, and reflect the ‘dreamful ease’ of ‘The Lotus Eaters’, with a fertility close to decay. In many of Rossetti’s compositions there is ‘no spatial depth; the background is entirely filled with foliage pressing upon the figures, and the bright colours bring each detail forward to the surface’. Thus Rossetti’s figures are surrounded and enclosed by nature, displaying what Fletcher has called his ‘embowering consciousness’.

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39 In was largely through the efforts of Rossetti and his circle, that Blake’s popularity was revived in the nineteenth century. See Preston, *Blake and Rossetti*, *passim*.
42 See Fletcher, *Gardens and Grim Ravines*, p. 140.
43 Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, p. 82.
44 Fletcher (*Gardens and Grim Ravines*, p. 150) argues that ‘the very qualities that make the bower a perfect trysting place (its secrecy and remoteness from the concerns of the world) are also the qualities
Pia de’ Tolomei (1868–80), *La Ghirlandata* (1873), and *The Day Dream* (1880) (see figs. xix–xx), but it is also a feature of his earlier work. Even Ruskin, otherwise an ardent admirer, complained that his painting reflected

> not the light of sunshine itself, but of sunshine diffused through coloured glass. And in object-painting he not only refused, partly through idleness, partly in the absolute want of opportunity for the study of nature involved in his choice of abode in a garret at Blackfriars,—refused, I say, the natural aid of pure landscape and sky...\(^\text{45}\)

Rossetti’s paintings perhaps more than any other demonstrate the tensions and anxieties variously painted into the work of each Pre-Raphaelite.\(^\text{46}\) They represent the aesthetic character of nature in the city.\(^\text{47}\) Works such as *The Tune of the Seven Towers* and *The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra*, and nearly all of his paintings after 1860, either frame, ‘embower’ or ‘entomb’ their subjects inside nature, figure nature as inner ‘mind-scape’ rather than ‘outer’ landscape, or bring nature into a gloomy interior.

These are also some of the most striking features of Morris’s ‘Pre-Raphaelite period’. Though he occasionally manages to escape the bower, and move genuinely ‘outside’, most of his work of the late 1850s and 1860s has the aura of ‘the casement half opened on summer nights’, of the medieval bower or pleasure garden: an internalised world where the natural and the aesthetic coalesce. Morris’s work on the Oxford Union murals in 1857, for example, shows the young artist almost totally under the sway of Rossetti. The painting of these Arthurian scenes on the upper walls of the Debating Hall has been discussed at length by various sources, and the project is generally considered to have been a failure.\(^\text{48}\) Rossetti, who coordinated the scheme,


\(^{46}\) Meisel (‘Half Sick of Shadows’, p. 340) writes that ‘[t]he multiplying mirror, the ambiguous enclosure, the picture on cloth, are some of the motifs that recur’ in Pre-Raphaelite work to confront and debate ‘the validity of their calling, the relation of art to Nature, and the relation of both to the eye of the spirit’.

\(^{47}\) Woodring has noted the paradox of a movement emphasising sharp outline and vivid colour beginning in a city where the sun could barely cast a shadow (*Nature into Art*, p. 151).

\(^{48}\) See, for example, W. Holman Hunt, *Oxford Union Society: The Story of the Painting of the Pictures on the Walls and the Decorations on the Ceiling of the Old Debating Hall (Now the Library)*
Figs. xix–xx
Rossetti’s later ‘embowered’ work: *La Pia de’ Tolomei* (1868–80) and *The Day Dream* (1880), both use Jane Morris as the model.
seems to have given little consideration to the technical requirements of fresco painting. Thus all ten of the designs, and Morris's in particular, are now extensively damaged and barely visible. It is still possible, however, to distinguish the original colour, 'ultra-medievalism' and bower-like nature of these works. The figures in Morris's 'Sir Palomydes's Jealousy of Sir Tristram', one of the weakest pictures in the hall, are almost crowded out of the painting by a tree, flowers and foliage (fig. xxi). In part this derives from the difficulties Morris experienced in painting the human figure: according to Val Prinsep, who also worked on the project, Rossetti told Morris that Iseult's head was 'not human—you must get some nature', and ordered him to go and study the features of the daughter of a local innkeeper.49 Ms. Lipscombe was not allowed to sit to Morris, however, and thus Morris compensated by placing Tristram and Iseult in the midst of gigantic sunflowers. In later years Morris wished that this work 'had disappeared from the wall' and wrote that he was 'conscious of its being extremely ludicrous in many ways'.50 But Morris's mural is testimony to the 'embowering' influence of Rossetti and his tendency to enclose figures 'deep in a leafy core'.51 Furthermore, Morris's work on the roof of the building repeated this entangling and enclosing theme. Described by Rossetti as 'a vast pattern-work of grotesque creatures',52 Morris filled the gaps between the ceiling rafters with 'all kinds of quaint beasts and birds' inspired by thirteenth-century illuminated manuscripts.53 This was a much less naturalistic design than the surviving patterns one sees today (fig. xxii).54

In addition to Morris's attempts at painting, however, the depiction of nature in much of his earliest poetry and prose is controlled by a 'Pre-Raphaelite' perspective: sometimes it seems a hallucination; sometimes it seems lit by 'sunshine diffused through coloured glass'. Occasionally this Pre-Raphaelite mood is held in tension with


53 Edward Burne-Jones commenting on the work done by Charles Faulkner who helped Morris with the roof decoration; quoted in Mackail, Life, vol. I, p. 120.
Morris’s mural on the walls of the Oxford Union Debating Hall, ‘Sir Palomydes Jealousy of Sir Tristram’ (1857).

Morris’s work above the murals on the roof of the Oxford Union Hall. This is the ‘new and lighter design’ of the 1870s, which replaced the earlier ‘vast pattern-work of grotesque creatures’.
‘fresh-aired’ experience of nature, and with a Ruskinian attention to detail and form. It is this tension that gives Morris’s first volume of verse, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858), its ‘spikiness’; a tension that has led to its being read as an attempt to express the ‘grotesque’ elements of ‘Gothic culture’ garnered from Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice*. And, certainly, there are ‘savage’, ‘changeful’, ‘rigid’ and ‘redundant’ moments in this poetry. Nevertheless, the nature in and of *The Defence of Guenevere* is expressed and represented in techniques and terms that derive far more from Rossetti than Ruskin. It is the ‘painterly’ quality and context of these poems which needs to be stressed, and they need to be approached with something of the sensitivity usually associated with interpreting the visual as well as the verbal arts.

There was frequently a direct link between a Rossetti painting and a Morris poem, and their ideas acted and reacted upon common enthusiasms. Significantly, Morris dedicated the volume ‘To My Friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti Painter’.

Contemporary reviews of *The Defence of Guenevere* were quick to signal that this was a ‘book of Pre-Raphaelite minstrelsy’, and that Morris’s dedication was virtually ‘superfluous’. Some drew links between the poems and ‘certain fresco illustrations of Arthurian romance attempted at Oxford by painters of this [the Pre-Raphaelite] school’. Others emphasised Morris’s ‘realistic’ description and detail,

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55 Discussing the influence of Browning on Morris, MacCarthy (A Life for Our Time, p. 142) refers to Sordello’s ‘spikiness of language’ and it seems an apt description for the often ‘angular’ images of Morris’s verse.
57 As suggested by James P. Carley when analysing the colour symbolism in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, in ‘“Heaven’s Colour, the Blue”: Morris’s Guenevere and the Choosing Cloths Reread’, *JWMS*, vol. IX, no. 1, Autumn 1990, p. 22.
58 Compare, for example, Morris’s title poem ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ with Rossetti’s painting *Lancelot in the Chamber of Guenevere*, Morris’s ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’ with Rossetti’s *Arthur’s Tomb*, ‘Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery’ with *Sir Galahad Receiving the Sangraal*, ‘The Blue Closet’ with *The Blue Closet*, ‘The Tune of the Seven Towers’ with *The Tune of the Seven Towers*, ‘Welland River’ with *Burd Ellayne*, and even Morris’s ‘Defence of Guenevere’ with his own *La Belle Isadell*. This should also be seen in the context of the Victorian inclination to relate picture and story, especially among those influenced by the works of Scott. See J.D.W. Murdoch, ‘Scott, Pictures, and Painting’, *The Modern Language Review*, no. 67, 1972, p. 43.
61 Garnett, unsigned review, p. 33.
arguing, for example, that Morris described ‘Sir Galahad’ ‘just as he lived and moved and had his being some twelve hundred years ago’.\textsuperscript{62} Or, they stressed

\[\text{[t]he ‘conscientious rendering of the actual’, in its minutest details, ... observed not only in the description of gestures, attitudes, features, and garments, so that many passages read like descriptions of a Pre-Raphaelite picture, but the same ‘fidelity to nature’ is preserved in the language of the interlocutors...}\textsuperscript{63}

\textit{The Defence of Guenevere} certainly contains astonishingly vivid and poignant poems, ‘painted’, rather than penned, with an acute brilliance and relief. A Pre-Raphaelite intensity and minuteness of vision are apparent throughout the volume: ‘One thinks of Galahad’s vision of drops of melted snow on his steel shoes and “bunches of small weeds” between the tiles of the floor he stares at in “Sir Galahad, a Christmas mystery story”’.\textsuperscript{64} There is also a similarly luxuriant use of colour. One can see Morris starting to ‘paint’ nature in ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, a tale that owes much to Ruskin, but which also reflects the influence of Rossetti’s work in the Pre-Raphaelite \textit{Gern}: all along by the poplar trees were there trellises, but on these grew nothing but deep crimson roses; the hollyhocks too were all out in blossom at that time, great spires of pink, and orange, and red, and white, with their soft, downy leaves. I said that nothing grew on the trellises by the poplars but crimson roses, but I was not quite right, for in many places the wild flowers had crept into the garden from without: lush green briony, with green-white blossoms, that grows so fast, one could almost think that we see it grow, and deadly nightshade, \textit{La bella donna}, oh! So beautiful; red berry, and purple, yellow-spiked flower, and deadly, cruel-looking, dark green leaf, all growing together in the glorious days of early autumn.\textsuperscript{65}

Here Morris layers foliage upon foliage and colour upon colour to create a superabundance that is closer to the penned and painted bower of Rossetti than, as MacCarthy has suggested, the evil flowers of Baudelaire.\textsuperscript{66} In \textit{The Defence of Guenevere}, also, Morris vividly ‘paints’ his poems: there are ‘scarlet silks’, ‘green banks of streams’, ‘blood-red daggers’, ‘purple seas’, ‘yellow flowers stained with

\textsuperscript{62} Garnett, unsigned review, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{63} Unsigned review, \textit{Tablet}, vol. XIX, April 1858, p. 266; in \textit{The Critical Heritage}, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{64} Armstrong, \textit{Victorian Poetry}, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{65} Morris, ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, p. 151.
\textsuperscript{66} MacCarthy, \textit{A Life for Our Time}, p. 88.
red’, ‘golden tresses’, ‘damozels wearing purple and green’ and, Morris’s favourite, ‘heaven’s colour ... blue’. In addition, and in a similarly Pre-Raphaelite fashion, this brilliant colour, coupled with detail, ‘detach[es] the act of vision and perception from other experience, force[s] them into hyperconscious significance, and make[s] it necessary to consider what the nature of seeing is’.67

But this also points to the problematic ‘naturalness’ of Morris’s Pre-Raphaelite nature, and many contemporary reviewers commented that The Defence of Guenevere lay in the ‘fog-land of Art’.68 The poems were described as ‘[m]ystical and pathetic’, or ‘quaint in detail but possessing no real meaning’.69 The reviewers accused Morris of a ‘luminous indistinctness’, and a ‘too romantically ethereal ... wild, weird beauty’, though they praised ‘the pure beauty of “Sir Galahad” and “The Chapel in Lyoness”, pieces in which the rough chivalry of the middle ages appears as it were transfigured, shining with a saintly halo of inexpressible loveliness’.70 In particular, they drew attention to similarities with the work of Rossetti, ‘with all their richness of colouring, depth of pathos, poetical but eccentric composition, and loving elaboration of every minute detail’. ‘Who but Mr. Rossetti or his double’, one reviewer asked, ‘could have written anything like this?’:71

For these vile things that hem me in,
These Pagan beasts who live in sin,
The sickly flowers pale and wan,
The grim blue-bearded castellan,
The stanchions half worn-out with rust,
Whereo their banner vile they trust—
Why, all these things I hold them just
Like dragons in a missal-book,
Wherein, whenever we may look,
We see no horror, yea, delight
We have, the colours are so bright;
Likewise we note the specks of white,
And the great plates of burnish’d gold.

Just so this Pagan castle old,
And everything I can see there,

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68 Chorley, unsigned review, p. 37.
69 Chorley, unsigned review, p. 39.
70 Garnett, unsigned review, p. 36.
71 Garnett, unsinged review, p. 34.
Sick-pining in the marshland air,
I note; I will go over now,
Like one who paints with knitted brow,
The flowers and all things one by one,
From the snail on the wall to the setting sun.72

An unsigned notice in the Saturday Review noted these similarities between Morris and Rossetti, but was more critical. This review drew particular attention to the problems of Pre-Raphaelite art and noted how these tensions were reflected in Morris’s poetry. It stated that Pre-Raphaelitism was ‘the product of the principle which was first preached by Wordsworth’, and that it was ‘at the Laker’s urn that Pre-Raphaelitism first drank inspiration’. The reviewer argued: ‘If, therefore, Mr. Morris really wished to show us what Pre-Raphaelitism in poetry was, he should have to go back to its beginnings, not to its recent developments’.73 Moving into a more general attack on Pre-Raphaelite art, the article stated that ‘[a]n exact transcript of nature is impossible, and were it possible, would be false’. ‘[W]hen painters think it their duty to work through a microscope’, it continued, ‘and to try to paint every stain on every leaf, as well as every leaf on every tree, they not only forget what art is, but are ignorant of what artistic imitation is’.74 Morris was then accused of the same ‘extravagance’:

He works in the patient spirit of the illuminators, but then he is grotesque as well as minute and patient. All his thoughts and figures are represented on a solid plane; he has no notion of distance, or aerial perspective, or gradation of tints; or rather, of malice prepense, he neglects these things. He has abundance of vivid, positive colour, sharp outline, and great richness of word diaper, with a certain stiff, antique, cumbrous embroidery of diction; but it is all cold, artificial, and angular.75

In many respects, this is a fair assessment, and one agrees that Morris’s ‘men and women, and trees and flowers, and castles and horses, are not like anything we ever saw, except in illuminations’.76

74 Unsigned review, Saturday Review, p. 44.
75 Unsigned review, Saturday Review, pp. 44-5.
76 Unsigned review, Saturday Review, p. 46.
The ‘illuminating’ quality of Morris's poetry has an effect on most of the descriptions of nature throughout *The Defence of Guenevere*. Walter Pater observed that the nature encountered here has a medieval, monastic flavour: sensuous, tense and passionate, sometimes bordering on the delirious. Pater also noted that this ‘wild, convulsed sensuousness’ conveyed a ‘deep’ but not ‘objective’ sense of nature, a sense that was ‘no real escape to the world without us’. Rather, in this ‘poetry of the Middle Age’, ‘[t]he aspects and motions of nature only reinforced its prevailing mood’, being ‘in conspiracy with one’s brain against one’. Thus, Pater argued, in such poetry ‘[a] single sentiment invaded the world: everything was infused with a motive drawn from the soul’.\(^7^7\) In poems such as ‘Two Red Roses Across the Moon’ or ‘The Gilliflower of Gold’ flowers and shrubs play a symbolic part similar to those in Rossetti’s paintings.\(^7^8\) Though never as singularly or obviously ‘meaningful’ as Rossetti, as sentimental as Millais, or as ‘theological’ as Hunt, Morris’s flowers do constitute a subtle ‘language’, with nature assuming the status of motif.

The subjectivity of this poetry is also revealed in its landscapes: environments in which Morris is still ‘the proprietor ... of the landscapes and properties of childhood’.\(^7^9\) Several poems recall the trees and bracken of Epping Forest which bordered Woodford Hall. This woodland was the source of the deathly ‘place where the hornbeams grow’ in ‘Shameful Death’;\(^8^0\) and of the thicket of hazels in ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’:

> And so we enter’d Verville wood next day,
> 
> In the afternoon; through it the highway runs,
>    ‘Twixt copses of green hazel, very thick,
> And underneath, with glimmering of suns,
>    The primroses are happy; the dews lick
> 
> The soft green moss.\(^8^1\)


\(^7^8\) See, for example, Jackson’s analysis of the ‘symbolic implications’ of this poem in ‘Two Red Roses Across the Moon’, pp. 29–34.


\(^8^0\) See Morris, ‘Shameful Death’, in *The Defence of Guenevere*, p. 92.
In the beech-wood thickets of *Rapunzel* Morris also vividly recalled his favourite haunt:

> my heart almost burst

> Beneath the beeches, as I lay a-dreaming,
> I tried so hard to read this riddle through,
> To catch some golden cord that I saw gleaming
> Like gossamer against the autumn blue.  

Other poems also recall the landscapes of Morris's childhood but in more clearly problematic terms. Water House, Walthamstow, provided the Eden-like, and then poisoned, moated 'castle' of 'Golden Wings'. The *walled* garden described in the opening verses is very Pre-Raphaelite, both in its depiction of elementary colours, and because it is enclosed. The poem moves from an infinite delight in the peace and beauty of the earth—from a garden in a 'happy poplar land', where 'green moss' and 'yellow lichen' grow over 'scarlet bricks', 'red apples shone / At the right time of the year', and lovers sat and kissed on 'hot summer noons, not seen'—to an uneasy awareness of a land- and 'mind-scape' under threat:

> The apples now grow green and sour
> Upon the mouldering castle-wall,
> Before they ripen there they fall:
> There are no banners on the tower.

> The draggled swans most eagerly eat
> The green weeds trailing in the moat;
> Inside the rotting leaky boat
> You see a slain man's stiffen'd feet.  

Thus 'Golden Wings' both idealised and then destroyed the medieval pleasure garden. The last section of the poem recalled the rotting garden of Mariana's moated grange: both the rankness and decay of Tennyson's poem and the abandon of Millais's painting. Michael Waters has suggested that Tennyson's *Mariana* may have been a

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83 Pauline Dewan ('Patterns of Enclosure in Morris's Early Stories', *JWMS*, vol. XI, no. 2, Spring 1995, p. 11) has argued that Morris's 'patterns of enclosure' in his early work draw attention to what is at the centre of it '—often something of great beauty and significance, and usually connected with art'.

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'textual prototype' for 'Golden Wings', but there is again something of the deathliness of Rossetti in this poem: a tension, it has been suggested, that derives from 'the sense of beauty under threat'.

It is a tension that also derived from Morris remembering and rendering experiences of 'past' nature in an urban, aesthetic present. In 1856 Morris had moved from Oxford to Upper Gordon Street, Bloomsbury, and then, on the suggestion of Rossetti, into rooms on the first floor of 17 Red Lion Square (Rossetti had lived at this address a few years earlier). With Burne-Jones, Morris inhabited three rooms filled with 'books, boxes, boots, bedding, baskets, coats, pictures, armour, hats, easels—tumble and rumble and jumble'. Painting or writing 'from nature', or at least from the kind of nature they had known around Oxford, now posed a considerable problem. Creese has spoken of the mass deprivation of sight in Victorian cities, and the enclosed squares of London must have seemed particularly inadequate. Thus Morris was forced back on memory, and in some of his poems he seems to be mourning the 'loss' of nature. The narrator of 'The Sailing of the Sword' looks out '[a]cross empty garden-beds' to 'my sisters' heads / Bowed each beside a tree'. 'The Haystack in the Floods' has a sodden Essex countryside, and the 'Summer Dawn' seen from Water House, Walthamstow, is melancholy rather than hopeful:

The summer night waneth, the morning light slips,
     Faint and grey 'twixt the leaves of the aspen, betwixt the cloud-bars,
That are patiently waiting for the dawn:
     Patient and colourless, though Heaven's gold
Waits to float through them along with the sun,
Far out in the meadows, above the young corn,
     The heavy elms wait, and restless and cold
The uneasy wind rises; the roses are dun;
Through the long twilight they pray for the dawn,
Round the lone house in the midst of the corn. 

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88 Creese, 'Imagination in the Suburbs', p. 41.
89 Morris, 'The Sailing of the Sword', in *The Defence of Guenevere*, p. 102.
90 Morris, 'Summer Dawn', in *The Defence of Guenevere*, p. 144.
This pre-dawn landscape reflects, as Fletcher has observed, a ‘mood of frustrated longing and waiting’. Similarly, the narrator of ‘Spell-Bound’ complains that he is trapped ‘[a]bove the golden-waving plains’ and that the ‘reaper never cometh near’. Fletcher has interpreted this poem as an indication of Morris’s frustration that ‘a gap between man and nature has opened up’ and that ‘his institutions breed violence and distrust’. The force of this poetry, and the intense personal places within it, seem to suggest, however, that Morris is more frustrated at his own personal separation from the landscapes, hopes and dreams of childhood. These poems are pervaded with a sense of loss and foreboding, and the landscapes are also frequently remembered as places of death. ‘Shameful Death’ takes place both ‘in a place where the hornbeams grow’, and where ‘sky was overcast, / And the smoke roll’d over the reeds of the fen’. And, even though Morris’s ‘bowers’ are not as dark and deep as Rossetti’s, they can still be tomblike:

Lying so, one kiss,
And I should be in Avalon asleep,
Among the poppies and the yellow flowers;
And they should brush my cheek, my hair being spread
Far out among the stems; soft mice and small
Eating and creeping all about my feet,
Red shod and tired; and the flies should come
Creeping o’er my broad eyelids unafraid...

Yet although an intense subjectivity animates these poems, Morris’s personality is never obvious, and this creates a tone of naive, ‘unconscious’ description similar to Pre-Raphaelite work. In some respects this attempt to hide the ‘adulteration’ of the author brings to the surface a medieval world that is rough and bloody rather than frigid, full of the details of foliage and armour. But it does not obscure the psychology or power of the ‘priest’s service in the temple’. This world is always the reflection of an inner life. What these poems achieve is the subordination of nature to emotion, and ultimately to art: nature has a vivid life, but it is not its own.

91 Fletcher, Gardens and Grim Ravines, p. 184.
93 Fletcher, Gardens and Grim Ravines, p. 185.
Descriptions reveal the intensity of past experience as a heightened reality captivating the dispassionate and reflective present:

I saw you kissing once, like a curved sword
That bites with all its edge, did your lips lie,
Curled gently, slowly, long time could afford
For caught-up breathings: like a dying sigh

They gather’d up their lines and went away,
And still kept twitching with a sort of smile,
As likely to be weeping presently...⁹⁶

Graphic images such as this, and those of ‘dews that lick the soft green moss’, reflect the influence of Rossetti’s sensuality, of which there is plenty in Morris’s poems.⁹⁷ But the effect of this intense observance is almost super-natural; Pater described the effect as ‘like a poison in one’s blood’, and argued that Morris ‘diffused’ through ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’

the maddening white glare of the sun, and tyranny of the moon, not tender and far-off but close down—the sorcerer’s moon, large and feverish. The colouring is intricate and delirious as of ‘scarlet lilies’. [There is] ... a sudden bewildered sickening of life and all things. In ‘Galahad: a Mystery’, the frost of Christmas night on the chapel stones acts as a strong narcotic: a sudden shrill ringing pierces through the numbness: a voice proclaims that the Grail has gone forth through the great forest. It is in the ‘Blue Closet’ that this delirium reaches its height with a singular beauty, reserved perhaps for the enjoyment of the few.⁹⁸

Pater’s last phrase hints at an anxiety that lies behind these poems, an anxiety particularly painful to the robust personality of Morris: that nature is sickening and ‘for the enjoyment of the few’. Unable to expend his vast amount of physical and imaginative energy in the open air, the poems become so intense that they approach the supra-natural or even the surreal:

If I move my chair it will scream; and the orange will roll out far,
And the faint yellow juice will ooze out like blood from a wizard’s jar;

⁹⁷ For the erotic detail of some of Morris’s poems, see, for example, Faulkner, Against the Age, p. 20. One contemporary unsigned review (Saturday Review, p. 46) also noted that ‘there was a great amount of kissing’ in Morris’s poems, and that ‘the kissers and the kissed had but little respect for the marriage service’.
And the dogs will howl for those who went last month to the war.
Wind, wind! thou art sad, art thou kind?
Wind, wind, unhappy! thou art blind,
Yet still thou wanderest the lily-seed to find.\(^9\)

Thus nature becomes an empty vessel, only able to be filled with aesthetic ‘meaning’. In ‘The Hollow Land’, a story first published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* and which shows the influence of writings in the Pre-Raphaelite *Germ*, Morris’s protagonist, ‘Florian’ of the ‘House of the Lilies’, asks: ‘Who … has not felt the cool waves round his feet, the roses crowning him, and through the leaves of beech and lime the many whispering sounds of the Hollow Land?’\(^100\)

In fact *The Defence of Guenevere* is ultimately a defence of the aesthetic, rather than an assertion of naturalism in the vein of Rossetti’s brand of Pre-Raphaelitism. In the title poem, beauty and justice are closely allied, and are made to prevail over truth. At first, Morris’s Guenevere is tearful and tormented, and as she describes her predicament the accent falls in strange places with ‘the effect of a great cry’.\(^101\) She implies that choosing between Arthur and Lancelot had been like choosing between two cloths, one ‘blue, / Wavy and long, and one cut short and red’.\(^102\) Equated with Lancelot, Guenevere’s choice of ‘heaven’s colour, the blue’ can be read as an allegory of Morris’s own immediate career. Beauty has become sufficient justification; Guenevere is ‘gracious proof’ of her integrity; and Morris’s poem is a ‘passionate defence of that love against a hostile inquisition’.\(^103\) But, in the end, it is the cry, the sense of underlying crisis, of destruction and death that is omnipresent. It is a cry that is issued as much against a world ‘against art’ as ‘against

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\(^{101}\) This analogy is made by Pater in *Essays on Literature and Art*, p. 109.

\(^{102}\) Morris, ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, in *The Defence of Guenevere*, pp. 1–2. James Carley’s article on these choosing cloths alerted me to their significance in this poem (‘Heaven’s Colour, the Blue’, pp. 20–2).

\(^{103}\) Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 68.
nature', but issued in a palace of art where romance finds its logical conclusion in death.\textsuperscript{104}

In *The Defence of Guenevere*, therefore, nature is rendered defenceless. The uneasiness of this position is sensed, the ‘power and responsibility of art’ are felt, but what Morris produced is not naturalism, but a kind of aestheticism. Under Rossetti’s influence nature had become not a fresh and invigorating place of life, but a dark place of stagnation and death. Thus even though Morris’s stories, like those in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, describe and notice people in landscape—their interactions with the world around them, the ‘sere damp fern’ trodden down by their horses, and the boughs they ride beneath—details such as mud splashing ‘wretchedly’ suggest a relationship between humanity and nature in which nature only reflects human meaning.\textsuperscript{105} Moreover, this meaning is frequently ‘sickly’ or morose. And, though Morris’s details of nature are more realistic than Rossetti’s ‘mystic’ trees or shrines ‘[o]ccult, withheld, untrod’,\textsuperscript{106} the idea of nature in Morris’s work had been similarly ‘embowered’ or ‘trapped’ by art. Morris remained trapped inside this artistic nature until he confronted a new vision of nature and a new version of history.

Rossetti’s hold over Morris waned towards the end of the 1860s, due to his increasing abuse of alcohol and drugs, and his lengthy affair and obsession with Morris’s wife. Yet in the 1890s Morris still defended Pre-Raphaelite art. He still insisted that the Pre-Raphaelites ‘did paint fully intending to be, and fully succeeding in being naturalistic’. What he did do, however, was ‘say a little more about what one means by the word Naturalism’:

Now the pre-Raphaelite pictures ... besides the mere presentment of natural facts ... aimed at another kind of thing which was far more important. In other words they certainly had entirely come to the conclusion that not only was it necessary that they should paint well, but that this painting, this good painting, the excellent execution, the keen eyesight, the care, the skill, and so on, should be the instrument for telling


\textsuperscript{105} Morris, ‘The Haystack in the Floods’, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{106} Rossetti, ‘The Blessed Damozel’, line 79.
some kind of story to the beholder. That you see completes the Naturalism.107

The search for human meaning now eclipsed the romantic search for meaning in nature.

III

Forget Six Counties
1. The island of comfort

In 1858, having lived for just over a year at Red Lion Square with Burne-Jones, Morris found himself in need of new accommodation. Early that year he had proposed to Jane Burden and, having been accepted, required a residence suited to married life. Plans for a new home were developed that summer when Morris made another trip to France, this time with Charles Faulkner and Philip Webb. Morris had met Webb while working in the architectural offices of G.E. Street, and the two soon formed a strong and lasting friendship. Morris appointed Webb as architect to his new house, though the project was a collaborative venture. The resultant ‘Red House’ at Upton near Bexleyheath, Kent, was, and to a lesser extent still is, both a site and a symbol of how Morris worked with nature at this early stage of his career. At once pastoral and Pre-Raphaelite, the Red House stands in the same problematic relationship to nature as the works discussed in the previous chapter. Yet the design and furnishing of this home also provided the initial conceptual, and practical, space for Morris’s venture into the decorative arts. As much a Morrisian attempt to recreate Eden as build a house, Rossetti described it as ‘a most noble work in every way, and more a poem than a house, ... but an admirable place to live in too’.4

Webb and Morris discovered the position for Red House after ‘much travelling about to look for possible sites’. Aymer Vallance, biographer and acquaintance of Morris, indicated that the choice of location for Morris’s new home rested on a bond between landscape and history. Vallance described the highways of Kent as ‘dear’ to Morris

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3 Besides building Morris’s first home, Webb joined Morris in many of his ‘crusades’: he was a member of the S.P.A.B., and followed Morris into the Socialist League. His life and work are described by Lethaby in Philip Webb and His Work, and also acknowledged in Nikolaus Pevsner, Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981 (1936), pp. 57–60.
through their having been trodden by the feet of Chaucer’s Canterbury pilgrims; while its historic memories were illustrious in his eyes, because it was there had sprung up and spread among carles and yeomen the popular movement led by valorous John Ball.6

Mackail also noted that Morris ‘may have pleased himself with the notion of living close to the track of the Canterbury pilgrims; the *vena porta* of mediaeval England’.7

In recognition of this link, Morris called the garden porch at Red House ‘The Pilgrim’s Rest’.

More practically, the site was chosen because of its proximity to Abbey Wood station and the recently extended North Kent Line. With his studio and ‘shop’ still in London, Morris needed to be in the city everyday. Bexleyheath, only ten miles from London, was therefore ideal: still rural enough to remind him of his native Essex, it was near enough to the city for him to ‘commute’ daily. It also made a convenient ‘weekend retreat’ for friends left in London. Georgiana Burne-Jones recalled ‘the excellent habit of going to Red House ... from Saturday afternoon to Monday morning’, and the ‘refreshing’ sense of escape.8 In this respect, Morris’s experience of nature during this period remained urban; the choice of this site was more an accommodation to the city than a move out or away from it. More specifically, there was a suburban quality to living at Bexleyheath because the site was close to a group of other dwellings, forming a kind of ‘middle ground between urban congestion and rural isolation’ (see fig. xxiii). As Bermingham has argued, ‘[a]ccessibility by railway made the countryside a kind of city park, a place to escape to, and the removal of country from daily life made rural nature an object of specialised ... study’. Like the Victorian suburb, the site for Morris’s home was testimony to the ‘fetish of rusticity’

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6 Vallance, *Art, Writings and Public Life*, p. 43.
7 Mackail, *Life*, vol. I, p. 141. It should be noted that in his description of the hunt for a site for Red House, Mackail took the opportunity to enlarge on ‘[w]hat Morris required in a country’. Mackail argued that Morris was ‘really indifferent’ as to how far the site was from London, and that Morris did not like the ‘normal English landscape’ because it was ‘everywhere inclosed’ and gave him ‘a sense of imprisonment’. In this chapter, I argue against this analysis: to justify his statement, Mackail (*Life*, vol. I, pp. 140–1) relied on quotes from Morris made nearly twenty years after his choice of the site at Upton, quotes that are an accurate assessment of Morris’s later thoughts, but do not represent his feelings at this time.
Fig. xxiii
1860 Ordnance Survey map showing the location of Red House and its proximity to other dwellings.

Fig. xxiv
Enlargement of 1860 Ordnance Survey map, showing garden layout and position of buildings at Red House. The black lines are the boundary fence or wall; the brown lines indicate wattle fencing; and the dotted lines show the position of walks or footpaths. The ‘w’ indicates the position of the well.
that represented the survival of an at once 'picturesque' and 'communal' sensibility. Providing refuge from the harsher realities of both rural and urban life, it was a combination of dream and reality, artifice and nature, metropolitan and country life.

It was, however, 'country life' that was the aim and ideal behind the building of Red House, though not the 'hunting, shooting and fishing' variety enjoyed by some of the middle to upper classes. Morris's choice of the site at Bexleyheath reflected more a desire to create an earthly paradise fitted to the purposes of art and relaxation. Morris wanted, according to Georgiana Burne-Jones, a site 'in the midst of apple-trees', and she recalled that the site at Upton was an 'orchard surrounded by meadows and with space where they could build in the orchard with scarcely any disturbance of the trees'. Mackail also recalled that 'the orchard seemed to suit his requirements as nearly as possible', and this desire to live 'embowered' by apple trees, with its implicit understanding of the countryside as secure, passive and fertile, reflects the rustic or pastoral aspirations behind the building of this home.

Yet although the 'paradise' created was informed by Biblical and classical ideas of Eden, it was primarily an idealised medieval 're-creation'. Surrounded and enclosed by meadows, the orchard, and a long, high wall, the garden at Red House was rather like a hortus conclusus, complete with medieval 'herbers'. A great deal of effort went into the planning of this space. Mackail claimed that the layout of house and garden 'had been planned with such care that hardly a tree in the orchard had to be cut down; apples fell in at the window as they stood open on hot autumn nights'. This is consistent with later pronouncements by Morris, who argued that gardens should be the first consideration when planning a house. Much of the garden was also pre-

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9 See Bermingham's chapter, 'Middle Grounds and Middle Ways: The Victorian Suburban Experience of Landscape', and especially the section on "The "Town Pilgrim of Nature"", in Landscape and Ideology, pp. 157-74; and also, Creese, 'Imagination in the Suburbs', pp. 49-67.
13 Mackail, Life, vol. I, p. 144. In fact these trees have played a central role in the re-imagining of Red House by later commentators, perhaps because of Morris's later strictures against the 'murder' of
planted so that the plants had time to achieve the luxuriance and complexity of established growth by the time the inhabitants arrived. The architectural drawings included aspects of the garden, including the jasmine, rose, honeysuckle and passion flowers which eventually covered the red-brick walls (fig. xxv). Georgiana Burne-Jones remembered these ‘had been planted against the walls of the house at the earliest possible time, so that there was no look of raw newness about it’.15

Accordingly, the garden ‘quickly took shape’:

In front of the house it was spaced formally into four little square gardens making a big square together; each of the smaller squares had a wattle fence around it with an opening by which one entered, and all over the roses grew thickly.16

An 1860 Ordnance Survey map (fig. xxiv), as well as details in Webb’s notebooks, support these descriptions.17 Wattle fencing, enclosing the internal angle of the L-shaped house, also formed an ‘inner court’. In the middle of this garden-within-a-garden ‘rose the most striking architectural feature of the building, a well-house of brickwork and oak timber, with a steep conical tiled roof’ (see figs. xxvi–xxvii). These semi-cloistered and trellised gardens were modelled on thirteenth and fourteenth-century herbers such as those described by Albertus Magnus or illustrated in manuscripts such as the Roman de la Rose.18 Those who spent time in this garden in the 1860s remembered it as an creative ‘bower’ of bliss,19 and much of the art produced by Morris during this period reflects the combined influence of the medieval illustrations and ‘direct’ observation of the garden modelled on them, such as the 1862

trees. See, for example, ‘Making the Best of It’ and ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’, in Hopes and Fears for Art, pp. 87, 125–30.

14 Webb’s notes on the site includes a list of eighty trees, among which are apple, plum, cherry, damson and hawthorn. The notebook belongs to a private collector, but was displayed at the Victoria and Albert Museum’s ‘William Morris, 1834–1896’ in May, June and July of 1996. See Linda Parry’s comments on this notebook in the extensive ‘catalogue’ that accompanied this exhibition in William Morris (hereafter referred to as V&A Catalogue), ed. Linda Parry, Philip Wilson in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1996, p. 26).


17 See Derek Baker, The Flowers of William Morris, p. 44.


19 See, for example, Georgiana Burne-Jones’s description in Memorials, vol. I, pp. 210–12.
Fig. xxv
Establishing nature: Philip Webb’s architectural drawings of the west elevation of Red House. The names of plants are very faintly indicated on the lower walls of the house. The sketched square to the left of the drawing may be a plan for one of the ‘herbers’.
Fig. xxvi
H.P. Clifford's line drawing of Red House, done for Vallance's 1897 study: one of the oldest images of Red House, though still without the wattle fencing.
Fig. xxvii
A more recent 'embowered' perspective of Red House from under one of the original fruit trees. Georgiana Burne-Jones felt that 'this little court with its beautiful high-roofed brick well in the centre summed up the feeling of the whole place'.
These arrangements anticipated Morris’s general prescriptions for gardens set out in later speeches and articles. In some ways, his preference for the ‘medieval’ garden reflected the eclectic taste of many Victorian gardeners as they reacted against the ‘landscape gardening’ of the eighteenth century. The ‘park’ model was rejected for its lack of imaginative variety; for its aesthetically displeasing and socially inconveniencing disconnection of house and garden; and for its deception of the spectator, who was misled into believing that what he saw before him was a ‘realistic’ if improved version of the natural scene.  

Morris emphasised that a garden should

be well fenced from the outside world. It should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature, but should look like a thing never to be seen except near a house. It should, in fact, look like a part of the house.

That Morris already felt this way at the time he built Red House is indicated by some of the ‘literary gardens’ he created. ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, published in 1856, provides a clear example of Morris’s preference for a ‘medieval’ style, rich, yet orderly and enclosed:

in the midst of a cloister was a lawn, and in the midst of that lawn, a fountain of marble, carved round about with flowers and strange beasts; and at the edge of this lawn, near the round arches, were a great many sun-flowers that were all in blossom ... and up many of the pillars of the cloister crept passion-flowers and roses. Then, farther from the Church, and past the cloister and its buildings, were many detached buildings, and a great garden round them, all within the circle of the poplar trees; in the garden were trellises covered over with rose...
Fig. xxviii
Art–Nature–Art: ‘Trellis’ (1862), one of Morris’s earliest designs for wallpaper, and probably inspired both by the garden at Red House and by medieval illustrations.

Fig. xxix
A cartoon for the King Arthur and Sir Lancelot window, commissioned in 1862 by Walter Dunlop for Harden Grange in Yorkshire. The design shows fencing, fruit trees and flowers similar to those in the garden at Red House.
This imagined garden is generous and superabundant but not opulent or ‘showy’.

The rest of this passage from the ‘Unknown Church’ describes a luxuriant variety of flowers (quoted p. 219 above), suggesting that Morris would also have been careful in his choice of blooms for the garden at Red House. As was the case with most things aesthetic, Morris was not satisfied with much of the work done by contemporaries. He demanded a careful and particular blend of culture and nature, and complained bitterly about ‘over-artificiality in flowers’. His defence of ‘wild’ and older varieties of rose against newer florists’ ‘specimens’ was typical of the passion he divested in issues concerning aesthetic taste and judgement, and probably of his concern for the garden at Red House.24 This Ruskinian zeal carried over into strictures against the Victorian taste for ferns (which belong ‘within reach of the spray of the waterfall’), non-native ‘curiosities’ ('generally the growth of hot countries where things sprout over-quick and rank’), ‘excessive’ colour ('scarlet geraniums ... or the yellow calceolaria ... grown together ... show that even flowers can be thoroughly ugly’), ‘carpet-gardening’ ('an aberration of the human mind’), and even certain forms of fencing ('use a live hedge, or stones set flatwise ... or timber, or wattle, or, in short, anything but iron’).25

These comments were made in 1879, but Morris seems to have adhered to such principles in his garden at Red House. The flower beds were edged with lavender and rosemary and filled with lilies, sunflowers or poppies, according to season: ‘things that are free and interesting in their growth, leaving Nature to do the desired complexity’.26 Indeed Morris’s insistence on natural as opposed to artificial gardening, on a ‘careful balance of lushness and decorum’, and on an organic relationship between house and garden, reinforced ideas already prevalent among some gardeners and inspired many later practitioners and theorists to explore new and/or different meanings

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26 Morris, ‘Making the Best of It’, p. 87.
of the domestication of nature around the home. Nevertheless, Morris’s gardens were primarily aesthetic creations which recreated the diversity and complexity of nature. In some respects a symbol of the lost ‘Gothic Eden’, but essentially a piece of art, the garden at Red House was primarily a Pre-Raphaelite bower ‘illuminating’ one corner of what was understood as an otherwise grimy, urban-industrial world.

Much the same can be said for the house itself. Mackail wrote that Morris ‘wanted it not merely as a place to live in, but as a fixed centre and background for his artistic work’. When it was built, Red House was a combination of Ruskinian Gothic, Pre-Raphaelite ‘Palace of Art’ and English rural vernacular. Jacques Migeon has noted that Ruskin’s Edinburgh Lectures were a significant influence on the design of Red House; Paul Thompson has argued convincingly that it was built in a style similar to that being used by G.E. Street and William Butterfield for country schools and vicarages, and Morris himself admitted that the house was ‘very medieval in spirit’. This is not the same as saying it was Pre-Raphaelite, but at this stage of Morris’s life, Rossetti was still a dominant influence and strongly affected what the younger artist considered to be a ‘truly’ medieval style. Features such as gables, arches, casements, a turreted well-house, courtyard and stables helped to make Red House Morris’s own joyeuse garde. In some respects, Red House was the realisation of a vernacular ‘nature of Gothic’. The characteristic features of Red House combine elements of both Gothic and ‘picture-esque’: a high pitched red-tiled roof, pointed arches, oriel, dormer, casement and lancet windows, a courtyard which suggested the monastic influence of Past and Present, and tall exposed chimney breasts. Even Paul

27 MacCarthy (A Life for Our Time, p. 165) has noted that there are many signs of Morris in William Robinson’s The English Flower Garden (1883), J.D. Sedding’s Garden Craft Old and New (1891), and Reginald Blomfield’s The Formal Garden in England (1892). Contemporary garden design historians such as Christopher Thacker (The Genius of Gardening: The History of Gardens in Britain and Ireland, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1994, pp. 123–8) have also noted Morris’s influence on gardens such as Gertrude Jekyll’s Munstead Wood. Jekyll would have come into close contact with Morris’s ideas when she attended the School of Art in South Kensington at which Morris was a lecturer and examiner.


Thompson, who otherwise emphasises the influence of Street and Butterfield, has argued that Morris’s planned extension to the house

was to have been a half-timbered wing enclosing the well court. To modern eyes this would have destroyed the simple excellence of the house, but to Morris it would have emphasised its romantic creeper-covered mediaevalism.33

All of which is not to underplay the influence of Webb, and the ‘school’ of English vernacular architecture referred to by Thompson. Indeed, Georgiana Burne-Jones indicated that Webb designed Red House so that ‘additions could be made without difficulty’ and that ‘architect and client had but one mind about the whole work’.34 Webb’s role, however, was always primary. It was Webb who designed the house and drew up the plans. It was Webb, also, who dealt with the contractor, William Kent, and specified all the details, such as the well-head, newel staircase posts, doors, hinges, walls and gates.35 It was probably Webb who decided that the house would be built out of the local red brick, though Morris’s later arguments for the use of local materials are now better remembered. Moreover, it was Webb’s search for a ‘free style’,36 and his bringing together of Street and Butterfield, that gave Red House many of the features which have since been considered architecturally pioneering or historically significant.37 One needs to treat with scepticism, therefore, claims such as those made by Vallance, that Webb ‘in effect was merely carrying out Morris’s directions’.38

35 As is apparent from Webb’s architectural drawings, kept by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.
36 Hermann Muthesius first noted Webb’s combination of vernacular, secular, broadly historical and yet inventive forms in Das Englische Haus (1904–05).
37 Architects and designers have admired the way Red House created different outside spaces and interior rooms related to a series of paths or routes through the building; and it has frequently been argued that the design and free functional planning of the house inspired aspects of Arts and Crafts architecture, especially C.F.A. Voysey’s domestic, rustic style. Some contemporary architectural historians have traced this development through to many of the ‘naturalistic’ architects of the twentieth century. See, for example, Edward Cullinan, ‘Morris, Architecture and Art’, in William Morris Today, eds. Sandy Nairne, Teresa Newman, Ian Tod and Ray Watkinson, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975, pp. 51–2.
38 Vallance, Art, Writings and Public Life, p. 43.
On the other hand, we cannot and should not ignore the fact that Red House in many ways grew out of Morris’s critical inhabiting of where he found himself, historically, culturally, artistically and personally. Steeped in Ruskin, a regular reader of The Builder, and a one-time employee of G.E. Street, Morris was also effected by the Gothic Revival movement, as indeed was Webb. The influence of this movement on Morris’s conception of nature will be explored below. The point here is to note that Morris was, if not centrally then at least critically, involved in the development of Red House. When work started on the house in 1859, Morris stayed at nearby Aberleigh Lodge to oversee the work. It has also been observed that Webb’s contract drawings of Red House contain many alterations in pencil, suggesting ‘something of his relationship with a demanding client’. In many ways the house was a collaborative project between Morris as artist and client, and Webb as designer and architect. W.R. Lethaby wrote that ‘the early work of Webb and Morris was so interwoven that we cannot tell in some instances where the work of one man began and the work of another finished’. And Lethaby is probably correct in his estimation that ‘[t]he house and gardens at Bexley Heath fully represented Morris’.

In particular, the house represented ‘the breadth of Morris’s conception of architecture, extending from the smallest decorative detail to the landscape itself’. In later years Morris enlarged on this conception and it is tempting to think that Red House represented a testing ground, or the seed of his later thoughts on these issues. In 1881 he described architecture as ‘one of the most important things which man can turn his hand to’, and argued that it was ‘worth the attention of serious people, not for an hour only, but for a good part of their lives, even though they may not have to do with it professionally’. He emphasised that it was a ‘great subject’ because ‘it embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man … it means the moulding and altering to human needs of the very face of the earth itself’. ‘[T]is we ourselves’, he argued, ‘each one of us, who must keep watch and ward over the fairness of the earth, and each with his own soul and hand do his due share

40 Lethaby, Philip Webb, p. 27.
41 Thompson, The Work of William Morris, p. 49.
therein'. This broad definition of architecture, ‘that is to say, the fairness of the earth amidst the habitations of men’, meant that it was intimately linked to the features of nature and landscape. Again and again Morris stressed that Victorians should feel ‘responsible to posterity for what may befall the fairness of the earth … for what we have done, in other words, towards the progress of Architecture’. ‘[L]et me remind you’, he told his 1881 audience, ‘of how it fares with the beauty of the earth when some big house near our dwelling-place … is at last to be turned into ready money’:

while it is being pulled down, you hear the axe falling on the trees of its generous garden … where man and nature together have worked so long and patiently for the blessing of the neighbours… Next morning when you get up you look towards that great plane-tree which has been such a friend to you so long through sun and rain and wind, which was a world in itself of incident and beauty: but now there is a gap and no plane-tree; next morning ’tis the turn of the great sweeping layers of darkness that the ancient cedars thrust out from them, very treasures of loveliness and romance; they are gone too … and the next day when you look in with a sore heart, you see that once fair great garden turned into a petty miserable clay-trampled yard, and everything is ready for the latest development of Victorian architecture…

Morris held no high regard for these ‘latest development[s]’. He argued that most Victorian houses were built ‘without any hope of beauty or care’ and that they expressed the ‘hypocrisy, flunkeyism, and careless selfishness’ of an age in which houses were ‘no longer part of our lives’. He did admit, however, that a rebellion had begun against these dwellings:

for of late there have been houses rising up among us here and there which have certainly not been planned either by the common cut-and-dried designers for builders, or by academical imitators of bygone styles. Though they may be called experimental, no one can say that they are not born of thought and principle, as well as of great capacity for design.

Perhaps he had Red House in mind when he wrote this speech. In another place he lapsed into deeper nostalgia:

44 Morris, ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’, p. 120.
47 Morris, ‘Making the Best of It’, p. 85.
48 Morris, ‘Making the Best of It’, p. 84.
time was that ... the new house indeed would have taken away a little piece of the flowery green sward, a few yards of the teeming hedge-row; but a new order, a new beauty would have taken the place of the old: the very flowers of the field would have but given place to flowers fashioned by man's hand and mind: the hedge-row oak would have blossomed into fresh beauty in roof-tree and lintel and door-post...

'Such', Morris argued, 'can a new house be, such it has been: for this is no ideal house I am thinking of'.\(^4^9\) Though these prescriptions come twenty years later and represent Morris's developed views on architecture, one can reasonably assume that Morris considered Red House 'added to the natural beauty of the earth instead of marring it'.\(^5^0\)

The image of nature acceding to art is striking and is particularly appropriate when one considers the interior decoration of Red House. The commonly accepted story, told by May Morris, Georgiana Burne-Jones and by Mackail, is that '[o]nly in a few isolated cases ... was there anything then to be bought ready-made that Morris could be content with in his own house':

Not a chair, or table, or bed; not a cloth or paper hanging for the walls; nor tiles to line fireplaces or passages; nor a curtain or a candlestick; nor a jug to hold wine or a glass to drink it out of, but had to be reinvented, one might almost say, to escape the flat ugliness of the current article.\(^5^1\)

Thus the decoration of Red House proceeded as a do-(or at least design-)it-yourself, communal effort on the part of Morris and his circle of friends. Mackail described the house as a 'canvas to work upon', and Morris persuaded many of his Pre-Raphaelite cohorts from the Oxford Union project to help beautify his home. Burne-Jones painted the walls with scenes from the medieval romance \textit{Sire Degrevaunt} and planned a series of scenes from the Trojan War, designed painted tiles for the fireplaces and allegorical stained glass for the windows. Other walls were covered in hangings of Chaucer's flaxen-haired women and bright flowers, designed by Morris and worked by Jane Morris and Elizabeth Siddall. Rossetti painted scenes from Dante's \textit{Vita Nuova} on the

\(^5^0\) Morris, 'The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization', p. 128.
doors of a huge ‘medieval’ settle. Morris painted trees and parrots interspersed with his adopted motto ‘If I can’ on the wall of the drawing-room.

All of these works revived or reworked images and themes used in Rossetti’s brand of Pre-Raphaelite art. Morris’s own efforts were particularly marked by this influence. A painting begun, but never completed, on the panels of a canopied cupboard in the hall depicts a kind of Arthurian Eden (see fig. xxx). Perhaps a reference to Lancelot’s bringing of Tristram and Iseult to the castle of the Joyous Gard, the two scenes show figures in a fenced garden in what has been called a Pre-Raphaelite version of Déjeuner sur l’herbe.52 With the exception of Rossetti and Webb, the models used were all those most intimately involved in the creation of Red House: Jane Morris, the Burne-Jones, Elizabeth Siddall and Charles Faulkner. Surrounded by roses, daisies and fruit trees, it is hard to tell whether this is a scene of art imitating life, or life imitating art.

Another decorative element that recalled the Oxford Union adventure, was Morris’s painting of the ceilings at Red House, again with the help of Charles Faulkner. This time, however, the scheme was geometrical and also relied on the help of Jane Morris. Many other schemes were also planned. None, however, could be described as naturalistic. Perhaps most tellingly, inscribed on the red-brick fire-place in the large drawing-room are the words ‘ars longa vita brevis’.

In many respects, therefore, Red House was a ‘palace of art’.53 It was not a light and airy house, nor was it simply furnished or decorated.54 This was still Morris’s ‘high Gothic’ and Pre-Raphaelite period, an aesthetic adventure to create ‘more a
Morris’s unfinished ‘garden of delight’, painted on panels of Webb’s cabinet in the hall at Red House.
poem than a house’. Nevertheless, it was from these efforts that many of his later concerns developed. The nature of the lifestyle at Red House reflected a sense of the value of communal working life; and the historical–natural–literary design elements indicated the direction of future artistic ventures. The decoration of Red House anticipated Morris’s later injunction to designers: ‘And as for your teachers, they must be Nature and History’ (my emphasis). Furthermore, though Morris wrote in 1861 that he had ‘long meant’ to establish a firm of decorators, and had already designed and decorated furnishings at Red Lion Square, it was ultimately the decoration of Red House which led to the establishment in 1861 of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company, ‘Fine Art Workmen in Painting, Carving, Furniture, and the Metals’. There were even plans to move the Company to Upton, and add an additional wing to Red House for Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones.

This description of Red House as a ‘palace of art’ conflicts with much twentieth-century appreciation of this building. Many who admire Red House today appreciate both its ‘earthiness’, the way in which it is linked to its environment, and the way it exhibits intimations of broad historical change, of history moved by the provision of restful space for contact with nature: often as ‘dwelling’ rather than ‘building’. Many also believe the ‘happy union’ of house and garden at Red House became, for Morris, a paradigm of the relationships between people and nature under ideal conditions. One needs to keep in mind, however, that Red House did not emerge from the same reasoning that produced the communal halls of News from Nowhere. Red House was a personal solution, a reaction, an escape, an attempt to wall off or shut out industrial ugliness and inhumanity, and not an attempt to grapple with or solve it. Morris did not build the house with his own hands, did not eschew a stark contrast to other Victorian interiors, and uses the light and airy photos of Red House as it now appears to make her point.

56 See Bigwood’s discussion of Martin Heidegger’s essay ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’, in Earth Muse, pp. 207–8. There is the frequent suggestion or intimation in some of the less critical works on Morris, that Red House is a site that upsets dichotomies such as public/private and mental/manual along with the culture/nature division discussed here. Edward Hollamby (Red House, Architecture Design and Technology Press, London, 1991, no page numbers), an architect who has lived at Red House since 1952, argues that the reasons for Red House’s appeal ‘lie in a renewed attraction towards three principles it epitomised at the time it was built—a reaction against pretension and overweening exhibitionism; a reaction against industrial ugliness; and a reaction against industrial inhumanity’.
domestic servants, and did not consider Red House as part of the suburban expansion of London that had 'taken away a little piece of the flowery green sward'. In 1879 he wrote:

my hope is that those who begin to consider carefully how to make the best of the chambers in which they eat and sleep and study, and hold converse with their friends, will breed in their minds a wholesome and fruitful discontent with the sordidness that even when they have done their best will surround their island of comfort, and that as they try to appease this discontent they will find that there is no way out of it but by insisting that all men’s work shall be fit for free men and not for machines: my extravagant hope is that people will some day learn something of art, and so long for more, and will find as I have, that there is no getting it save by the general acknowledgment of the right of every man to have fit work to do in a beautiful home.\(^{58}\)

Red House provided ‘fit work’ in a beautiful home, but it was still an ‘island of comfort’.\(^{59}\)

In 1860–65, however, the aim of Morris and his friends was to make Red House ‘the beautifullest place on earth’.\(^{60}\) More an intense hoarding than a ‘reasonable share’, it was an attempt to create a *hortus conclusus*, a medieval walled garden. Circled by meadows, a wall, an orchard, trellises, creepers, and, finally, ‘embowered’ by Pre-Raphaelite art, nature was used to enclose and escape. Like Andrew Marvell’s ‘Appleton House’, Red House was ‘Heaven’s Centre, Nature’s Lap ... Paradise’s only Map’. Moreover, one is also tempted to conclude that Morris, like the earlier poet, might have thought: ‘How safe, methinks, and strong, behind / These Trees have incamp’d my Mind’.\(^{61}\) The house was, as Douglas Schoenherr has noted, ‘strangely like’ Tennyson’s palace of art: ‘a symbol of intellectual and spiritual isolation and pride that finally has to be abandoned’.\(^{62}\) And, in 1865, with business demanding his presence in London, commuting damaging his health, and Burne-Jones’s rejecting his

\(^{57}\) See, for example, the conditions which obtain in *News from Nowhere*; and Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature*, p. 18.

\(^{58}\) Morris, ‘Making the Best of It’, p. 86.

\(^{59}\) It should be noted, however, that *some* found it ‘startling’ and ‘bizarre’. See the comments of William Bell Scott, quoted in MacCarthy, *A Life for Our Time*, p. 162.

\(^{60}\) Edward Burne-Jones, quoted by Mackail, *Life*, vol. i, p. 159.


idea of community living, Morris returned to the city, never to visit Red House again. The following year, the property was sold as a ‘capital freehold lease’ (see fig. xxxi), and Morris never owned a house or lived permanently in the country again. Ultimately, it seems, not all was right in the garden of Eden.
UPTON, NEAR BEXLEY, KENT.

To be Let,

A CAPITAL FREEHOLD RESIDENCE,

DISTINGUISHED AS "RED HOUSE."

Erected in 1859, on an elevated position, commanding Extensive Views of the surrounding much-admired scenery; it has exceedingly Dry Concrete Foundations, supporting very solidly-built Walls, faced with best Picked Kentish Red Bricks, stands in its own Grounds, approached by a Carriage Sweep, and affords the following accommodation:---

On the First Floor.—Three principal Bed Rooms and Dressing Room, a Large and Elegant Room, built as an Artist's Studio, capable of being converted into a Bed Room and Dressing Room; a Noble Corridor, lighted with Stained Glass, of high artistic excellence, with a beautiful Southern View over the Kentish Hills; fine Oak Landing and Staircase, Passage, Water Closet, and Two Servants' Bed Rooms (one for Three Beds); Drawing Room, 24 ft. by 18 ft., well lighted, and most elegantly and artistically decorated with the commencement of a series of Wall Pictures, by an Eminent Artist of the Old Water Colour Society. On the West end is a charming old English Oriel Window, looking North, South, and West.

There is access from this Floor to the High-pitched Roof above the Joists, forming a capital Store Room for Fruits, or could be made into an excellent Laundry Room.

On the Ground Floor.—a Fine Hall, entered through a Porch with a Gothic Arch, leading into a Lower Corridor, lighted with Stained Glass of the best character; Garden Porch, leading out to the charming Greenhouse, with well,8scepted in the Old English Style; Dining Room, 24 ft. by 15 ft., handsome Dado Paneling, commodious Cupboard and Closet; Library and Morning Room; Kitchen, fitted with capital Range; Butler's Hatch, Large and Light Pantry, ample Closet Room for China and Glass, Large Store Room, Scullery, Larder, Housemaid's Closet, Water Closet, Beer and Wine Cellars, Commodious Outbuildings, excellent COACH-HOUSE, and TWO-STALLED STABLE, WITH LOFT.

The Grounds are tastefully disposed, the Flower Garden with Pleasances in character with the House, Bowling Green, Orchard, and Productive Kitchen Garden, the whole containing more than an Acre.

There is an abundant supply of Spring Water, which has never failed in the hottest Summer.

Immediate Possession may be had.

The Fixtures and Fittings will be included in the purchase.

If water and Gas can be laid on if desired.

For Terms and Cards to View apply to

MR. MARSH,
Auctioneer, Surveyor, and Land Agent,
I, CHARLOTTE ROW, MANSION HOUSE.

June 1866

Fig. xxxi

'A Capital Freehold Lease': the land agent's bill for Red House, sold (not let) to James Arnold Heathcote in 1866.
2. The shadowy isle of bliss

While living at Red House, Morris had continued to write poetry. During this period he worked on a series of poems concerning the Trojan War, but these remained unpublished until 1915 when May Morris gathered them together for the Collected Works. This work was followed by an even grander cycle of poems which demonstrated that the idea of a safe place in nature was never far from Morris’s mind. The Earthly Paradise, published in four parts between 1868 and 1870, comprises some 1250 pages of rhymed verse, and is an immense narrative mythology loosely constructed around the storytelling of a group of Northern ‘Wanderers’ who have spent their lives searching for paradise. It relates the tales they tell when they arrive in ‘some Western land’, each of which draw on Morris’s extensive reading of eastern and western mythology. Yet although The Earthly Paradise is a huge and complexly constructed work, its representation of nature is often languid and monotonous. While the title suggests that the poems are a celebration of earthbound, sensuously material existence, ‘paradise’ is only, if ever, gained in unearthly, Arcadian landscapes, which can quite literally lull the reader to sleep. The mollifying charm of The Earthly Paradise established Morris as one of the foremost poets of the age; in the mind of many mid-Victorians, he was the poet of ‘perfect repose’. Thus, noting those verses which do emphasise humanity’s more precarious place in nature, we need to understand why most were more Elysian fields.

Many have noted the ways in which The Earthly Paradise reflects Morris’s disappointment in love and marriage at this time, ‘an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself’, as Mackail so tactfully put it. E.P. Thompson characterised The Earthly Paradise as ‘the poetry of despair’. He

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1 For discussion of this work, see Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, pp. 110–14; and MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, pp. 190–2.
believed that these verses represented a failed attempt to enshroud the painful reality of an ugly, industrialised England, as well as an unsuccessful marriage. Overall, Thompson’s analysis is an accurate assessment of a period in which Morris attempted to assimilate himself to life outside the palace of art. More recent studies of *The Earthly Paradise*, however, have sought a more positive and pivotal position in Morris’s oeuvre for this obviously significant work. It has been argued that the poem, seen as a whole, ‘gave fine expression to Morris’s faith in the power of life’ and was crucial to the process of his ‘poetic maturing’. It has also been claimed that *The Earthly Paradise* was a part of Morris’s ‘unified social vision’ and is therefore the most appropriate place to begin an assessment of Morris’s ‘career of social commitment’. In a similar fashion, Florence Boos has asserted that *The Earthly Paradise* anticipated several ‘deep motives’ of Morris’s later socialist thought, including his belief in the value of ‘fellowship’, the communal nature of culture and work, and in the restorative power of historical understanding. Most recently, Jeffrey Skoblow has contended that *The Earthly Paradise* is a poem that ‘stands against everything’, and that it provides a romantic and a materialist critique of nineteenth-century capitalism.

Each of these works has quite rightly attempted to ‘reclaim’ the significance of *The Earthly Paradise*; Morris’s nineteenth-century fame rested largely on his being ‘the author of *The Earthly Paradise*’. Nevertheless, many of these interpretations have not resisted ‘ways of reading that our time teaches’, and have ‘read back’ from Morris’s later socialist beliefs a commitment to ‘fellowship’, humanity, history and the world. When one explores the reactions of Morris’s nineteenth-century readers,
however, one becomes aware that some of our most recent readings overlook the extent to which *The Earthly Paradise* was a reaction to certain Victorian views of nature.

*The Earthly Paradise* was begun at Red House, but most of it was written in 'dismal Queen Square in black old filthy London'.\(^{10}\) Morris had moved here with his family in 1865. Georgiana Burne-Jones remembered that 'whitewash' and 'beautiful fabrics' partially 'conquered' the 'dinginess of the neighbourhood', but 'nothing ever made it a home like the one they had left'.\(^{11}\) Living among the 'bugs of Bloomsbury',\(^{12}\) and with only a cluttered yard, the house in Queen Square must have seemed a poor substitute for the Red House. No wonder, then, that Morris sought to construct a compensatory world. Living 'above the shop' felt too much like 'Podsnappery'.

In order to enter his earthly paradise, therefore, Morris called upon his readers to ignore the harsh realities of a polluted, violent and ugly world:

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;

He asked them instead to

Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean ...
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green;

and, just in case they missed the fact that this was a step back in time, he invited them to

Think, that below bridge the green lapping waves
Smite some few keels that bear Levantine staves,
Cut from the yew wood on the burnt up hill,

\(^9\) See note 8 above.
\(^{12}\) Morris used this phrase to refer to Bloomsbury in a letter to Jane Morris of 18 March 1878, in *Letters*, vol. I, p. 459.
And pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,
And treasured scanty spice from some far sea,
Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery,
And cloth of Bruges, and hogshhead of Guienne;
While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer’s pen
Moves over bills of lading—mid such times
Shall dwell the hollow puppets of my rhymes.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus, from the start, Morris invited his readers into a reactionary world: anti-modern, anti-urban and anti-industrial. It has been argued that this initial urban industrial setting of the poem, combined with the immediately juxtaposed ‘pastoral’ imagery, provides contextual tension for the whole work; that Morris’s antithetical or ‘dialectical perspective’ makes his invocation to forget ‘less escape than ... a kind of aesthetic activity with social significance’.\(^\text{14}\) In this way, \textit{The Earthly Paradise} is read as an expression of ‘idleness’ or ‘contemplation’—‘a green thought in a green shade’—which signalled the separation of nature and civilisation and reflected it in antithetical images.\(^\text{15}\)

Another way of understanding this passage, and indeed the whole work, is that it is civilisation’s \textit{proximity} to a nature feared to be empty or meaningless that prompts Morris’s call to oblivion. In other words, it is not so much that Morris rejects the ‘progressive’ and ‘mechanical’ views of nature and history put forth by Mill and Macaulay, but rather that he finds it difficult to face them. To call this turning away mere ‘idleness’ rather than ‘escapism’ seems to ignore the poet’s own prefatory ‘Apology’:

\begin{quote}
Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay...
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
... So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the beating of the steely sea,
\end{quote}

\(^{13}\) Morris, \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, vol. I, p. 3.
\(^{15}\) Calhoun, \textit{The Pastoral Vision}, p. 29.
Where tossed about all hearts of men must be;  
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,  
Not the poor singer of an empty day.16

Certainly most of Morris’s nineteenth-century readers saw this as poetry to escape with, to read ‘stretched ’neath some umbrageous beech, or sheltered from the glare of noon by some fern-crested Devonshire cliff, with lazy summer sea-waves breaking at one’s feet’.17 The Earthly Paradise was considered ‘an effectual antidote for the overwrought self-consciousness of this generation’.18

Some did not appreciate the ‘honeyed’ quality of Morris’s work. Alfred Austin complained that Morris had ‘cut himself off’ from all the ‘active influences’ of the age, and had

surrendered himself wholly to the retrospective tendency of his time,  
which, when taken by itself, is the most pathetic … proclivity of which the time is capable. He ignores the present, and his eyelids close with a quiet sadness if you bid him explore the future.19

Another reviewer, while acknowledging its ‘special and sterling excellence’, marvelled at the popularity of ‘a poem outbidding most Elizabethan poems in its claims on the leisure and patience of its readers’ in ‘our Victorian epoch of bustle and business’ .20

But, of course, it was precisely those with leisure who read The Earthly Paradise. The work struck a particular chord with the newly prosperous and enfranchised middle classes. Morris’s readers were those who had benefited from the mid-century expansion of industry and empire, those who had won the vote in 1867; they were the stockbrokers and industrialists who had purchased Pre-Raphaelite art, and who bought Morris & Co. furnishings. Many were ‘Podsnaps’, or Arnold’s ‘Philistines’, ‘mechanically worshipping their fetish of the production of wealth and of the increase of manufactures and population, and looking neither to the right nor left so long as this

19 Austin, unsigned article, Temple Bar; in The Critical Heritage, pp. 94–5.  
increase goes on'. Thus, as E.P. Thompson noted, Morris's verse could be read by those who considered themselves 'enlightened' as poetry 'in its proper place'. Very few noticed anything untoward in these verses; if they did, most shunned discussion of it. Rather, *The Earthly Paradise* provoked a discussion of 'escapism' in art. 

Ironically, only the future poet laureate noted that Morris did not strive to 'set the crooked straight', and that Morris sung 'only for those who, like himself, have given up the age, its boasted spirit, its vaunted progress, its infinite vulgar nothings, and have taken refuge in the sleepy region'. He concluded that Morris was 'the serene martyr of a mean and melancholy time'. In other words, as another reviewer noted, *The Earthly Paradise* was enjoyed by the Victorian middle classes because:

Mr. Morris ... [does] away with explanations and questions altogether. The reader is not only taken out of himself, but allowed to remain an unattached and, as nearly as may be, an indifferent spectator; his sympathy is excited, but in a general and diffused way. He is not expected to identify himself with the poet who tells the story or with any of his creatures. The persons pass before him in their due order, as parts in a connected series of beautiful images, and the beauty of the whole is the sole and sufficient reason for each past existing and being what it is. We accept them and enjoy them, as we might gaze on figures completing the effect of an excellent landscape.

For some, *The Earthly Paradise* could be a substitute for a country estate.

Closer study of this 'excellent landscape' reveals, however, that it is possible to find instances of the 'minute visionary veracity' contained in *The Defence of Guenevere*. One sees the 'mullet's flushed vermilion', and some reviewers found the verse 'strangely imaginative and suggestive, presenting pictures of almost

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21 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869); quoted in Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 139.
22 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 144.
23 Thompson (in *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 148) noted that this discussion gave rise to the 'art-for-art's-sake' school for whom Morris was a leading exponent of 'The English Renaissance of Art'. In this article in 1882, Oscar Wilde (*Essays and Lectures*, New York, Garland, 1978, p. 128) argued: 'Art never harms itself by keeping aloof from the social problems of the day: rather, by so doing, it more completely realises that which we desire'.
incomparable beauty'. It is necessary to understand, however, that the nature of *The Earthly Paradise* differs substantially from that of *The Defence of Guenevere*. Pater understood part of the transformation when he observed that *The Earthly Paradise* reflected a 'reaction from dreamlight to daylight'. Even though the daylight reached in *The Earthly Paradise* is more 'open' than the intensely personal 'dreamlight' of *The Defence of Guenevere*, there is a 'haze' over these broader landscapes. The landscape in ‘The Story of Rhodope’ is typical:

The green hill-slopes, besprinkled o’er with kine,  
And a grey neat-herd wandering here and there,  
And then the greener squares of well-propped vine,  
The changing cornfields and the homesteads fair,  
The white road winding on, that yet did bear  
Specks as of men and horses; the grey sea  
Meeting the dim horizon dreamily.

‘Perusal’ of this landscape left on the mind of one reviewer ‘images of drowsy beauty, which are neither entirely recollections nor quite suggestions, but partake of the nature of each’. It is an idealised countryside, a fact Morris acknowledged from the first, a necessarily mesmeric paradise, ‘a shadowy isle of bliss’. Charles Eliot Norton, writing in the *Nation*, felt that:

Mr. Morris’s landscapes have frequently, underlying their diversity of detail, a general similarity of outline and of tone... Every landscape, every description is clear, almost every one is finished and beautiful in itself, but there are too many which differ only in those minor points which, while they indicate the distinctness and truth of the poet’s vision, yet do not serve to give a strong enough impression of absolute variety.

There are grounds for recognising some ‘real’ landscapes in *The Earthly Paradise*. Mackail noted that Morris described scenes on the upper Thames encountered while on holiday in Oxford in 1867. He also suggested that Morris used

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30 Morris often used the word ‘haze’. See *The Earthly Paradise* verses for ‘September’ (vol. III, p. 2), October (vol. III, p. 122), and also the ‘mist’ of ‘November’ (vol. III, p. 206).  
32 Knight, unsigned review, p. 7; in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 55.  
the landscape around Bad Ems, where the Morries went for Jane’s health in 1869.\textsuperscript{35}

From letters Morris wrote while staying in Bad Ems, it is clear that he was working on ‘Acontius and Cydippe’, ‘The Death of Paris’ and ‘The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon’, all from the third part of \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, while staying at this spa town. In a letter to Webb of 31 July, he described the landscape of the ‘very narrow’ valley in which Bad Ems is situated, noting ‘the road on a sort of terrace’, the ‘jolly fruit-trees each side of them’, the vineyards ‘looking very neat and ship shape’, and above them ‘the bold uplands of the Rhine country, all covered with grain and oilseed crops’.\textsuperscript{36} This landscape reappears in the introductory lines to ‘September’ which immediately precedes ‘The Death of Paris’:

\begin{quote}
The level ground along the river-side  
Was merry through the day with sounds of those  
Who gathered apples; o’er the stream arose  
The northward looking slopes where the swine ranged  
Over the fields that hook and scythe had changed  
Since the last month; but ’twixt the tree-boles grey  
Above them did they see the terraced way,  
And over that the vine-stocks, row on row,  
Whose dusty leaves, well thinned and yellowing now,  
But little hid the bright-bloomed vine-bunches.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Swinburne acknowledged these ‘fruitful and faithful touches of landscape incident’, and noted others that were ‘broad and minute at once, large and sure by dint of accuracy’.\textsuperscript{38} Another contemporary critic went so far to say of \textit{The Life and Death of Jason} (1867), a tale which outgrew its place in \textit{The Earthly Paradise} and was published separately:

\begin{quote}
Mr. Morris is never more at home than when he is out of doors. He seems to revel in nature … not an elemental trait escapes him when he gets into his landscape vein. Far too fresh are his leafy, woody, airy, sunny scenes to be conceivably the result of a second-hand study; they bear the impress of nature directly on them… The poet who wrote the description of a storm in the first book of ‘Jason’ … must have studied out in the broad air,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Mackail, \textit{Life}, vol. I, p. 203.
open-eyed, open-eared, drinking in the beauties of prospect and sound
fresh from the springs of nature.39

Many of the monthly verses that occur between the Wanderers’ tales bear
evidence of these ‘beauties of prospect and sound fresh from the springs of nature’. In
the introduction to these verses, ‘The Author to the Reader’, Morris indicated his
intention to reveal ‘[s]ome portion of the flowers … of the varying land, / Wherein
erewhile I had the luck to stand’. He states that he

brought away
Some blossoms that before my footsteps lay,
Not plucked by me, not over-fresh or bright;
Yet, since they minded me of that delight,
Within the pages of this book I laid
Their tender petals, there in peace to fade.40

Thus in other verses he speaks of a ‘little stream, whose hamlets scarce have names,
This far-off, lonely mother of the Thames’,41 and ‘the gap made by our English hinds /
Amidst the Roman’s handiwork’.42 He does accept that these ‘tender petals’ of
memory are now ‘dry’ and ‘void of all their scent / And lovely colour’, yet he hopes
that ‘what once was meant / By these dull stains, some men may yet descry / As dead
upon the quivering leaves they lie’. Finally, he asks that the reader

Behold them here, and mock me if you will,
But yet believe no scorn of men can kill
My love of that fair land wherefrom they came,
Where midst the grass their petals once did flame.43

Perhaps these are blossoms ‘brought away’ from Red House; it is certainly a striking
image of nature pressed into the service of art and memory. It is also the kind of
resonance that May Morris emphasised in her introductions to The Earthly Paradise.
Quoting a fragment of ‘The Man Who Never Laughed Again’ (not included in the final
version), she observed that the eastern origins of the story had been forgotten, ‘and we
have been spirited to the banks of a sweet stream where the wind in the rushes mingles

with birds’ song, and the folk who live there are grave and simple and remote from all adventure’.

May Morris’s language hints, however, at the real nature of these ‘spirited’ and ‘remote’ worlds: the fact that Morris’s paradises are very rarely ‘earthly’. More often ‘paradise’ is only, if ever, attained in dream worlds, or gods’ playgrounds, where human life is meaningless and unreal, and nature’s laws are suspended. In ‘The Story of Cupid and Psyche’, Psyche is abducted by the wind, Zephyrus, and wakes up to:

\begin{verbatim}
A lovely grassy valley ...
That steep grey cliffs upon three sides did bound,
And under these, a river sweeping round,
With gleaming curves the valley did embrace,
And seemed to make an island of that place;
And all about were dotted leafy trees,
The elm for shade, the linden for the bees,
The noble oak, long ready for the steel
Which in that place it had no fear to feel;
The pomegranate, the apple, and the pear,
That fruit and flowers at once made shift to bear,
Nor yet decayed therefor; and in them hung
Bright birds that elsewhere sing not, but here sung
As sweetly as the small brown nightingales
Within the wooded, deep Laconian vales.
\end{verbatim}

Psyche then goes through into Cupid’s palace garden, which is also ‘like a paradise’. Both, however, are ‘[v]oid of mankind’, and in The Earthly Paradise Morris’s gardens are often strangely empty. It has been written that they form an emotional centrepiece in much of Morris’s writing, and that they often stand in for emotion that is missing or unacknowledged. This is a feature of The Earthly Paradise that not only illuminates ‘matters of the heart’, but also Morris’s ability to imagine a better future. Thus, while E.P. Thompson argued that the ‘sensitive evocation of natural beauty and of the seasons’, and the ‘touches of description of ordinary human life’ take us ‘outside the circle of despair’, these are only ‘touches’ swamped by the kind of life and landscape lazily gazed over in the opening of ‘The Story of Rhodope’:

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46 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 9.
47 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 133.
A Grecian-speaking folk there dwelt of yore,
Whose name my tale remembers not, between
The snow-topped mountains and the sea-beat shore,
Upon a strip of plain, and upland green,
Where seldom was the worst of summer seen,
And seldom the last bond of winter’s cold;
Easy was life ’twixt garden, field, and fold. 48

Thus contemporary critics concentrated on ‘the wonderful touches … of fairy
mystery’ and the ‘weird lights’ and ‘wafts of mystical wind’ that floated through
Morris’s landscapes. Pater, in the Westminster Review, went so far as to suggest that
the ‘atmosphere’ on ‘which its effect depends belongs to no actual form of life’.
Rather, he argued, Morris’s poetry projected

above the realities of its time a world in which the forms of things are
transfigured. Of that world this … poetry takes possession, and
sublimes beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is
literally an artificial or ‘earthly paradise’. It is a finer ideal, extracted
from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. 49

In a sense, therefore, May Morris comes close to the truth; her father’s
landscapes in The Earthly Paradise are both ‘spirited’ and ‘situated’. Perhaps the term
‘landscape vein’, used by Henry Buxton-Forman, is, in this respect, the most accurate
assessment of Morris’s poetry of this period. A landscape is contained within a frame,
and the nature encountered in The Earthly Paradise, however ‘spectral’ or ‘ideal’, is
still English, decorative and generally reassuring. This ‘Englishness’ is everywhere
apparent, from the ‘real’ proclivity of beech trees and thrushes to the ‘ideal’ romance
of rustic lifestyle. Morris even described the German landscape of the Lahn valley in
reassuringly English terms. Writing to Webb, he notes that the river at Bad Ems is
rather like ‘the Thames at Clifton-Hamden’, and that the valley itself is something like
‘the lake-country’, though ‘without the sour grow-nothing air of that soaking land’. 50
Even landscape that reminds him of the scenery in Wilhelm Meister is described in
‘jolly’ terms:

49 Walter Pater, unsigned review, Westminster Review, vol. XC, October 1868, pp. 300–12; in The
Critical Heritage, p. 80.
I think the country very jolly I must say; it all runs towards the big gorge in little gorges, the centres of which are all grass and hold the moisture like a cup and are as green as green can be, one little valley I came to was so jolly; a flat green space with alders round two sides of it, the great hills in the distance at one end and round the other the hills rising steep with great lanky beech woods—as dry as a bone—There is nothing of the commonplace about the ordinary nature here, it is a wonderful country and fit for the breeding of German sentiment...

It was also ‘fit for the breeding’ of Morris’s safe and domestic verse.

Thus most of the nature in *The Earthly Paradise* is safely romantic. Morris catered, as Paul Thompson has noted, for an increasingly insecure audience, frightened by the rapid transformation and degradation of the landscape. He reflected and promoted ‘the desire for a permanent secure land’.⁵¹ By those of his own time, he was seen as a ‘representative of the romantic movement ... in its latest and probably its final stage’, where romanticism was held to be a movement that has sought to turn to the purposes of art all, instead of some only, of the material of the world and of imagination; [and] ... has held itself at liberty to handle every phase of being, past or present, natural or supernatural, to repeat or recast every construction of the mature or immature human imagination in which it can find beauty, be that construction never so irregular, never so unscientific, never so fantastic, wayward, ‘heterocosmic’...⁵²

This romantic impulse is also apparent in Morris’s desire to ‘re-harmonise’ the world: to re-animate nature with the visions and mysteries of myth and folktale. Another broadly romantic feature of the poem is the poetic pretext for the tale-telling: the journey of a group of wanderers. Though undoubtedly inspired by Chaucer, the ‘living chronicle’ that is their search also recalls the poetic wanderings of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and the prose of Carlyle, Defoe and many of the German romantics. One might even read *The Earthly Paradise* as a story that looks back to a romantic ‘age of discovery’. The poem is, after all, told by a group of adventurers who, leaving a plague-infested Europe, seek out new worlds to conquer and ultimately an earthly

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paradise or an ‘isle of bliss’. It might be ‘romanticism in decline’, but Morris’s nature in *The Earthly Paradise* is still more picturesque than real, still a ‘land of dream’.\(^{53}\)

The poem also marks a romantic desire to organise parts into an organic whole. The poem is intricately constructed and conjoined. There are introductory and linking verses, a seasonal rhythm, grouped tales and themes: a complex ‘design’ that has been explored in depth by Boos.\(^ {54}\) Nearly all the major romantic writers aimed at a kind of organised unity, what Abrams has called ‘an equilibrium of opponent forces which preserves all the products and powers of intellection and culture’.\(^ {55}\) In some respects, Morris is part of the romantic effort outlined by J. Hillis Miller, one that attempts to recreate ‘the bridge between man and God’: ‘the idea that the isolated individual, through poetry, can accomplish the “unheard of work,” … create through his own efforts a marvellous harmony of words which will reintegrate man, nature and God’.\(^ {56}\) In this respect, the desire to handle nature in a romantic way, was not simply a matter of convention. As the reviewer who stressed Morris’s romanticism argued, there was also a ‘school which opposes itself to romanticism’, a school which

preferred to deal with clear conceptions testable by rules of reason and canons of propriety, semi-scientific conceptions, not too remote from sight and handling, and clothed in forms of beauty not too wayward, fugitive, unstable, or hard to grasp and control.\(^ {57}\)

In many respects, this is the ‘school’ that Morris sought to oppose and retreat from in writing *The Earthly Paradise*.

By the late 1860s, however, many Victorians had begun to find ‘fantastic’ constructions of nature less easy to accept. As Miller argued, many Victorians no longer possessed Wordsworth’s ‘sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused’.\(^ {58}\) Lacking this, Morris failed to construct a convincing ‘bridge’ between ‘man’, God and nature. Morris was unable, for example, to take Teufelsdröckh’s leap


\(^{54}\) See her *The Design of The Earthly Paradise*, cited above.


of faith. He did not wake up ‘surrounded by a beautiful landscape, in the midst of nature’ and experience the ‘heavy dreams’ rolling away. Whereas Teufelsdrockh woke ‘to a new Heaven and a new Earth’, and could then answer the question ‘what is nature?’ with the answer ‘the “Living Garment of God”’, Morris’s was much more an earthly realm.

One of the reasons we are brought closer to earth by Morris is an intermittent tension, aptly described by E.P. Thompson as the ‘undertow of death’. This ‘undertow’ is most frequently encountered as fear, though it appears in the poetry in more ways than one. In the prefatory ‘Apology’, for example, the narrator warns readers that ‘he’ cannot make ‘quick-coming death a little thing’, that ‘sweet days die’, and that his ‘isle of bliss’ will be ‘shadowy’ and ‘[m]idmost the beating of the steely sea’ where ‘ravening monsters mighty men shall slay’. Moreover the reader is also reminded that though the poet can ‘sing’ of spring, summer and autumn, the ‘drear wind’ of December still blows outside: the days of ‘earth’s cold leaden sleep’ are the ultimate reality. In the ‘Prologue’, the Wanderers leave their plague-ravaged homeland in search of a land of immortality, of ‘gardens ever blossoming ... where none grew old’, but death also lurks within the monthly verses that link the tales they tell. March is welcomed as the ‘first redresser of the winter’s wrong’, but we are reminded that it is ‘Death himself who ‘begetteth all this storm of bliss’. Even in ‘August’, signs of approaching decline are signalled in the verse. With the ‘fulfilment of the year’s desire’ comes ‘heavy-headed’ wheat ‘dreading its decay’

And blacker grew the elm-trees day by day.

59 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 150.
60 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 131.
61 It has been suggested that even the form of publication of Morris’s poem—four parts in three separate volumes between 1868 and 1870—reinforced the work’s central theme: ‘the desire to avoid life’s end’. By prolonging the middle section, described as the ‘great good place in the poem’, ‘movement forward takes place but the end is not yet reached’. The poem thus pauses in a middle equated with ‘the realm of life, situated between birth and death’, repeating a pattern of ‘postponed endings and prolonged middles’ in the body of the poem itself: ‘Within the larger frame of the poem as a whole, each inset tale is a moment of lingering, of postponing the onward journey to death in the outer frame’. See Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, The Victorian Serial, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1991, pp. 191–7.
About the edges of the yellow corn,
And o'er the gardens grown somewhat outworn
The bees went hurrying to fill up their store;
The apple-boughs bent over more and more;
With peach and apricot the garden wall
Was odorous, and the pears began to fall
From off the high tree with each freshening breeze.66

As the next tale begins the Wanderers watch 'the reapers' slow advancing line' over this scene. Moreover, even in the tales, told 'of names remembered, / Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead', the reader is often on the verge of 'waking from delight / Unto the real day void and white',67 the tales often seem 'Like to the middle of some pleasant dream, / Which, waked from, leaves upon the troubled mind / A sense of something ill that lurked behind'.68 More often than not, this 'something ill' is death.

This is made clear in the 'Epilogue' where we are reminded that 'each tale’s ending needs must be the same: / And we men call it Death'. The narrator tries to convince the reader that the 'Wanderers' now look 'with other eyes' on death's 'real face, than when so long agone, / They thought that every good thing would be won, / If they might win a refuge from it'. They have not, however, beaten death. No matter how rich the illusion of happiness, it is always transient and poisoned by the knowledge of mortality. The Wanderers still do not know

Why they should live to have desire and foil,
And toil, that overcome, brings yet more toil,
Than that day of their vanished youth, when first
They saw Death clear, and deemed all life accurst
By that cold overshadowing threat—the End.69

A few reviewers noted this morbidity. After the second volume of The Earthly Paradise appeared, a critic in the Guardian remarked:

With all his love of beauty and rare power of depicting it, he is anything but a cheerful writer... Several tales... are haunted by the feelings that

66 Morris, 'August', in The Earthly Paradise, vol. II, p. 188.
the brightest flowers of life bloom and are gathered under the shadow of death.\(^{70}\)

This was, however, an uncommon response among Morris’s contemporaries. Most preferred to forget the ‘cold overshadowing threat’.

Why was death written so closely beneath certain lines of *The Earthly Paradise*? A good deal of the answer to this question lies in what was being written about nature, and about humanity’s place within it, at this time. The poem was published between 1868 and 1870. These were years that saw a barrage of attacks on religion, and the promotion and defence of evolutionary theory. In 1869 Huxley coined the word ‘agnostic’ at a meeting of the newly founded Metaphysical Society. 1869 also saw the founding of the weekly scientific journal *Nature*, which contributed to ‘the demise of the truth-complex’ and the often very public disillusionment of leading intellectual figures. Shortly after, in 1871, came the publication of Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, the abolition of religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge, Huxley’s suggestion that one could be either a clergyman or a scientist but not both,\(^{71}\) Rossetti’s contemplation of ‘the mummy of a buried faith’ at the British Museum, and Swinburne’s assertion that ‘God is buried and dead to us’.\(^{72}\) All these events are indicative of the ideas fermenting while *The Earthly Paradise* was being written and published.

Most significantly, the writing and publication of *The Earthly Paradise* coincided with the years in which Huxley most vociferously defended the theory of evolution. In November 1868 Huxley had lectured in Edinburgh ‘On the Physical Basis of Life’, a lecture that was subsequently published in the *Fortnightly Review*. This article provoked a storm of criticism in the *Contemporary Review*, and over the next four to five years, Huxley was forced to defend his thesis, waging a strenuous battle in the periodical press. We have already noted that Morris believed that Huxley had usurped Homer as the new teller of tales about the world, as the bearer of a new

\(^{70}\) Unsigned review, *Guardian*, 20 April 1870, p. 468.

\(^{71}\) Huxley, *Collected Essays*, vol. II, p. 149.

\(^{72}\) Swinburne, ‘To Walt Whitman in America’, line 106.
culture of nature. It has also been noted that in *Man's Place in Nature* Huxley very clearly posed '[t]he question of questions for mankind', and that answers to these questions in the 1860s and 1870s were often couched in terms of despair or rejection of nature. For many, after Darwin and after Huxley, nature could not carry the same value. In 1874, John Stuart Mill's posthumously published essay, 'Nature', emphasised its 'perfect and absolute recklessness' and argued that natural forces 'go straight to their end, without regarding what or whom they crush on the road'.

According to Mill, attention to nature had become 'one of our most copious sources of false taste, false philosophy, false morality, and even bad law'.

On the one hand, *The Earthly Paradise* attempted to answer Huxley's questions in a way Huxley himself had suggested in *Nature*. By encouraging Victorians to re-acquaint themselves with myth and folklore, Morris was doing just what the scientist had done when he published Goethe's 'Aphorisms' in the front of his journal: reminding readers of 'the wonder and the mystery of Nature'. Thus there is a sense in which *The Earthly Paradise* is the 'unconscious poetry' of religion, 'an ever surer and surer stay' in a world where '[t]here is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve'. 'Our religion', Arnold argued,

> has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.

And, in some respects, *The Earthly Paradise* was the defence of poetry and, by extension, of a transcendental view of nature and the world. At this time, Morris was still able to write to his friend Swinburne: 'I am proudly conscious of my position as the Christian poet of the age: though I must risk that position ... by impugning the statement of holy writ, "Blessed are those that seek, for they shall find", at least in my

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73 See Chapters 2 and 3 of Section I above.
75 See Chapter 3 of Section I above.
case'. Even though this was written in response to a jest by Swinburne, rather than because of any particular pietism on Morris’s behalf, many still praised ‘his Christian viewpoint’. Morris led his readers ‘with all good faith into a delightful no-man’s land, where nothing is improbable, where nature exists but has left her laws behind her’.

On the other hand, however, *The Earthly Paradise* also indicates that, for Morris, secular, evolutionary nature was threatening and ‘accurst’. For Morris, as for many others, this nature also diminished human life as humanity could no longer consider itself distinct. Even more disturbing were the questions asked by poets such as Tennyson, who felt compelled to consider briefly whether humanity as a whole, not just the individual, was destined for extinction. *The Earthly Paradise* was, in effect, Morris’s *In Memoriam*: a remembrance of life in the presence of death. It sought to block out despair by the recreation of worlds in which ‘man’ still had a special place in nature.

E.P. Thompson also made this comparison and contended that what was new about this culture was a ‘total absence of hope’: ‘hope not for a future life, but for human fulfilment upon earth’. He argued that

> Morris had (perhaps unfairly) taken Huxley as the Prophet of a society utterly careless of beauty, of art, and the finer human virtues, which looked upon both nature and the past of mankind as an ‘ugly confusion’, a jungle of accidents within which self-interest and the values of possession contaminated every relationship.

There is little evidence, however, that Morris perceived, at this stage, more than a very general lack of ‘human fulfilment upon earth’. *The Earthly Paradise* speaks more
strongly and clearly of an intensely personal lack of fulfilment, and of a more universal or 'cosmic' disappointment, than of failed sets of relationships. His 'dis-ease', and that of his Wanderers, seems more like Teufelsdröckh's fear of a 'huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb', than that of the proto-socialist. Like Teufelsdröckh, Morris and his 'puppets', appear as pilgrims without a shrine. Morris despaired because any 'quest' now seemed pointless:

Are thine eyes weary? is thy heart too sick
To struggle any more with doubt and thought,
Whose formless veil draws darkening now and thick
Across thee, e'en as smoke-tinged mist-wreaths brought
Down a fair dale to make it blind and nought?
Art thou so weary that no world there seems
Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams?

As E.P. Thompson noted, Morris leaves us with this last question: leaves us feeling that his world has contracted to the four walls of the solitary individual. Even though the verse attempts to take us beyond inwardness, to take us out into the natural world, this natural world is 'blind and nought' because of the 'smoke-tinged mist-wreaths'. It is shady and insubstantial and the only alternative seems to be an ethereal moonlight:

Look out upon the real world, where the moon,
Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high trees,
Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon,
Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze
Died at sunset, and no images,
No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth—
Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?

This vision is ephemeral, however, and offers no respite:

Yea, I have looked, and seen November there;
The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,

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82 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 133.
84 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 124.
Strange image of the dread eternity,
In whose void patience how can these have part,
These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?85

This is one of the most powerful pieces in *The Earthly Paradise* in which we break away from the slack and languorous poetry of the stories which are soothingly but also tediously unreal. Yet it also indicates that knowledge of the world and of all living things has been tainted by the ‘void patience’ of a ‘Dread eternity’. As Boos has noted, in this passage ‘nature’s unity and constancy frighten; its starkness undercuts thought of human demands and yearnings. Vastness and permanence are not beautiful but “sublime”, … impervious to human finitude and death’.86 This is still the poetry of retreat, in which the overall impression gained is that Morris feels

better is it resting in a dream,
Yea, e’en a dull dream, than with outstretched hand,
And wild eyes, face to face with life to stand,
No more the master now of anything,
Through striving of all things to be the king—
Than waking in a hard taskmaster’s grasp
Because we strove the unsullied joy to clasp—
Than just to find our hearts the world, as we
Still thought we were and ever longed to be,
To find nought real except ourselves, and find
All care for all things scattered to the wind... 87

No doubt this is the kind of poetry that caused Pater to remark: ‘To regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions has more and more become the tendency of modern thought’.88

Morris’s experience of the absence of God, however, was intermittent rather than absolute or definite. He was in a position similar to that outlined by J. Hillis Miller: not a state of blank atheism, but ‘living without God in the world’. As suggested above, the mythological tales can be read as attempts to write mystery and wonder back into nature, but the frame of the work, and some of the stories, seems to reflect more the splitting apart of this communion, to acknowledge that God is no

longer immanent in nature. The fact that Morris began the poem in the city, for example, points to his acknowledgment of ‘the humanisation of the world’. As Miller states, ‘[l]ife in the city is the way in which many men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world’; and at the start of *The Earthly Paradise* it is this environment that Morris asks his readers to forget. Nevertheless, by doing this, and by punctuating his stories with the monthly verses which in a highly personal way do occasionally ‘look out upon the real world’, the reader is reminded that each must start with the inner experience of the isolated self, that the interior states of self are a beginning which in some sense can never be transcended. As Miller states:

Most of the great works of nineteenth-century literature have at their centres a character who is in doubt about his own identity and asks, ‘How can I find something outside myself which will tell me who I am and give me a place in society and in the universe?’ Subjectivism, like urbanisation and the failure of medieval symbolism, leads man back to an experience of the absence of God.89

Thus, along with the experience of the absence of God, due in part to ‘the image of Nature ruling all things with blind indifference’, ‘another kind of isolation swept over the Victorians, with an emotional impact more painful than madness or bitterness—cosmic isolation and the terror of absolute solitude’.90 Some have argued that this was apparent from Carlyle on: that his work marks the stages of transition in England from the romantic to the Victorian preoccupation with alienation and community.91 It is certainly apparent in much Victorian writing: the plaint, ‘alone, alone, all alone’, as Abrams has argued, can be heard in Pater’s solipsism, Arnold’s cultural humanism and Carlyle’s corporatism.92 It can also be heard throughout *The Earthly Paradise*. In ‘The Hill of Venus’, for example, loneliness is equated with reality, and it is also this story, the last of the entire work, that outlines Morris’s perception of the limitations of orthodox Christianity.93 It gives voice to Pater’s observation that every impression ‘is the impression of the individual in his isolation,

each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world’.\textsuperscript{94} Morris shares this dream in \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, and just occasionally it becomes a nightmare. Morris’s Wanderers have much in common with Arnold’s voyager without a haven, ‘still bent to make some part he knows not where’:

\begin{quote}
Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head.\textsuperscript{95}
\end{quote}

A much wider scepticism is featured in the lyric for December, which opens the final, fourth part of Morris’s poem. The narrator now speaks directly to and of ‘thou who clingest still to life and love, / Though nought of good, no God thou mayst discern’.\textsuperscript{96} In March 1870, a review in the \textit{Christian Observer} noted that Morris’s poetry was devoid of Christian morality.\textsuperscript{97} This was unusual as most still read \textit{The Earthly Paradise} because of ‘the music which is heard amidst its groves’.\textsuperscript{98} One review in particular reveals, however, how a contemporary could understand what lay behind Morris’s escape and what was contained in Morris’s verse. It underlines, in the light of current controversy and debate, the implications of the nature of \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, of life that goes from ‘nothing unto dark nothing’.\textsuperscript{99}

\begin{quote}
[F]or the individual man the language of the poet throughout is not only that of resignation to a doom of absolute extinction after a short sojourn here, but of the philosophy which makes this extinction the one justification of merriment. The cornel-wood image stands in the city of Rome

For twice a hundred years and ten,
While many a band of striving men
Were driven betwixt woe and mirth
Swiftly across the weary earth,
From nothing unto dark nothing;

and the fact that a log of wood will last

While many a life of man goes past,
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{95} Arnold, ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’, lines 85–7.


\textsuperscript{97} Unsigned review, \textit{Christian Observer}, vol. LXIX, March 1870, pp. 198–208.


And all is over in short space,
is a reason for not fearing what any son of man can do, and for being

merry while we may,
For men much quicker pass away

than the tablet on which a tale is written. It is true that it is a wicked sorcerer who asks

who knoweth certainly
What haps to us when we are dead?

and answers

Truly, I think, by likelihood,
Nought haps to us of good or bad.
Therefore on earth will I be glad
A short space, free from hope or fear.

But everywhere the signs are manifest that to the mind of the poet the future presents the same utter blank, and that life is not merely a mystery but an unsubstantial and wearisome dream.⁴⁰⁰

Nevertheless, while this reviewer complained that Morris never looked beyond ‘the visible heaven’, he did note that

[f]or the agonies involved in the constant flux and reflux of human affairs the only remedy lies in the ‘crucible of time’,

that tempers all things well,
That worketh pleasure out of pain,
And out of ruin golden gain.

That Morris found a ‘remedy’ in ‘the crucible of time’ has been stressed by many of the more recent critics of The Earthly Paradise. Among Morris’s unchanging lands, eternal realms and gardens of the immortals, it is argued, there is acknowledgment of, and accommodation to, history as, if not a benevolent, then at least not a malevolent force. The story of ‘Ogier the Dane’, for example, is read as an embodiment of Morris’s belief in the recurrence and renovating force of history.¹⁰¹ In ‘The Hill of Venus’, the knight’s leaving of a garden ‘that no weed, / Nor winter, or decay had ever

known' is read as an indication of Morris's refusal to accept a 'static, antisocial paradise' or 'the awful prospect of eternal, changeless bliss'. It is noted that Morris 'does not yearn for death with the same passionate, erotic intensity' as his friend Swinburne. It is also argued that time heals the Wanderers of their fear and 'enables them to face the death they had once hoped to outrun'. Kocmanova goes so far as to argue that *The Earthly Paradise* is an expression of Morris's 'faith in the power of life'.

Certainly *The Earthly Paradise* demonstrates Morris's preference for humanised nature. This is never more apparent than in the first stanza of 'August':

    Across the gap made by our English hinds,  
    Amidst the Roman's handiwork, behold  
    Far off the long-roofed church; the shepherd binds  
    The withy round the hurdles of his fold;  
    Down in the foss the river fed of old,  
    That through long lapse of time has grown to be  
    The little grassy valley that you see.

We also need to be aware that the kind of 'discovery or redefinition of the autonomy of consciousness' found in *The Earthly Paradise* is associated with 'the appearance of the historical sense'. J. Hillis Miller has argued:

    The central factor in historicism is an assumption of the relativity of any particular life or culture, its limitation and fragility. The attitude of historicism accompanies the failure of tradition, the failure of symbolic language, the failure of all the intermediaries between man and God [including nature]. Historicism consequently can mean the anguish of feeling that one is forced to carry on one's life in terms of a mockery of masks and hollow gestures.

In this respect, *The Earthly Paradise* can indeed be read as a historicist work: it is a catalogue of failed gods, beliefs and civilisations compiled by an author who assumes a

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103 Fletcher, *Gardens and Grim Ravines*, p. 173.
highly complex series of masks, and who admits that his 'puppets' are 'hollow'. There is still, however, a predominantly negative impulse behind the work. We cannot be confident that Morris, at this stage of his life, grasped what Miller argues Browning 'glimpsed': 'the fact that the sad alternatives of nihilism, on the one hand, and escape beyond the world, on the other, could be evaded if man would only reject twenty-five hundred years of dualism'. *The Earthly Paradise* does not convince all who read it that Morris had 'come to see that being and value lie in this world, in what is immediate, tangible, present to man, in earth, sun, sea, the stars in their courses'.¹⁰⁹ Even though Boos finds many 'stoic resemblances' in *The Earthly Paradise*,¹¹⁰ and argues that the work's 'tempered meliorism' provided Morris 'with an acceptable alternative to the more Christian and conventional optimism expressed in the work of his contemporaries Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins, and to the alienated grief of Arnold's poetry', it still seems far-fetched to argue that, as a whole, *The Earthly Paradise* reflects an 'acceptance' by Morris of 'natural birth and growth', of recurrence, recommencement, renewal and resurrection.¹¹¹ At the end of his work, Morris was still much closer to Arnold's 'alienated grief' than an alternative set of beliefs based on an 'evolving interpretation of fate as nature, which enabled him to avert resolutions which inclined toward simplism or despair'.¹¹² Morris was a poet who acted as his tale-tellers as they strove '[i]n their wild way the heart of Death to move', but reasoned

Surely on their side I at least will be,
And deem that when at last, their fear worn out,
They fall asleep, all that old shame and doubt,
Shamed them not now, nor did they doubt it good,
That they in arms against Death had stood.¹¹³

In recalling 'Death' as he bids farewell to his book, however, Morris only half turns back to life.¹¹⁴

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¹¹³ Morris, 'Epilogue', in *The Earthly Paradise*, vol. IV, p. 239.
¹¹⁴ See also, however, Kocmanova, *The Poetic Maturing*, p. 114, who argues that this passage indicates a fuller turning to face life, but admits that it is probably with 'no hope'.
That Morris ‘flagged’ at this stage of his life was acknowledged by his best and closest friends.\textsuperscript{115} Georgiana Burne-Jones described the late 1860s as ‘a self-absorbed time and one of restlessness and transition for all the friends’, with Morris ‘brooding over the gigantic scheme of The Earthly Paradise’.\textsuperscript{116} She also noted that at this time ‘Morris never either drew near to or seemed to take the least possible pleasure in “the world”’.\textsuperscript{117} That Morris still strove to ‘look out on the real world’ is indicated in a letter written to Jane Morris in 1869. ‘For me’, he reasoned, ‘I don’t think people really want to die because of mental pain, that is if they are imaginative people; they want to see the play played out fairly—they have hopes they are not conscious of’.\textsuperscript{118} Nevertheless, at this stage of his life, Morris still tended to act in the artistic realm, and to deal with mortality, to stave off thinking about death, by creating ‘immortal art’, a process that also ‘humanised’ nature, or at least made it bearable. After all, Morris’s romantic forebears had acknowledged art as ‘the mediatress between, and reconciler of, nature and man … the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human’.\textsuperscript{119} This reconciliation was a widespread Victorian reflex.

Thus it is not necessary to look in \textit{The Earthly Paradise} for Morris’s later courage and commitment to the world in order to understand its historical significance. Nor is it necessary to discover embryonic socialism, or an emphasis on human community and ‘fellowship’, in order to find the poem deeply expressive of Morris’s sense of the human place in nature. It is necessary to accept the pain and despair expressed in \textit{The Earthly Paradise} and to acknowledge, with the narrator: ‘No little part it was for me to play—/ The idle singer of an empty day’.\textsuperscript{120} But perhaps the most we can say of \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, though even this makes an important move beyond it, is that it marks some acceptance of ‘[w]axing and waning, steadfastness and change’.\textsuperscript{121} In 1871 Morris asked:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{115} Georgiana Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. II, p. 24.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Georgiana Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. I, p. 286.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Georgiana Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. II, p. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Morris to Jane Morris, 3 December 1870, in \textit{Letters}, vol. I, p. 128.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Morris, ‘L’Envoi’, in \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, vol. IV, p. 333.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Morris, \textit{Love is Enough}, in \textit{CW}, vol. IX, p. 77.
\end{itemize}
How shall the bark that girds the winter tree
Babble about the sap that sleeps beneath,
And tell the fashion of its life and death?
How shall my tongue in speech man’s longing wrought
Tell of the things whereof he knoweth nought?\textsuperscript{122}

In some respects, Morris had found a way to say these things in \textit{The Earthly Paradise}. But he had not found a shrine, and the ‘heavy dreams’ had not ‘roll[ed] gradually away’. He had not woken, like Teufelsdrockh, ‘to a new Heaven and a new Earth’. Nor had \textit{The Earthly Paradise} acknowledged that if ‘Nature is one, and a living indivisible whole, much more is Mankind, the Image that reflects and creates Nature, without which Nature were not’.\textsuperscript{123}

\textit{The Earthly Paradise} does tell us of Morris’s most pressing personal and ‘existential’ dilemmas. Mackail’s comments on this work have usually been taken as a gesture towards what propriety then forbade him to write, that is of the emotional and sexual entanglements of Rossetti, the Morrises and the Burne-Joneses. Most emphasise that when Mackail speaks of \textit{The Earthly Paradise} containing ‘an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself’, he refers to ‘matters that lay near … [Morris’s] heart’. But Mackail also notes that ‘the final words’ which Morris ‘puts in the mouth of his book’ also contain ‘his deepest thought on the mystery of things’.\textsuperscript{124} The last lines quoted by Mackail, and some of the last lines of the ‘Envoi’, are:

\begin{quote}
‘Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere,
Though still the less we knew of its intent:
The Earth and Heaven through countless year on year,
Slow changing, were to us but curtains fair,
Hung round about a little room, where play
Weeping and laughter of man’s empty day.’\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

Nature has become a curtain, but human life is still ‘little’. Moreover the final reiteration of the phrase ‘empty day’ seems to echo feelings of emptiness expressed

\textsuperscript{122} Morris, \textit{Love is Enough}, pp. 77–8.
\textsuperscript{123} Carlyle, \textit{Sartor Resartus}, p. 196.
after the completion of *The Earthly Paradise*. To his wife, Morris confessed that he was ‘dull now my book is done’, and that ‘one doesn’t know sometimes how much service a thing has done till it is gone’. *The Earthly Paradise* had not helped Morris to decide on a future course of action. He merely hoped ‘something else of importance will turn up soon’.126

In retrospect Morris reflected on this period of his life, on the ‘eyeless vulgarity’ and ‘sordid, aimless, ugly confusion’ of Victorian industrial capitalism, which had destroyed nature as well as art, as ‘a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap’, with ‘the pleasure of the eyes ... gone from the world, and the place of Homer ... taken by Huxley’. Living at the centre of the world’s largest ‘counting-house’, Morris tried, by writing *The Earthly Paradise*, to reinstate Homer, to defy the rationalism which had made the world empty. Nevertheless, he had to apologise for being the ‘idle singer of an empty day’, and offered no convincing alternative. While a vast, impersonal nature lurked behind the ‘curtain’, Morris’s main impulse was to ‘sing’ of the ‘green leaf’ rather than the ‘sere’, and to indulge his readers in a romance of nature. The warnings were there, the sense of unease was present, but the flowers of Morris’s *Earthly Paradise* merely brought back ‘fragrance of old days and deeds ... to folk weary’.128

3. Wonders of intricate patterns

In the 1860s, at the same time that he was composing *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris was involved in another project that involved bringing flowers and foliage into the lives of citified Victorians. In 1861 he had formalised his design and furnishing activities by establishing Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company with Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Webb, Madox Brown, Charles Faulkner and Peter Paul Marshall. The story of the formation of ‘the Firm’ (as the partners chose to call it), of its development, success and eventual reconstitution as Morris & Co. in 1875, has been admirably told by Charles Harvey and John Press in *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (1991). Morris’s achievements as a designer, and as a business man, are evidence that at the same time that he was ‘retreating’ in *The Earthly Paradise*, he was also ‘advancing’ in other, more worldly, affairs. This is particularly apparent when one considers his handling of nature in a visual medium. The designs Morris produced for the Firm, particularly those for wallpaper and textiles, were, and still are, recognised for Morris’s skilful handling of natural forms. In the domain of pattern design we see Morris confidently handle nature and what he described as its ‘wonders of intricate patterns’. ¹ In this respect, his tendency to see and create pattern in and with natural forms mimics and reproduces the formal orders observed and constructed by natural scientists. Nevertheless, it is also possible to understand his representation of natural forms as another way of creating a safe nature with which Victorians could be comfortable. Thus Morris’s work as a designer is, in some ways, continuous with *The Earthly Paradise* project as an attempt to ‘forget six counties overhung with smoke’. ²

Having examined the physical shape and form of Morris’s various designs, therefore, it will then be necessary to consider their social, cultural and even political significance.

² There are further similarities between the two activities. As mentioned above, the structure of *The Earthly Paradise* also demonstrates Morris’s tendency to create patterns. The manuscripts of this poem also display his desire to decorate; the margins to several of the pages are furnished with flowery and leafy forms (see, for example, the beautiful foliate marginalia on nearly every page of the ‘Rough copy of Rhodope’ in the Morris Papers at the British Library, MS 45304, and also in MS 45298, pp. 87, 99, MS 45299, p. 7, and MS 45303, pp. 1, 5). These pages are also forerunners of the elaborately decorated calligraphic manuscripts produced by Morris in the 1870s. MacCarthy (*A Life for Our Time*, p. 268) has compared these pages to ‘demented wallpaper’, and they are certainly similar to Morris’s patterns for home furnishings, and reflect the ‘green’ borders around his work. See the author’s ‘The Green Borders of William Morris’, *The University of Melbourne Library Journal*, vol. II, no. 2, December 1996, pp. 10–15.
To understand Morris’s significance as a pattern designer, it is necessary to provide context for his work and to recognise that the way he handled natural forms was influenced by the practice and principles of earlier nineteenth-century design reformers. At the beginning of the century, much British pattern design was influenced by French manufactures, due mainly to France’s post-revolutionary emphasis on export and the industrial exhibition of 1798. Typical of French-influenced ornamentation at this time were wallpapers featuring brightly-coloured vases, bouquets or trails of flowers on a pale satin background (see fig. xxxii). Particularly popular in the 1840s, this sumptuous ‘naturalistic’ style also included even more highly-coloured and shaded ‘cabbage-rose’ or ‘flower garden’ designs, often embellished with elaborate rococo scrolls.3

Perturbed by the incursion of French goods during a period of intense social and economic rivalry, the British government established a Select Committee in 1836, which launched a number of efforts to improve British design. In 1837 government-funded Schools of Design were established;4 in 1847, 1848 and 1849 ‘Art Manufactures’ exhibitions were mounted by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce; in 1851 the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was held as a showcase for British manufactures; and in 1852 a Museum of Manufactures was established at Marlborough House, which later became the South Kensington (and eventually the Victoria and Albert) Museum. The impact of the collections at South Kensington on Morris’s work was considerable,5 and I shall have more to say about it elsewhere. It is also important to recognise the influence of a number of key individuals in this design reform movement. Though it is hard to


Fig. xxxii

French ‘naturalistic’ design. This style remained popular well into the latter half of the century, but was particularly popular in the 1840s and 1850s. Thus in 1849 the London firm of L. Marks & Co. advertised in *The Builder* that ‘in order to go with the times’ they had, ‘in addition to their large and magnificent stock of French Papers, printed some very choice FRENCH DESIGNS’ (vol. VII, no. 328, 19 May 1849, p. 239).
pinpoint the exact means by which their work affected Morris, it is obvious that their handling of natural forms, and the context they created, contributed to the development of Morris's own rendering of natural patterns.

The work of Augustus Pugin, for example, had a profound effect on designers in the latter half of the century. Displayed in the new Palace of Westminster and at the Great Exhibition, it was largely due to Pugin's work, and the work of those influenced by him, that designs of a more abstract or formal nature challenged the popularity of naturalistic pattern. As Clive Wainwright has argued, Pugin's *Floriated Ornament* (1849) 'established principles for the use of natural forms which were as influential in the world of flat pattern as his other principles were in architecture, metalwork and furniture'. In *Floriated Ornament*, Pugin railed against contemporary uses of natural pattern that gave 'a fictitious idea of relief, as if bunches of flowers were laid on'. He argued:

*Nature supplied the medieval artists with all their forms and ideas; the same inexhaustible source is open to us; and if we go to the fountain head, we shall produce a multitude of beautiful designs treated in the same spirit as the old, but new in form. We have the advantage of many important botanical discoveries which were unknown to our ancestors; and surely it is in accordance with the true principles of art, to avail ourselves of all that is beautiful for the composition of our designs.*

Nevertheless, Pugin also argued that '[i]t is impossible to improve on the works of God', and insisted that 'the great skill of the ancient artists was in the adaptation and disposition of their forms'. It was this emphasis, this context created by reformers such as Pugin, that most affected Morris's generation of pattern-makers. Morris would largely have learnt about Pugin from Street and Webb, though he would also

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5 On the influence of this Museum in general, see Barbara Morris's *Inspiration for Design*.  
8 See Wainwright, 'Pugin and His Influence', p. 18; and also his 'Morris in Context', in V&A Catalogue, pp. 354–5, 358–9.
have read the many discussions of his work in *The Builder* and *The Ecclesiologist*. Such was Pugin’s influence that in 1888, the architect John Dando Sedding reflected that ‘[w]e should have had no Morris, no Street, no Burges, no Shaw, no Webb, no Bodley, no Rossetti, no Burne-Jones, no Crane but for Pugin’.10

Pugin’s principles were almost immediately adopted into the syllabus of the government schools of design, and were taken up by a number of other design reformers. Henry Cole, who disseminated Pugin’s ‘correct’ principles in the *Journal of Design and Manufactures* (1849–52), entreated artists to design ‘rational’ patterns for everyday articles. Owen Jones, superintendent of works at the Great Exhibition, produced severely conventional, geometric patterns ‘in accordance with the laws which regulate the distribution of form in nature’.11 In his influential survey of ‘the innumerable and ever-varying phases of Ornamental Art’, *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), Jones argued that ‘the future progress of Ornamental Art may be best secured by engrafting on the experience of the past the knowledge we may obtain by a return to Nature for fresh inspiration’, but insisted

that in the best periods of art all ornament was rather based upon an observation of the principles which regulate the arrangement of form in nature, than on an attempt to imitate the absolute forms of those works; and that whenever this limit was exceeded in any art, it was one of the strongest symptoms of decline: true art consisting in idealising, and not copying, the forms of nature.12

The painter Richard Redgrave, who helped devise the Government School of Design’s curriculum,13 was also specific about attention to nature. He insisted that

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9 See, for example, the discussions of pointed architecture in *The Builder*, vol. XV, no. 756, 1 August 1857, p. 440; no. 773, 28 November 1857, pp. 692–3; and no. 776, 19 December 1857, pp. 741–2; and also of Pugin’s *Floriated Ornament*, in ‘On the Applications of Botany to Ornamental Art’, *The Builder*, vol. XV, no. 743, 2 May 1857, p. 251.
12 Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, pp. 2, 154. Morris may have read the front page article in *The Builder* (vol. XV, no. 735, 7 March 1857) that ‘expressed in warm terms’ its admiration for the book, and which endeavoured to ‘make known the scope of “The Grammar of Ornament” to those of our readers who do not already know the work’.
nature was 'the true source of ornamental design' and advocated a course of studies in which students would be trained in 'the power of imitating the form and colour of objects' drawn both from nature and from historical examples of natural ornamentation. Once they had mastered 'nature's laws of growth' and could produce 'the knowledge required to form original combinations from Nature', the students were then to attend to 'knowledge of manufacturing processes' so that their designs could be appropriately adjusted to suit the various modes and materials used in manufacture.\[14\] This is very close to Morris's advice to designers in the 1870s and 1880s, discussed later in this chapter. Redgrave, though he wanted to see nature 'more fully insisted upon',\[15\] did not want to see a return to 'the florid and gaudy compositions, consisting of architectural ornament in relief, with imitative flowers and foliage ... rendered with the full force of their natural colours and light and shade'.\[16\] In the *Manual of Design* prepared from his reports and addresses of the 1850s, he rejected 'the merely imitative treatment now so largely adopted', and suggested that 'the endeavour ought to be to seize the simplest expression of the thing rather than to imitate the thing itself'.\[17\] As Woodring has noted, Redgrave's repudiation of what he called 'the accident of facts',\[18\] prefigured many of the design principles articulated by Morris.\[19\]

It was the designer and theorist Christopher Dresser, however, who paid closer attention to nature than any of the other design reformers. A contemporary of Morris, rather than a forebear, Dresser was trained at the Schools of Design in the

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70. It is possible that Morris may have learnt about Redgrave, if he didn’t know of him already, in an article on 'A System for Furniture and Decoration' by 'A Marlborough-House Student' in *The Builder*, vol. XIII, no. 635, 7 April 1855, pp. 160-1.
18 Redgrave, 'The Treatment of Subject in Painting' (1868), lecture at the Associated Arts Institute, in *Manual of Design*, pp. 365-87. In this lecture, Redgrave called upon his audience 'to study Nature, not only in its general aspect, but also closely in its minute details, by the separate and careful imitation of parts', but reminded them that 'mere imitation is an error and an impertinence'.
1840s, became a lecturer and master of the botanical drawing classes in the Department of Science and Art at South Kensington in the 1850s (he was later granted a doctorate from the University of Jena), published a number of works on botany and design theory and produced patterns for fabrics, lace, carpets, linoleum and wallpapers. Following Pugin and Jones, Dresser also argued that designers should ‘follow the hints given by nature’, but also advised that they ‘act in accordance with an inward instinct or passion’.20 He recommended they observe ‘the ministrations of plants to ornament’, and spend ‘even a week or fortnight in contemplating an unpretending form’.21 Dresser’s observations and drawings in his *Unity in Variety, as Deduced from the Vegetable Kingdom, being an Attempt at Developing that Oneness which is Discoverable in the Habits, Mode of Growth, and Principle of Construction of All Plants* (1859) indicate his own talent in this field. Yet he also wrote:

We shall refer to plants, we say, for the purpose of illustration and of discovering the habits of nature in respect to the point under consideration; yet we shall regard as the greatest authority the opinions of men who have cultivated their sense and perception of the beautiful through a long series of years, and shall approve these practices which have received the sanction of the masters of the great art-epochs, and commend themselves to our judgment by fitness and consistency.22

Dresser also published works such as *The Art of Decorative Design* (1862), *Development of Ornamental Art in the International Exhibition: Being a Concise Statement of the Laws which Govern the Production and Application of Ornament, with References to the Best Examples* (1862), and *Modern Ornamentation, Being A Series of Original Designs for the Patterns of Textile Fabrics, For the Ornamentation of Manufactures in Wood, Metal, Pottery, & c.; also for the Decoration of Walls & Ceilings and other Flat Surfaces* (1886). In spite of his emphasis on attention to plants and flowers, therefore, Dresser’s designs were heavily affected by historical precedents, and most of his patterns were flat, formalised ‘artistic botany’ (see fig. xxxiii).23

Fig. xxxiii
Christopher Dresser’s flat, formalised ‘botany’.
Again, Dresser’s principles were very similar to those expounded by Morris. Unfortunately, there is no record of what Morris thought of Dresser’s work, though he must have heard of Dresser’s books and lectures (many of which were published or reviewed in journals such as Building News, Art Amateur and the Art Journal), and probably saw his work at art and architectural exhibitions. Furthermore, Dresser’s wallpaper designs were printed by Jeffrey & Co., who also reproduced Morris’s patterns. Though Dresser’s designs are, on the whole, more stylised than those of Morris, they exhibit an attention to detail, structure and application that resembles Morris’s later designs for textiles.

Ultimately, Morris’s work combined, to varying effect, elements of both the older naturalistic patterns and the more recent formal and geometric designs. Morris produced his own distinctive ‘expression’ of nature, and laid more emphasis on conditions and methods of production. Nevertheless, he worked largely within the context of the principles established in the 1840s and 1850s, and at a time when nearly all theorists and designers emphasised the value of attention to nature. While Morris’s principles and practice would do much to change the tastes of the upper and middle classes, in the world of design his concerns were largely prefigured in the writings of figures such as Pugin, Jones, Dresser and Redgrave. Thus, even though many of Morris’s patterns were more naturalistic than those produced by these designers, they were by no means revolutionary.

In turning to examine Morris’s various patterns it is necessary to be aware that Morris’s activities were stimulated by the need to make a living, as well as by the desire to reform the art world and to effect improvements in home furnishings. In the 1870s Morris ‘churned’ out pattern after pattern in order to satisfy the demands of his

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24 See, apart from Ruskin of course, the many articles in The Builder, such as ‘On Designing Medieval Ornaments, with Reference to the Natural Kingdom’, vol. XIII, no. 639, 5 May 1855, pp. 205–7; ‘On the Applications of Botany to Ornamental Art’, vol. XV, no. 743, 2 May 1857, p. 251; ‘On Form Light, and Shade in Architectural Foliage’, vol. XIII, no. 672, 22 December 1855, pp. 620–2; and books such as Andrew James Symington’s The Beautiful in Nature, Art, and Life (1857), reviewed by The Builder, vol. XVI, no. 787, 6 March 1858, p. 164.
25 For evidence of Morris’s dwindling private income, and thus his need to make the Firm a financial success, see Harvey and Press, Design and Enterprise, pp. 24, 87–8.
rapidly expanding business. Though some of Morris’s patterns were hand-printed or woven, by mid-century developments in mechanisation, such as the eight-colour English surface-printing machine, increased production and lowered costs.26 In 1875 Morris found himself ‘up to the neck in turning out designs for papers, chintzes and carpets’.27

Another reason Morris produced so many designs (estimates vary from around 150 to over 600),28 was that he designed different patterns for different media. Mirroring the concerns of Redgrave, Morris’s first consideration in designing any pattern was that the ornamental form should respect the material and function of the object. He argued: ‘Not only should it be obvious what your material is, but something should be done with it which is specially natural to it’.29 Thus he considered the individual qualities of each material he worked with—paper, textile, tile and glass—and regulated his design through his knowledge of printing, dyeing and weaving, etc. He also believed that the method of construction should be reflected in the decorative structure of the work. He argued, for example, that weaving tapestry on a common loom enabled the decorator to turn a ‘wall into a rose hedge or a deep forest, for its material and general capabilities almost compel us to fashion plane above plane of rich, crisp, and ranging foliage with bright blossoms or strange birds showing through the intervals’.30 It was his knowledge of the entire design and manufacturing process, even though some of Morris & Co.’s production was contracted out,31 that was a significant factor in his success as a designer.

26 See Banham, ‘The English Response’, pp. 132–8. As early as 1849, for example, the firm that would print all of Morris’s papers, Jeffrey & Co., was advertising ‘their extensive stock of paper hangings, which, from the use of steam-power and recent improvements in the application of machinery, they are able to offer at remarkably low prices’; in The Builder, vol. VII, no. 324, 21 April 1849, p. 191.
Some of the first designs Morris was called upon to produce for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. were for stained glass windows, an obvious point of departure for the newly formed company. The early 1860s saw a spate of neo-Gothic church building and refurbishment, and ecclesiastical furnishings, particularly stained glass, were a major source of income for the Firm. Many of their first commissions came from the clergy, including the impressive work done for G.F. Bodley’s Gothic revival churches: St. Michael and All Angels, Brighton, and All Saints, Selsley, near Stroud in Gloucestershire. In 1861 Morris produced several designs for the Selsley windows, including those for the Annunciation in the chancel south window, and for the western rose-window featuring the Creation (see figs. xxxiv–xxxv).

The chief designer of stained glass for the Firm, however, was Burne-Jones, who produced almost 700 cartoons between the founding of the Firm and his death in 1898. Burne-Jones had already produced designs for glass before Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was constituted, and, quite appropriately, it is his name that has been most closely associated with the Firm’s glass. Nevertheless, Morris’s role, as A. Charles Sewter recognised in The Stained Glass of William Morris and His Circle (1974–75), was underestimated by earlier commentators such as Mackail. Drawing on the evidence of cartoons, sketches and various documents, Sewter records approximately 170 designs by Morris, and demonstrates that he played a crucial part in the production of the Firm’s stained glass. George Wardle, the Firm’s business
Figs. xxxiv–xxxv
Cartoons for Annunciation window, chancel south side, All Saints, Selsley, Gloucestershire, 1861. These cartoons show the Archangel Gabriel wearing a gold patterned robe, his wings composed of peacock feathers, and carrying a lily; and the Virgin Mary in a gold, red and black floral robe; both are featured against a rose-covered trellis in the background.
manager from 1870 to 1890, also acknowledged the significance of Morris’s work in this area. He recalled:

The scheme or general plan of a window was settled by Mr. Morris... Then, the window ordered, Mr. Morris distributed to the other members of the Firm the parts of the design for which they would make cartoons, reserving for himself usually the so-called ‘ornamental’ portions. But not always, for I found in the portfolio many cartoons for figures, Saints and Angels which had been made by Mr. Morris.37

Wardle also stated that

all the quality of what was called ‘Morris glass’ was due to the interpretation Morris gave to the designs he received and to the practical use of colour, which in his hands gave results no other glass painters could imitate... Not only the colouring of the windows, the design of it, taking it as a whole was Mr. Morris’s and usually also such details as were not human figures.38

Morris also chose the glass, set the leading supervised the painting and drew up the manufacturing plans for most windows.39 It should come as no surprise that Morris proved an able ‘decorator’ of stained glass, because the medium was perfect for merging the architectural and artistic influences of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, for the interplay of history, art and nature.

Most significant to this study are the designs for ‘backgrounds and foliage’ singled out for comment by Mackail, and discussed at length by Sewter. It was in these spaces that Morris generally chose to represent nature, surrounding the central figures with ‘wonders of intricate patterns’. A clear idea of the kind of work done by Morris can be seen by examining a cartoon drawn by Burne-Jones for tracery lights at All Saints, Middleton Cheney. Burne-Jones provided the figures of Adam and Eve and some background pattern, but indicated to Morris: ‘put millions of flowers here as in the foreground of good women’, and ‘Gerard’s herbal all over here’ (fig. xxxvi).40 As

Fig. xxxvi
Design for Adam and Eve tracery lights, west window,
All Saints, Middleton Cheney, Northamptonshire,
1870.
discussed below, Gerard’s herbal was an important source for many of Morris’s patterns.

Sewter identified five types of foliage background designed by Morris for the Company’s windows: ‘open foliage with winding stems; rose hedge; Gothic tree; scrolled foliage and dense foliage with fruit or flowers’. Examples of these various forms of representation are given below (figs. xxxvii–xli). Also added to this list must be the floral patterns ‘sprinkled’ on the robes of figures, such as the King Arthur who wears a sunflower robe in a window for Harden’s Grange in Yorkshire, and the Archangel Gabriel in a window designed by Morris for St. Mary’s, King’s Walden in 1869 (fig. xlii). Furthermore, given Morris’s central role in the overall design of windows, it is also possible to see his influence in windows designed by other Company employees. Thus, even though he handed the design of foliage over to William Emile Pozzi ‘when other occupation left him little time for this work’, Morris’s style was still apparent (see figs. xliii–xliv).

Ray Watkinson has argued that the best examples of the Firm’s stained glass, those which ‘keep the eye continually entertained’, are found in the windows of All Saints at Middleton Cheney. Watkinson gives the following description of the chancel east window, designed in 1864–65:

In the figure of St. Agnes, the diagonal meander of a leafy twig which oraments her robe is contrasted with the more geometric pattern in the lining of her turned back sleeve. There is nothing finicky about this subsidiary work; it provides contrast with the major forms of the figure but never becomes trivial... Behind the figures ... runs a containing hedge or screen of tall saplings, thickly leaved and bearing fruit. Here the hedge is of pomegranates... On the narrow strip of ground at the feet of the saints, daisy and violet radiate their tight clusters of leaves and throw up their flowers—as in the verdures of fifteenth-century tapestries. Watkinson’s description evokes Morris’s other patterns for paper and textiles, and there are certainly some similarities between these designs for different media.

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42 Wardle, ‘Memorials’, p. 96. William Emile Pozzi was a glass-painter first used by the Firm in the late 1870s. For his role, and that of other designers of foliate backgrounds, such as John Henry Dearle, see Sewter, The Stained Glass, vol. I, pp. 48–9, 76–7.
Fig. xxxvii
South west window, All Saints, Madeley, Staffordshire, c. 1872–73. An example of backgrounds featuring ‘open foliage with winding stems’, probably designed by Morris. Morris also designed the figure of St. Peter; Madox Brown designed the figures of Noah and St. Philip.
Cartoon for background to Virgin Mary, chancel south window, St. Martin's, Marple, Cheshire, c. 1873. An example of the 'rose-hedge' background, probably designed by Morris, this drawing also illustrates the type of background or 'filler' work done by Morris. The figure in this design was drawn by Burne-Jones.
Fig. xxxix
Nave west window, St. Stephen's, Gateacre, Lancashire, 1883. An example of a ‘scrolled foliage’ background, designed by William Emile Pozzi.
Fig. xl
Cartoon for Eve and Virgin Mary, chancel east window, All Saints, Middleton Cheney, Northamptonshire, 1864–65. An example of a dense fruit and foliage background, designed by Morris.

Fig. xli
Cartoon for part of fourth light in head of nave window, Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge, c. 1875. An example of Morris's dense foliage and fruit designs, this time featuring a vine and grapes motif similar to Morris's 'Vine' wallpaper of 1873–74.
Fig. xliii
Archangel window, south aisle, St. Mary’s, King’s Walden, Hertfordshire, c. 1869. Designed entirely by Morris, these windows illustrate his rich use of colour and pattern, both in the flat, abstract backgrounds, in the angels striking green wing feathers, and in Gabriel’s beautiful foliate robe.
Fig. xliii
Tracery lights for the Vyner Memorial Window, Lady Chapel east window, Christ Church, Oxford, 1872–73. The figures, and probably the foliage, for this window were designed by Burne-Jones, but the beautifully delicate flowers are very much in the Morris style.
Fig. xlv
South aisle window of St. Peter and St. Paul’s, Cattistock, Dorset, 1882–83. Morris designed several angels for this small, but particularly beautiful window. They reveal Morris’s skill as a colourist, as a setter of lead lines, and his tendency to bring naturalistic details to even the simplest windows (here in the patterned robes). These windows also demonstrate the great skill of those employed to paint the windows, in this instance: John Henry Dearle, and three others listed in the company’s Catalogue of Designs as ‘Bowman’, ‘Singleton’ and ‘Stokes’.
Pomegranates, willows, grapes and vine leaves are just some of the natural forms used by Morris in stained glass as well as paper and textile designs. Thus, on the basis of these similarities, and because Morris made more comment on them, it is his designs for wallpapers and textiles that will be used for a more searching and formal elaboration of his rendering of nature.

Morris and his partners had been fortunate to profit from efforts to extend the influence of the established Church, and the subsequent dramatic upswing in church building. This also meant, however, that Morris's business suffered when tastes in glass design wavered, or waves of building came to an end. As Harvey and Press have noted, it was part of Morris's talent as a businessman to develop a variety of burgeoning markets. Particularly from the late 1860s on, Morris began to place greater emphasis on a style of goods suitable for the prospering middle classes, rather than ecclesiastical furnishings or decorative work for a select group of 'artistic' clients. Morris's was not the first or by any means the only firm to make this move; many other home furnishers, such as Maples in Tottenham Court Road (established 1842), John Lewis's in Oxford Street (1864), and Arthur Liberty's in Regent Street (1875), followed the new demand for luxury goods and made the same marketing judgments. Furnishings made by 'the author of The Earthly Paradise', however, had a certain cachet, and Morris's business expanded rapidly in the 1870s.

The designs that Morris produced for this market were almost entirely naturalistic, though it is possible to observe a variety of styles and phases. Morris had already designed wallpapers in the early and mid-1860s: 'Trellis' (designed in 1862 and

43 Watkinson, William Morris as Designer, p. 38.
44 Harvey and Press quote figures that indicate the Church of England constructed 1,727 new churches in England and Wales between 1840 and 1876, and restored 7,144. In the early years of the Firm, 1861–66, 397 new parishes were commissioned. See Harvey and Press, Design and Enterprise, pp. 56–7, quoting a Return showing the Number of Churches (including Cathedrals) in every Diocese in England, which had been built or restored at a cost exceeding £500 since the year 1840 (1876). For the reasons behind this expansion, including social and political unrest after the end of the French wars, see Chadwick, The Victorian Church, vol. 1, pp. 363–9, and Inglis, Churches and the Working Class, pp. 23–4.
45 Harvey and Press, Design and Enterprise, pp. 75–8. See, in particular, p. 75, where they argue that it was about this stage (the late 1860s) that Morris's income from his shares in Devon Great Consols began to fall, thus making it necessary for Morris to make the Firm commercially successful. Morris's concern about his income and his desire to expand the Firm, coupled with the fact that
registered in 1864, see fig. xxviii above), ‘Daisy’ (1864), ‘Fruit’ or ‘Pomegranate’ (1866) and also the more abstract ‘Diaper’ (c. 1868). These early designs are quite different from those that came later. They have a naive charm that defied both the earlier elaborate ‘French’ naturalism and the currently fashionable formalism. ‘Daisy’ has two different kinds of clumps alternating in regular rows (fig. xlv). Although a formal pattern, the daisies themselves are rendered in a vital but simple manner quite appropriate to the ubiquitous and yet diminutive subject. The design is not, however, an attempt at naturalism in the Pre-Raphaelite sense of the word. Morris’s daisies are here a simplification and conventionalisation of the referent. Nor are they inspired by the plants themselves. Linda Parry has demonstrated that the source of this pattern is a wall hanging illustrated in a fifteenth-century version of Froissart’s chronicles (see fig. xlvi).46 Similarly, ‘Trellis’, with its continuous orderly pattern furnished by a rose trailing over a wooden support, was probably inspired by the numerous examples of the subject in medieval manuscripts and paintings. ‘Fruit’, to some extent, breaks away from this format, employing a diagonal blossoming stem to achieve a more naturalistic effect (fig. xlvii). Nevertheless, this pattern can also be ‘read’ as merely an elaboration upon the more rigidly structured ‘Daisy’ and ‘Trellis’, and as an adaptation of Webb’s designs for panels in the Green Dining Room at the South Kensington Museum, also of 1866.47 In many respects, all of these papers bear some resemblance to the characteristics of formalistic wallpapers already on the market. They indicate how far Morris was willing to forego ‘truth to nature’ in order to accommodate art and history.

There followed a gap of about six years before Morris produced any other designs for wallpaper.48 By this time, the wallpaper industry was booming, with

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'Daisy' wallpaper pattern, registered 1 February 1864.

Illustration from *The Dance of the Wodehouses* in a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of Froissart's Chronicles, showing hangings that inspired Morris's 'Daisy' wallpaper, and possibly his 'If I can' embroidered hanging of 1856–57.
Fig. xlvii

‘Fruit’ or ‘Pomegranate’ wallpaper pattern, designed and first issued c. 1866.
national production rising from 1,222,753 rolls in 1834 to 32,000,000 in 1874.\(^49\) In the 1870s, Morris dramatically increased his production of patterns to cater to the expanding market, though his papers always remained at the more expensive end of the range.\(^50\) The patterns he produced between 1871 and 1876 were more overtly, thought not wholly, naturalistic. ‘Scroll’ (c. 1871), ‘Larkspur’ (c. 1872), ‘Jasmine’ (1872), ‘Vine’ (c. 1873), ‘Willow’ (1874), ‘Powdered’ (1874), ‘Lily’ (c. 1874), ‘Acanthus’ (1874–75), ‘Marigold’ (c. 1875), ‘Poppy’ (1875), ‘Chrysanthemum’ (1876), and ‘Pimpernel’ (1876) all feature intricate twining growth that suggests closer observation of natural processes and a more sophisticated understanding of pattern design. They differ most notably from the earlier designs because of their delicacy, movement, depth and density. ‘Jasmine’ (perhaps a wistful recollection of the vines that clambered over the walls at Red House) is a particularly sophisticated example (fig. xlviii). Set against a background of hawthorn leaves, blossoms and branches, the jasmine vine scrolls over the surface, producing a complex structure and rhythm. Furthermore, as Edward Cullinan has noted, the ‘crossing of darker by lighter, from behind when combined with the intermediate background, creates a great sense of “depth of surface”’.\(^51\) In a similar way, ‘Vine’ contrasts a stylised willow background with a meandering stem, leaves and bunches of grapes (fig. xlix). An even more vibrant and vigorous example of Morris’s designs during this period is the ‘Acanthus’ pattern (fig. 1). Here the foreground is bolder and more densely packed, and the structure provides, as May Morris noted, an ‘impression of the complexity of the many-folded great leaves’.\(^52\) All of these designs display Morris’s genius for massed pattern.

They also show that, at a fundamental level, most of Morris’s designs derive from living nature. Thus, many commentators have observed that the patterns of this period in particular feature plants and flowers found in his own gardens.\(^53\) Lindsay suggested that Morris’s designing activities were a part of his ‘paradisiac quest’ to


\(^50\) In 1890, for example, the price of Morris & Co. wallpapers ranged from about £0.13 to £0.80 per 21” roll. See Harvey and Press, *Design and Enterprise*, p. 174.

\(^51\) Cullinan, ‘Morris, Architecture and Art’, p. 53.


Fig. xlvi

‘Jasmine’ wallpaper pattern, designed c. 1872, first issued 1872.

Fig. xlix

‘Vine’ wallpaper pattern, designed c. 1873, first issued 1874.
Fig. 1

'Acanthus' wallpaper pattern, designed 1874, registered 22 July 1875.
rediscover the secrets and joys of the ‘childhood-garden of freedom and communion’; others have argued that Morris’s naturalistic designs ‘immortalised the wildflowers of the water meadows and country gardens of southern England’. These claims are supported by Morris’s obvious delight in plants, evident in letters that, as Watkinson has noted, might easily be the beginning of designs:

In the garden we have lots of tulips out looking beautiful: the white bluebells & some blue ones: some of the anemones are in blossom & they all soon will be: they are very lovely... Apple-blossom for the most part only in bud; but that cherry-tree near the arbour opposite my window is a mass of blooms. The heartseases are beautiful: very big. A few of the Iceland poppies are out: these will go on a long time. The gooseberries are not all gone we shall have a fair sprinkling. Two of the little cherries trees on the wall by the frame have cherries on them. Finally the raspberries are showing for blossom.

From letters such as these, we appreciate Morris’s powers of observation, his ability to see detail as well as the whole. May Morris believed that ‘nothing in the open air escaped him’, including ‘every turn of a leaf or attachment of a stem’, and that the finest of his patterns were memorable for a ‘familiarity with nature that makes it human and entertaining’.

In some respects, Morris’s expression in these designs can be compared to the representational vividness of the natural scientists. As noted above, Huxley’s writing had the capacity to render ‘the flux of phenomena with a sense of locale, immediacy and vigour’. Darwin’s way of seeing ‘repetitiousness of form’ and ‘geometries of organisation’, it has been argued, amounted to a ‘vigorous appropriation, through definition, of natural space’. In many ways, Morris did much the same thing. Aware of diversity and complexity in nature, Morris was not afraid of ‘super-abundance of ornament, any more’, he argued, ‘than nature is’. Moreover, like the scientists,

54 Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 130.
55 Wilhide, *Decor & Design*, p. 64.
59 See Chapter 3 of Section I above.
Morris too was in search of ‘laws’ determining an effective and satisfying pattern. In 1877, he urged those assembled at the Trades’ Guild of Learning to pay ‘resolute attention to the laws of nature, which are also the laws of art’. Lindsay believed that the elements of Morris’s patterns ‘have their own free field of self-assertion, and this freedom is always dialectically one with the laws of formative development which embrace all manifestations of life, all organisations of matter’. Looking at the complicated growth in these patterns, we see Morris observing nature as vigorous, interlinked, organised and complex. In ‘Jasmine’ or ‘Pimpernel’, it is Nature we are looking at—not just plants and flowers.

While many of these patterns demonstrate that Morris noticed nature, they also show that it was not his intention to produce realistic interpretations of them. Even in the more naturalistic patterns of the early to mid-1870s, Morris frequently turned to artistic antecedents for inspiration. In many ways, this group of patterns bear some similarity to the earlier French and French-inspired naturalistic patterns. As Derek Baker has observed, Morris’s ‘Jasmine’, though considerably more complex, certainly echoes William Kilburn’s design of the late eighteenth century (fig. li).

Perhaps the most important sources for Morris’s designs, however, were the illustrations contained in medieval or early-modern herbals. The herbals most used and admired by Morris were John Gerard’s *Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597) and Leonhard Fuchs’s *De historia stirpium commentarii insignes* (1542), but he also owned copies of Pliny the Elder’s *Historia naturalis* and Otto Brunfels’s *Herbarum Vivae Eicones* (‘portraits of living plants’). Gerard’s work was of particular

63 Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 129.
64 Baker also notes that Kilburn, a calico and wallpaper designer, also worked as an illustrator in William Curtis’s *Botanical Magazine* and in the *Flora Londonensis* (1795–8). See Baker, *The Flowers of William Morris*, p. 76.
Fig. ii
William Kilburn's late eighteenth-century jasmine pattern (compare Morris's own 'Jasmine' design).
importance. Morris’s brother, Stanley, told Mackail that Morris used Gerard’s herbal
to learn about plants and trees when he was young, and it seems that this habit
continued in later life. May Morris indicated several patterns ‘reminiscent of Gerard,
whose leaves we used to turn over together, when my Father would point out this or
that, such as the special elegance of the curves of the dog-tooth violet combined here
with the wood-bell and wood-sorrel’. That Morris used Gerard extensively can be
seen by comparing his own designs with illustrations from the herbal (see figs. lli–lv).

Morris probably followed illustrations from Gerard and other herbals because of their aesthetic appeal—because of ‘the special elegance of the curves’—rather than
because of their value as exact, ‘scientific’ examples. It has also been suggested that
the convention of drawing that required a clear outline of the plants’ forms, and the
bold woodcut technique by which they were reproduced, probably helped Morris to
give an accurate representation of plant and flower without weakening the pattern.
The herbals certainly extended his repertoire of conventions for dealing with natural
forms. As we shall see when we turn to examine Morris’s design principles,
conventional forms were a core element of his design philosophy.

Morris’s chief strength as a designer, well summed up by Edward Cullinan,
was his ‘unique way of using plants, abstracting from them both a poignant summary
of their own nature and a series of overlaid rhythms and events that are far more than
skin deep’. These ‘summaries’ were not merely imitative of older patterns or
illustrations. Watkinson has written that Morris was ‘no more sympathetic to art-as­
archeology than to art-as-abstraction’. Observation of the natural growth of plants
and flowers, Watkinson argued, enabled him to cover a surface with ‘the freedom
which comes of discipline’ and to avoid ‘mere imitation of historic forms’. The

Andrea Mattioli’s Commentarii in Sex Libror Pedacii Dioscoridis Anazarbei de Medica Materiá
(1544), though this book is not listed among those valued by Ellis.

66 Note on a conversation with Stanley Morris by J.W. Mackail; in Mackail’s notebooks at the


68 Watkinson, William Morris as Designer, p. 51.

69 Derek Baker (The Flowers of William Morris, p. 69) has suggested that Morris may have used other
handbooks to analyse pattern, such as J. Page’s A Guide for Drawing the Acanthus, published in 1840.


71 Watkinson, William Morris as Designer, pp. 50–2.
Figs. lli–liii

‘Willow Bough’ wallpaper pattern, first issued 1887, and Gerard’s illustration for the ‘common willow’. May Morris suggested that Morris’s ‘Willow Bough’ was ‘a keenly-observed rendering’ of willows ‘by our little stream that runs into the Thames’ (AWS, vol. I, p. 36), but it seems more likely that Morris, who had closely observed willows as a boy at the Water House, and had already designed such papers as ‘Willow’ and ‘Vine’ (which has willows in the background), was just as much influenced by Gerard.
Figs. liv–lv
Gerard’s ‘white jasmine’ and ‘manured vine’. Each of Morris’s corresponding designs bears considerable resemblance to these earlier illustrations.
similarity of many of Morris's designs to herbals indicates, however, that Morris believed that one should not replicate nature too closely either: where order was not apparent, it should be created and imposed.

The anti-naturalistic tendency in Morris's design activities became more apparent towards the end of the 1870s, due largely to his growing interest in producing textiles. Morris's interest in design for textiles had been apparent since his early experiments with embroidery at Red Lion Square and Red House. In the early years of the Firm, he had, along with Webb, provided many of the designs for ecclesiastical commissions. With the Firm's move towards the production of more commercial furnishings in the late 1860s, however, Morris turned his attention to designing for printed textiles. The first pattern he produced was 'Jasmine Trellis' (c. 1868–70), a simple floral, almost 'aesthetic', design, similar to many other commercial styles of the time. Morris had possibly been influenced by what May Morris remembered as copies of 'pleasant old-fashioned shiny ("calendered") chintzes' already produced for the Firm by Thomas Clarkson of Bannister Hall, a leading Lancashire cotton printer. These designs had been chosen from a collection of wood-block printed patterns from the early 1830s. 'Tulip and Willow' (1873) was the next pattern for printed textiles produced by Morris, and this 'denser' design was characteristic of others of the 1870s. 'Tulip' (1875), 'Marigold' and 'Larkspur' (both 1875, and both used for wallpaper as well as textiles) are all part of this group clearly recognisable as belonging to the same period as the more naturalistic wallpapers of 1873–76.

In the late 1870s, Morris began to learn to weave and became much more interested in designing patterns for woven textiles. Many of the designs Morris produced at this time, therefore, even those not specifically produced for woven textiles, show a symmetry and structure common to woven design. The wallpaper

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72 Many of these tended to imitate medieval hangings, and, though Morris produced some exquisite floral and foliate patterns in the 1870s and 1880s, much of the Firm's later embroidery was designed by May Morris and John Henry Dearie. The best work on Morris's textiles is Linda Parry's *William Morris Textiles*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1983; and Parry's more recent essay, 'Textiles', and catalogue entries in *V&A Catalogue*, pp. 224–95.  
73 Parry makes this observation in 'Textiles', p. 252.  
74 May Morris, AWS, vol. I, p. 44.  
‘Acorn’ (1879), for example, is based on a ‘turn-over’ pattern with plant forms arranged symmetrically on a vertical axis. Printed textiles featuring a more formally structured pattern include ‘Iris’ (1876), ‘Pomegranate’ (1877) and ‘Honeysuckle’ (1876). May Morris described this last as the ‘most truly “Morrisian” in character of all his pattern-making in mid-life’:

To make so formal a structure as a ‘net’ look like a very bower of blossoming things, orderly yet natural, is a real triumph of technical and imaginative skill... The crown-imperial with its graceful top-knot, the great poppy whose leaves form an inner net, the honeysuckle, the fritillaries, the background of yew-twigs, all these elements, looking as if they were copied straight from the garden, are brought together in a decoration for a wall or window unique in the history of design past or present.76

Yet even more ‘orderly’ were those patterns designed specifically for fabrics to be woven from wool, silk and cotton. ‘Tulip and Rose’ (1876), ‘Crown Imperial’ (1876), ‘Bird’ (1878), ‘Peacock and Dragon’ (1878), ‘Flower Garden’ (1879), ‘Bird and Vine’ (1879) and ‘Dove and Rose’ (1879) are all flatter, more heavily stylised designs, many with a turn-over pattern repeat or near symmetrical construction. In these patterns there is not the sense of the deep undergrowth of nature observed in earlier designs. Instead of a sense of forever changing pattern and movement (only a sense in the earlier patterns, because they were always designed on a repeat pattern format), instead of tangled growth, complexity and ‘evolution’, there is symmetry, poise and balance, more evidence of the calculating human eye and designing human hand. There are in designs such as ‘Flower Garden’ and ‘Bird’, for example, formal ‘crowns’ of foliation with subsidiary elements, more like extravagant posies or plants set one above the other, rather than trails of continuous growth (see fig. lvi). Patterns such as ‘Dove and Rose’ are also heavily stylised, featuring birds superimposed upon repeating ‘nets’ of foliage.

This change from the patterns produced for printed fabrics and wallpaper was due in part to Morris’s understanding of the technical process of weaving and the types of patterns more suited to this media. The change was also motivated by Morris’s

Fig. lvi
‘Bird’, woven textile pattern, designed 1878.

Fig. lvii
‘Snakeshead’ printed textile pattern, designed 1876; thought to be based on imported Indian silks.
increased attention to historic textiles, particularly those kept at the South Kensington Museum. Morris had been interested in historic, particularly late medieval, textiles from an early age, but once he began to plan his woven designs he paid particular attention to the collections at South Kensington. While giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Technical Instruction, held at the Museum, Morris remarked that he had used the Museum’s resources ‘as much as any man living’, and acknowledged that any good designer ‘cannot afford to disregard the works of art that have been produced in times past when design was flourishing’. Morris’s knowledge of the South Kensington collections is further demonstrated in lectures of the 1880s, and by the fact that the Museum invited him to be an ‘Art Referee’ in 1883. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, he was recognised as one of the foremost authorities on Persian and Turkish carpets and advised the Museum to purchase many of its finest pieces.

The influence of the Museum’s collections can be seen in all of his designs after the mid-1870s. As Barbara Morris has observed, the mock-medieval woven ‘Peacock and Dragon’ is probably based on a fourteenth-century Sicilian textile; ‘Crown Imperial’ is related to a fifteenth-century Rhenish linen; and several other of Morris’s patterns drew inspiration from Italian silk velvets. Less traceable, but still obvious, are the effects of these textiles on designs such as the diagonally structured stems of the ‘Wild Tulip’ wallpaper (1884), the formal ‘Bruges’ (1888), and the ‘oriental’ ‘Granada’ (1884), ‘Brocatel’ (c. 1888) and ‘Isaphan’ (c. 1888) textiles. These last, later three, feature particularly formal, non-naturalistic design elements.

Later designs for printed cottons are also more formal, some almost heraldic. ‘Snakeshead’ (1877), ‘Bird and Anemone’ (1881), ‘Brother Rabbit’ (1882), and ‘Strawberry Thief’ (1883), some of Morris’s most popular designs, all contain similar

79 Both the ‘Ardabil’ and ‘Chelsea’ carpets, for example, were purchased largely on Morris’s advice.
80 Barbara Morris, Inspiration for Design, pp. 98–103.
81 Carpets produced by Morris & Co., particularly the hand-knotted variety, were also influenced by Persian colour schemes and designs, though the Company’s brochure also stressed that ‘Western’ carpets should ‘show themselves to be the outcome of modern and Western ideas’. See ‘The
features to the woven textiles described above. ‘Snakeshead’ (fig. lvii) and other patterns, such as ‘Indian Diaper’ (1875), are thought, however, to be based upon imported Indian silks, perhaps seen by Morris at Thomas Wardle’s dye works at Leek, but also available throughout London at this time. Thus, on the whole, May Morris’s observation that ‘nothing of the floweriness is sacrificed to the formality of “trace-and-turnover’” is rather misleading. Most of these later patterns are much less ‘flowery’, with nature’s presence heavily curtailed and controlled.

Nevertheless, they still contain nature, if only in the form of suggestion or summary. There are no Morris patterns which are strictly abstract. Every design makes some reference to the growth of foliate forms; Morris’s plants and flowers are never entirely ‘picked’ or static. There is truth in May Morris’s comment that a late wallpaper design such as ‘Wild Tulip’ (1884) still shows ‘much of Nature’s profusion’, and evidence of the spring garden at Kelmscott, even though it also shows signs of the Turkish and Persian textiles Morris studied at South Kensington. ‘Strawberry Thief’ was also described by May as a remembrance of ‘the rascally thrushes at work on the fruit-beds’: a ‘note of the June garden and the little lords of it’ (see fig. lviii). Furthermore, in a letter to Thomas Wardle of 1877, Morris wrote: ‘I am studying birds now to see if I can’t get some of them into my next design’. Soon after he produced ‘Bird’ and, over the next few years, other bird-containing designs such as ‘Bird and Vine’, ‘Dove and Rose’, ‘Bird and Anemone’ and ‘Strawberry Thief’. Like many of his designs for tapestries, these and other patterns such as ‘Brer Rabbit’ (1882),

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82 Parry (William Morris Textiles, p. 46), citing the entry for the British India section of the 1878 Paris International Exhibition catalogue, states that exports of silk from India had increased dramatically in the 1870s due to the continued use of natural dyes in India.


84 May (AWS, vol. I, p. 36) believed that ‘[t]he character of this delicate design is all “Kelmscott”’, and that her father had given ‘the lovely network of growth in the tulip-beds with the minimum of convention’.

85 Morris’s first design for tapestry was ‘Acanthus and Vine’, which he nicknamed ‘Cabbage and Vine’ because of the wild and voluminous leaves. He did not, however, produce many designs for tapestry, believing that it ‘is not fit for anything but figure-work’ (Morris to Thomas Wardle, 14 November 1877, in Letters, vol. I, p. 409). Nevertheless he did create flower and leaf motifs to surround Burne-Jones’s figures, and some of these were influenced by sixteenth-century Flemish *millefleurs* designs, as seen in pieces such as ‘La Main Chaude’ and ‘The Three Fates’; in the Victorian and Albert Museum, 5668–1859; 5668A–1859; no. 65–1866.
Fig. Iviii
‘Strawberry Thief’ printed textile pattern, registered 11 May 1883: a remembrance of ‘the rascally thrushes’ at Kelmscott.
employ motifs based on English or British plants and flowers, or on those sufficiently ‘old’ or acclimatised as to ‘feel’ domestic and familiar. Not for Morris were those patterns that featured palms, bamboo or rain forest vegetation from Brazil. 88 There is a hint of chauvinism in Morris’s emphasis that ‘outlandishness’ is a ‘snare’:

those natural forms which are at once most familiar and most delightful to us, as well from association as from beauty, are the best for our purpose. The rose, the lily, the tulip, the oak, the vine, and all the herbs and trees that even we cockneys know about, they will serve our turn better than queer, outlandish, upsidedown-looking growths. 89

Also worthy of mention in this context are a group of late printed cottons, often referred to as the ‘river chintzes’ (see figs. lix–lx). Most of these follow a ‘flowing’ diagonal structure and were named after tributaries of Morris much-beloved Thames, including ‘Evenlode’ (1883), ‘Wey’ (1883), ‘Kennet’ (1883), ‘Windrush’ (1883), ‘Lodden’ (1884), ‘Wandle’ (1884), ‘Cray’ (1884), ‘Lea’ (1885), and ‘Medway’ (1885). While the treatment of many of these patterns is evidently inspired by other textiles, 90 they are also representations loaded with the memory of real scenes. May Morris (who also had a keen eye for nature’s patterns) described these ‘river-scapes’ which inspired her father:

Knee-deep grows the flowered grass in early June in those rich water-side meadows, and the perfume of the blossom seems indescribably mingled with the bird’s song, with the soft fall of water over the weir, and the quivering of the warm air alive with butterflies and wandering sheaths of the elm-blossom—all one delicious entanglement of charm. 91

This refers to the reaches of the upper Thames around Kelmscott Manor, perhaps where the Windrush feeds into the Thames. 92 ‘Wandle’, on the other hand, was to

88 One can imagine that Morris would have hated even more the scenic or ‘geographic’ wallpapers, featuring panoramas of the Bay of Naples, ‘Eldorado’, or ‘The Voyages of Captain Cook’. On the taste for these papers and ‘exotics’ in Victorian Britain, see Ronald Rees, Interior Landscapes: Gardens and the Domestic Environment, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993, pp. 130–40.
90 Certain flowers in ‘Evenlode’, for example, seem inspired by Persian or Turkish design. See also, Parry, William Morris Textiles, pp. 53–5.
92 May Morris (AWS, vol. I, p. 45) wrote that ‘Windrush’ was ‘named in memory of pleasant summer journeys along the Windrush valley’. See also Morris’s letter (3 March 1883, in Letters, vol. II, p. 165) to May regarding the naming of ‘Evenlode’.
Fig. lix–lx
The ‘river chintzes’: the design for ‘Wey’, c. 1883; and ‘Windrush’ printed cotton, registered 18 October 1883.
honour’ the ‘helpful stream’ by Merton Abbey, where Morris had moved his works in 1881.93 May Morris, in characteristically romantic fashion, noted that ‘Wandle’ was ‘fitly named for the little stream sparkling among the greenery about the old wooden workshops within the walls of the ancient Abbey building’, and that it was ‘neither an echo of medieval form, nor a copying of Nature’s tangled beauty: just of bit of Morris’s self, built up on the old “continuous” pattern-plan’.94 In many respects, these flowing tributes to nature’s tributaries, mirroring the ‘soft fall of water over the weir’, mark a climax in Morris’s design work as, from the mid-1880s, Dearle produced most of the patterns for paper and textiles. These last river chintzes are the confident, rich, orderly ‘culturing’ of nature of an attentive, responsive and powerfully imaginative Victorian adaptor of nature’s patterns to flat surfaces.

The effect of all this movement, structure, and pattern, and also of the rich colours Morris employed,95 was ultimately the most important feature of his designs. As Parry has argued: ‘To admire Morris textiles [and, we might add, stained glass and wallpaper] simply as attractive flat patterns not only denies their success as furnishings, but underestimates Morris’s genius as a designer’.96 Many have discussed the full decorative schemes carried out by the Firm,97 and it is not my intention to discuss the faults and merits of each here. It is necessary, however, to consider what Morris’s varyingly naturalistic designs ‘said’ to the occupants, or ‘did’ to the Victorian interior.

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93 On 4 September 1883 Morris (Letters, vol. II, p. 223) wrote to his daughter, Jenny: ‘one of [the designs] … (I am working on it this afternoon) is such a big one that if it succeeds I shall call it Wandle: the connection may not seem obvious to you as the wet Wandle is not big but small, but you see it will have to be very elaborate and splendid and so I want to honour our helpful stream’. On the Merton Abbey works, see Chapter I of Section IV below.
94 May Morris, AWS, vol. I, p. 36
95 There is no room here for a discussion of Morris’s use of nature and history to develop vegetable dyes, but his use of a ‘vegetable palette’ and analysis of eighteenth-century dyers’ manuals is another example of his mediating between the two. See Morris’s many letters to Thomas Wardle between 1870 and 1896, in Letters, passim; his discussion ‘Of Dyeing as an Art’, in AWS, vol. I, p. 260; and also Parry’s description of Morris’s experimentation and the dyeing process in William Morris Textiles, pp. 39–45.
96 Parry, William Morris Textiles, p. 128.
97 See, for example, Parry’s discussion of 1 Palace Green, London (home of Rosalind and George Howard), Rounton Grange, Northallerton, Yorkshire (home of Margaret and Sir Isaac Lownthian Bell), 1 Holland Park, London (home of Aleco Ionides and family), Old Swan House, Chelsea Embankment, London, and Great Tangleby Manor, Surrey (both homes of Wickham Flower), Clouds, Salisbury, Wiltshire (home of the Hon. Percy Wyndham), Wighton Manor, Wolverhampton, West Midlands (home of Theodore Mander), Bullerswood, Chislehurst, Kent (home of the Sanderson family), Stanmore Hall, Middlesex (home of William Know D’Arcy), Standen, East Grinstead, Sussex (home
What did Morris's patterns, as representations of nature, make people feel? What, in other words, did Morris's patterns 'say'? What did he attempt to make nature 'say'?

Ellen Frank has argued that Morris's work demonstrated a change in aesthetics and philosophy which enabled the 'citified' Victorians, starved of natural scenery, to content themselves 'with a Nature of home furnishings, without finding external Nature an oppressive critique of ... [their] carefully secured, even more carefully rationalised, haven of retreat'. Frank maintains that Morris's 'domestication of Nature' is evident in the ways in which he reconstitutes the external landscape within the home. In this respect, Frank claims, nature-as-decoration became 'a new mode of participation in the world outside' as Victorians endeavoured to possess a real, but no longer threatening, nature. Frank quotes M.H. Baillie Scott, who declared that a house with nature tamed into decoration is 'like Romance in the form of fiction': it unveils 'an enchanted realm where thrilling deeds may be done without danger and permanent habitations enjoyed without expense'.

Frank's integration of Morris into her schema of 'domesticating' Victorians is, on the whole, a reasonable assessment of the 'language' of Morris's patterns. Though he generally disparaged such 'literalism', Morris's decorative work responded to the same desire for 'interior landscapes' made manifest in the Victorian taste for conservatories, winter gardens and Wardian cases. Furthermore, Morris's 'hints on pattern-designing' to the London Working Men's College in 1881 included advice to represent an untroubled nature:

we must provide ourselves with lesser (I will not say worse) art with which to surround our common workaday or restful times; and for those times, I think, it will be enough for us to clothe our daily and domestic walls with ornament that reminds us of the outward face of the earth, of the innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest as he does. I say, with ornament that reminds us of these things ... because scientific representation of them would again involve us I the problems of


100 See Rees, Interior Landscapes, pp. 147-65.
hard fact and the troubles of life, and so once more destroy our rest for us.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 177.}

Percy Lubbock, describing the effect of walking into a Morris-furnished room, evidently thought Morris had achieved these goals:

the pomegranates of Morris were on the walls, his glowing tulips were on the chairs or in the hangings... I can’t describe, I couldn’t exaggerate the romance of the discovery. Say what you will, there remains this magic in the touch of the genius of Morris, that it brings you strangeness and rarity into your own life, the life that you lead, and you aren’t called to stop and stare and exclaim, you haven’t to adapt your ways by force to a strange new presence. It allows you to live and work as usual, as before, but with romance in the breathable air.\footnote{Percy Lubbock, \textit{Shades of Eton}, Jonathan Cape, London, 1929, p. 94.}

Sunk in an chair upholstered in ‘Violet and Columbine’, in a room hung with ‘Bird’, with windows bordered by ‘Dove and Rose’, and the floor covered with ‘Tulip and Lily’, it is doubtful that nature would have appeared ‘red in tooth and claw’ (though, with this much pattern, there could be an element of competition). If earlier floral patterns ‘charmed’ by reason of a ‘pregnant sensuality’ that ‘responded to the pent-up emotions of a corseted society’,\footnote{Jacqué, ‘Luxury Perfected’, p. 64.} Morris’s work soothed by reason of an enveloping romance that countered the age of capital and machinery. Morris’s drawing room at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, was hung with ‘Bird’ and ‘Peacock and Dragon’ to achieve what Morris considered a ‘medieval’ effect.\footnote{In the lecture ‘Textile Fabrics’, delivered at the International Health Exhibition of 1884, Morris described patterns which were the inspiration for ‘Bird’ as achieving the perfect balance between ‘the wild fantasy and luxurious intricacy of the East with the straight-forward story-telling imagination ... of medieval Europe’: quoted in Parry, ‘Textiles’, p. 270.} As Kelvin has argued, decoration provided Morris with ‘a joy and pleasure akin to what Wordsworth felt when he looked at mountains and streams or apostrophised them in poetry’.\footnote{Kelvin, ‘Introduction’, in \textit{Letters}, vol. I, p. xxvii.}

While Morris’s furnishings might have felt soothing or romantic, there was also a subtle yet more sophisticated symbolism in his work. While, as Frank notes, later attempts by designers to exclude nature from the interior re-established the myth ‘that Nature really is frightening and man is much more comfortable in a home, isolated...
perhaps, but protected’, 106 Morris’s patterns attempted to bring a complex, negotiable nature into the Victorian interior. They alluded to a free and rich growth of life, perhaps even to a ‘commonwealth’ of humanity in nature. Though clients such as Beatrice Webb doubted there was ‘much socialism’ in ‘beautiful surroundings’, 107 a ‘reasonable share’ of beauty in the home became part of Morris’s politics as well as his art. This becomes clearer when one examines the lectures Morris delivered on these subjects.

In ‘The Art of the People’, delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design in 1879, Morris called upon artists to ‘follow nature, study antiquity, make your own art’. 108 This advice may well seem contradictory, yet Morris explained what he meant in ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, delivered at the London Working Men’s College in 1881. Here he observed that ‘ornamental pattern work, to be raised above the contempt of reasonable men, must possess three qualities: beauty, imagination and order’. 109 All elements in this schema were equally important, but ‘beauty’ was the quality that nature was largely called upon to provide. Thus one aspect of Morris’s design principles emphasised the ‘romance of external nature’ as a crucial quality of pattern-making and interior decoration. 110 In this respect he followed Ruskin, seeking to carry his mentor’s dictum that architecture should replace absent nature through to the decorative arts. 111

Nevertheless, as has already been noted, Morris’s decorative work did not aspire to the painstaking imitation of nature that had been part of the ‘gospel’ of the early Pre-Raphaelites. When discussing suitable ornamentation for a wall, he argued:

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111 See The Two Paths (Works, vol. XVI, p. 320), where Ruskin instructs his readers to ‘get rid of any idea of decorative art being a degraded or separate kind of art. Its nature and essence is simply its being fitted for a definite place; and, in that place, forming part of a great and harmonious whole, in companionship with other art’.
If you are to put nothing on it but what strives to be a literal imitation of nature, all you can do is to have a few cut flowers or bits of boughs nailed to it, with perhaps a blue-bottle fly or a butterfly here and there.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 178.}

‘I don’t deny that this may make good decoration now and then,’ he continued, ‘but if all decoration had to take that form I think weariness of it would drive you to a white-washed wall; and at the best it is a very limited view to take of nature’.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 178.} Morris asked if it was

not better to be reminded [my emphasis], however, simply, of the close vine-trellis that keeps out the sun by the Nile side; or of the wild woods and their streams ... or of the many-flowered summer meadows of Picardy? Is not all this better than having to count day after day a few sham-real boughs and flowers, casting sham-real shadows on your walls with little hint of anything beyond Covent Garden in them?\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 178.}

Furthermore, Morris believed that process and material also limited the imitation of nature.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 182.} When designing wallpaper patterns, for example, Morris stressed the need ‘to create due paper-stainers’ flowers and leaves, forms that are obviously fit for printing with a block’ and to resist the ‘mere twisting of natural forms into lines that may pass for ornamental’.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 177.} Decorative art, he insisted, ‘must be suggestive rather than imitative’.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 179.}

In the same lecture, however, Morris also stressed:

You may be sure that any decoration is futile, and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation, when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol.\footnote{Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-designing’, p. 179.}

He fervently disliked strictly abstract designs, and required ‘plenty of meaning’ in patterns. That is not to say that his work had a symbolic or emblematic meaning.
Morris's flowers could not be 'read' in the ways identified by Seaton; there is no literal 'vocabulary' of Morris's designs. What Morris required was 'unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs, and tendrils'. In addition, he placed particular emphasis on the importance of clearly defined structure, and the importance of 'rational' and 'continuous growth':

in recurring patterns, at least, the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily from another. Take heed in this growth that each member of it be strong and crisp, 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.

This was not wholly natural growth. 'To take a natural spray of what not and torture it into certain lines, is a hopeless way of designing a pattern', Morris argued. Any representation of nature would become 'soulless and tiresome' unless it reflected 'some part of the infinite variety which abides in the mind of man'. 'In all good pattern-designs', he insisted, 'the idea comes first'. Naturalism alone, in other words, did not produce successful patterns and designs. Morris recommended, therefore, that strict order be imposed on a pattern because it 'both builds a wall against vagueness and opens a door therein for imagination to come in by'. Morris called this 'the conventionalising of nature', and considered that such 'conventionalised' forms would remind 'a reasonable and imaginative person ... not only of the part of nature which ... they represent, but also of much that lies beyond that part'.

One cannot conclude, however, that Morris's 'conventionalised' nature should make patterned nature entirely 'mechanical'. Morris insisted:

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119 See the Appendix, 'A Combined Vocabulary', to Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1995, pp. 167–97. May Morris (AWS, vol. I, p. 36) also commented: 'Modern symbolism in design always bored Morris, and we know his remark about Peter Bell and his primrose after people had been asking him what a certain design “meant”'.


121 Morris, 'Some Hints on Pattern-designing', p. 199. Morris believed that 'continuous growth' was a quality that emerged in the movement from 'old Classic' to 'young Gothic' pattern-work (p. 185).


123 Morris, 'Some Hints on Pattern-designing', p. 178.


At the same time in all patterns which are meant to fill the eye and satisfy the mind, there should be a certain mystery. We should not be able to read the whole thing at once, nor desire to do so, nor be impelled by that desire to go on tracing line after line to find out how the pattern is made...\textsuperscript{126}

Morris still reminded his audiences of the risks of ignoring natural forms. ‘[U]nless you know plenty about the natural form you are conventionalising,’ he argued, ‘you will not only find it impossible to give people a satisfactory impression of what is in your own mind about it, but you will also be so hampered by your ignorance that you will not be able to make your conventionalised form ornamental’.\textsuperscript{127} Nevertheless, his invocation of ‘mystery’ suggests that he believed there was a certain point at which the quest for knowledge about nature should cease. This belief, that the form and movement of nature take precedence over the study of its parts, reflects Morris’s romantic heritage. It places him alongside the artists and philosophers who took issue with the ‘mechanistic’ approach of the Newtonians and Darwinians, even though he looked at nature as carefully as these scientists. It also places him within the tradition of those Victorians who sought to ‘preserve Nature for the human imagination’.\textsuperscript{128} His patterns reflect human interaction with nature, its inevitability, its necessity, and its need for ordering and restraint. This interaction can best be understood if one accepts that the ordered complexities of Morris’s graphic designs are transferred into his social theory.

That Morris, the student of Ruskin, should move easily between aesthetics and ethics should come as no surprise, and it was at the height of Morris’s pattern designing, that is 1876 to 1882, that he entered public politics. In 1883 he described his political stance as ‘Socialism seen through the eyes of an artist’, and, even before he committed to socialism, he argued that a ‘new art of conscious intelligence’ would be ‘wrapped up ... with changes political and social’. ‘I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few’, he told his first audience in 1877.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{126} Morris, ‘Making the Best of It’, in Hopes and Fears for Art, p. 109.
\textsuperscript{127} Morris, ‘Making the Best of It’, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{128} Knopflmacher and Tennyson, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiii.
All Morris’s public lectures broach the subject of a ‘new art’, the ‘birth of a new art’ or ‘the new birth of art’. John Hanna has called it ‘a new art of environmental design’ and argued that ‘Morris turned for examples to the English man-made landscape, whenever he expounded his theory’. Emphasising the connection between Morris’s art and propagation of ‘scientific socialism’, Hanna suggested that hanging Morris’s designs the wrong way destroys the growth motif that manifests Morris’s desire for social revolution.130 The movement and growth in Morris’s patterns, however, are by no means the only indication of Morris’s desire for changed relationships. How and why nature comes to be present in these patterns also reveals what might be called a socio-environmental consciousness.

This becomes apparent when one accepts that, however conventionalised Morris’s patterns became, his work still significantly ‘re-presented’ nature. It is possible to think of Morris’s patterns as a ‘cultivating art’, which allows the traditionally subordinate category of nature to resume something of its original encompassing of culture. His art was a way of responding to, participating in and being within nature. In 1877 he stressed that ‘one of the chief uses of decoration, the chief part of its alliance with nature [my emphasis]’ was to ‘sharpen our dulled senses’ and give people pleasure in the things that they must use and make:

> for this end are those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented, which men have so long delighted in: forms and intricacies that do not necessarily imitate nature, but in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the way that she does, till the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, or the mountain flint.131

> [E]verything made by man’s hands has a form’, he argued, ‘which must be either beautiful or ugly; 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’.132 And this natural art had a specifically social function. It was to ‘make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain sides’ so that

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it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirits to come from the open country into a town: every man’s house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work: all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful...

Thus, Morris called for his audience to

extend the word art beyond those matters which are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting and sculpture and architecture, but the shapes and colours of all household goods, nay, even the arrangement of the fields for tillage and pasture, the management of towns and of our highways of all kinds: in a word, to extend it to the aspect of all the externals of our life.\textsuperscript{133}

Of course, in his own day, Morris failed to extend objects of art much beyond the purview of the wealthy middle to upper classes, and many have remarked on the seeming contradiction between his production of wallpaper for royalty or barons of industry and his socialist campaigning.\textsuperscript{134} He did influence a new and younger generation of nature-inspired theorists and designers,\textsuperscript{135} but, for the further extension of art, Morris believed that society would have to wait for revolution. He did work towards the extension and preservation of nature for as many as possible, and this work will be examined in the next section. In the meantime, Morris designed patterns that tell us about nature: about the growth, complexity, interrelationship and structure observed and created by a Victorian immersed in the nineteenth-century visual and scientific reordering of the natural world. At his very first lecture on the decorative arts, he told his audience: ‘For your teachers, they must be Nature and History’.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{132} Morris, ‘The Lesser Arts’, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{133} Morris, ‘Art under Plutocracy’, pp. 164–5.
\textsuperscript{134} It is reported that Morris vented some frustration in this regard while decorating the house of an iron magnate, Sir Lowthian Bell: “It’s only that I spend my life in ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich”. This comment was apparently made in the late 1870s at Rounton Grange, Yorkshire, and relayed from Sir Lowthian Bell through Alfred Powell to W.R. Lethaby and quoted in his \textit{Philip Webb and His Work}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{135} See, for example, the works of Lewis F. Day, such as \textit{The Anatomy of Pattern} (1887) and \textit{Nature in Ornament} (1892). In the latter work, Day uses Morris’s ‘Fruit’ pattern as an example of ‘the considerations of nature and of ornament ... evenly balanced’ (B.T. Batsford, London, 1892, p. 170). See, also, the patterns for textiles and wallpapers by designers such as J.H. Dearle, C.F.A. Voysey, Allen F. Vigers, George Sumner, Sidney G. Mawson and Walter Crane.
\textsuperscript{136} Morris, ‘The Lesser Arts’, p. 15.
When we talk of Morris’s patterns as ‘naturalistic’, therefore, we have to be aware that these are not timeless designs, but historically specific representations.
4. A new land at last to be seen

In order to understand how Morris was able to formulate a hopeful and positive future for art, nature and humanity, it is necessary to examine another of his attempts to 'forget six counties’, begun in the late 1860s. This attempt took a fairly conventional Victorian form: interest in the language, literature and history of a foreign, ‘exotic’ land. In 1868 he met the Icelandic scholar Eiríkr Magnússon and began to study and translate the sagas of the North. Drawing heavily on Magnússon’s knowledge, but also on the works of other Nordic enthusiasts such as Benjamin Thorpe, Thomas Carlyle and George Dasent, Morris began a passionate involvement with Icelandic culture and nature. In so doing, he encountered a dramatic new landscape, which challenged his dream of nature as benevolent and pastoral, but also his nightmare of nature as the ‘eternal void’. The 'new land' seen through the saga literature, and from the back of an Icelandic pack-pony, enabled Morris to imagine nature anew.

Morris’s association with this northern culture and nature can be divided into a number of phases. The first was his study, translation and publication of *The Saga of Gunnlaug Worm-tongue* (1869), *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (1869) and *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* (1870). These works, actually translated by Magnusson and then versified, and often ‘archaised’, by Morris, are predominantly plot- and character-driven translations that contain very little descriptive detail. They are, as a consequence, poor places to look for Morris’s

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1 Magnússon’s role as tutor and guide has often been belittled in studies of Morris’s encounter with Iceland. May Morris ignored Magnússon’s contribution to her father’s translations, and MacCarthy has little to say of this skilled philologist in her recent biography. A theologian and linguist, Magnússon arrived in London in 1862 to supervise the printing of an Icelandic New Testament for the British and Foreign Bible Society and eventually became a lecturer in Icelandic at Cambridge and Deputy Librarian of the University Library. He taught Morris Icelandic, provided the initial, literal translations of the sagas, which Morris then versified, and acted as chief guide on Morris's first Icelandic journey in 1871. My attention was drawn to Magnússon’s influence by a paper delivered by Gary Aho at the William Morris Centenary Conference, Exeter College, Oxford, 28 June 1996.

2 It is probable that Morris’s first encountered saga literature when Burne-Jones introduced him to Benjamin Thorpe’s *Northern Mythology* (1851–52) in 1852. Carlyle wrote a number of pieces on Norse myth, including an essay on Odin in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841). George Webbe Dasent published the first English grammar of Old Icelandic in 1843, and was well known for his translations of the sagas. The Victorians could also draw on many accounts of
ideas about nature. Or, rather, they are poor places to look for Morris’s ideas about the nature of Iceland, because much of this work demonstrates that his involvement with the North at this stage was still as an Anglo-Norman medievalist. Most of these translations attempt to gloss over the blunt austerity of the originals. Contemporaneous with *The Earthly Paradise*, they also contain moments of gloomy introspection in face of a hostile world. In the prefatory poem to *The Story of Grettir the Strong*, life is ‘scarce worth the living’, the land is ‘wretched’, and ‘men fare without an aim / Unto the dull grey dark from whence they came’. Here nature is ‘dull’, ‘dark’, and implacable, and Morris has neither the opportunity (given that these are translations), nor, it would seem, the inclination, to find much of hope or beauty in the Nordic landscape.

Subsequent phases of involvement with Iceland are much more informative. *A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871* and *A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873* reveal Morris’s impressions of both culture and landscape, and disclose his changing appreciation of nature. Morris’s visits to Iceland have been described as both a taking of a ‘carapace’, and as ‘a strong turn towards reality’. In effect, they were both, though it is necessary to distinguish between the two voyages as they reveal a changing appreciation of the world observed.

Morris’s first journey to Iceland encompassed an overnight train journey from King’s Cross, via Newcastle, Berwick and Edinburgh, to the harbour at Granton. From Granton, he took a Danish mail boat up the east coast of Scotland, and sailed between the Orkney’s and the Shetlands to the Faeroes. From here, the boat sailed north-west to the east coast of Iceland, then west around the south coast of the island, and finally into Reykjavík. Ponies and guides were hired in Reykjavík, and the party took a south-east route to Lithend, then journeyed north, via the hot springs at Geysir, across ‘wilderness’ to the fjords of the north, went south and west to encircle the Snaefellness peninsula, and then back to Reykjavík.

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Icelandic travel by authors such as John Barrow, Lord Dufferin, Sabine Baring-Gould, Sir Richard Francis Burton, Anthony Trollope and Elizabeth Jane Oswald.


via the site of the ancient assemblies at Thingvellir. The trek took approximately six weeks and, apart from his Icelandic guides, Morris was accompanied by Magnússon, Faulkner and a ‘gentleman’ from Dorset, W.H. Evans.

Morris’s first visit to Iceland was undertaken at a time when he was still grappling with personal problems, but little of the writing in the Journal is deliberately introspective. Written for Georgiana Burne-Jones, and frequently bluff, burlesque and self-mocking, most of the Journal is an outward-looking travelogue documenting Morris’s observations about the land, people and history: a record of a journey where he was ‘in fact very happy’. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to read how Morris, poet of meadow and dale, responded to scorched black lava fields, to glaciers, geysers and the stench of sulphur, to nature’s endless re-formation. How did Morris cope with the Icelandic state of mind: the knowledge that if nature wanted to blow you away, there was not much you could do about it?

Morris felt that the Faeroes were his ‘first sight of a really northern land’, and we see in his entry for 11 July 1871 the first example of the ‘dreamer of dreams’ confronting a dramatically different landscape. Here his response is a mixture of trepidation and awe of a kind that resists quantification, but also attempts a kind of poetic assimilation. At first, Morris confessed, he ‘shuddered’ at the sight of the ‘mournfully empty and barren’ land. He conceded, after a walk about Straumey, that there was an ‘air of romanticism’ about the place, but that it

6 I have used current spellings of Icelandic place names in my text, but retained Morris’s anglicised forms when quoting from his diaries.
7 This journey came at the height of Jane Morris’s affair with Rossetti, and Morris had left them together at Kelmscott Manor. This was also a difficult period in the marriage of Morris’s close friends, Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones. Thus many have argued that Morris’s interest in Iceland was, in part, compensation for a failed marriage or romance. ‘On the Edge of the Wilderness’ (*Poems By the Way*, in CW, vol. IX, pp. 146–8), a poem first published in the *Fortnightly Review* in April 1869, describes a man who wishes to depart to a ‘desert place’ where ‘the wind from off the waste / Sighs like a song that bids me make good haste / The wave of sweet forgetfulness to taste’. Moreover, the references in this poem are explicitly to those ‘who faithless are, and who are wed’. Others have merely noted that Morris felt a kind of psychological correspondence with these barren landscapes: that he appreciated their ‘sad-faced and tender paganism’ (Henry Buxton Forman, quoted by Vallance, *Art, Writings and Public Life*, p. 194).
was of a 'beauty ... I can’t describe'. ‘[I]t was like nothing I had ever seen’, he emphasised, ‘but strangely like my old imaginations of places for sea wanderers to come to’. He did manage to find the words, however, and, as the boat headed out from the Westmanna Firth, he figured the nature of the North as Gothic sublime:

I turned to look ahead as the ship met the first of the swell in the open sea, and when I looked astern a very few minutes after, I could see ... a terrible wall of rent and furrowed rocks, the little clouds still entangled here and there about the tops of them: here the wall would be rent from top to bottom and its two sides would yawn as if they would have fallen asunder, here it was buttressed with great masses of stone that had slipped from its top; there it ran up into all manner of causeless-looking spikes: there was no beach below the wall, no foam breaking at its feet. It was midnight now and everything was grey and colourless and shadowless, yet there was light enough in the clear air to see every cranny and nook of the rocks, and in the north-east now the grey sky began to get a little lighter with dawn.

In the next sentence he described how he ‘stood near the stern and looked backward a long time till the coast ... was now a long flat line’. The feeling, as John Purkis has remarked, is that of paradise lost. Though it is not yet a gaining of the world, Morris was certainly struck by the occasion. He wrote home to Jane: ‘I have seen nothing out of a dream so strange as our coming out of the last narrow sound into the Atlantic, ... nothing I have ever seen has impressed me so much’.

Similarly, when Morris first saw Iceland, he found that it was ‘no use trying to describe it’, because it was ‘just like nothing else in the world’. Again, however, he reacted with trepidation to what he initially saw as a bleak, inhospitable landscape. He described the coast around Papey Island in the east as ‘a terrible shore indeed: a great mass of dark grey mountains worked into pyramids

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11 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, pp. 17-18. Though a powerful description of the scene, it is also tempting to read this passage as an indication of Morris’s awareness of the personal journey he was undertaking: of troubled lands left behind and opening new vistas. Yet, while Morris is aware of this departure, the main interest is still in what has been left behind.
12 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 18.
13 Purkis, The Icelandic Jaunt, p. 13. Purkis asks: ‘Why call up a picture of a beach and foam at this point, only to deny them?’
and shelves, looking as if they had been built and half ruined'. Some of this sentiment is carried over into a later poem called ‘Iceland First Seen’:

Lo from our loitering ship a new land at last to be seen;
Toothed rocks down the side of the firth on the east guard a weary wide lea,
And black slope the hillsides above, striped adown with their desolate green;
And a peak rises up on the west from the meeting of cloud and of sea,
Foursquare from base unto point like the building of Gods that have been,
The last of that waste of the mountains, all cloud-wreathed and snow-flecked and grey,
And bright with the dawn that began just now at the ending of day.

This poem, probably written after 1871, contains the hope of a new dawn. Many of the entries in the Journal, however, betray more uncomfortable feelings about the shocking difference of Iceland. On the first day of their trek, Morris described the country as ‘[m]ost strange and awful ... a doleful land ... with great rubbish heaps of sand’. He felt ‘cowed’ after seeing the ‘distortion and disruption’ of the Markarfljót: ‘as if I should never get back again’; caves nearby were ‘just like the hellmouths in 13th century illuminations’. At Geysir, Morris slept imagining ‘a new Geysir bursting out just under our tent’, and thought their campsite at this ‘beastly place’ a ‘nasty, lumpy thin piece of turf’. Worse still was the ‘wilderness’ between Geysir and Vatnsdalur, where he noted the ‘jagged bare mountains, all beset with clouds’, which showed ‘dreadful inaccessible ravines and closed up valleys with no trace of grass about them among the toothed peaks and rent walls’. ‘I think it was’, Morris reflected, ‘the most horrible sight of mountains I had the whole journey long’. In these passages, Morris’s expedition is figured as a physically and mentally difficult journey that confronted and unsettled. As Fletcher has noted, there is no evidence of the ‘romantic primitivist’ who idealises ‘unspoilt’ nature.

18 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 28.
19 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 54.
20 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 53.
22 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 77.
23 Fletcher, Gardens and Grim Ravines, p. 174.
It would be inaccurate to underplay Morris's sense of shock, horror and despondency in face of terrain that, to one brought up in the south of England, frequently appeared bleak, inhospitable and dangerous. Yet there was much more to Morris's response to Iceland than consternation or astonishment. He did not present his reader with generalised 'waste' or 'wilderness', but with a country rich in detail. He noticed the shape of the land: of rocks, mountains, craters, cliffs, headlands and volcanoes, occasionally supplementing his descriptions with rough pencil sketches. He never failed to be impressed by the strange, spiky formations made by the flow of lava, or to remark on the many different forms of water: 'strange hot springs', 'dreary' bogs, 'curdled' streams, 'green cold' lakes, 'numberless' waterfalls, 'turbid' rivers and 'wonderfully clear' firths. Each day's weather was also recorded, and the effects of sun on the landscape drew the attention of his wonderful eye for colour. He noted the variously 'inky-purple', 'indigo' or 'ultramarine' mountains, black volcanic sand, 'emerald-green' grass, curdled white rivers and 'crimson red' or orange sunsets. He was also amused by the habits of the pack ponies (one of which he took home to England), and constantly looked out for birds, spying falcons, eagles, thrushes, redwings, ravens, gulls, cormorants and sanderlings, as well as the ptarmigan, golden plovers, and snipe that were frequently shot for dinner.

Iceland's flora was also carefully noted. Among the flowers in the meadows and along the river sides, Morris saw willow herb, buttercups, crowberries, purple cranesbill, gentian, sea pink, meadowsweet, bladder campion, blue milkwort and yellow horned poppies. Indeed, for one so impressed by the sagas as tales of heroic deeds in implacable lands, it is ironic that on his own adventures Morris was frequently searching for signs of softness and green. He compensated for the lack of trees by searching for these tiny flowers. He looked forward to the sight of the bright green tini or homefields, the 'flowery green lips' of rivers, and the grassy green 'islands' on the jagged lava flows. These pockets of green provided a resonant contrast to the volcanic scars and large glaciers.

After looking down on 'the labyrinth of the furious brimstone-laden Markfleet', he

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'went down through the fragrant birch-boughs on to the grass and lay down there'.

Perhaps because of this attention to green, the Journal also figures a land not entirely empty of people. Morris regularly remarked on the homesteads plentifully scattered along the route, and on the Icelanders who welcomed them into their homes, or merely stopped to watch them cook dinner. Though he felt slightly uncomfortable inside the turf-covered homesteads, he was generally charmed by the outer appearance of wooden gables, turf walls and grassy or flowery roofs. He also paid attention to the textiles, wood carvings and metalwork displayed in the homes and churches. In Dr Skaptason’s house at Hnausar, for example, he admired ‘a really fine belt of silversmith’s work’, which he estimated was ‘not later than 1530 in date, for there was a St. Barbara engraved on the smooth side of the tag in regular Hans Burgmair style’. Also noted were the hay-making, sheep-farming, whaling and fishing activities of the Icelanders.

Nevertheless, few people emerge from Morris’s descriptions of landscape, and it was the physical details of culture and nature that generally attracted Morris’s attention. In these descriptions the human landscape is dwarfed by ‘wilderness’ or mythic history, and its place in the Journal often depends on whether or not it has a ‘picturesque’ or saga-linked setting. Such passages reveal that Morris felt let down when the Icelanders did not live up to his expectations. When he discovered ‘fowls scratching about’ the priest’s house at Oddi, he ‘felt a queer feeling something akin to disappointment of how like the world was all over after all’. The place was only redeemed by the ‘painterly’ qualities of the landscape: by the distant but dramatic backdrop of Ingólfsfjall, Hekla and

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25 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 54.
26 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 93.
27 Morris uses these details to help supplement future works relating to Icelandic literature and history. See, for example, the six volume Saga Library, translated by Morris and Magnússon, Bernard Quaritch, London, 1891–1905. Though much of the credit must go to Magnússon, the detailed geographical maps and references, topographical details, genealogies, historical explanations, laws, customs and superstitions recorded in this library also reflect Morris’s keen eye and memory.
Thríhyrningur, the ‘quivering’ mirage-like plain, and, ‘just as if it were painted’, a faint rainbow in a ‘clear and bright’ sky.28

More frequently, Morris relied on mythical or historical associations to give meaning to the landscape. The saga legends shaped his itinerary and populated his narrative. Sitting in ‘Mr. Jón Víðalin’s house at Viðalstunga’, he wrote: ‘We are come in Viðidal now, and behind us to the north east can see the hills of Langdale, the main scene of the Bandamanna Saga: before us is a slope with a stead called Borg, the place of the Saga of Finnbogi the Strong’.29 He saw this headland as the place where the warrior Grettir overcame an ancient ghost only to be left forever terrified of the dark; or that pile of stones as the spot where Gudrun forced her husband to murder her former lover. He wrote home excitedly: ‘I slept in the homefield of Njal’s house, and Gunnar’s; and at Herdholt: I have seen Bjarj, and Bathstead and the place where Bolli was killed, and am now ½ hours ride from Holyfell where Gudrun died’.30 This aspect of the trip was so important that Morris grew impatient when forced to make a detour. Furious at having to camp at Geysir, he wrote:

understand I was quite ready to break my neck in my quality of pilgrim to the holy places of Iceland: to be drowned in Markfleet, or squelched in climbing up Drangey seemed to come quite in the day’s work; but to wake up boiled while one was acting the part of accomplice to Mangall’s Question was too disgusting.31

We see the divide between ‘the two cultures’ alive and well in this passage, as Morris proclaims his affinity with Carlyle: his hatred of nature ‘veiled under names or formulas’, and love of ‘the half-dumb, stifled voice of the long-buried generations ... calling out of the depths of the ages’.32 In ‘Iceland First Seen’,

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29 Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 94.
32 Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History, in Works, vol. XII, pp. 10, 35. Much of Morris’s thought about the North echoes aspects of Carlyle’s study. Carlyle had admired the ‘Norsemen’ as ‘Strong sons of Nature’, whose ‘[c]haracter simple recognition of the workings of Physical Nature, as a thing wholly miraculous, stupendous and divine’ had ‘not yet united under a name the infinite variety of sights, sounds, shapes and motions, which we now collectively name Universe, Nature, or the like,—and so with a name dismiss it’ (pp. 33, 21, 10). In many respects,
also, Morris indicated that it was the sagas that caused and defined his visit to
Iceland:

Ah! what came we forth for to see that our hearts are so hot with desire?
Is it enough for our rest, the sight of this desolate strand,
And the mountain-waste voiceless as death but for winds that may sleep
not nor tire?
Why do we long to wend forth through the length and breadth of a land,
Dreadful with grinding of ice, and record of scarce hidden fire,
But that there 'mid the grey grassy dales sore scarred by the ruining
streams,
Lives the tale of the Northland of old and the undying glory of dreams?\(^{33}\)

It has been argued that Morris's interest in the sagas is evidence that he
was primarily impressed by the 'human story' of Iceland.\(^{34}\) Yet, as P.M. Tilling has
made clear, 'the fictionalised exaggerations of events and people of the distant
past' are not the same as 'contemporary social reality'.\(^{35}\) On this first visit Morris
was only concerned to report on the 'human story' of Iceland in so far as it
pertained to the sagas. In this respect, Morris figured Iceland as a 'tomb of the
past',\(^{36}\) a 'mournful' island where 'every place and name marks the death of its
short-lived eagerness and glory'.\(^{37}\) Though he noted that the day-to-day lives of
contemporary Icelanders were probably little different from those of the heroes of
the sagas, they still frequently disappointed Morris's saga-fuelled expectations.
'Lord! what littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and
violence that had place here once', he wrote, and continued:

it is an awful place: set aside the hope that the unseen sea gives you here,
and the strange threatening change of the blue spiky mountains beyond the
firth, and the rest seems emptiness and nothing else: a piece of turf under
your feet, and the sky overhead, that's all; whatever solace your life is to
have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful
themselves.\(^{38}\)

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Morris's work is a secular version of Carlyle's, which also respected the Norse 'Consecration of
Valour' (p. 47).

\(^{33}\) Morris, 'Iceland First Seen', p. 125.
\(^{34}\) See, for example, Fletcher, Gardens and Grim Ravines, p. 175.
\(^{35}\) P.M. Tilling, 'A Kind of Beauty: William Morris's Travels to Iceland', in English Literature and
the Wider World, vol. IV, 1876–1918, The Ends of the Earth, ed. Simon Gattrell, Ashfield Press,
\(^{36}\) Morris, 'Gunnar's Howe above the House at Lithend', in Poems by the Way, p. 179.
\(^{38}\) Morris, A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871, p. 108.
This rare reflective passage in the first Journal indicates that this is still substantially the author of The Earthly Paradise writing: that Morris still turned inward or to art for ‘solace’. Contemporary life was redeemed only by its relationship to a glorious past. In this respect, travelling, for Morris, had meant not only journeying through space but also through time. The Icelanders Morris met were ‘lazy, dreamy, without enterprise or hope … full of their old lore, living in their stirring past … among dreams of “Furor Norsmanorum”’. 39 ‘Truly’, Morris wrote, ‘it would all have been nothing but for the memory of the old storytellers’. 40 All Morris had to say about meeting Jón Sigurðsson, leader of the Icelandic independence movement and President of the Althing, was that he was ‘shy’ and ‘scholar-like’: ‘a literary man whose editions of Sagas I know very well’. 41

When Morris returned from this first visit to Iceland, he resumed work for the Firm and began two new literary projects. The first, Love is Enough (1872), is a complex narrative poem set in a largely pastoral world, with seemingly little Icelandic about it. According to the prefatory ‘argument’:

The story, which is told by way of a morality set before an Emperor and Empress newly wedded, showeth of a king whom nothing but love might satisfy, who left all to seek love, & having found it, found this also, that he had enough, though he lacked all else. 42

On first glance, therefore, this work seems to affirm romantic, amatory, even otherworldly values: the world of Rossetti and Burne-Jones. 43

42 Morris, Love is Enough, p. 3.
Yet there are signs of Iceland in this poem: intimations of Morris’s feelings as he ‘scaled the dark mountains’, and as ‘the bitter wind piped, and down drifted the rain’. Yet the Music’, verses that separate and introduce sections of the narrative, tells of the King’s ‘sad-hearted’ search ‘over wearier wastes’, and of his dreams of happiness and love. It is a chorus which advised its audience to ‘set’ their ‘faces as steel to the fears that assemble’, and to press on in the search for love in face of all adversity. The King dreams of ‘a land wherein Love is the light and the lord’, and where his ‘tale ... be a treasure to add to the hoard / Of pleasure laid up for his people’s reward’. ‘The Music’ warns, however, that ‘the waste has no music like this, / And not thus do the rocks of the wilderness glisten’. Love, the poem asserts, can be found only where there is life because it is the secret of life. Moreover in Love is Enough comes the spark of the knowledge, that life, in its varying forms, is the answer to death: ‘The sign of the Earth, its sorrow and its bliss, / Waxing and waning, steadfastness and change’. Though this realisation was slow and wavering, and in spite of his later recognition that love, in itself, was not enough, there is a fresher sense of hope in this poem than in any of Morris’s previous works, and the hope is substantially derived from the sign of life upon the earth.

Another indication of this growing, still undeveloped, cognisance was Morris’s attempt, while working on Love is Enough, to write a ‘realistic’ novel set in Victorian England. I shall have more to say about nature in this novel below. Here, it is enough to note that a substantial change is happening to the ‘dreamer born out of his time’. That he should wish to turn and describe a contemporary landscape—to face, if

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44 Morris, Love is Enough, p. 47.
45 Morris, Love is Enough, p. 76.
46 Morris, Love is Enough, p. 47.
47 Morris, Love is Enough, p. 77. See Kocmanova, The Poetic Maturing of William Morris, p. 131.
48 Morris found this work particularly hard to write. On 13 February 1872 (Letters, vol. I, p. 155) he found himself in a ‘maze of rewriting and despondency’, and complained: ‘I have been in trouble with my own work, which I couldn’t make to march for a long time’.
49 Reflecting on the title of his poem, Morris is reported to have commented at a later date: ‘There’s a lie for you, though ’twas I that told it!... Work and love, that’s the life of a man’. See Henry Halliday Sparling, The Kelmscott Press and William Morris, Macmillan, London, 1924, p. 100.
not 'six counties overhung with smoke', human hearts 'tossed about' the Victorian 'steely sea'—indicates a substantial turn towards the world.

In April 1873 Morris made a brief return to the 'comfort' of the south, visiting Italy with Edward Burne-Jones. From his letters home, we can see that Morris appreciated the beauties of the southern landscape, of going 'through a country like a garden: green grass & feathery poplars, and abundance of pink blossomed leafless peach and almond trees'. Nevertheless, there is a note of disappointment in these letters. He got 'tired of the eternal mulberry trees', and one gets the impression that he would rather have been in Iceland. Even the art and architecture fail to live up to his expectations. Morris was disappointed that he couldn't find the same connections between art, history and landscape in Italy that he had in Iceland. Perhaps he should have known that Italy would not suffice; only weeks after his return from Iceland, he had written:

I rather miss the mountains ... which is not what I expected, for I use to consider myself a hater of them: today I had to go out on business to a place near Wimbledon, and there was what people called a pretty view there, and I thought how dull it looked...

By November 1872, he was planning another visit to Iceland.

Morris's second visit in 1873 was also intended as a pilgrimage to the past, as another chance to escape. In many ways, however, this visit was substantially different from the last. In 1873 Morris travelled without the knowledge and experience of Magnússon and Evans, and the journey took a much more adventurous route: north-east between Hofsjökull and the mass of Vatnajökull to the huge waterfall at Dettifoss, west to the northern port of Akureyri, across to the southernmost edge of Skagafjördur, and finally back south.

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53 Morris to Philip Webb, 10 April 1873, in Letters, vol. I, pp. 185-6. Morris also tells Webb that Burne-Jones 'complains of me that I seem to pay more attention to an olive-tree or a pot than a picture'.
between Thrfstapajökull, Langjökull and Hofsjökull to Reykjavík. The difference between this trip and the first, is apparent in the record Morris made of it. The 1873 journal survives in a much more fragmentary form, but was published as *A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873* alongside the *Journal* in the *Collected Works*. Though the *Diary* is less comprehensive, it is also more immediate, being a direct transcript of notes taken at the time rather than a polished work written after the event.\(^{56}\) This circumstance partially accounts for the difference between the *Diary* and the earlier *Journal*.

This difference is also due to a distinct qualitative change in the tenor and subject of the writing. Gone, as Purkis has noted, is the ‘vague dreaminess’ of *The Earthly Paradise* period; Morris now writes ‘like an active wide-awake man who ... is fully engaged in realising the present moment’.\(^{57}\) Perhaps this is why his *Diary* entries trail off, first into point form, and then completely. Living had become more important than reflecting. This attitude is also apparent in those observations that make it into the *Diary*. Morris pays more attention to the signs of life and fertility in the landscape. He decides the Logberg ‘would hold quite twice as many people as I said before’, and provides a lush picture of it:

> it was unmown now and the grass was high in it and quite full of flowers, Loki’s purse (money-rattle), buttercups, milkwort, white clover, cranesbill, one or two alpine flowers I can’t name, and a most lovely little dark blue gentian: it was a very happy morning.\(^{58}\)

The Vestmannaeyjar look ‘very green and inviting’. ‘[T]he seabirds were a wonder to see here’, he writes, ‘as thick as bees about a hive, and lying on the lower grass slopes like great masses of white flowers’.\(^{59}\) In 1871, these islands had seemed ‘like the broken-down walls of castles in the sea’.\(^{60}\)

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\(^{56}\) As is noted on the last page, Morris didn’t complete the *Journal* until 30 June 1873. It would seem, however, that by September 1871 it was polished enough for Morris to give readings from it (see the entry for 12 September 1871 in Nicholas Salmon’s *The William Morris Chronology*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1996, p. 59), and to suggest in a letter to Louisa Baldwin (21 September 1871, in *Letters*, vol. I, p. 149) that she may soon read it.


\(^{58}\) Morris, *A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873*, in *CW*, vol. VIII, p. 189.

\(^{59}\) Morris, *A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873*, p. 186.

Of most significance in the *Diary*, however, is the way in which Morris pays more attention to the material conditions of people in the landscape, even though the descriptions are less expansive. He notes whether homesteads are ‘poor’ or whether the bonders are proud pig owners, and records the effects of climate change and famine. He is concerned when the bonder at Bardardalur tells him about recent emigration: that ‘two hundred people had been minded for America by the “Queen”’. It is in 1873 that he realises that ‘the people here have had many bad years together and it has sickened them of it’. This new attention to the human landscape, also noted by Purkis, marks the beginning of an understanding of the heroism of everyday life in that landscape, but also of the cognition that ‘the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes’ (as he would put it a decade later).

Though there are occasional bouts of romantic reflection, even these appeared more hopeful. In Bardardalur, Morris found ‘something eminently touching about the valley and its nearness to the waste that gave me that momentary insight into what the whole thing means that blesses us sometimes and is gone again’. Iceland, in other words, sets Morris thinking about what is of value in life, and, like *Love is Enough*, it is life itself, fully and plentifully lived. Thus human courage in the landscape also allows hope to enter the ‘tomb of time past’: if Gunnar’s ‘death-conquering song’ can ‘bridge all the days that have been’, then ‘young is the world yet ... and the hope of it flourishing green’.

This recognition of courage and defiance is the strength he draws from on this journey. Though occasionally he feels depressed and homesick, he is not

61 Morris, *A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873*, p. 224. Such comments, though infrequent, seem to belie May Morris’s ‘impression’ of the 1873 trip (‘Introduction’, in *CW*, vol. VIII, p. xxxiii). She believed the *Diary* demonstrated that Morris ‘had shaken off his human sympathies, that people did not interest him—he had no need for them—and that he had withdrawn into a frame of mind in which he saw the wilderness in its real loneliness, awful, unlovable and remote from human life’.

62 Purkis (The Icelandic Jaunt, p. 27) sums up the contrast between the *Journal* and the *Diary* thus: ‘by the end of the second Morris has achieved his quest: Iceland has been wrestled with and conquered—now it is like a friend to be treated familiarly and without fear. In the process Morris has worked out a neurosis, and so his writing changes from the distorted vision of depression to the clear insight of health and normality’.

63 Morris to Andreas Scheu, 15 September 1883, in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 229.

64 Morris, *A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873*, p. 225.
cowed' by the landscape. In Breidabólsstadur, he notes that he is 'nothing like so anxious about our journey as last time'. In fact, having seen the 'great ridges and peaks' of the Armannsfell range on the first day, any 'misgivings' about the visit are 'conquered'. When Morris crosses 'wilderness' in 1873, he finds the black sands 'strange' rather than 'dismal'. Nature is faced, therefore, with less dread: it is strange and full of wonder, rather than depressing. When he returned, Morris confided to a friend:

Do you know I feel as if a definite space of my life had passed away now I have seen Iceland for the last time: as I looked up at Charles' Wain tonight all my travel there seemed to come back on me, made solemn and elevated, in one moment, till my heart swelled with the wonder of it: surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed.

Many have remarked on the new strength Morris found in Iceland. E.P. Thompson has argued that the moral courage Morris needed to turn and face Victorian society came from crossing 'the river of fire': 'from the energies and aspirations of a poor people in a barren northern island in the twelfth century'. Thompson considered that there could be few more striking examples of the regenerative resources of culture than this renewal of courage and of faith in humanity which was blown from Iceland to William Morris, across eight hundred years of time. In view of such insights, Thompson concluded that Morris gained from the North 'a new focus on the world' and found in the sagas 'a quite new

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65 Morris, 'Gunnar's Howe above the House at Lithend', p. 179.
66 Morris, A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873, p. 196.
67 Morris, A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873, p. 188. E.P. Thompson noted that the 'free use' of such 'strong active verbs' also 'give the sense of challenge' (Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 180).
68 Compare Morris's comments about Fljótisdalur in 1873 (A Diary of Travel in Iceland, 1873, p. 220), with those on the Kaldidalur pass in 1871 (A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1873, p. 79).
70 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 176.
71 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 176. It is interesting to note that in the first edition of his work (Romantic to Revolutionary (1955), p. 215), Thompson phrased this more emphatically. In this work it was 'the revolutionary power of culture', rather than 'the regenerative resources' that blew 'across the waters of the North Sea and eight hundred years of time'.

value to human action—viewing it no longer in terms of the subjective moods of
the actors’, but ‘as deeds judged by the society in which the actors moved’. That
Morris was impressed by the presence of ‘earth’s voices’ in Icelandic literature and
history is illustrated in a manuscript poem written before any of his visits.

Tale-teller, who 'twixt fire and snow
Had heart to turn about and show
With faint half-smile things great and small
That in thy fearful land did fall,
Thou and thy brethren sure did gain
That thing for which I long in vain,
The spell, whereby the mist of fear
Was melted, and your ears might hear
Earth’s voices as they are indeed.
Well, ye have helped me at my need. 71

It was not simply the voices of ‘external nature’ that Morris heard beyond ‘the mist
of fear’. They were human voices also, voices that the earth can ‘keep’ and ‘heal’,
and voices that could also prompt to action. In a poem written on his return from
Iceland, ‘Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper’, Morris wrote:

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.

And all thy joy and sorrow
So great but yesterday,
So light a thing tomorrow,
Shall never pass away.

Lo! lo! the dawn-brink yonder,
The sunrise draweth nigh,
And men forget to wonder
That they were born to die.

Then praise the deed that wendeth
Through the daylight and the mirth!
The tale that never endeth
Whoso may dwell on earth. 74

72 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 183.
73 This poem was inscribed in the manuscript of his translation of the Eyrbyggja Saga, completed in
74 Morris, ‘Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper’, in Poems By the Way, p. 184. I take the dating of this
It was the possibilities of human history—the 'tale that never endeth'—and the fact that they are 'cherished' by the 'Earth' that Morris found most impressive in Iceland.

Morris's interest in Iceland entered another phase when he returned from his last voyage. Though his time was absorbed by many of the artistic activities already discussed above, he continued to turn to Iceland and the sagas for literary inspiration. In *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876) Morris drew on the Old Norse *Völsunga Saga* in preference to the later German *Nibelungenlied*. He began work on this long narrative poem in 1875, though he had previously published a 'translation' with Magnússon in 1870. In this poetic retelling of what Morris considered 'the Great Story of the North', we see the effects of his experience of both Icelandic nature and history.

One of the features of *Sigurd the Volsung* (the work by which Morris wished to be remembered), is the record contained therein of his experience of landscapes encountered in Iceland as well as those closer to home. In this poem he carefully differentiated between various locations, and landscape imagery serves to provide information about the tale, but nearly all of these images are laden with human values. Frequently, his description of landscape betrays his romantic-pastoral heritage. The Volsung homeland, Lymdale, for example, is a 'vaguely generalized "countryside"' full of 'blossoming' human activity that has marked the land over time. These

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76 Ironically, Morris's *Sigurd* was neither as popular or enduring (it only sold 2,500 copies in twenty years) as another contemporary version of which he vehemently disapproved: Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Niblungs* (completed in 1874 and first performed in 1876). Morris (Morris to Henry Buxton-Forman, 12 November 1873, in *Letters*, vol. I, p. 205), who was sent a translation of the libretto of *Die Walküre* in 1873, commented: 'I look upon it as nothing short of desecration to bring such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gaslights of opera: the most rococo and degraded of all forms of art—the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express!'
78 See, for example, Morris's description of Lymdale in Book III, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs*, in *CW*, vol. XII, pp. 140–3.
activities render Lyndale ‘a country of cunning craftsmen’, much envied by those from ‘lands of storm’ or ‘homes of warfare’.  

In fact Lyndale’s ‘grassy, fruit-grown land’ is generally figured as a metaphor for the Volsungs, who are its ‘finest fruits’. Some of the most striking examples of this drawing together of natural and human characteristics, are metaphors and similes referring to the Branstock oak, itself an image of Igdrasil. In Book I of the story, this tree is described growing from the floor and supporting the Volsungs’ hall, and provides an image of the unity of the people. In subsequent chapters, the tree is often used as a simile to describe various members of the family. Morris describes Sigmund as ‘Like the best of the trees of the garden’ after he has drawn Odin’s sword from the Branstock. Human life and nature are also drawn together when Sigmund dies in battle. Here Morris used an epic simile that describes how even a tree that is cut down can achieve immortality as it ‘floats on the flood, / And beareth the kings and the earl-folk’. Moreover the deeds of Sigurd, the fairest branch of the family tree, enhance the growth of the Branstock. After he has killed Fafnir, Morris tells us: ‘And the Branstock bloometh to heaven from the ancient wondrous root; / The summer hath shone on its blossoms, and Sigurd’s Wrath is the fruit’.  

Alongside Lyndale, however, lies the inhospitable home of the Niblungs, described in very different terms to those used for the home of the Volsungs. While Lyndale is idyllic and pastoral, the Niblungs’ home is a mountain top castle surrounded by ice and cold. Again, landscape is observed as an expression of the

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79 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 61. See also Ennis’s discussion of Morris’s various uses of the word ‘craft’, in her ‘Introduction’, pp. xviii–xxii.  
80 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 3.  
82 Morris may have recalled Carlyle’s celebration of Igdrasil. In _On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History_, Carlyle wrote: ‘Is not every leaf of it a biography, every fibre there an act or word? Its boughs are Histories of Nations. The rustle of it is the noise of Human Existence, onwards from of old. It grows there, the breath of Human Passion rustling through it... It is Igdrasil, the Tree of Existence. It is the past, the present, and the future; what was done, what is doing, what will be done; “the infinite conjugation of the verb To do”’ (p. 25).  
83 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 1.  
84 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 8.  
85 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 58.  
86 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 116.  
87 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 3.  
88 Morris, _Sigurd the Volsung_, p. 152.
nature of its inhabitants. In describing the Niblungs, however, Morris achieved a striking rapprochement with a world of rocks and ice. As Fletcher has noted, the landscape description in this part of his story is much more substantial than that of the pastoral Lyndale. ⁸⁹

The Niblungs inhabit an almost inaccessible mountain home that appears to have been manufactured by ‘Gods’ and ‘aimless Giants’, and is

O’erhung by the cloudy mountains and the ash of another day,
Where to the slopes clomb upward till the green died out in the grey,
And the grey in the awful cloud-land, where the red rents went and came
Round the snows no summers minish and the far-off sunset flame... ⁹⁰

Here, we leave the grassy landscapes of southern England behind, and encounter Morris’s remembrance of Iceland. In contrast to the hall of the Volsungs, which is supported by benevolent nature, the castle of the Niblungs is at the mercy of swiftly changing elements, which also parallel Morris’s experiences in Iceland. ⁹¹ In the description of Sigurd’s journey from the Glittering Heath to Hindfell, the scene and effects of weather are all drawn from memory, as the light, clouds and winds ‘gather and change’. ⁹² Other Icelandic landscapes are recalled in the description of the ‘desert of dread’ and the ‘mighty water hurled’ over a ‘wall of mountains’ in Regin’s description of Loki’s search for the cursed gold. ⁹³ In addition, and appropriately, the Niblungs are rarely associated with spring and blossoming, and when they are the image is often subverted. ⁹⁴

Thus, in these comparisons, we see Morris working with conventional images that juxtapose pastoral and wilderness. Surprisingly, Morris’s images of wilderness are more powerful, and this testifies to the depth of Morris’s experience of Iceland. Nevertheless, these are not romantic images of the sublime, and when Morris requires

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⁸⁹ Fletcher, Gardens and Grim Ravines, p. 176.
⁹⁰ Morris, Sigurd the Volsung, pp. 151–2.
⁹¹ Morris, Sigurd the Volsung, p. 152.
⁹² Morris, Sigurd the Volsung, p. 120.
⁹³ Morris, Sigurd the Volsung, p. 81.
⁹⁴ Grimhild’s use of the metaphor of blossoming, for example, contains an ironic sub-text, as this passage occurs after she has given Sigurd the potion that makes him forget Brynhild (Sigurd the Volsung, p. 167).
his characters to derive joy from, or be exulted by the landscape, he enables them to perceive a humanised landscape. Thus when Sigurd and Brynhild, ‘rejoicing in their mirth’, climb Hindfell to gaze out over the world, it is ‘the garths of men-folk’s dwellings’, ‘the rich and plenteous acres’ and ‘the loom and the mine and the stall’ that are the real source of their pleasure in the landscape. The ‘silver ocean’s hem’ and ‘the woodland wastes and the mountains’ merely ‘hold’ the ‘kingdoms of the earth’.  

The use of landscape to reflect human values is a conventional use of nature imagery. Yet these are also striking images of human culture embedded in, and affecting, nature that give rise to far more contemporary themes. One of the most significant features of *Sigurd the Volsung* is the way in which it reflects Morris’s thoughts about the Icelanders’ stoic relationship with a land and livelihood so much more precarious than Morris’s own. Central to the story is a heroic confrontation of society and nature that echoes, in certain respects, Morris’s own confrontation of the more morbid aspects of his own nature. It explores, as John Goode has recognised, how individuals work out the nature of their determination by the social, natural and historical environment. Goode believes the poem ‘records the development of the extreme disaffection of the inner mind from the outward life in terms of a highly modernised myth’. He also argues that ‘Morris’s adoption of a style which is passively the product of the very alienation the story is about’ prevents it from being ‘a great Victorian degenerative myth of social alienation and the breakdown of sexual relationships’.

A discussion of the literary style of *Sigurd the Volsung* is beyond the parameters of this work. One might argue, however, that although we may not overcome alienation by reading *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris achieved something of the sort by writing it. Goode’s relatively recent interpretation can be read alongside the criticism of nineteenth-century readers who saw Morris’s style, his use of the *langzeile*...
or long line, as ‘more rooted in the earth, more vivid with the impulse of nature’, ‘a grave beauty, from which all mere prettiness is clean consumed away’. Others, while uncomfortable with the metre or ‘consistent archaism in language and phrase’, still considered this the most forceful of Morris’s works to date: Theodore Watts found it ‘more vigorous and more dramatic than the best stories of the Earthly Paradise’; Edmond Gosse considered it ‘more spirited and more virile’, with Morris ‘no longer the “idle singer of an empty day”, but the interpreter of high desires’; and an American reviewer found it ‘clearer and more tonic’: ‘not the empty echo of “in vain! in vain!” but a promise, a watch-word,—or rather a pass-word for admission to a brighter and securer life’. Some critics believed that Morris found ‘in the Teutonic ideal of tribe-fellowship, of the subordination of the individual life to the age-long life of the House, or of the Kindred, all the elements of a reasonable joy and purpose and satisfaction for the individual life itself’. Thus, while Goode considers Sigurd the Volsung ‘socialist’ because it transforms alienation ‘into revolutionary consciousness by the recognition of the collective possibilities of the mind’s curve away from actuality’, Morris’s story is also personally radical because of its turn towards actuality. Morris’s ‘responsibility’, to use Goode’s term, did not only begin in dreams: it also began in Iceland.

Morris’s imagination and conscience was so stirred by this understanding of nature and history that he frequently drew upon the insight. Many of his later ‘prose romances’ draw upon scenes or details of life in Iceland. Moreover, in 1890 Morris and Magnússon began to publish a Saga Library that brought together all of their

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100 Theodore Watts, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, no. 2563, December 1876, pp. 753–5; in *The Critical Heritage*, p. 231. Watts’s assertion of the vigour of the poem is tempered, however, by his desire to still see Morris as a romantic figure, who ‘consents to breathe the smoke with us’, but still lives ‘in the atmosphere of the Golden Past’ (p. 231).
101 Gosse, review, p. 233.
104 Goode, ‘William Morris and the Dream of Revolution’, p. 239.
105 See Chapter 4 of the Appendix.
translations. In the introduction to the series, Morris summed up why he had been
drawn to Iceland:

Although Iceland is a barren northern Island, of strangely wild, though to
the eye that sees, beautiful scenery, the inhabitants of it neither are nor
were savages cut off from the spirit and energy of the great progressive races...
Still more, while over the greater part of Europe at least, all
knowledge of their historical past has faded from the memory of the
people, and the last vestiges of their pre-historical memories are rapidly
disappearing, in Iceland every homestead, one may almost say every field,
had its well-remembered history, while the earlier folk-lore is embedded in
that history, and no peasant, however poor his surroundings may be, is
ignorant of the traditions of his country, or dull to them, so that a journey
in Iceland to the traveller read in its ancient literature is a continual
illustration, freely and eagerly offered, of the books which contain the
intimate history of its ancient folk.106

It has been remarked that Morris in Iceland is something akin to Darwin in the
Galapagos Islands,107 and, like Darwin, Morris’s ‘discovery’ was not immediate, not
yet revolutionary.

* * *

Another landscape became part of Morris’s life shortly before and after his
visits to Iceland. In May 1871 he wrote enthusiastically:

I have been looking about for a house for the wife and kids, and whither do
you guess my eye is turned now? Kelmscott, a little village about two
miles above Radcott bridge—a heaven on earth, an old stone Elizabethan
house like Water Eaton, and such a garden! close down on the river, a boat
house and all things handy.108

Thus, over five years since he had given up the Red House, Morris once more had
recourse to a home in the country. The lease was signed just before his first trip to
Iceland, and, though his initial reasons for renting Kelmscott Manor were as a ‘house

107 Tony Benn made this comparison in a paper presented at the conference ‘William Morris
for the wife and kids', the building has come to be intimately associated with Morris's life, art and ideals. Indeed a considerable mythology has been built around the idea of Morris at Kelmscott. Many commentators have described Kelmscott as a kind of centre of Morris's work, as his ideal place or the 'core' of his being. Without denying the importance of Kelmscott to Morris, it is necessary to shift this emphasis. Kelmscott Manor, and its environs, were indeed a 'haven of rest' and a source of inspiration to Morris, and it is important to understand why. Morris spent very little time at Kelmscott, and felt there was an unreal quality to the time he spent there. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that the nature at, of and around Kelmscott was only a small part of Morris's culture of nature.

In 1895 Morris provided a description of Kelmscott Manor to *The Quest*, a magazine organised by the Birmingham Guild of Handicraft. In the article, he began by locating the house geographically, 'on the plain of the Thames Valley', and then noted the villages, churches and general historical associations of the area. Finally, he came to the house situated 'at the very end of the village on a road which, brought up shortly by a backwater of the Thames, becomes a cart-track leading into the meadows along the river':

The house ... is a lowish three storied one with mullioned windows, and at right angles to this another block whose bigger lower windows and pedimented gable-lights indicate a later date. The house is built of well-laid rubble stone of the district ... the roofs are covered with the beautiful stone slates of the district ...

Standing a little aloof from the N.E. angle of the building one can get the best idea of a fact which is essential to note, and which is found in all the old houses hereabouts, to wit, all the walls 'batter', i.e. lean a little back...

The garden, divided by old clipped yew hedges, is quite unaffected and very pleasant, and looks in fact as if it were, if not a part of the house, yet at least the clothes of it: which I think ought to be the aim of the layer out of a garden. 111

109 Most likely, the house was initially leased as a place where Jane Morris and Rossetti could be together without causing scandal. Rossetti was a joint tenant until July 1874; F.S. Ellis, Morris's friend and publisher, replaced him on the lease.

110 Mackail (*Life*, vol. I, pp. 224-5) believed that Morris's 'intense passion for Nature ... obtained a centre in the Manor House at Kelmscott', and that, for the next twenty-five years, he 'found in it a peace and joy that no other place gave him'.

Thus Kelmscott incorporated many of the features Morris had sought to include in Red House: local materials (the coarse oolite stone found throughout the Thames valley), an orderly, well set out garden, as well as gables reminiscent of Gothic architecture. It also included a diverse range of interior spaces, ceiling heights, floor levels, window angles and views, which mirrored and reflected the exterior. In the ‘great parlour’ Morris could enjoy ‘the green reflections of the garden’, and, from the tapestry room, ‘a glimpse of the Thames clover meadows and the pretty little elm-crowned hill over in Berkshire’, as well as the barn, ‘with its beautiful sharp gable’, the grey stone sheds and ‘the flank of the earlier house and its little gables’. Over a hundred years later, the visitor to a ‘restored’ Kelmscott can still appreciate these qualities (see figs. lxi–lxiii).

The house and its surroundings, however, meant many things to Morris. Initially, the associations cannot have been all pleasant; the house provided, after all, a ‘bower of love’ for Jane Morris and Rossetti. Yet Morris soon sloughed off any such associations, and considered Kelmscott a sanctuary of his own. By 1882 he had come to consider it ‘the type of the pleasant places of the earth’, and explained that ‘as others love the race of man through their lovers or their children, so I love the earth through that small space of it’. One of the reasons for this love was that Kelmscott provided a haven from his usual experience of ‘the earth’: from grime and ugliness, from bustle, business and London. This idea of Kelmscott as a place of retreat is apparent in many of his letters. The feeling of restfulness and relief is almost palpable, for example, when, in 1880, he told Georgiana Burne-Jones that ‘the ancient house has me in its arms again’. In other letters, the outdoor spaces are the focus of keen observation and a source of renewal and delight for the city-weary Londoner: ‘the promise of things pushing up through the clean un-sooty soil’. Easy access to the Thames provided another source of pleasure. Morris’s favourite approach to Kelmscott was along the river and he twice made the journey from London by means

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Fig. lxi
Detail of Ordnance Survey map (c. 1870s), showing location of Kelmscott Manor, and its various outbuildings, in relation to the village and the Thames.
Fig. lxii
Kelmanctt Manor, c. 1885. May Morris standing to the right.

Fig. lxiii
Contemporary photo of a ‘restored’ Kelmscott.
of an ‘ark’. Quiet hours spent fishing were also an ideal time to observe closely the riverside herbage.

Wandering around the garden, bird watching, rowing on the Thames, fishing, as well as walking about the country and observing farm work and animals, rested and rejuvenated. ‘I had three very good days at Kelmscott’, he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1887: ‘once or twice I had that delightful quickening of perception by which everything gets emphasised and brightened ... anxieties and worrits, though remembered, yet no weight on one’s spirits—Heaven in short’. May Morris felt he was ‘like a man come out of prison’ when he arrived from London, and there are many letters that record the holiday mood of days spent ‘recreating’ the countryside. Passages in his fiction also revive these pleasures. Thus one significant element of Kelmscott for Morris was that it provided a place of escape and refreshment, a haven, retreat and place of rest. A poem he wrote for his bed at Kelmscott, perfectly captures this feeling of repose:

The wind’s on the wold  
And the night is a-cold  
And Thames runs chill  
Twixt mead and hill,  
But kind and dear  
Is the old house here,  
And my heart is warm  
Midst winter’s harm.  
Rest then and rest,  
And think of the best

117 For details of this journey, see Morris’s ‘Description of an expedition by boat from Kelmscott House Upper Mall Hammersmith to Kelmscott Manor Lechlade Oxfordshire with critical notes’ (British Library, Add. MSS 45407); edited and reprinted by J.M. Baissus as ‘The Expedition of the Ark’, JWMs, vol. III, no. 3, Spring 1977, pp. 2–11. This watery connection between the two Kelmscotts (in 1879 Morris changed the name of his new house on the Thames at Hammersmith from ‘The Retreat’ to ‘Kelmscott House’) was a constant source of pleasure to Morris.


120 See, for example, Morris to Jenny Morris, 24 August 1888, in Letters, vol. II, pp. 803–4; Morris to Jenny Morris, 28 August 1888, in Letters, vol. II, pp. 805–6; and Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, 22 June 1889, in Letters, vol. III, p. 80. See also entries in Sydney Cockerell’s diary, which record holiday activities at Kelmscott. On 1 September 1895, for example, he wrote: ‘In mg. went for a walk towards Buscot Wood with W.M., Jenny & Mr. Price, but we sat down under a tree, instead of going on, & watched the cloudless sky & the flocks of starlings and pigeons. In aftn. loll’d about and picked nuts & plums & lay on the grass chatting. In evng. W.M. read some of his favourite bits out of Handley Cross. A very happy day’ (British Library, Add. MSS. 52772).

121 See, for example, the description of ‘The Pleasure Party’ in The Novel on Blue Paper, pp. 56–70.
Morris's greatest pleasure in this environment, however, derived from its human qualities, from his sense that it had 'grown up and out of the soil and the lives of those that lived on it': 'some thin thread of tradition, a half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river'.\(^{122}\) He admired the sense of empathy between building and landscape and considered Kelmscott an example of 'the works of our fathers yet alive amid the very nature they were wrought into, and of which they are so completely a part'.\(^{123}\) It was a place where he could 'commune' with the past, where the grass was so green 'that it brings all the distance near and flattens the landscape into a medieval picture'.\(^{124}\) In his 'abortive novel' of 1872, he has a character gaze out over this landscape and imagine 'tales going on amongst it all'.\(^{125}\)

In the same story, which is substantially set in the vicinity of Kelmscott, the local river is admired because it has 'such a look of history and romance and promise of great things to come'.\(^{126}\)

This historical sensibility also relates to Morris's sense of the importance of roots, and of establishing an intimate relationship with the place in which one lived. In many ways a 'stay-at-home' kind of person,\(^{127}\) Morris reflected on the travelling of the leisured classes as a 'makeshift' that should be substituted by 'making the place in which you live, in which you work, beautiful and pleasant':

\(^{122}\) Morris, 'Some Gossip about an Old House on the Upper Thames', pp. 364-71.
\(^{123}\) Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', p. 17.
\(^{125}\) Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p. 61.
\(^{126}\) Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p. 64. Morris's description of the village of 'Ormslade' recalls Kelmscott in no uncertain terms. It is in a 'country of good building stone' where 'people kept building decent houses with little mullioned windows a good hundred years later than in most parts of England' (p. 11). MacCarthy (A Life for Our Time, p. 274) asserts, however, that Morris wrote The Novel in early 1871, and states, rather awkwardly, that the setting is 'uncannily prophetic of Kelmscott'. Her assertion appears to be made on the basis that Morris read exerts of the work to Georgiana Burne-Jones in March of 1871 (p. 273), but there is no conclusive evidence that it was The Novel, and not some other manuscript, read at this time. It seems more likely, based on a letter to Louisa Baldwin of 22 June 1872, the references to a Kelmscott-like landscape and various other minor details, that early 1872 (or, at least, late 1871) is a more likely date for the work. I am indebted to Sue Mooney for her help in this matter.
\(^{127}\) He admitted as much in a letter to Edith Marion Story, 10 May 1871, in Letters, vol. I, p. 132.
Then you can stay at home and enjoy yourself, learning as you should and would do the countenance and expression of every tree, and every bough, every little sweep of bank or hollow, till they become dear friends to you…

This was an important aspect of Morris’s work, which will be discussed at greater length below. It is enough to note here that much of his imaginative work reveals his strong desire for ‘rootedness’. In both prose and poetry, Morris’s protagonists are often searching for the ideal place. In some respects, Kelmscott was Morris’s ideal place. It was one of the ‘generously built’, ‘blended works of Nature’ and history, which ‘once made an English country-side a special treasure’.

Morris’s enjoyment of Kelmscott also rested on wider physical and historical associations with the area as a whole. May Morris, who also knew the area well, felt it was his ‘romance-country’, and in her introductions to the Collected Works recalled the ‘happy wanderings’ that led them ‘chiefly into the three little valleys of the streams that feed the Thames from the lower Cotswolds, Coln, Leach and Windrush’. Much of her pleasure, she suggested, was due to Morris’s knowledge of the history of the area: his ‘delight’ in the ‘traces of the ancient people’. The ‘skald’ himself (the reference to Iceland indicates Morris brought back something of their way of seeing) enjoyed the ‘settled-down’ look of the buildings and villages scattered regularly through this landscape. In a letter of 1890, he described a journey ‘through Fairford up the valley of the Colne, through Quennington, Coln St Aldwyn’s, Bibury, Ablington, Winsom, Colne Roger, Colne St Denis and Fosse Bridge’, and noted that ‘[t]he whole valley is a mass of lime-stone, and looks indeed as if it had been made for people 4 ft high’. He thought Bibury ‘the most beautiful village in England: lying down in the winding valley beside the clear Colne’.

These small villages in the vicinity of Kelmscott were partially responsible for the network of small ruralist

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130 May lived at Kelmscott until her death in 1938.
133 Morris to Kate Faulkner, 8 August 1890, in Letters, vol. III, p. 188.
communities figured as an ideal in later work. As early as 1874, he was asking friends to imagine living ‘in little communities among gardens & green fields’.

Morris also commented lovingly on the many small early English and Norman churches in these villages: ‘the works of the Thames-side country bumpkins, as you would call us, nothing grander than that’. His favourite building was the massive thirteenth-century tithe barn at Great Coxwell. From a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones, it is evident that what Morris most admired about the building was its ‘solid’ beauty, endurance and usefulness. Like Thomas Hardy, Morris admired the ‘functional continuity’ of the barn, which made ‘the spirit of the ancient builders ... at one with the spirit of the modern beholder’. This connection between past and present, a sense of history that was not ‘merely landscape and sentiment’ (as he dismissed his ‘novel’), determined Morris’s feeling for Kelmscott.

Given the importance of history and nature in Morris’s work as a whole, it is not surprising that the ‘romantic realities’ of Kelmscott and its environs appear in much of his work. Lindsay described Morris’s power for giving a legendary and symbolic note to all the houses in which he lived or worked through the intensity with which he made them parts of his whole outlook, settings for the transformations of the existing world in terms of a steadily realised idea.

134 As suggested by MacCarthy, among others, in A Life for Our Time, p. 315.
138 Hardy (Far From the Madding Crowd, London, Macmillan, 1974 (1874), pp. 176–7) admired the barn as a building that ‘embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time’: ‘The fact that four centuries had neither proved it to be founded on a mistake, inspired any hatred of its purpose, nor given rise to any reaction that had battered it down, invested this simple grey effort of old minds with a repose, if not a grandeur, which a too curious reflection was apt to disturb in its ecclesiastical and military compers... The defence and salvation of the body by daily bread is still a study, a religion, and a desire’.
The most famous evocation of the house is that given at the end of *News from Nowhere*. Here, Mackail thought, Morris created a ‘new Arcadia’, with an ‘account of his return to the loved place which he could not wish or fancy but unchanged upon a changed and happier earth’.\(^{142}\) The account, widely known, is one of the strongest expressions of Morris’s culture of nature, with both the character Ellen and the house a powerful example of how he saw human life and history ‘growing out of’ nature.\(^{143}\) Here Kelmscott holds the ‘gathered crumbs’ of this harmonious relationship, and stands as a powerful symbol of Morris’s hopes for a nature and history that exist as a continuum.

Nevertheless, Kelmscott was only ‘gathered crumbs’. It was a place in which Morris, with his increasing business and political commitments, could never spend much time. It was somewhere he wanted to be, but mostly could not be: ‘an unattainable ideal’ or ‘object of desire’.\(^{144}\) It was merely Morris’s own, private ‘share in the beauty of the earth’, not the core of his work, nor the basis for his ideas about nature. It was one expression of ways in which history and nature might harmoniously relate, and not the only or essential perfect place. Nevertheless, much has been written in this vein. A ‘mythology’ of Kelmscott was born at the end of the last century and has grown throughout this one. In 1885 May Morris thought it ‘the only house in England worth inhabiting’;\(^{145}\) in 1899 Mackail described Kelmscott as a centre for

\(^{141}\) Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 174.


\(^{143}\) See Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 201–2. The passage derives part of its power and specificity from the fact that Morris seems to have been staying at Kelmscott when he wrote it. See Morris’s letter to Kate Faulkner, 8 August 1890 (*Letters*, vol. III, p. 188), where, after describing the ‘most beautifully green’ fields and ‘wide spreading meadows as lovely as anything can be’, he states that during his work there he hopes to ‘finish the News from Nowhere’. He must have finished it soon after, because the last instalment of the serialised story was published in *Commonweal* on 4 October 1890.

\(^{144}\) Jan Marsh, ‘Kelmscott Manor as an Object of Desire’, in *Art and Kelmscott*, p. 73.

\(^{145}\) May Morris, 9 September 1885, British Library, Add. MSS 50541. May had particularly strong feelings about Kelmscott and, along with contemporary arts and crafts enthusiasts and practitioners, considered Kelmscott and the Cotswolds as a centre of ‘Morrisian’ activities. This is apparent in extracts from May’s introductions to the *Collected Works* already quoted. May’s personal passion for the house is also revealed in many of her letters. On 18 April 1911 (May Morris Papers, William Morris Gallery, J.418), for example, she writes: ‘If Mother’s injudicious friends succeed in persuading her to leave Kelmscott, I shall certainly leave England. I haven’t got much courage left and that will about use up the store’. Living at Kelmscott until her death in 1938, May maintained Kelmscott as a kind of memorial to her father, and made careful arrangements for its survival after her death. See A.R. Dufty, ‘William Morris and the Kelmscott Estate’, *Journal of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, vol. XLIII, part 1, 1963, pp. 97–114.
Morris’s love of nature;\textsuperscript{146} in 1914, ‘in these days of disaster and horror’, Evelyn de Morgan found it comforting ‘to think of Kelmscott as still a haven of peace’;\textsuperscript{147} in 1952 John Betjeman, who had visited May, emphasised its ‘strong atmosphere’;\textsuperscript{148} in 1958 Geoffrey Grigson considered it ‘an emotional centre of England’;\textsuperscript{149} in 1994 MacCarthy called it a ‘mystic centre’ that played an important role in the ‘almost transcendental rediscovery of nature … of Morris’s middle age’;\textsuperscript{150} in 1996 Jan Marsh rated it ‘the best, the ideal, almost the perfect place in the country’;\textsuperscript{151} and Linda Parry described it as ‘Morris’s spiritual home’.\textsuperscript{152}

Fuzzy mysticism and nationalistic sentiment, however, were not an important part of Morris’s experience of Kelmscott. It was the association of nature and material human history that Morris appreciated. Moreover, though he acknowledged that the pattern of settlement in this region was of the type that had ‘once made an English country-side a special treasure not to be seen elsewhere’,\textsuperscript{153} this should not be confused with the kind of nostalgia for ‘Merrie England’ that only found value in ‘green and pleasant’ corners. Though there might be a ‘nontheoretical’ Englishness in much of Morris’s work,\textsuperscript{154} and particularly in his appreciation of landscape, it is necessary to observe the limits of this quality.

Faulkner has observed that applying the idea of ‘Englishness’ to Morris is difficult because the idea was as contested in the last half of the nineteenth century as it is indeterminate now.\textsuperscript{155} Yet is it any more helpful to claim that Morris’s Englishness is of an ‘oppositional’ kind that combined ‘an exemplary … love of place (mainly bits of England) with principled resistance to Nation and State’?\textsuperscript{156} Certainly it is useful to note that Morris’s work emerged at a time when there was a concerted effort from

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{146} Mackail, \textit{Life}, vol. I, pp. 224–5.
\item \textsuperscript{147} Evelyn de Morgan to May Morris, 28 August 1914 (British Library, Add. MSS 45347).
\item \textsuperscript{148} John Betjeman, BBC Radio, 4 May 1952.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Geoffrey Grigson, \textit{Country Life}, 29 May 1958, vol. CXXIII, no. 3197, p. 1172.
\item \textsuperscript{150} MacCarthy, \textit{A Life for Our Time}, pp. 314, 274.
\item \textsuperscript{151} Marsh, ‘Kelmanst Manor as an Object of Desire’, p. 71.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Morris, ‘Address to Birmingham Students’, p. 428.
\end{itemize}
some quarters to define ‘Englishness’ through language, folklore and song, literature, art and history. Occasionally his work intersects with these movements in interesting ways. Yet it must be emphasised that Morris’s ideas were broadly antithetical to all varieties of patriotism: to that which rallied behind Charles George Gordon, as well as that of ‘socialist’ colleagues such as H.M. Hyndman and, later, Robert Blatchford. Indeed, hatred of English nationalism was the immediate catalyst for Morris’s entry into politics. In a letter to Andreas Scheu of 1883, Morris stated that ‘the outburst of Chauvinism which swept over the country’ at the time of the ‘Eastern Question’ was one of the reasons he had moved into public life in the late 1870s. In the same letter he indicated that his primary motivation for supporting the Liberals at this time was that he thought they might ‘stem the torrent of Chauvinism’ and check ‘the feeling of national hatred and prejudice for which I shall always feel the most profound contempt’.

Nevertheless, in a lecture entitled ‘Early England’ of 1886, Morris admitted: ‘I am no patriot as the word is generally used; and yet I am not ashamed to say that as

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157 See the various essays in Colls and Dodd’s Englishness.
159 Morris frequently expressed his contempt for the ‘heroes’ of empire, both in contributions to Commonweal in the 1880s and in private communications. In 1885, for example, in answer to James Mavor’s criticisms of the Socialist League’s Soudan Manifesto, Morris asserted that ‘in our opinion it was quite necessary to attack the Gordon-worship which has been used as a stalking horse for such widespread murder’, and that ‘we are internationalists not nationalists’ (26 March 1885, in Letters, vol. II, p. 410). Morris related the news of Gordon’s death to his daughter, May, with the laconic: ‘what has happened? ... Khartoum fallen—into the hands of the people it belongs to’ (20 February 1885, in Letters, vol. II, p. 388). In the same letter he noted that he visited the painter W.B. Richmond, who had become ‘seriously excited as to the success of British arms’, he had to ‘enlighten him on the subject of patriotism’ (p. 389).
160 H.M. Hyndman (The Historical Basis of Socialism in England, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., London, 1883, p. 194n) was ‘quite prepared to bear the reproach of Chauvinism in regard to what I say about the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples’, and insisted upon ‘the right and duty of this nationality to maintain its independence even under capitalism’, concluding ‘[i]f this is to be a jingo, then I am a jingo’ (Justice, 3 September 1910; quoted in C. Tszuki, H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 211). In Merrie England (Clarion Press, London, 1894, p. 123), Robert Blatchford had also argued that ‘England should be owned by the English, and managed for the benefit of the English’.
161 On 24 October 1876, Morris wrote his first public letter to the Editor of the Daily News (Letters, vol. I, pp. 323–6) protesting against British intervention in Turkey after the collapse of the government and the massacre of Christians. Subsequently, Morris became an active member of the Eastern Question Association, which continued to oppose interventionist policy throughout the 1870s.
Thus place was certainly important to Morris. In works such as *News from Nowhere*, utopia is definitely located in the English landscapes he knew and loved (though substantially transformed): ‘[h]is utopia possesses’, as Paul Meier has noted, ‘history and geography’.164 Even so, the climactic description of this place is not nationalistic, but rather personal or, as Faulkner suggests, ‘simply human’.165 It is necessary to be aware how easily this kind of imagery can be appropriated for a nationalistic cause. Lionel Johnson, for example, believed Morris’s ‘virile and pleasant pages … tell of England’s natural beauty’, thus essentialising the ‘natural’ countryside, a move that directly contradicts Morris’s understanding of the way in which the landscape is socially produced.166 For Morris, Nowhere is a place of natural beauty because it has been made that way by the overthrow of an ‘ugly’ society. As Kelvin has suggested, though the graphic ‘preface’ to *News from Nowhere* seems to be a ‘play of exteriority’—to indicate that Kelmscott Manor is the object of the entire journey, both through time and up the river—perhaps the real significance of the romance is its ‘play of interiority’, its mirroring of the personal and, at the same time, social and political desires of Morris: an assertion that ‘human beauty is the true face of nature freely operating’ (see fig. lxiv).167

Ultimately, it was the social and political desires of Morris that shaped his attitude to nature and to Kelmscott. These desires are further explored in the next section, but it is necessary to observe that they almost led to a rejection of his country retreat. This feeling is apparent in the unfinished ‘novel’, which marks a significant stage in Morris’s representation of nature. In general, the appreciation of landscape in this work is tinged throughout with melancholy and the sense that a leave-taking is

167 Kelvin, ‘Interiors and Exteriors: *News from Nowhere* and *The Spoils of Poynton*’, paper presented at the William Morris Centenary Conference, Exeter College, Oxford, 30 June 1996. Kelvin first suggested that Charles March Gere’s frontispiece acted as a kind of preface to the story, which signalled that the house was the object that structured the entire tale. Yet, by exploring themes of exteriority and interiority, and in light of Morris’s almost excessive attention to the illustration,
Fig. lxiv
The graphic 'preface' to News from Nowhere by Charles March Gere, 1892.
necessary. There is the suggestion that one should not 'bury oneself' in the country, that it can be a 'prison', even though it can occasionally provide fleeting 'sparks of feeling':

Yes! Even as the beautiful church was a grave and a ruin, the comely well-conditioned village a dull prison, the fair sweet-scented countryside a sort of dull enchanted valley to be escaped from, so was this handsome house ... a curse without a name, a lurking misery that could not be met and grappled with, because its very existence had slain sight, and memory, and hope—that of pain itself... 

In fact, as Penelope Fitzgerald has noted, renunciation and the struggle for self-control are some of the major themes of this novel. In Morris's letters, also, there is evidence that he felt he had to leave Kelmscott. In 1879 he told Georgiana Burne-Jones that there 'must soon be an end for me of playing at living in the country: a town-bird I am'. Later that same year, contemplating 'the moon rising red through the east-wind haze' and listening to 'a cow lowing over the fields', he felt 'chastened by many thoughts, and the beauty and quietness of the surroundings, which latter', he asserted, 'I am, as it were, beginning to take leave of'. Lindsay recognised this change and saw it as a symptom of Morris's decreasing passivity and growing agitation. Lindsay wrote convincingly of Morris's 'farewell mood' at this time:

a mood in which he feels that he no longer has the right to Kelmscott, had been growing on him since 1872, when a deep sense of standing apart and yet feeling the rich and secret movements of the world all around had invaded his consciousness. The withdrawal had as its obverse side an ever-stronger need to enter the full struggle of the world and find his place in it; which involved finding there his comrades and his enemies with a new fullness. The farewell mood deepened his need to achieve union with the earth he loved, not in any single intuitive way, but by vindicating the earth, by playing his part in a struggle to free it from the polluting, desecrating, and destructive forces that had become dominant.

Kelvin also suggested that the desired image of Kelmscott became a piece of autobiography for Morris, and thus ultimately represented a human interior.

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168 Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, pp. 6–7. One suspects that Morris may have drawn upon Rossetti's rather ambivalent opinion of Kelmscott here. It should be noted, also, that Morris specifically contrasts other country areas with 'the rest not of death, but of happy life' (p. 34). Nevertheless, 'inevitable melancholy' creeps into even the happier landscape (p. 66).
172 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 234.
There are hints, even in the novel, of the 'obverse side' to this mood. Morris makes observations about the countryside that are rare in his former writing. The country is populated by 'heavily-walking men' and 'anxious-looking women'. He remarks on the 'silence' and 'dullness' of the countryside and on 'rich' yet 'limited' landscapes. These are the signs that in the 1870s, he was starting to learn what, by 1890, he knew: that the villages around Kelmscott 'are beautiful ... though terribly marred by the signs of neglect and poverty, and shabby gripping the causes of which we know so well'. In 1889 he offered his extended 'Thoughts in the Country-Side' in Commonweal. He starts by enumerating the beauty and pleasure in the scene:

Midsummer in the country—here you may walk between the fields and hedges that are as it were one huge nosegay for you, redolent of bean-flowers and clover and sweet hay and elder blossom. The cottage gardens are bright with flowers, the cottages themselves mostly models of architecture in their way. Above them towers here and there the architecture proper of days bygone, when every craftsman was an artist and brought definite intelligence to bear upon his work. Man in the past, nature in the present, seem to be bent on pleasing you and making all things delightful to your senses...

Slowly, however, he introduces a hint of discord, cautiously at first:

And all, or let us say most things, are brilliantly alive. The shadowy bleak in the river down yonder, which is—ignorant of the fate that Barking Reach is preparing for its waters—sapphire blue under this ruffling wind and cloudless sky... From the bleak in the river, amongst the labyrinth of grasses, to the starlings busy in the new shorn fields, or about the grey ridges of the hay, all is eager, and I think all is happy that is not anxious.

Yet he meets figures in the landscape who are 'anxious', and they relate a 'shabby, sordid story' of 'lack of employment' and 'slavery'. He then addresses his reader:

What will happen ... with all this country beauty so tragically incongruous in its richness with the country misery which cannot feel its existence? ... The architecture of the crafts-gildsmen will tumble down, or be 'restored' for the benefit of the hunters of picturesque, who, hopeless themselves, are incapable of understanding the hopes of past days, or the expression of them. The beauty of the landscape will be exploited and artificialized for

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174 Morris to Kate Faulkner, 8 August 1890, in Letters, vol. III, p. 188.
the sake of the villa-dweller’s purses where it is striking enough to touch their jaded appetites; but in quiet places like this it will vanish year by year (as indeed it is now doing)…\textsuperscript{175}

Though posed in the late 1880s, Morris was asking himself these questions by the mid-1870s. Though he had yet to articulate the passage indicated by ellipses—‘if we must still be slaves and slaveholders, it [the country beauty] will not last long’—he had discovered that the beauty he appreciated in nature was of little value if the human life within it was unhappy or unjust. In fact, far from making a ‘transcendental recovery of nature’, Morris now attempted to make a human one. He didn’t reject the green and pleasant places of the countryside: he never dropped the lease on Kelmscott. He realised, however, that the idea of nature, to be of any value, could not be blind or ‘red in tooth and claw’. It had to mean much more than place; it had to be recognised as part of history. Moreover, humanity had to be a part of it, and it had to be part of humanity. Morris ended his ‘Thoughts in the Country-Side’:

\begin{quote}
The hayfield is a pretty sight this month seen under the elm, as the work goes forward on the side of the way opposite to the bean-field, till you look at the haymakers closely. Suppose the haymakers were friends working for friends on land which was theirs, as many as were needed, with leisure and hope ahead of them instead of hopeless toil and anxiety…? And if a new Ashdown had to be fought (against capitalist robbers this time), the new White Horse would look down on the home of men as wise as the starlings in their equality, and so perhaps as happy.\textsuperscript{176}
\end{quote}

Though the country was the place in which he could most effectively ‘forget six counties’, by the late 1870s Morris was no longer willing to do so.

\textsuperscript{175} Morris, ‘Under an Elm-tree’, pp. 426, 429.
\textsuperscript{176} Morris, ‘Under an Elm-tree’, p. 430.
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