# 2 Sustaining *The Earthly Paradise*

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William Morris's immense poem *The Earthly Paradise* was enjoyed and celebrated by influential Victorian readers from George Eliot to Walter Pater. Yet of all its over forty thousand lines, perhaps only two still reverberate within the cultural memory. The first is from the opening 'Apology,' where Morris's poet-speaker describes himself throughout this lyric's modulating refrain as 'The idle singer of an empty day.'[1] The second, fainter echo is of the opening line of the poem's prologue and first tale, 'The Wanderers': 'Forget six counties overhung with smoke' (I, 3). Recalling just these two lines, one might assume that *The Earthly Paradise* was written to be a long indulgence in escapism, and that it would have little to say to the social and economic realities of our own time. Yet, as Clive Wilmer has remarked in an introduction to a selection of Morris's prose, quoting the succeeding lines of the prologue ('Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke, / Forget the spreading of the hideous town'), 'already present in this forgetting is a protest against the filth and misery of capitalist society' (Wilmer 2004: xv). Since the early 1990s when Wilmer first wrote his introduction, Morris's politics have increasingly come to be understood as ecological as well as socialist. His work is now widely recognised as one of the most potent nineteenth-century expressions of environmental politics, ethics and aesthetics, alongside the writings of Wordsworth and Ruskin in England and Emerson, Thoreau and Muir in America. Morris's importance for the green movement was underscored when Caroline Lucas MP, the co-leader of the UK Green Party, gave the annual Kelmscott lecture in November 2013 (Lucas 2013).

To date, the case for a green reading of Morris has concentrated on his later political writings, particularly his utopian fiction, *News from Nowhere*, and to a lesser degree on his designs (see O'Sullivan 1990; Boos 1999; Frankel 2003; Hale 2003; Mayer 2008; Pinkney 2010; O'Sullivan 2011; Alexander 2015: 102–9). In this chapter, I want to develop the argument made by Patrick O'Sullivan, Tony Pinkney, Florence Boos and others for reading Morris through the lens of environmental politics by pursuing it into another genre in which he excelled—poetry—and back into an earlier phase in his career, before he became a campaigning



socialist. My aim is to trace what *The Earthly Paradise*—Morris's most sustained poem—can teach us about sustainability. The sustainability of social and environmental relations is, I will argue, a major theme within Morris's poem. While Wilmer is right that the germ of Morris's later socialist radicalism can be found in the opening lines of *The Earthly Paradise*, this major poem—one of the most popular, massive and, although this is less often appreciated, well-crafted Victorian narrative poems—marks its own distinct moment within Morris's political trajectory. Though not socialist, it is, in its own way, profoundly radical. In an essay on Morris, Wells and T. H. Huxley, Piers Hale argues that

> Although Morris' idealization of pre-capitalist labor practices might seem irrelevant to the modern world, his very point, and arguably one that resonates with those interested in environmental justice issues today, is that a world that is radically different to the one we currently inhabit is precisely what is required.
>
> (Hale 2003: 280)

The political value of Morris's writings, as of Ruskin's, lies in their ability to conceive of alternatives beyond the imaginative horizons of industrial capitalism. Wilde's remark in 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' that 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at' has a renewed force in a time when the global economic system predicated on perpetual growth is being increasingly exposed as an unsustainable delusion (Wilde 2003: 1184).

If *News from Nowhere* projects its Utopia in the future, *The Earthly Paradise* places its quest for Paradise at a particular moment in the medieval past. Where Guest reaches Nowhere, if only in a dream-vision, the wanderers who sail west from Europe in the first of the twenty-five tales that make up Morris's poem do not achieve the immortality they hope for. In place of this goal, however, Morris offers them and us the prospect of a sustainable society through his poem's framing narrative, its structure and the experience of reading it. In the first section of this chapter, I will focus on the wanderers' quest. When they leave Europe, it is in the process of being slowly destroyed by plague and war. The societies they encounter in their voyage are themselves more or less sustainable, with the social relations on the island where they eventually land up offering the most developed model of sustainability. A crucial marker of the difference between the wanderers' medieval Europe and the ancient Greek civilisation of the islanders, which they have sustained for over a thousand years, is a shift within the poem from a linear to a cyclical conception of time. This cyclical pattern is signalled in the telling of twenty-four tales over the twelve months of a year. In the second section of the chapter, I will show how Morris uses what is in effect an iterative structure to explore further what might make for a sustainable

society. As the tales are themselves retellings of ancient or medieval legends, many of the polities within which they take place are monarchical, and a question that recurs is what constitutes a sustainable model of kingship. Yet the implications of these tales extend beyond the relationship between a king and his subjects to suggest wider models for social and economic relations between individuals. They intimate too that sustainability depends ultimately upon states of mind. In conclusion, I will consider how the states of mind which the poem looks to cultivate in its own readers are themselves exemplary of sustainable social relations.

## Time and sustainability in *The Earthly Paradise*: The framing narrative

Sustainability is a temporal concept. To be sustainable is to be sustainable through time. Unlike the competing idea of resilience, sustainability implies the possibility of systems or structures that can persist without fundamental change, rather than through continual adaption to changing circumstances. The pursuit of sustainability as an ideal can thus be seen as a quest for a new way of living in and with time, one in which what is valued is not the novelty of the moment or the singularity of the event but the durability of ways of life. This is the quest that, unwittingly, Morris's wanderers undertake in *The Earthly Paradise*.

Morris locates his wanderers with a chronological as well as a geographical precision unusual in verse romance. Their leaders, Rolf, Nicholas and Laurence, are respectively a Norwegian born and educated in Constantinople, a Breton squire fascinated by ancient myth and a Swabian priest and alchemist. They set sail first from Norway and then collect a second ship and crew at Bremen before heading west. Their object is to find the Earthly Paradise, where they hope to find immortality on earth. The wanderers' motivation comes initially from their own imaginations, stoked by old books and legends, and by Laurence's pursuit of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life. But their departure soon becomes more pressing, as 'Upon the land a pestilence there fell / Unheard-of yet in any chronicle' (I, 9). Following the eighteenth-century historian Sven Lagerbring, Boos notes in her edition of *The Earthly Paradise* that the plague arrived in Norway in May 1349 (Morris 2002: 77–8). The wanderers leave 'Viken' (I, 15) in Norway in September. Six days after leaving Bremen, they encounter Edward III's navy in the English Channel. Boos notes that the king was indeed recorded as intercepting shipping in the Channel that year, as part of his protracted campaign to exert power over France (Morris 2002: 86–7). By Rolf's own account, they then wander for thirty years before they reach their penultimate destination (I, 85), spending some time there before escaping to the island. As the narrator tells us in the opening lines of the prologue that, at the time of their eventual arrival on the island, 'Geoffrey



Chaucer's pen / Moves over bills of lading' in the port of London (I, 3), this can be dated to no later than 1386, when Chaucer stopped being Comptroller of Customs to become a Member of Parliament (Morris 2002: 70).

This historical precision is important because it places the wanderers expressly within history, not legend. The wanderers exist within linear time. They are aware of where their mission sits in the history of exploration, looking back to Leif Erikson's voyage to 'Vineland' (I, 15) and drawing inspiration too from 'an English knight' who 'had the Earthly Paradise in sight' (I, 8), identified by Boos as Sir John Mandeville, the accounts of whose putative travels began to circulate in the fourteenth century (Morris 2002: 75). The specific moment when they set off from Europe is also significant. It is a natural disaster—the Black Death—which prompts them to leave Europe and not merely continue idly dreaming about the prospect of Paradise. Though it bears on the wanderers themselves less directly, their Europe is further ravaged by war, symbolised in the 'many an ageing line' (I, 20) engraved prematurely on Edward III's face and captured too in the disjuncture between his claim that 'if ye be men / Well-born and warlike, these are fair days' (I, 21) and Rolf's intimation that 'like to one he seemed whose better day / Is over to himself, though foolish fame / Shouts louder year by year his empty name' (I, 20).

Rolf and his companions are not merely wanderers, but refugees, seeking a new life in what a century and a half later Amerigo Vespucci would call the New World. As Nicholas puts it in a plea to Edward III, they are those 'who take this death-bound life in hand / And risk the rag to find a happy land, / Where at the worst death is so far away / No man need think of him from day to day' (I, 24). At the best, they conceive of their object in ideal terms as a state of immortality on earth. Yet their first encounter with a native culture once they reach the Americas is a ghastly parody of this ideal. Climbing to the top of a hill surrounded by forest, they come upon a stone circle, in the middle of which, Rolf relates:

> We saw a group of well-wrought images,
> Or so they seemed at first, who stood around
> An old hoar man laid on the rocky ground
> Who seemed to live as yet; now drawing near
> We saw indeed what things these figures were;
> Dead corpses, by some deft embalmer dried,
> And on this mountain after they had died
> Set up like players on a yule-tide feast.
>
> (I, 41)

The mummies are arranged in attendance on the near-dead king as a hunter, a cupbearer, 'Two damsels daintily apparelled' (I, 42), guards

and litter-bearers. The king himself is destined to become one of the 'bodies brown and dry' wrapped in 'gaudy rags' (I, 40) that the wanderers had discovered in a chamber lower down the hill. These desiccated corpses of kings reveal the vanity of their claims to earthly power and to immortality. Those of their attendants suggest the abuse of these same ideals, as young men and women are ritually killed and preserved in honour of the delusion that a life can be lived eternally.

Over the course of Rolf's account of their travels, it becomes increasingly clear that the wanderers' yearning for immortality is irreconcilable with their need for a sustainable existence free from death in the more mundane sense articulated by Nicholas. Disillusioned by their early encounters with hostile natives and ghoulish customs, they cease to expect Paradise, yet they are constantly drawn to abandon actual happiness in pursuit of it. When they find themselves among a 'people most untaught and wild' (I, 55) who 'possessing nought, / And lacking nought, lived happy' (I, 57–8), Rolf nonetheless rouses most of his followers to leave them and cross the mountains inland in search of a land where, according to their new hosts, 'dwelt men like the Gods, and clad as we, / Who doubtless lived on through eternity' (I, 57). In telling this story, Rolf hints that, while their hosts seemed 'free from thought' (I, 58), it was in fact the wanderers themselves who only 'half understood' the tale they were told (I, 56). The only people they find beyond the mountains are savage cannibals, though their journey does yield them another parody of their quest, as the 'ten months and a day' that they are away from their fellows and hosts are so horrendous as to distort time, slowing it down so they seem like 'years' (I, 63). On their return, the party divides into three, with the contented settlers, 'alive and well, /Wedded to brown wives' (I, 62) choosing to stay, one crew abandoning the quest and setting sail for Norway, and Rolf, Nicholas and Laurence setting off once again with a hard core of followers in quest of Paradise. Again, they find what might seem a reasonable approximation to it among a people who honour them as lords and counsellors, and yet again they abandon it, duped after twenty-five years by a stranger who promises to deliver up to them the secret of his own persistent youth. When they reach his country, they find themselves entombed in a pyramidal temple as living gods, forced to witness human sacrifices in yet another horrific parody of life as immortals.

Escaping this last nightmare in the turmoil of a political revolt, the wanderers finally reach a welcome shore, not in mainland America, but on an island which Rolf characterises as 'a quiet home / Befitting dying men' (I, 27). In accepting the hospitality of the islanders, the wanderers abandon their quest for immortality. In the process, however, they attain a more limited but sustainable form of earthly paradise. The island is no more free from death by ageing than the Europe they have left, but it is free from epidemics and wars—free, in effect, from history. Its architecture, religion and costumes are all unchanged from when it was founded by Greek colonists, presumably over a thousand years before. Its polity resembles an idealised Greek or Roman city-state, not compromised by slavery, imperialism or the radical democracy of fifth-century Athens. The island is not socialist, nor even parliamentary, but it is a republic—a *res publica* or 'commonweal' (I, 6), in the word of the leader of the city's elders, who form a senate that rules seemingly by consent, not coercion.



Morris does not give details of the island's constitution. As a political ideal, it seems at first naïvely conservative, especially when one considers the lofty way in which the 'wisest man' (I, 5) who governs the city refers to 'our peasants' (I, 6) and to 'these maidens' (I, 27) who wait on the elders and their visitors. When Morris invites us to 'see / Soldiers and peasants standing reverently / Before those elders' (I, 5), he appears to be endorsing a stratified society. Before dismissing the island as a Tory fantasy, however, or merely a rehearsal of the oligarchic utopian tradition from Plato to More, it is worth considering how Morris imagines its social relations. These are witnessed in the brief passages of narrative framing the twenty-four tales told by the elders and the wanderers that make up the bulk of the poem. As Amanda Hodgson has observed, over the course of the poem, these tales increasingly attract an audience that includes younger men and women as well as the old men who tell the stories (Hodgson 1996: 351). The more we see of the island, the more relations between old and young, men and women, elders and peasantry, seem harmonious and egalitarian. The elders appear to earn their position through their wisdom and experience, not by right of birth. There is no suggestion that they form a class or caste apart from the wider population; instead, they are its senior members. Moreover, they are genuine in their loathing of tyranny and their commitment to the commonweal, not telling 'sad stories of the death of kings' like Shakespeare's failed tyrant Richard II (III, ii, 152), but rather 'Remembering what a glory and a gain / Their fathers deemed the death of kings to be' (I, 343) (1988: 382). In these social conditions, Morris may be suggesting reverence need not be deference, and governance can be free of politics.

Such relations can pertain, Morris suggests, because this is a small-scale polity, little bigger than a single community, recalling 'times long passed away, / When men might cross a kingdom in a day' (I, 106). The island's economy can therefore remain relatively simple. As Morris sees it, it helps the social cohesion that it is founded on agriculture and trade, not the industry that defiles the six counties around London, and that the islanders have abandoned any ambitions to explore beyond their own archipelago. Even so, Morris and his islanders are not naïve about the reality of economic relations even in such an apparently ideal society. Even as they relish the old stories of tyrannicide, 'some' of the elders are doubtful:

> For thinking how few men escape the yoke,
> From this or that man's hand, and how most folk

Must need be kings and slaves the while they live,
And take from this man, and to that man give
Things hard enow.

(I, 343)

This undifferentiated 'some' may be made up of elders from the island, aged wanderers or both, so this critique of economic injustice can be taken to apply, if not necessarily equally, to the island itself as well as to medieval Europe and, by implication, Morris's readers' modern world. These lines are a reminder that Morris does not imagine his utopia to be perfect. At the same time, it is another credit to the elders that they recognise the problem of the abuse of economic power.

The island may not have eliminated all social ills, but it has sustained for centuries a way of life that appears to have kept its population, relatively speaking, happy and healthy. It would be possible to cherry-pick the elements of Morris's vision of sustainability that match current green political ideals—localism, anti-capitalism, egalitarianism and so on—and to set aside the paternalism of the island's social order as a regrettable and rare failure on Morris's part to rise above the mainstream values of his time. But Morris's elders are more revealing than this. Their presence bears on the question of what makes a society sustainable in at least two important ways. Firstly, they embody and enact the island's intrinsic conservatism. This conservatism is a necessary condition of its sustainability as opposed to resilience. Few political acts could be more conservative than to sustain the same social and economic relations unchanged for a thousand years or more. With the consent of the population, this is what the elders of the island have done. But then, to sustain social, economic or environmental conditions as they are, whatever they are, is necessarily a conservative move. To appreciate this requires that we strip the term 'conservative' of its ideological accretions as an endorsement, firstly, of a preexisting hierarchy of power and property and, more recently, of capitalism as the proper economic order. Morris's elders are profoundly conservative, but their conservatism exists outside the channels of history. The social relations they conserve are more benign, less unequal and more fairly prosperous than any that had existed historically, whether in the Graeco-Roman world from which they derive, the medieval world which Morris is often presumed to have idolised but which his wanderers repudiate, or in his own time. This is why, in turn, they are more sustainable.

The sustainability of the island at once is predicated on and entails a withdrawal from history. This is symbolised by life on the island being ordered not by the linear time of chronology but rather by the prior cyclical pattern of the seasons. This annual cycle gives the poem as a whole its structure. Each month two tales are told, the first by one of the elders, the second by one of their guests, the now-settled wanderers. The cycle of tales begins in March in the early spring and ends at the



close of the following winter with the old men noticing the new growth beginning to appear in late February. This view of time is better fitted to a local and principally agricultural economy than to one that is global and industrialised, so the repudiation of industry in the poem's opening lines is integral to regaining it. At the same time, Morris's distaste for the 'hideous town' that is Victorian London does not prevent him from allowing his islanders their own city. It is industrial urbanisation that he rejects, not urban living *per se*.

What makes Morris's return to this seasonal cycle more than merely an idealised pastoral calendar is the continual reminders that he inserts into his tales and the framing narrative of the losses that come with the passage of time. The framing narrative passage at the end of the poem's final tale is characteristic and telling:

Sad eyes there were the while the tale was told,
And few among the young folk were so bold
As to speak out their thoughts concerning it,
While still amidst that concourse they did sit.
But some when to the fresh bright day they turned,
And smooth cheeks even in that freshness burned,
'Neath burning glances might find words to speak,
Wondering that any tale should make love weak
To rule the earth, all hearts to satisfy;
Yet as they spake, perchance, some doubt went by
Upon the breeze, till out of sight and sound
Of other folk, their longing lips had found,
If but a little while, some resting-place,
On hand, on bosom, on bright eager face.

But the old men learned in earth's bitter lore,
Were glad to leave untouched the too rich store
Of hapless memories, if it might be done;
And wandered forth into the noonday sun,
To watch the blossoms budding on the wall,
And hear the rooks among the elm-trees call,
And note the happy voices on the breeze,
And see the lithe forms; making out of these
No tangled story, but regarding them
As hidden elves upon the forest's hem
Gaze on the dancers through the May-night green,
Not knowing aught what troubled looks may mean.

(IV, 433)

The 'young folk' here exhibit a strong if not unshaken faith in love which matches their own frank sexual desire for one another. In keeping

with Morris's egalitarianism, they are not expressly differentiated into men and women. The line of the syntax would suggest that the 'smooth cheeks' are those of the speakers who vouchsafe their faith in love and whose 'longing lips' find satisfaction in kissing their lovers' bodies as well as hands and faces. By this reading, Morris is giving us an expression of what is most likely female sexual desire, unashamed and intimate if ultimately private. But the 'longing lips' may also be male, the 'burning glances' female. Indeed, unusually for Morris, even homoerotic love and desire is if not intended then not excluded here. What matters is the desire itself, which, whether procreative or otherwise, is a part of the process of rejuvenation implied in the cycles of the seasons and the generations. The old men, by contrast, cannot experience this rejuvenation in themselves because their age inevitably brings with it 'hapless memories' of failure and misfortune. Instead, they take their pleasure in the revival of the natural world around them.

Morris suggests that the challenge of living within cycles of time but outside of history is faced most directly not by the young but by the old, whose memories are wont to be reinscribed as histories, and who, like the wanderers fleeing the plague, cannot deny the presence of death. This is the second reason why the elders cannot be dismissed as marginal within Morris's vision of a sustainable society. It is striking that, while the elders and the young folk have very different views of love, their means of dealing with their discontent are similar in one key respect. Both turn away from narrative to direct experience. *The Earthly Paradise* is a narrative poem which celebrates storytelling on an immense scale, yet the islanders themselves avoid telling the 'tangled story' of their own lives or of the world around them. Their gaze is determinedly ahistorical, like that of elves looking in on the world of people. Morris's closing analogy is precise. His elves are at once supernatural, looking on the world as if from beyond time, and quintessential nature spirits, looking at the human world of history from the cyclical world of the forest. This cyclical time is reinforced by a forward movement that brings May to mind when it is still only February. What is more, by stepping out of time, looking not to their memories but rather existing in the immediate pleasure of the moment, the old men attain a state which, by Morris's analogy, is equivalent to that of immortal beings. In so doing, they show how it is that the island can be at the same time a home for dying men and an approximation to the Earthly Paradise.

## Sustainable kingship and sustainable societies: The tales

The iterative structure of *The Earthly Paradise* sees each tale told in the same circumstances by the same groups of people at regular intervals. It enables Morris to extend his consideration of what makes for a sustainable society across several different examples. As most of the stories



are drawn from classical and medieval legend, most of the societies in which they take place are monarchical. The titles of three of the first four tales—'The Man Born to Be King,' 'The Doom of King Acrisius' and 'The Proud King'—establish kingship as a major theme across the poem. Recalling the old men's observation that 'most folk / Must need be kings and slaves the while they live,' Morris's examination of kingship in these tales and others pertains not only to the role of a monarch but to social, economic and environmental relations more widely. In considering what makes for sustainable kingship, he is asking too what makes for a sustainable society.

The kings in Morris's tales are individuals—Morris's characterisation in the poem is more subtle than he is given credit for—but they tend to share certain traits. They are typically conniving and treacherous, and the honour in which they are ostensibly held contrasts with their moral corruption. As with Pelias and Jason in Morris's other long poem of the 1860s, *The Life and Death of Jason* (itself originally composed for *The Earthly Paradise*), the foil for several of these corrupt kings—Acrisius and Polydectes in 'The Doom of King Acrisius,' Proetus and Jobates in 'Bellerophon at Argos' and 'Bellerophon in Lycia'—is a resolute and frank hero. In other tales, the haughty and corrupt king is matched with a countertype. In 'The Man Born to Be King,' the king tries repeatedly to destroy the peasant boy, Michael, who is prophesied to succeed him. The very fact that Michael is not born to kingship by hereditary right, and that he does not knowingly seek the role, is what makes him eligible for it. In 'The Proud King,' Jovinian's moral failings—his arrogance and tyranny—are exposed even more directly as an angel assumes his place and strips him of all recognition from his people. Even where Morris's kings are not vicious, they are impotent, like the fathers of Andromeda and Psyche, who cannot stop their daughters from being sacrificed to monsters, and Croesus of Lydia, whose wealth cannot save his son. Across these tales, the premise that monarchy should be dynastic is a cause of strife, whether the kings find themselves threatened by their own lineage or unable to secure it. Indeed, the secure passage of kingship from one generation to another is rare in Morris's mythic worlds. Michael's reign fulfils its promise but the beneficence of his rule does not survive his death, 'Nor will the poor folk see again / A king like him on any throne' (I, 214). Jovinian rules well for thirty years after his divine chastening, yet even though he has his own tale written down as a moral lesson 'That it may lie when I am gone away, / Stored up within the archives of the King,' his successor takes 'little heed' of it, 'So much did all things feed his swelling pride' (I, 342).

The moral character of Morris's kings is an index of the moral character of their societies. This is clearest in two tales from June and July: 'The Love of Alcestis' and 'The Watching of the Falcon.' These tales are linked to one another and to the frame narrative by the theme of

immortality. In the first, the well-loved Admetus, king of Pherae, is raised from near-death by his wife Alcestis who, unasked, lovingly sacrifices her own life for his. In the second, the unnamed king of an unnamed land undergoes an ordeal, staying awake seven days and nights watching a falcon on the promise that, if he does not sleep, a fay will grant him whatever he wishes. His initial hope is for immortality but, before he undertakes the test, he reads on a scroll that she has not the power to bestow it. Undeterred, he goes through with the ordeal, dreaming next of great power but claiming in the end a night of sex with the fay herself as his reward, even though she tells him that 'this wished-for joy, / That surely will thy bliss destroy, / Will let thee live, until thy life / Is wrapped in such bewildering strife / That all thy days will seem but ill' (I, 569). After he returns home, his son revolts against him and dies a suicide, his daughter is shamed, and his country plunged into war. When he finally dies, he is an outlaw in the hinterland of his own kingdom.

The contrasts between the two stories and the two kings are stark. In his polemic against political economy, *Unto This Last*, Ruskin writes that the 'true meaning' of the title 'king' has 'been long lost through the pretences of unhelpful and unable persons to [...] kingly character' (Ruskin 1985: 194). Most of Morris's kings are cases in point, but Admetus is an exception and is rewarded accordingly. He is gifted immortality and his wife's love and her life too are freely given to him. The king in 'The Watching of the Falcon' pursues immortality and, when he cannot have it, compels the fay to sleep with him. Admetus, once risen, is a mythical god-king. Like Christ or Arthur, he transcends this world and yet is feted to return, as 'either on the earth he ceased to dwell, / Or else, oft born again, had many a name' (I, 502). Nonetheless, he is remembered under his own name through the tale. The identity of the king in the other tale is forgotten, for all that he imagines his name remembered alongside Alexander's. Both stories are old traditions, yet where the one is preserved intact, the other is at best a crumbling memory.

Another contrast between these two kings is in their attitude to power and to war as a means to it. The anonymous king rules 'a storied folk [...] To whom sharp war had long been bliss' (I, 577). He dreams of conquest and leads his men into battle against the barbarian hordes who, in fulfilment of the fay's prophecies, overrun his country, killing, raping and burning, 'For all the land was masterless' (I, 582), in spite of his military skill and strength. Admetus is honoured as a king, by Morris as well as his subjects, precisely because he eschews martial prowess and conquest:

> A happy man he was; no vain desire
> Of foolish fame had set his heart a-fire;
> No care he had the ancient bounds to change,



> Nor yet for him must idle soldiers range
> From place to place about the burdened land,
> Or thick upon the ruined cornfields stand.
>
> (I, 488)

The elder who tells this tale dismisses 'foolish fame,' repeating the phrase from Rolf's recollections of Edward III, who did indeed seek 'the ancient bounds to change' by marshalling his soldiers on 'the ruined cornfields' of France. In 'The Wanderers,' Edward praises the 'fair days' of war, but he recognises, as the king in 'The Watching of the Falcon' does not, 'that in Asia Alexander died / And will not live again' (I, 25). Unlike his son, the Black Prince, when he smiles in response to Nicholas's plea, it is not in mockery. Edward's redemption within the poem comes with his decision to give the wanderers safe passage, and with his humbling and compelling counterfactual speculation that 'it yet may hap that I a king / Shall be remembered but by this one thing, / That on the morn before ye crossed the sea / Ye gave and took in common talk with me' (I, 25). For Admetus's part, 'Better to him than wolf-moved battered shields, / O'er poor dead corpses, seemed the stubble fields / Danced down beneath the moon' (I, 489) after the harvest.

The contrast between Admetus and the blighted king in 'The Watching of the Falcon' is emblematic of the mores and economics of their respective kingdoms. When we first see Admetus, he is sitting 'Among his people, wearied in such wise / By hopeful toil as makes a paradise / Of the rich earth' (I, 457). The syntax is ambiguous but the strong impression is that Admetus has shared this toil with his people and that they are sharing in his satisfaction. As the elder remarks, he is 'little like a king, / As we call kings,' as he is 'glad with everything' and therefore 'free from sickening fear and foolish strife' (I, 457). Admetus's attitude is characteristic of his people. They are content to live with sufficiency, not excess. O'Sullivan has pointed out that Morris' Nowhere is 'a true steady state economy' in which 'Production is for needs, not wants' (1990: 180). The same is true of Pherae under Admetus's rule. The elder locates his story 'In those old simple days, before men went / To gather unseen harm and discontent, / Along with all the alien merchandize / That rich folk need, too restless to be wise' (I, 456–7). Foreign trade here stands metonymically for the drive to acquire and possess that which we do not need, to prize objects over the experience of living, luxuries over necessities—a drive which, as Morris recognises, becomes for those who cannot surmount it a 'need' in itself. It is the absence of this drive which makes Pherae a 'paradise,' like the golden age of Greek mythology.

The unnamed kingdom in 'The Watching of the Falcon' seems at first another paradise to set alongside Pherae and the island. This tale is told by the priest, Laurence. The received wisdom is that Morris fails to differentiate the narrators of his tales (see, for example, Birch 2009: 325).

But Laurence has a particular liking for stories of hubris in which the overreacher falls foul of supernatural powers. His sarcasm in telling 'The Watching of the Falcon' is pronounced. He begins by describing what appears to be a land of plenty. The harvests are plentiful, the rivers full of fish, the 'laden barges' heavy with goods, 'The maids are straight, and fair of face, / And men are stout for husbandry, / And all is well as it can be / Upon this earth where all has end' (I, 552–3). It seems at first as though the inevitability of death is the only thing that sets a limit to happiness in this prosperous land. Yet Laurence's next lines disabuse us of this presumption:

> For on them God is pleased to send
> The gift of Death down from above,
> That envy, hatred, and hot love,
> Knowledge with hunger by his side,
> And avarice and deadly pride,
> There may have end like everything
> Both to the shepherd and the king:
> Lest this green earth become but hell
> If folk thereon should ever dwell.
>
> (I, 553)

It is, on reflection, death that ensures that this land is as good as it is—not a paradise, but at least not a hell—by cutting off the hateful emotions that this apparently straight, stout people harbour for one another. Like the rich who crave 'alien merchandise,' they are compulsively acquisitive, whether this manifests itself as envy of one another, avarice for wealth, hunger for knowledge or heated desire. As Laurence explains:

> So folk within that country fair
> Lived on unable to forget
> The longed-for things they could not get [...]
> Nowise content with what they had,
> But falling still from good to bad
> While hard they sought the hopeless best;
> And seldom happy or at rest
> Until at last with lessening blood
> One foot within the grave they stood.
>
> (I, 553–4)

This addiction to more and ever more, so that satisfaction can never be attained but is always superseded by new longings, plagues this outwardly thriving people. It is the same insatiable appetite that drives their king to watch the falcon, craving first immortality, then boundless



power, then impossible sexual fulfilment. Through him, it destroys the country as a whole, torn apart in a grim act of poetic justice by a race of men like beasts 'driven afar / Unto the place whereon they stood, / Hungry for bestial joys and blood' (I, 578).

The contrasts between Admetus and the unnamed king, and between their respective peoples, reveal that for Morris sustainability in kingship or society is as much a state of mind as an outcome of economics. It is true that Pherae is presented as principally an agrarian economy, the unnamed kingdom a trading one. But although Morris is suspicious of trade, the islanders trade among themselves and their society is sustainable. It is not trade *per se*, or even foreign trade, that is the root problem, but the craving that it represents for more than is sufficient for a happy life. Once this craving is indulged, whether in the king, in the individual whom he represents, or across society as a whole, it becomes endemic. Thereafter happiness itself is no longer sustainable, because it cannot exist without satisfying the need for more, which through its nature is incapable of satisfaction.

The endings of these two tales return to the question of sustainability by tracing, as in the frame narrative, a move from linear into cyclical time. In 'The Love of Alcestis,' the sacrifice of the queen and the effective resurrection of the king usher in a time out of time, with no events bar the changing of the seasons:

> So passed the order of the world again,
> Victorious Summer crowning lusty Spring,
> Autumn with cleared fields from the harvesting,
> And Winter the earth's sleep; and then again
> Spring, Summer, Autumn, and the Winter's pain;
> And still and still the same the years went by.
>
> (I, 501)

In revising this passage, Morris rewrote the third of these lines as 'Rich Autumn faint with wealth of harvesting' (2002: 519). The less regular and fluent rhythms of the original line convey more directly the lack of narrative drive behind the turning of the seasons, reinforced by the caesura marking the winter's sleep in the following line, itself a relatively rare device within Morris's typically steady couplets. As on the island, life in cyclical time is not idyllic. The 'Winter's pain' brings death inevitably to mind, reminding us that winter is indeed a time of dying, for people and animals as well as plants, and recalling too the idea of age as the winter of one's life. Nevertheless, this is a picture of a life comprised of steady, dependable cycles, continuing the contented order of Admetus's own rule. It is recognised as such by the wanderers listening to the tale. Although it returns them

briefly to their 'old desires,' their 'altered hearts' conclude on reflection that 'the rest, / Most surely coming, of all things seemed best,' so 'in despite of death, / With sweet content that eve they drew their breath' (I, 503). Like the elders, they are learning how to die within the cycles of life.

The words with which Laurence closes his tale the following month reinforce this same message:

> As for the land, great Time did turn
> The bloody field to deep green grass,
> And from the minds of men did pass
> The memory of that time of woe,
> And at this day all things are so
> As first I said; a land it is .
> Where men may dwell in rest and bliss
> If so they will—Who yet will not,
> Because their hasty hearts are hot
> With foolish hate, and longing vain
> The sire and dam of grief and pain.
>
> (I, 584)

Laurence's sarcastic turn of phrase, setting out as if to praise only to condemn, is marked in two changes of direction mid-line, first to return to the poem's opening ideal, the second to repudiate it as before. The 'turn' of 'Time,' the growth of the grass, the fading of the cultural memory all suggest a movement from recorded history into the undifferentiated cycles of life, yet here all these cycles have done is to return the people to their previous dissatisfaction. Three moments are held together here: those of the story, its telling in the fourteenth century, and its composition in the nineteenth. In all three, people have failed to attain the 'rest and bliss' that might have been theirs had they managed to set 'longing' aside. 'Bliss' here signals once again that such a life would be a kind of paradise but 'rest' is the more crucial term for Morris. To 'rest' is to remain content as you are, even into death; to be 'restless' is to plague yourself with a craving for 'alien merchandize'—to fail to be self-sufficient economically but, more crucially, psychologically. As the people themselves remain restless, their societies remain ill-at-ease, always wanting more than they can sustainably have. Laurence, like Morris himself, is a product of the Old World order that he critiques. The island elder who tells the tale of Alcestis and Admetus finds sufficiency, though not an end to pain, in a cyclical life—a promise borne out, to a good extent, by life of the island itself. Generalising instead from life in Europe, Morris reminds us through Laurence how deeply engrained the habit of restlessness is, and how far we have to go to free ourselves from it.



## Conclusion: sustainability and narrative art

In *Unto This Last*, Ruskin puts a powerful case for a sustainable society characterised by sufficiency, not the restless pursuit of more. 'What is chiefly needed in England at the present day,' he argues:

> is to show the quantity of pleasure that may be obtained by a consistent, well-administered competence, modest, confessed, and laborious. We need examples of people who, leaving Heaven to decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for themselves they will be happy in it, and have resolved to seek—not greater wealth, but simpler pleasure; not higher fortune, but deeper felicity; making the first of possessions, self-possession; and honouring themselves in the harmless pride and calm pursuits of peace.
>
> (1985: 227)

*Unto This Last* was serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, then reissued as a book in 1862, as Morris was beginning work on *The Earthly Paradise*. The vision of a sustainable society that emerges from Morris's poem bears a striking resemblance to Ruskin's. Both men felt revulsion towards the ugliness of the industrial environment and moral rage at abuses of the power over others that the ownership of the means of production gave to a few individuals. Environmentally and morally, industrial capitalism as they see it produces a society that is unsustainable. For both of them, part at least of the solution lies in simplifying economic relations by returning to preindustrial conditions in which social and economic units are less diffuse and labour less alienated.

Morris's social vision in *The Earthly Paradise*, though less precise than Ruskin's in *Unto This Last*, is more thoroughly imagined as lived experience. The presence of the elders notwithstanding, life on the island is more egalitarian than that which Ruskin calls for. Morris's sustainable societies are more explicitly local too. Most crucially, rather than returning to the Middle Ages as an ideal, as Ruskin does, and as Carlyle and Pugin had done before him, Morris imagines medieval Europe as a damaged and unsustainable world, as indeed he had done before in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. For Morris, the solution to the problems of industrial capitalism is not to reverse several hundred years of history in pursuit of a lost ideal, but rather to step outside history altogether, to find a way of living in time that is immediate, not self-conscious, and in keeping with the cycles of nature and agriculture. To do this, Morris suggests, we need not only to recapture a prior mode of being—prior, that is, to the act of charting history—but also to learn to live with death. Whether this is possible for us in 'these latter days' (IV, 437), as Morris calls them in the closing words of the poem's

'Epilogue,' is moot. As he asks in the lyric for July, referencing once again the diurnal and seasonal cycles of life:

> Ah, love! although the morn shall come again,
> And on new rose-buds the new sun shall smile,
> Can we regain what we have lost meanwhile?
>
> (I, 528)

Whether or not this is a real possibility, it is an imaginative necessity if we are to find ways of sustaining our civilisation as the islanders have done for another thousand years.

The recognition of the need to break free of the linearity of history and to fashion anew other ways of living in time is one of Morris's most distinctive and profound insights into the challenge of sustainability. Another, shared with Ruskin, is his insistence that the most fundamental change that must happen before our way of life can become sustainable is a change of mind. To be sustainably happy, Ruskin argues, we must decide to be happy with what we have, where what we have is sufficient for our needs. Such a life is realised in full in *The Earthly Paradise* only in rare societies guided by good and humble kings: Pherae under Admetus, or Michael's reign, 'When scarce a man would stop to gaze / At gold crowns hung above the ways' (I, 214). But life on the island itself is a fair approximation. Here the communal pleasures of dancing, eating and drinking, the shared thrill and fulfilment, however transitory, of love and sex, and the delight an individual can take in observing the natural and human worlds, are all examples of what Ruskin calls the 'simpler pleasure' that brings with them 'deeper felicity.' In all these, it is in lived experience, not commodities, that satisfaction is to be found.

The happiness that the islanders and their guests find in these experiences literally embodies Ruskin's famous precept that 'There Is No Wealth but Life' (1985: 222). In Morris's poem, the type of experience vividly lived is storytelling and listening to stories. Storytelling is not escapism for Morris, at least not in the sense that it takes us away from our own lives. Rather, it is a lived experience in its own right. Storytelling is a communal activity which generates at once shared and intensely private responses to be savoured in the moment and apt to be revived in the memory or through acts of retelling. As an art, it is both sustainable and democratic. Telling stories expends few resources and requires only a little leisure, something Morris imagines will be available to all in a world in which people are not always scurrying to gain what they do not need and forcing one another to work as slaves or wage-slaves for this end.

In their very vividness, Morris's stories in *The Earthly Paradise* set out to absorb their readers in the act of reading. Pater's remark from the notorious conclusion to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* that 'Not the fruit of experience but experience itself is the end'



originated in a review he wrote of Morris's poetry for the *Westminster Review* in October 1868 (qtd. in Faulkner 1973: 91). Morris celebrates life lived through experience, not acquisition, in his poem. But the poem also offers a richness of experience itself. In a letter to John Blackwood, George Eliot writes 'We take Morris's poem into the woods with us and read it aloud, greedily, looking to see how much *more* there is in store for us. *If ever* you have an idle afternoon, bestow it on the *Earthly Paradise*' (qtd. in Faulkner 1973: 10, original emphasis). The intensity of her pleasure in the poem, shared with her partner George Henry Lewes, chimes with Pater's sense of its significance. Yet the greed that she feels to consume more and more of it, like Pater's insistence that we must 'burn always with this hard gem-like flame,' is of a kind with the restless appetites that Morris himself rejects (qtd. in Faulkner 1973: 91). *The Earthly Paradise* responds better to a more restrained, less urgent reading, one that relishes each tale in turn, returning to them as the mood calls. Its pleasures can be intense but they can also be muted, even melancholy, like those experienced by the old men within it in listening to the same tales that we read. Reading in this way is itself a model of sustainable living, taking unhurried pleasure in the immersive yet immediate experience of narrative poetry, whether experienced communally as a 'listener' (I, 102), as Morris himself addresses us, or privately as a solitary reader.

Unlike an oral tale, a book such as *The Earthly Paradise* cannot be wholly exempt from the means of production and exchange. Morris's poem sold remarkably well, through several editions. Even so, its status as a commodity remains subsidiary to its capacity as a rich repository of stories. As 'popular' and, from 1890, one-volume 'cheap' editions were printed, its twenty-five tales and forty thousand lines became ever more affordable (Morris 1918: iv). Eventually, through its circulation in second-hand copies, the poem would achieve a fair approximation to the sustainability of the tales told within it. If a change of outlook is the most fundamental precondition for sustainability, the reproducible and shareable art of narrative and poetry is at once a means to that change and a rich form of sustainable pleasure. Hours spent in reading Morris's poem, printed in double columns over 450 pages in a battered set of hard covers, are themselves a fair type of the wealth that is life.

## Note

1 William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise: A Poem*, 3/4 vols (London: Ellis, 1868–1870), I, p. 1. Subsequent references given parenthetically. The first part of the poem, published in 1868, was reissued in two volumes as Parts I and II in 1870. References are given to the original 1868 text as I; references to passages first published in Part IV in 1870 are given as IV; as it happens, there are no references to Part III.

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# 3 Transatlantic dialogues in sustainability

## Edward Carpenter, Henry David Thoreau and the literature of simplification

*Peter Adkins*

> What sort of line my life would have taken if Thoreau had come to me a year earlier, I cannot tell. It is certain that there would have been considerable difference.
>
> Edward Carpenter (1916: 116)

In his autobiography *My Days and Dreams* (1916), Edward Carpenter recounts how during his visit to the USA in the summer of 1884, his second and final trip to the country, he went 'to Walden pond, bathed in it and added a stone to Thoreau's cairn' (1916: 118). If meeting and befriending Walt Whitman had defined Carpenter's first trip to the USA in 1877, his subsequent excursion presented an opportunity for a different literary pilgrimage: the chance to visit the pond just south of Concord, Massachusetts, where Henry David Thoreau had lived and had written about in *Walden* (1854). Thoreau's account of leaving society and self-sustaining in the woods had affected Carpenter greatly. It was '[j]ust about the very day' that he had moved to a seven-acre smallholding at Millthorpe in 1883, Carpenter recalled, that *Walden* 'fell into [his] hands' and left him feeling 'paralyzed' (1916: 115–6). Perhaps recollecting Thoreau's admonishment of 'young men [...] whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, barns, cattle and farming tools,' possessions that stand as 'encumbrances' to living simply (Thoreau 1986: 47), Carpenter lamented that *Walden* had presented him with a 'charming ideal of a simplification of life' at precisely the point that he had 'committed myself to all the exasperations of carrying on a house and market-garden' (1916: 115–6).

Carpenter, born in Brighton in 1844, the youngest of nine siblings in a wealthy family with an established military lineage, had previously experienced a transformative encounter with American literature as a newly ordained curate at Cambridge in the early 1870s, when the writings of Walt Whitman had stirred him to begin writing his own expressive and expansive poetry (1916: 83–4). In 1874, disillusioned with the clergy,