A Reasonable Share in the Beauty of the Earth:

William Morris’s Culture of Nature

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Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of History
University of Melbourne
1998
Declaration

This thesis comprises my own work, and due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is less than 130,000 words in length, exclusive of the bibliography, appendix and footnotes.
Abstract

This thesis explores what William Morris meant when he called for a ‘reasonable share in the beauty of the earth’ for all. Taking its cue from discussion of Morris’s work in the 1980s and 1990s, it concentrates on the ways in which this statement represents a particular aggregation and formulation of ideas about nature. It challenges contemporary analyses that value Morris’s work only in light of subsequent events—that uncritically celebrate the ‘eco-centric’ or ‘green’ Morris—and argues that it is necessary to explore nineteenth-century contexts for Morris’s work. Thus it fills a gap in the understanding of Morris’s concept of nature by exploring its historical circumstance: its roots and development, assimilations and transformations. It argues that Morris considered the only way to a full and lasting appreciation of nature, and a ‘reasonable share in the beauty of the earth’ for all, was through a very anthropocentric concern for humanity.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments i  
List of Illustrations ii  
Note on Sources and Spelling vii  
Introduction 1  

I. A Victorian Culture of Nature  
1. The impression of romance 23  
2. A religion no longer believed in? 50  
3. The place of Homer taken by Huxley 82  
4. The dream of London 114  

II. The Defence of Nature  
1. The crown of memory 159  
2. Against the age against nature 177  
3. The nature of beauty and truth 190  
4. Naturalism? 208  

III. Forget Six Counties  
1. The island of comfort 231  
2. The shadowy isle of bliss 246  
3. Wonders of intricate patterns 274  
4. A new land at last to be seen 306  

IV. The Object of Work  
1. Decent surroundings 342  
2. The land for the people 371  
3. Communism as completed naturalism? 388  
4. The transition between works of nature and of art 400  

Appendix: A Vision Fair  
1. Pilgrims of nature? 422  
2. A natural society? 438  
3. The mould of the ages: a new garden of England 459  
4. Woods beyond worlds 471  

Afterword 487  
Bibliography 498
Acknowledgments

I have been fortunate to receive an Australian Postgraduate Research Award, a Melbourne University Postgraduate Scholarship, travel grants from the Arts Faculty and School of Graduate Studies at the University of Melbourne, and financial support from the History Department. I am also grateful for the casual and part-time employment that the History Department has provided.

My greatest debt, however, is to the many people who have helped and supported me during the course of this work.

Stuart Macintyre, Ian Britain and David Goodman have shared their knowledge and provided invaluable guidance. I am indebted to each of them for their advice, encouragement and generosity, and for allowing me the latitude to pursue my work in the way I felt necessary. I would also like to thank the other staff and students of the History Department at the University of Melbourne for providing a stimulating and supportive environment.

My work has been made easier by prompt dispatches from the William Morris Society in London, and I thank those responsible. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of staff at various institutions I visited in England in 1996, but particularly those at the Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow. Florence Boos has also been generous enough to share her unpublished research with me, including the revised version of her conference paper 'Morris the Green'.

My friends and family have waited, watched, listened and supported over the course of this thesis. I would not have had the chance to do this work without the earlier sacrifices and support of my parents, Tony and Pat Wills. I hope they know how much I appreciate the opportunities they provided. My sister and friend, Jo Wills, has always listened, supported and encouraged, and also provided invaluable assistance with the illustrations that appear in this work. I also have a wonderful group of friends who have provided essential space and 'fellowship' away from this work. In particular, I would like to thank Haico Schepers, who lived through the early stages of this project with great forbearance; and, finally, Jonathan Gifford for being there at the end, and for his amazing grace, patience and generosity.
## List of Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Following page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>Description of Elm House, Walthamstow, for a sale catalogue of 17 June 1891. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii</td>
<td>Plan of Elm House and its gardens made for a sale catalogue of 17 June 1891. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii</td>
<td>Detail from 1863 Ordnance Survey map. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv</td>
<td>The River Lea at Ford’s Ferry near Walthamstow, c. 1880. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v</td>
<td>Gardeners at work at Cleveland House, Walthamstow, c. 1860. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi–vii</td>
<td>Queen Elizabeth’s Hunting Lodge (Royal Forest Hotel) in 1849 and 1885. Sources: <em>The Youth’s Magazine</em> (1849), and Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii</td>
<td>Banqueting room of the Royal Forest Hotel in 1893. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix</td>
<td>Silbury Hill, Wiltshire. Source: author’s photograph</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>Details of Water House, Walthamstow, from a sale catalogue of 1847. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xi</td>
<td>Plan of Water House, Walthamstow, made for a title deed of 1847. Source: Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiii</td>
<td>The fourteenth-century cloisters of New College, Oxford. Source: author’s photograph</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arthur Hughes's *April Love* (1856).

Drawing by Morris for stained glass.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Arthur's Tomb*, detail (1854).
Source: postcard by PJ Reproductions Ltd

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blue Closet* (1856–57).

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *La Pia de' Tolomei* (1868–80) and
*The Day Dream* (1880).

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.
Source: photograph by Cyril Badd

1860 Ordnance Survey map, featuring Red House.

Enlargement of 1860 Ordnance Survey map, showing garden layout and position of buildings at Red House.

Philip Webb's architectural drawings of the west elevation of Red House.

Line drawing of Red House by H.P. Clifford, 1897.

Recent photograph of Red House.

'Trellis' (1862)

Cartoon for King Arthur and Sir Lancelot window, commissioned in 1862.

Unfinished painting by Morris on panels of Philip Webb cabinet in the hall at Red House.
xxxii French 'naturalistic' design.

xxxiii Christopher Dresser’s flat, formalised ‘botany’.
Source: Stuart Darwin, Christopher Dresser (1993)

xxxiv-xxxv Morris’s cartoons for Annunciation window, All Saints, Selsley, Gloucestershire, 1861.

xxxvi Design for Adam and Eve tracery lights, All Saints, Middleton Cheney, Northamptonshire, 1870.

xxxvii South west window, All Saints, Madeley, Staffordshire, c. 1872–73.

xxxviii Cartoon for background to Virgin Mary, chancel south window, St. Martin’s, Marple, Cheshire, c. 1873.

xxxix Nave west window, St. Stephen’s, Gatene, Lancashire, 1883.

xli Cartoon for Eve and Virgin Mary, chancel east window, All Saints, Middleton Cheney, Northamptonshire, 1864–65.

xlii Cartoon for light in head of nave window, Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge, c. 1875.

xliii Archangel window, south aisle, St. Mary’s, King’s Walden, Hertfordshire, c. 1869.
Source: Christine Poulson, William Morris (1989)

xliii Tracery lights for the Vyner Memorial Window, Lady Chapel east window, Christ Church, Oxford, 1872–73.
Source: author’s photograph
South aisle window of St. Peter and St. Paul’s, Cattistock, Dorset, 1882-83.
Source: author’s photograph

‘Daisy’ wallpaper pattern, 1864.

Illustration from The Dance of the Wodehouses.

‘Fruit’ or ‘Pomegranate’ wallpaper pattern, c. 1866.
Source: Sanderson & Co. advertising pamphlet

‘Jasmine’ wallpaper pattern, c. 1872.

‘Vine’ wallpaper pattern, c. 1873.

‘Acanthus’ wallpaper pattern, designed 1874, registered 1875.

William Kilburn’s late eighteenth-century jasmine pattern.

‘Willow Bough’ wallpaper pattern, c. 1887, and John Gerard’s illustration for the ‘common willow’.
Source: Victoria and Albert Museum postcard, and John Gerard, Herball or Generall Historie of Plants (1597)

Gerard’s ‘white jasmine’ and ‘manured vine’.
Source: John Gerard, Herball or Generall Historie of Plants (1597)

‘Bird’, woven textile pattern, designed 1878.

‘Snakeshead’ printed textile pattern, designed 1876.

‘Strawberry Thief’ printed textile pattern, registered 1883

‘Wey’ and ‘Windrush’ printed cottons, c. 1883.

Detail of Ordnance Survey map showing Kelmscott, c. 1870s.

Kelmscott Manor, c. 1885.

Kelmscott Manor, 1996.
Source: author’s photograph
lxiv The graphic 'preface' to News from Nowhere by Charles March Gere, 1892.

lxv London survey map, 1896, showing 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith.

lxvi 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, from the Thames.
Source: author's photograph 352

lxvii Plan of the garden at Kelmscott House by Morris, 1878.

lxviii Morris & Co.'s Merton Abbey works, shown on a map of 1894.
Source: David Saxby, William Morris at Merton (1995) 363

lxix The mill pond at Merton Abbey by Lexdon Lewis Peacock (1850–1919).
Source: David Saxby, William Morris at Merton (1995) 363

lxx Photographs of the Merton works.
Source: David Saxby, William Morris at Merton (1995) 363

lxxi Membership card for the Democratic Federation, designed by Morris in 1883.

lxxii Cover designed by Morris for A Summary of the Principles of Socialism in 1884.

lxxiii Pattern drawn by Morris at a Hammersmith Socialist Society meeting.
Source: May Morris, William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist (1936) 413

lxxiv Frontispiece to A Dream of John Ball, Edward Burne-Jones, 1888.
Source: William Morris, A Dream of John Ball (1892) 427

lxxv Map of the Sundering Flood, H. Cribb, 1897.
Source: William Morris, The Sundering Flood (1897) 474

lxxvii Frontispiece to The Wood Beyond the World, Edward Burne-Jones, 1894.
Note on Sources and Spelling

As indicated in the bibliography, this thesis uses The Collected Works of William Morris (1910–15), The Collected Letters of William Morris (1984–96), and the Thoemmes Press editions of Morris's political journalism as the main sources of Morris's writings. All quotations follow the spellings in the 'original'. I use the plural spellings here to indicate the character of Morris's own various and 'eclectic' style, even in the 'edited' Collected Works. I have not used the patronising 'sic' in my text. The reader should also note that Morris's punctuation and capitalisation are somewhat idiosyncratic!
Introduction

For surely there is no square mile of earth's inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way, if we men will only abstain from wilfully destroying that beauty; and it is this reasonable share in the beauty of the earth that I claim as the right of every man who will earn it by due labour; a decent house with decent surroundings for every honest and industrious family; that is the claim which I make of you in the name of art. Is it such an exorbitant claim to make of civilization?

In October 1881, when William Morris made this claim in front of the Wedgwood Institute at the Burslem Town Hall, the 'nature' of capitalist industrialism and science mitigated against the realisation of any such proposal. In the 'smoke-grimed' squalor of Burslem, there were few 'decent' houses or surroundings for 'honest and industrious' families, let alone for those whose lives and circumstances made such typically Victorian values impractical. Moreover, it is unlikely that those who heard Morris speak at Burslem appreciated the radicalism of his statement. They would have had to know what Morris meant by a 'reasonable share in the beauty of the earth', and few of the designers or potters in attendance could have apprehended the revolutionary transformation of 'sharing' and 'beauty' that was intended.

It is the purpose of this thesis to explore what Morris meant by a 'reasonable share in the beauty of the earth', a phrase that suggests Morris's concern with sharing and social justice, responsibility and 'natural' limits, pleasure and work. Taking its cue from discussion of Morris's work in the last two decades (surveyed in detail below), this work concentrates on the way in which this statement represents a particular aggregation and formulation of ideas about 'nature'. It proceeds upon the basis that the phrase 'a reasonable share in the beauty of the earth' is informed by the key concept of what is 'natural' or 'of nature'. I shall discuss some of the problems of dealing with 'nature' at a later stage, but the definition of 'nature' which I use is fairly loose. It covers the 'concept through which humanity thinks of its difference', as well

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as the 'structures, processes and causal powers that are operative within the physical world'. It also includes what has been called 'surface nature': 'landscape', 'countryside', 'rurality' and 'wilderness'; the green spaces created in urban and industrial environments; the locus of sensuous experience and aesthetic perception; and the 'nature' we threaten and attempt to conserve.\(^3\) Morris's work abounds with references to these spaces, reproduced in a variety of shapes and texts, and an understanding of his 'culture of nature' significantly enhances comprehension of the moment of his appeal.

This work is not the first to recognise that 'nature' was important to Morris. Many biographers, art and literary historians and critics, as well as social and political commentators, have commented on the ways in which images and ideas of 'nature' suffuse Morris's work. J.W. Mackail and Aymer Vallance, the first to write substantial studies of Morris, believed that their subject's life and work was heavily influenced by the English landscape and environment. Both of these writers pointed to the 'practical beginning of his artistic researches' in Epping Forest and the Thames Valley. They chronicled Morris's fury and dismay at the rapid encroachment of a polluting and morally corrupt industrial landscape, as well as his efforts to recover rural landscapes in verse and prose.\(^4\) In a similar way, May Morris, in her capacity as the editor of her father's posthumously published *Collected Works* (1910–15), provided a vast array of 'natural context' for Morris's work. With ardour, care, and bias, May recalled the 'natural' circumstance and significance of their country outings and gardens, of the wallpapers, textiles, poems and romances, and of the lectures and letters.\(^5\) These first Morris scholars emphasised Morris's love of the 'countryside' and his vision of a 're-naturalised' England. In their age, perhaps the first to apprehend the consequences of birth, life and death in an industrial landscape—an age that could, therefore, produce a

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\(^3\) Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, pp. 155–6. Soper's discussion of the 'politics of nature', the demarcations drawn though the use of the term, including both 'nature-endorsing' and 'nature-sceptical' perspectives provides the useful survey and analysis upon which this summary is largely based. See also, however, note 49 below.


reactive ‘back to nature’ movement—Morris was perceived as a defender of ‘nature’s’ realms. It is no surprise, therefore, that future generations of Morris scholars have also noted these tendencies, often in the context of their own awareness of a threatened ‘natural’ environment.

The first half of the twentieth century, however, saw considerable debate over Morris’s socialist legacy, which was contested and claimed by a number of different groups. In 1921 John Bruce Glasier’s *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*, following Mackail’s lead, argued that Morris was indifferent to Marxist doctrine and that he advocated revolution in the ‘whole conception of life’.

This interpretation was taken up by the Independent Labour Party, which constructed a British ‘ethical and anti-Marxist’ ‘road to socialism’ in which Morris was a key figure. In the 1930s, however, steps were taken towards a recovery of Morris the Marxist. John Middleton Murry published a number of articles on Morris and Marx, and R. Page Arnot’s *William Morris: A Vindication* (1934) confronted and convincingly refuted many of the more stridently anti-Marxist ‘myths’ of Morris.

Nevertheless, despite the attempts to assimilate Morris to Marx, it was largely the more broadly socialist Morris, and his socio-aesthetic vision of the world—where

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his ‘career as a socialist touched his career as a poet’—which had the most significant impact amongst a wider public in the earlier years of the twentieth century. ‘Nature’ was assumed, often implicitly, to be an important component of this vision. This is evident in the life and work of the rural ‘guild socialists’ influenced by Morris’s writings and example. It is also apparent if one examines the ways in which those caught up in the war and interwar years turned to Morris for hope and inspiration. The socialist theorist and historian G.D.H Cole recalled that reading Morris as a young boy had shown him a ‘vision of a society in which it would be a fine and fortunate experience to live’; political theorist Harold Laski reported finding copies of Morris’s News from Nowhere and A Dream of John Ball ‘in house after house’ of Northumberland miners, even when most of the furniture had been sold; and, more explicitly, British Labour politician Barbara Castle related how reading Morris taught her that ‘beauty’ needed to become an integral part of work, and indeed all economic and human relationships, and that it ‘cannot be appliqued onto institutionalised ugliness as a preserve of the elite’. For Castle, and for many others, it was Morris’s vision of the ‘earth and its glory’ that gave them hope as they confronted bleak years of war and depression.

The availability of interpretations of Morris that combined his political and aesthetic vision contributed to new interest in his work by those with similar propensities and concerns in the second half of the century. The first major treatment of Morris after the Second World War was E.P. Thompson’s landmark William

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Morris: *Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955). Published in the same year the Churchill government announced that Britain would produce and maintain its own hydrogen bomb, focussing on Morris’s revolutionary transformation of English romanticism, and using Morris to fill the ‘silences’ of Marx, Thompson’s work can be read as part of an effort to discover how ‘Blake’s Jerusalem might yet be built’ in the Cold War era.\(^\text{15}\) Asserting that Morris ultimately stood ‘on the side of Karl Marx contra mundum’,\(^\text{16}\) Thompson’s argument also acknowledged that Morris’s importance lay in his reworking of the relationship between art, humanity and the ‘natural’ world. Yet Thompson tended to include ‘nature’ only as a category of romantic interest for Morris: ‘nature’ was the ‘given’ of history and romance—the ‘forest dim’, the ‘valley glades’ or ‘fairy lands forlorn’\(^\text{17}\)—rather than the conscious desire of a revolutionary imagination.

Three years after the publication of Thompson’s work, Raymond Williams included Morris in his *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958), a survey of writers who reacted against industrial ‘revolution’ and the social and political changes it brought in its wake. Williams, in contrast to Thompson, explicitly stated that the ‘keystone’ of the criticism of the new industrial civilisation was the word ‘unnatural’. He emphasised the fact that William Cobbett, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and Morris, among others, based much of their essentially moral criticism of culture and society on a distinction between the ‘organic’ and the ‘mechanical’. In his conclusion, Williams entered his own critique, which not only underlined postwar problems of mass culture and community, but also some of the wider environmental effects of the ‘dominative mood’ of industry.\(^\text{18}\)

Significantly, in later editions of their works, both Thompson and Williams came to see some of the new and wider significances of their analyses. Williams, in a ‘New Foreword’ to *Culture and Society* of 1982, considered that whereas the ‘merely romantic critique of industrialism or industrial capitalism’ was dismissed by many in the

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\(^{15}\) Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 273 (originally published by Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1955). All references in this work are to the revised edition, unless otherwise indicated.

\(^{16}\) Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 762.

1960s, by the 1970s this critique had returned ‘to make startling connections with the new ecological and radical-ecological movements’. He continued: ‘I now often find it ironic that some of the newest and most important thinking of our own time, seeing the crises of the social order and the natural order as inseparably linked, can be found in embryo or indeed in significant development in these earlier writers’.\textsuperscript{19} In ‘Socialism and Ecology’ (1982), he also invoked Morris, claiming that Morris had brought socialist and ecological thinking together, ‘making the kind of junction ... which ought to have come earlier, ought to have been better sustained after Morris, and ought to be much clearer and stronger than it is even today’.\textsuperscript{20}

Similarly, although unable to create much interest in ‘Morrisist’ solutions in the immediate postwar years, by the mid-1970s Thompson was able to detect ‘the first signs of a “thaw” in the icy resistance to Morris’, and to point to the recent ‘(remarkable discovery!) that he is a pioneer of responsible “ecological” consciousness’.\textsuperscript{21} Thompson’s parenthetical irony was not inappropriate, but in light of his later sympathies with ‘green’ politics and issues, it is surprising that he did not draw out more of the romantic assumptions shared by Morris and the new social and political forces emerging in the 1970s.

One of those who did underline such parities was Jack Lindsay, whose study of Morris’s life and work was published in 1975, a time of growing public concern over resource scarcity and environmental pollution. One of the first ‘discoverers’ of an ‘ecological’ Morris, Lindsay’s work developed a ‘garden and forest of childhood’ theme that emphasised the ways in which Morris strove to ‘find the childhood-dream inside history’, ‘to find ways and means of actualising the essence of the earthly paradise’.\textsuperscript{22} In this way Lindsay’s work managed to provide some interesting

\textsuperscript{19} Williams, Culture and Society, p. viii.
\textsuperscript{20} Raymond Williams, ‘Socialism and Ecology’, in Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism, ed. Robin Gable, Verso, London, 1989, pp. 210–26 (quote from p. 216). Williams blames Morris, in part, for the unsustained juncture of these traditions, because of what he calls Morris’s ‘notion that the future, the socialist future, would be in some kind of reconstitution of the medieval world’.
\textsuperscript{21} Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 801.
\textsuperscript{22} Jack Lindsay, William Morris: His Life and Work, Constable, London, 1975, p. 377.
contextual scenarios for the examination of ‘nature’ in Morris’ work. He attributed Morris’s infamous tantrums to a ‘thwarting power’ which came between him and ‘the garden of enjoyment and the forest of independence’. He described Morris’s life’s work as an attempt to ‘introduce into life at as many points as possible the forms of flowers, leaf, bird, which he had come to love at Elm House and Woodford Hall’. Arguing, therefore, that the garden was a dominant factor in Morris’s notion of a regenerated Britain, and that Morris’s ‘adventure of freedom’ was ‘a realisation of beauty and communion with the earth’, Lindsay maintained that what made News from Nowhere relevant in the 1970s was a ‘core’ struggle against ‘pollution and the destruction of the environment’. Lindsay’s emphasis was that Morris ‘was pioneering a century ago in the comprehension of problems which have risen into the general consciousness, and even then imperfectly, only in the 1970s’.

Lindsay’s work did not stand alone in the 1970s ‘discovery’ of an environmental or ecological Morris. Nicholas Gould, in an article on Morris for The Ecologist in 1974, found his subject ‘echoing’ his own complaints regarding the ‘rape of the English countryside’. Quoting from Morris’s essays and lectures, Gould made the important distinction that ‘nothing less than Morris’s concern for the total human environment should satisfy us today’. Yet perhaps most strikingly, and with a slightly different emphasis, Gould drew a comparison between Morris’s fury at capitalists who purchased landscape art but polluted the ‘real’ landscape around them, and his own sense of disbelief at ‘the recent sale of a Stubbs painting of a cheetah for a sum of money sufficient to have ensured the survival of cheetahs as a species’.

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21 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 8. Another, related, hypothesis is that this attitude, though in some ways idiosyncratic, was also part of a ‘general development’ in which the English (presumably English men) ‘rejected the mother image at a conscious level’ and instead settled into ‘their own private dreams of homelike homes ringed by gardens and woods and lapping water’. Lindsay explains that this ‘general development’ goes ‘back to the early eighteenth century as the peasantry were uprooted, as cash-values began to dominate, and as the individual felt driven back on himself in a new way’. ‘Out of this trend’, he argues, ‘came the phrases “in the bosom of the family”, “in the bosom of nature”, taking the place of the older phrase “in the bosom of Mother Church”. Thus the turn to Nature, to the Earth-Mother, involves the finding of a new, and yet more consoling and protective surrogate for the actual mother’ (p. 8).

22 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 9.

23 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 378.

24 Lindsay, Life and Work, pp. 382–3.

Such comparisons were prompted, reinforced and extended by an accompanying wave of revaluation of Morris’s socialist thought in the 1970s. Works by John Goode and Miguel Abensour emphasised those visionary and utopian aspects of Morris’s thinking which could not be assimilated within an orthodox Marxist position. Rebutting the notion that Morris was merely a ‘Marxist dreamer’, they paved the way for a continuation and broadening of interest in Morris in the 1980s, alongside growing awareness of environmental degradation. Thus Peter Faulkner’s *Against the Age* (1980) stressed the relevance of Morris’s ‘most profound insight’ to ‘our own wasting world’, which was ‘that man is most completely human when he is able to see himself in the perspective of the natural universe’, and John Hanna insisted that Morris’s work represented a ‘new art of environmental design’ that stressed growth and the ‘force that through the green fuse drives the flower’. Moreover, Morris was reaffirmed as a figure of central importance in the ‘back to nature’ movements that gathered momentum in the late nineteenth century. In her examination of this ‘pastoral impulse’, Jan Marsh discussed Morris as a key influence who helped to shape and suggest a path for Victorian society ‘beyond industrialism’. Peter Gould stressed Morris’s importance in a similar way in *Early Green Politics* (1988), in which he argued that Morris’s changing position illustrated ‘the distinction between “ecological” or “environmental” and radical-libertarian approaches to Nature’. In addition to these analyses, the first of Norman Kelvin’s superb volumes of Morris’s collected letters allowed Morris the ‘nature’ lover to speak for himself, and

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further revealed how Morris 'makes the connections among nature, art, and history that characterise his thought at its best'.34

By the 1990s, therefore, Morris scholarship was well down the path from red to green. During the 1990s this path has been made explicit, extended and diversified. Paddy O'Sullivan has detailed how Morris’s works contain a detailed analysis of why, and how, capitalism creates environmental disruption, and also explain how a revolution in the economic basis of society would lead to major ecological, and hence landscape change, and a shift in the relationship between human beings and the rest of Nature.35

O'Sullivan has argued that News from Nowhere—'a vision for our time'—provides a document which 'by no means incidentally' sets out and explores how radical environmental ideas could operate in a future society, and thus that 'Morris made an unrivalled contribution to ... environmentalism'.36 Paul Thompson has also indicated 'Why William Morris Matters Today' in his 1990 Kelmscott Lecture on 'Human Creativity and the Future World Environment'. He argued that Morris’s life and work offer some solutions to the problems posed by the possibility of 'world climatic disaster' and 'the collapse of centralised communism as a credible solution to the social and economic problems of world poverty'.37 In 1993 environmental historian David Pepper argued for a fusion of 'red' and 'green' social thought based upon Morris’s vision,38 while there have also been a number of authors who have demonstrated that Morris has been an important influence on the German Grünen,39 and it would appear this influence is spreading.40

Many of these currents of thought informed one of the more substantial recent biographies of Morris, Fiona MacCarthy’s *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (1994). Emphasising Morris’s ‘sense of place’, MacCarthy has asserted that ‘[t]here is no real way of understanding Morris until you can see [how]… the particular pattern of a landscape, the relationship of buildings, the precise lie of the land’ is reflected in his work, and ‘how the places he returned to, in his imagination, lasted all his life’.\(^4\)

This accent was also incorporated into the 1996 commemorations of the centenary of Morris’s death. Several exhibitions emphasised Morris’s interactions with ‘nature’ and his place in the landscape. The Victoria and Albert Museum’s ‘blockbuster’ retrospective, ‘William Morris 1834–1896’, established these themes at the beginning of its exhibition by using video technology to transform images of real trees and flowers into the patterns of Morris’s work, and by choosing ‘nature into art’ motifs for its promotional material.\(^4\)\(^2\) Similarly ‘green’ themes were made explicit in a keynote speech entitled ‘Morris the Green’, delivered at the William Morris Centenary Conference. Here Florence Boos suggested that Morris was ‘an important predecessor of late twentieth-century environmentalism in all its various hues of green—from “deep”-ecological and eco-feminist “theorists”, to “pragmatic” activists and resource planners’.\(^4\)\(^3\) In many respects, Boos’s claims stimulated much of my analysis, and I return to a discussion of her work in the Afterword.

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\(^4\)My own discussions with members of the European, American and Australian ‘green’ parties indicate that Morris has been an inspiring figure for many. See also Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought: An Introduction*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1990, pp. 188–9.

\(^4\)Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, Faber & Faber, London, 1994, pp. viii–ix. An important part of my own research, therefore, has been to visit these landscapes. For the influence of these visits, see the Afterword.

\(^4\)These included a painted sunflower becoming a ‘real’ one and ivy growing out of one of the floriated initials designed by Morris for the Kelmscott Press. The most prominent image of the exhibition, however, was a large, green acanthus leaf becoming Morris’s ‘Acanthus’ pattern. Used on promotional posters, catalogues and leaflets, this green leaf shaped and framed the visitor’s expectations and thus experience of the exhibition, manipulating ‘green’ concerns alongside ‘nature into art’ aesthetics. The exhibition’s discussion of Morris’s ‘environmentalism’, however, was in many respects disappointing, a point I discuss further in the Afterword.

Thus there have been many studies which suggest the importance of 'nature' in Morris’s work, and in the process Morris has been substantially 'greened'. In the last ten years, in particular, the number of articles published on 'Morris and nature' has increased considerably.\textsuperscript{44} In a variety of ways, however, many of these works are limited and unsatisfactory. Many have been monographs that explore one aspect or dimension of Morris's use of or relationship to 'nature', and have failed to make connections between the many and varied representations of 'nature' in his work. No one has tried to take a broader view of Morris’s 'nature' in context, or examined the history of Morris’s understanding of 'nature' in relation to this context. Nor has anyone attempted to explore the ways in which Morris’s 'nature' resists simple quantification or exposition. Certain complexities have been lost in the, unquestionably useful, attempt to see Morris as an early 'green man'. While this thesis has been in progress, such readings have increased markedly in number, and the 'red–green' pendulum of interpretation has swung too far towards the 'green'. Such 'presentist' interpretations fail to consider that words such as 'ecology' and 'eco-centrism' were not Morris’s words, and that the historical context of Morris’s work was more properly humanism, materialism and culture, rather than 'eco-centrism', ecology, and nature.

In many respects, therefore, this thesis challenges contemporary interpretations. It argues against analyses that value Morris’s actions or aspirations only in light of subsequent events, rather than assessing their validity in terms of his own experience.\textsuperscript{45} In other words, this thesis argues that it is more appropriate to endeavour, as far as possible, to understand Morris’s ideas about 'nature' from within his own culture. It attempts, therefore, to fill a gap in the understanding of Morris’s nature by exploring the history of Morris’s ideas about 'nature': its roots and development, its assimilations and transformations. In particular, it aims to restore the kind of historical context and complexity that indicates the ways in which Morris’s thoughts about nature resist explication through contemporary concerns and concepts.

\textsuperscript{44} These articles are discussed throughout this work, and thus I refer the reader to my main chapters and bibliography rather than listing or discussing them here.

Understanding Morris’s own language and fabric of thought has been a major concern throughout.

Before outlining how this history proceeds, however, it is necessary to say something about the difficulties involved in unravelling ideas about ‘nature’ in general. Central to western thought for thousands of years, the word ‘nature’ bears a bewildering variety of meaning, interpretation and usage. Raymond Williams, one of the more perceptive analysts of the word, identified three main classifications: (i) ‘the essential quality or character of something’; (ii) ‘the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both’; and (iii) ‘the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings’. Morris uses all of these senses, but it is the last two which are of particular concern here. Nevertheless, as Williams has also asserted, it is the historical development and interactions of these senses that informs nineteenth-century understandings, and indeed our sense of the word today. ‘Nature’ and what is considered ‘natural’ did, and still does, sustain an array of metaphors and analogies that contain ‘an extraordinary amount of human history’. Yet although it is one of the most complex and indeterminate words in the English language, from here on quotation marks are omitted from around nature. Although they are useful as devices warning against the assumption of a stable and coherent entity, constant use of them throughout this thesis would be clumsy both in a literary and conceptual sense. A sophisticated approach to Morris’s work requires a flexible, sometimes even ambiguous, understanding of nature. The intention is not to pin down nature, but to watch it wax and wane, shift and mutate.

Nevertheless, a few other general observations about nature are necessary in order to indicate more clearly the subject matter of this thesis. On the one hand,
despite the complex historical and cultural presence of nature, both in the world and in Morris’s work, and in spite of certain misgivings concerning the ‘greening’ of Morris, this thesis reflects a desire to develop and hold in tension both a historical, culturally mediated nature and an understanding of nature as a non-cultural presence. Writing about nature at the end of the twentieth century involves acknowledging the sometimes sickening consequences of the failure to recognise that there is any intrinsic order or value in the non-human world. To a certain extent, the idea that nature has a rational, stable, self-equilibrating order is one of the most valuable ideas that modern science has given our age. The task of historians, as Donald Worster has suggested, is to promote an awareness of the histories of human attitudes to nature, of shifts in the social context of thought, and ‘an obligation to scrutinise critically the dominant ideas lest they become dogmas’. Nature includes aspects of constancy and continuity which prevent it from being merely relative; it is not ‘endlessly deferred’, and is perhaps best described as an ‘indeterminant constancy’. Morris certainly did not dismiss nature as a cultural fiction, or believe that culture was the only determining force in the constitution of reality. He recognised that human existence is not only involved in cultural ‘fields’, but is also part of an interconnected web of often highly sensual relations with the non-human. Thus nature needs to be understood here as an

of nature’ and the demarcations drawn through the concept, including both ‘nature-endorsing’ and ‘nature-sceptical’ perspectives, see Soper’s What is Nature? (also cited above). Useful cultural perspectives are provided by Simon Schama’s Landscape and Memory (1995) and also Alexander Wilson’s stimulating The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez (1992). Ann Bermingham’s Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860 (1986) provides an excellent discussion of the way depictions of nature register ideological positions in an English context. Clarence J. Glacken’s Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century (1973), and Basil Willey’s The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period (1940) both provide a helpful broader overview of ideas about nature. For attempts to ‘see’ non-cultural, or not purely cultural, nature in the past, Donald Worster’s Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas (1977) and Alfred W. Crosby’s Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900 (1986) are landmark texts in their field. Sensitivity to the damage done by excessively non-cultural views of nature is provided by works such as Richard Grove’s Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860 (1995), and Richard Grove’s ‘Decolonising the Language of the Green Movement’, Green Line, no. 76, 1990, pp. 4–5. A related qualification is also provided by those who have examined nature in relation to gender issues, including authors such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Carol Bigwood, Greta Gaard, Stephanie Lehar, Huey-li Li and Maria Mies.


intimate characteristic of the human situation within ‘a natural-cultural relational field’.\(^{53}\)

On the other hand, this work does try to ‘see’ and understand nature as Morris might have, does attempt to define and explain the Victorian ‘structures of feeling’ that surrounded his viewing and comprehension.\(^{54}\) Morris’s ideas and interactions are understood to embody, at least partially, a set of socially, culturally and economically determined values which he could not fail to negotiate. Nevertheless, though this is a history that is cognisant of socio-historical relationships, it is also mindful of crude and reductive economic or psychological ‘explanations’ of cultural developments which presume the relationships involved are unproblematic or finally determining. It does not, therefore, emphasise direct causal explanations. Rather, it attempts to create ‘a kind of texture of cultural patterns of meaning and perception’.\(^{55}\) In this respect, interpretation draws upon some of the methods and strategies which have traditionally been considered the tools of literary critics or historians of art. This is not only necessary because much of the context for Morris is artistic and literary—because he had a highly developed visual and literary imagination. It is also useful because, in this field, questions of representation and interpretation are familiar problems, and it is often asked what a picture or novel does, how it does it, and what the relationship is between the picture or novel and the ‘reality’ it claims to represent.\(^{56}\) By asking these questions it is also possible to examine the ways in which these texts, rather than simply reflecting social reality, can be a means of creating or transfiguring that reality.\(^{57}\) Too simplistic a text/context dichotomy ignores the fact that context is

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54 I use the word ‘Victorian’ here to indicate a period in time. I do not intend to imply that there is a singular Victorian ‘structure of feeling’ from which Morris drew his understanding of nature, one available to society at large. Rather, the culture within which Morris is best understood is merely one particular, generally literary, artistic and upper-middle-class culture relevant to some but by no means all Victorians.


not simply a pre-linguistic reality that language transparently describes.\textsuperscript{58} It is the intention of this thesis to recognise that the ideas encountered in Morris's work need to be historically located as part of the collective obsessions of an age as well as exceptional cultural products. The aim of this history is to see difference as well as similarity, divergence as well as pattern, change as well as continuity.

This study begins, therefore, by examining various contexts for Morris's encounter with nature. Born three years before the ascendancy of Queen Victoria in 1837, and dying five years before the end of her reign in 1901, Morris's life was in some ways eminently Victorian, and his work reflects and makes connections with many of the currents of thought about nature that occupied his contemporaries. Indeed, part of the reason for the profusion and breadth of analysis which surrounds the work of Morris is that in reading him one is engaging, as John Goode has noted, with 'a highly developed traditional imagination taking full in the face, in its unfinished, barely elaborated state, the most important body of ideas of our era'.\textsuperscript{59} Thus the first section of this study outlines some of the more general sources of Morris's thoughts about nature. It notes the ways in which changes that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries shaped many of the understandings of nature during the Victorian period, including the transformation of English romanticism, the emergence of literary and artistic 'realism', developments in the natural sciences, the disappearance of God, and the socio-aesthetic redeployment of real and imagined landscapes allied to the processes of capital, industry and urbanity. It argues that Morris's ideas are at times romantic, reflect the influence of Evangelical and Tractarian beliefs, become necessarily post-Darwinian and are predominantly urban. Moreover, from this survey, it becomes apparent that many Victorians felt that they were being progressively alienated from nature, a loss Morris confronted himself. Yet, as Ann Bermingham has observed, alienated and objectified as science and/or spectacle, nature could, even as the 'countryside' diminished in economic and political importance, become a superlative cultural ideal providing urban industrial culture with the myths

\textsuperscript{58} This point is convincingly argued by Dominic LaCapra, in \textit{History & Criticism}, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1985, p. 137; and by Lloyd S. Kramer, in 'Literature and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominic LaCapra', in \textit{The New Cultural History}, p. 126.

needed to sustain it.60 Talked about more as it was perceived to exist less, Morris could not fail to express a Victorian nature.

Having posited some signposts, themes and suggestions in Section I, this work proceeds in a roughly chronological order. The themes which arise from a study of Morris's nature are shown to emerge in a biographical and wider historical context. This should not be taken to suggest a teleology in which Morris's dealings with nature progressively improve or become more accurate. Yet a reasonable degree of coherence is achieved by placing Morris, both temporally and physically. It helps to reveal the ways in which Morris's nature underwent considerable development throughout a life's work that, as one of his more recent editors admitted, 'routinely exhaust[s] the enumerative abilities of his biographers'. 61 It is a schema that seeks to demonstrate the ways in which Morris's poetry, prose, art, and social theory derive from, and in turn shape, his dealings with nature: how his relationships with the material world of landscape importantly and incisively inform and generate a growth of ideas, values, beliefs and aesthetic perceptions in all areas of his work, how these, in turn, affect how he understands nature, and how perception and imagination interact.

Section II commences this exposition by examining some of the material, moral and aesthetic resources that informed Morris's youthful thoughts on nature. Entitled 'The Defence of Nature' (a play upon 'The Defence of Guenevere'), the section explores formative influences, many of which endow him with a sense of nature as a standard of value. The first chapter begins by examining Morris's early childhood and school years, and finds him enjoying both a romantic and a historical nature at the family home bordering Epping Forest in Essex, and later at Marlborough College in Wiltshire. The second and third chapters underline how these early enthusiasms are reinforced during his period at Oxford by reading the work of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. During his years at university Morris developed an interest in history that drew him to Carlyle's contrast of 'past and present', his indictment of social relationships based on cash and self-interest, his thundering criticism of the capitalist

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age 'against nature' and the idealised rusticity of life in a medieval monastery. Morris also developed, through reading as well as friendship with Ned Jones (later Sir Edward Burne-Jones), a passion for art and architecture that led him to abandon ideas of a career in the Church for that of an architect. The role of Ruskin was crucial in this development. His aesthetic criticism inspired Morris and his friends with a love of 'The Nature of Gothic', which, to a large extent, established for Morris the nature of beauty and truth. Moreover, though Ruskin's social criticism had no immediate effect on these young dwellers in the 'palace of art', the messages were absorbed by Morris and emerged in the 1870s to provide a springboard to socialism. The final chapter in this section, however, examines the influence of the natural aesthetic of the Pre-Raphaelite painters defended by Ruskin. In the late 1850s, having been articled only briefly to the Oxford architect G.E. Street, Morris turned his hand to painting under the influence of the leader of this 'brotherhood', the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Alongside Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelite painters' version of naturalism was an important influence upon Morris's feelings of the way nature stood in relation to art. Under the influence of Rossetti, Morris aestheticised and interiorised nature, a combination that reached forceful expression in his earliest poetry.

Section III, 'Forget Six Counties', then explores some of the ways in which the idea of a natural world served as a place of sanctuary for Morris. Drawn to London in the late 1850s because of the city's cultural and commercial hegemony, Morris felt the need to create spaces separate from the sordid squalor and misery of industrial London. This endeavour was exhibited in his choice of abode, his literary work, his venture into decorative handicrafts and in voyages overseas. The first chapter of this section examines the way ideas of nature were incorporated into the building of the Red House at Bexleyheath in Kent. Designed by Morris's close friend Philip Webb, this house shared the same problematic relationship to nature as Pre-Raphaelite art, but also provided a space in which Morris could work in new ways with nature. The next chapter follows Morris back to London and examines The Earthly

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62 In a letter to his friend, Cormell Price, of July 1856 (Letters, vol. 1, p. 28), Morris referred to the fact that he felt himself 'slipping off into a kind of small (very small) Palace of Art', a reference to
Paradise (1868–70), the long poem which established his reputation as a poet. Here
the poem is read as an attempt both to confront an ugly and discomfiting reality and to
seek refuge from it in the Elysian fields of a mythical history and nature. In the
complex structure of the poem, it is possible to discover Morris both retreating from
and struggling to cope with new understandings of the human place in nature.
Reflecting what in some ways was a contrary movement, the third chapter of this
section looks at Morris’s design work and his creation of spaces in which it was
possible to move beyond fear and despair by creating a safe, benevolent and
domesticated version of nature. This work for ‘the Firm’, the company started with,
among others, Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Webb in 1859, and which eventually became
Morris & Co., renegotiated the relationship between nature and the Victorian interior
in a way that provided a sophisticated representation of nature in art and echoed the
natural ‘wonders of intricate patterns’. Finally, Section III concludes with an
examination of Morris’s last attempt to ‘forget six counties’: his confrontation of the
nature and history of Iceland. The ‘new land’ which reveals itself to Morris, however,
changes his resolve to ‘forget’, and enables him to forge a different kind of relationship
with nature, one that is extended to and reflected in his leasing of Kelmscott Manor on
the upper Thames.

These relationships are explored and discussed in Section IV. Entitled ‘The
Object of Work’, it analyses Morris’s working out of more appropriate relationships
between human industry and nature, reflecting Morris’s recognition that, however else
nature was inscribed in the Victorian imagination, the predominant relationship
between humanity and ‘external nature’ was defined by labour, production and
industry. The section starts by investigating Morris’s calls for ‘decent surroundings’
during the late 1870s and early 1880s, the decade in which, as E.P. Thompson noted,
middle-class England ‘re-discovered’ the problem of poverty. Based on Morris’s
recognition that nature is frequently the object of human work, it then examines how
Morris assimilated and transformed Marx. It investigates the problems of ‘communism
as completed naturalism’ and how Morris developed, with the help of an alternative

Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem, ‘The Palace of Art’, in which the protagonist builds a palace to satiate
the senses and soul.
socialist tradition, a position that incorporated a more pronounced concern for the nature of work and for the human figure in the landscape. Central to these chapters are Morris’s eloquent and passionate lectures, speeches that display the centrality of nature in his hopes and fears for present and future society.

Finally, this thesis extends examination of the ideas and meanings discussed in Section IV into the visionary and imaginative realm by exploring Morris’s ‘vision fair’. Due to word length requirements, this analysis has been added to the body of this work in an Appendix. It treats the vision of nature in the socialist romances written in the mid to late 1880s, concentrating on the utopian News from Nowhere, a landscape where all of humanity could enjoy ‘a reasonable share in the beauty of the earth’. It investigates how Morris imagined that the nature of work in Nowhere would reproduce the ‘beauty of the earth’ by creating a more natural society and a new ‘garden of England’. It also notes that the context for the creation of News from Nowhere was historical, that Morris drew on models of organic proto-socialist societies from the past, reacted to urban industrial orthodoxies of the present, and followed this work by creating more fantastical worlds through which it was possible to imagine more and better.

Such a framework is obviously ambitious, but the impetus to attempt to cover and comprehend the wide variety of Morris’s achievements derives from two sources. One is a sense that what is missing or distorted in some assessments of Morris’s nature has arisen through insufficient attention to Morris’s work as a whole. Second, this thesis is predicated upon the assumption that what is particularly valuable (or, perhaps more honestly, appealing) about studying Morris is the whole human being, the entire effort of his life, and thus in trying to hold in tension all his various strains of thought and achievement. This has meant that this study has, at times, had to rely on the work of those more skilled in the analysis of literature, architecture, painting, pattern design and political theory. No small part of this work is the exposition, synthesis and summary of the considerable achievements of those Morris scholars who are experts in their fields, and I wish to register my indebtedness to their expertise.

This thesis reveals, however, that an exploration of nature throughout Morris’s work uncovers some of the ways people have misconceived his concerns in this area. Recognising nature as alive and present certainly enhances our understanding of his poetry and prose, his designs for wallpaper and textiles, his public lectures and essays, and also his seemingly more private world of romance. Such attention to the ways in which nature enters into his life as an artist, writer and socialist discloses the ways in which it is possible to derive inspiration today from Morris’s sense of the place of humanity within nature. This is a sense that is characterised by participation and restraint, and which provides a vision of a world in which the spaces occupied by both humankind and those realms which are more typically nature’s are interactive and negotiable. As many have already argued, Morris’s thoughts on nature engage with contemporary meanings of the earth: as home or habitat, as resource, refuge, inspiration, playground, laboratory and profit centre. As such, they provide an arena in which it is possible to examine some of the conflicts that have arisen between nature and culture today.

Nevertheless, this exploration of nature also reveals the ways in which Morris’s was a life and vision not just for ‘our time’ but of his. It attempts to develop a dialogue in which an ‘autonomous past is allowed to question our recurring attempts to reduce it to order’.\(^{64}\) It shows how Morris grappled with a culture of nature that put human life firmly within nature at the same time as many felt increasingly distant from it. This dichotomy of effect was what he strove to reject. It also argues that although many of the natural spaces in Morris’s work are recognisably ‘Victorian’, they are also a product of more personal, idiosyncratic meanings that develop through his own particular imaginings of an ‘organic’ Middle Age: through tangled overgrown poetry, verdant chintzes and floral cottons, to a rural Thames Valley, an almost ‘ecotopian’ Nowhere, and on into fantastic ‘woods beyond worlds’. Only by understanding these various contexts can we appreciate the way in which Morris’s call for a ‘reasonable share in the beauty of the earth’ for all was founded on a vision that

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was socially just before it was natural. Only then can we comprehend how Morris’s work still stands as a trenchant critique

of a civilization that is too apt to boast in after-dinner speeches; too apt to thrust her blessings on far-off peoples at the cannon’s mouth before she has improved the quality of those blessings so far that they are worth having at any price, even the smallest.\textsuperscript{65}

I

A Victorian

Culture of Nature
I. The impression of romance

Romanticism, though in the descendent and increasingly tamed, was still a dominant mode of expression for many Victorians, especially when they thought or wrote about nature. One of the best ways to understand the variety of cultural phenomena that shaped Victorian nature, therefore, is to examine and comprehend their romantic inheritance. Morris recognised that his generation had ‘been a good deal made by those of the Byron and Shelley time’,¹ and indicated that ‘the impression of romance’ was an early and lasting influence on his perception of the world: on his sense of the conjunction of art, history and nature.² For Morris, romance was a crucial form and texture of expression, an almost palpable historical sentience for all that was embedded in the idea of England’s ‘green and pleasant’ past.³

It is necessary to recognise three ‘levels’ of romantic influence in this respect. One of these is that which derived from Morris’s own reading of romantic texts: those which he acknowledged as influential and formed part of his personal ‘canon’, such as Scott, Blake, and Keats. Secondly there are the meanings and interpretations of romantic texts which Morris encountered via Victorian critics such as Ruskin, Carlyle and Rossetti: texts which are mediated or come down to Morris through a predominantly Victorian frame of reference, such as the works of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and the paintings of Turner. And, finally, there are those often

³ In an ‘Address at the Twelfth Annual Meeting, 1889’ (of the S.P.A.B.), Morris defined romance as ‘the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present’; in AWS, vol. I, p. 148. The connotation of romance here is that often referred to as Romantic or Romanticist. I follow Morris in the use of romance and romantic, and do not mean to indicate a genre of medieval literature.
unacknowledged romantic 'structures of feeling' that shape and guide his ways of viewing or comprehending. In this instance we have to acknowledge the pervasive influence of Wordsworth and theorists of the picturesque such as Gilpin. It is this sensibility that both continued and transformed a consciousness of the separation of humanity and nature, and an emphasis on the 'truths' apparent in nature. This chapter will be primarily concerned with the critical and more general Victorian mediation of romantic texts, leaving Morris's own readings to emerge in a biographical context.

British experiences of romanticism were various, and differed over time. It is possible, however, to distinguish a number of related and recurring facets of the romantic treatment of nature which are relevant to Morris. These comprise romanticism as: a descriptive mode which both related the self-sufficient details of a closely observed 'local' nature, and tended to expression through imagery and symbols drawn from the natural world; a belief in nature as a tranquil, beneficent realm where the human spirit could be rejuvenated through 'communion' with nature; a related emphasis on the 'organic' relationship within and between humanity and a vital natural world; the idea that at some stage of human history humanity had been closer to nature, with a subsequent emphasis on the role of retrospect, memory, childhood and the historical imagination; and an ambivalent sense, on the one hand, of the threat posed to nature's realms by the powers of urban and agrarian industry and capital, and, on the other, of an immense and eternal nature which belittled human achievement.

For the Victorians, the great romantic observer and interpreter of nature was William Wordsworth. Morris's expressed feelings about Wordsworth ranged from the ambivalent to the disparaging: 'Did I ever abuse Wordsworth?—I recant—though his cold unhuman, & somewhat prolix poetry has not much attraction for me'. When we consider the extent to which Morris was influenced by Ruskin, and Ruskin in turn was

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4 Consequently 'romance', like nature, is difficult to define. Karl Krober (Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1975, pp. 3-4) has indicated that we are more likely to 'confront' romanticism by examining the 'sensibility actualized by specific artworks' than by debating whether it can be defined by 'pseudo-scientific' words such as 'organicism'. Jacques Barzun (Classic, Romance and Modern, Secker & Warburg, London, 1961 (1943), pp. 155–68) has provided a helpful survey, however, which lists a wide variety of usages.
inspired by Wordsworth, however, we need to treat this ambivalence with caution. Ruskin believed Wordsworth to be the ‘keenest-eyed of all modern poets for what is deep and essential and nature’,\(^5\) and Charlotte Brontë appears to have spoken for many Victorians when she said that *Modern Painters*, which drew its epigraph from *The Excursion*, ‘seems to give me eyes’.\(^7\)

Perhaps more than anything else Wordsworth was ‘exemplary in his *seeing* of nature and not in any quest to see beyond it’.\(^8\) Both he and Coleridge were the first to evaluate in poetry a wide range of sights and sounds that had hitherto not been celebrated widely in verse. Poems such as Coleridge’s ‘Frost at Midnight’ displayed an eye and ear receptive to the breadth and detail of the world: the ‘greenness’ of ‘the general earth’ alongside the ‘quiet’ shining of ‘silent icicles’.\(^9\) Morris’s preference for writers whose work had a heightened visual quality, especially Keats and Coleridge, should alert us to the links between this kind of attention to nature and Morris’s descriptions of the world.\(^10\) Moreover there are certain respects in which the character of natural objects Morris notices mimics and resembles those of his romantic forebears. Florence Boos has indicated how some of Morris’s early poetry reflects a knowledge

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\(^5\) Morris to Morgan George Watkins, 21 August 1867, in *Letters*, vol. I, p. 53. Thus Lindsay (*Life and Work*, p. 271) has suggested that Morris ‘could not forgive Wordsworth for his pietism, his moralising of nature’.


\(^10\) When Morris was planning the Kelmscott Press editions of Coleridge and Keats’s work, he expressed markedly more enthusiasm for Keats, but did declare his pleasure in the ‘fine detail’ of Coleridge’s poetry. He informed his editor: ‘Keats was a great poet who sometimes nodded… Coleridge was a muddle-brained metaphysician, who by some strange freak of fortune turned out a few real poems amongst the dreary flood of inanity which was his wont. It is these real poems only that must be selected… Christabel only just comes in because the detail is fine; but nothing a hair’s breadth worse must be admitted. There is absolutely no difficulty in choosing, because the difference between his poetry and his drive is so striking’ (Morris to F.S. Ellis, 8 January 1894, in *Letters*, vol. IV, p. 119). There were thirteen poems in the final version of the Kelmscott Coleridge: ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, ‘Christabel’, ‘Kubla Khan’, ‘Love’, ‘A Fragment of a Sexton’s Tale’, ‘The Ballad of the Dark Ladie’, ‘Names’, ‘Yorrett and Age’, ‘The Improvisatore’, ‘Work Without Hope’, ‘The Garden of Boccaccio’, ‘The Knight’s Tomb’ and ‘Alice du Clos’. It is also apposite to note that Mackail (*Life*, vol. I, p. 178) records Morris complaining that Shelley (whom he otherwise admired) ‘had no eyes’.
of the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and there are plentiful examples of Keatsian observations of seasons of ‘mellow fruitfulness’ in his more mature work:

Dumb is the hedge where the crabs hang yellow,
Bright as the blossoms of the spring;
Dumb is the close where the pears grow mellow,
And none but the dauntless redbreasts sing...  

There are also many instances of the sounds of nature, particularly of water: ‘the drip / of dew and rain’, the ‘sweet gurgling’ of a moat, and mud splashing ‘wretchedly’.  

Colour was also an important part of this perception of the detail of nature. Perhaps one of the most important romantic colourists, in both the literary and visual arts, was William Blake, who had a profound effect on much Victorian, and especially Pre-Raphaelite, work. Rossetti, who was deeply influenced by Blake and who in turn had a profound early impact on Morris, helped to finish Alexander Gilchrist’s study of the poet. Rossetti not only linked the visionary paintings of Blake with the practice of the Pre-Raphaelites, but also emphasised that Blake’s colouring-in of the natural world was an ‘effect of truth’:

In Blake’s colouring of landscape, a subtle and exquisite reality forms quite as strong an element as does ideal grandeur; whether we find him dealing with the pastoral sweetness of drinking cattle at a stream, their hides and fleeces all glorified by sunset with magic rainbow hues, or revealing to us, in a flash of creative genius, some parted sky and beaten sea full of portentous expectation.

Morris’s early interest in the ‘subtle and exquisite reality’ of coloured landscape is apparent from his purchase of vividly coloured Pre-Raphaelite works. In 1856 he bought Ford Madox Brown’s *The Hayfield* (1855–56), a work painted precisely because of the ‘wonderful effects’ of colour Brown perceived in ‘the warmth of the uncut grass, the greeny greyness of the unmade hay ... with lovely violet shadows &


long shades of the trees ... melting away one tint into another imperceptibly'. And Morris’s own work, both literary and visual, continued this concern with ‘figurative yet not wholly unreal shapes and hues’. Boos has suggested that the influence of poems such as Wordsworth’s ‘The Thorn’, which emphasise the ‘lovely tints’ of ‘olive green and scarlet bright, / In spikes, in branches, and in stars’, can be found in Morris’s juvenilia. Certainly his early mature poetry and illuminated manuscripts evidence a Blakean concern with the intermingled territory of the visual and verbal. This desire to present the written word as part of a picture, both real and imagined, shows Morris colouring-in the natural world with a vividly romantic pen and brush.

The romantic interest in the details of nature also extended to the details of rural life, and particularly rural work. Thus while the ‘Preface’ to Lyrical Ballads (1798) invited the reader to reconsider rural life sincerely and directly, so Wordsworth’s later Prelude displayed a concern with ‘the shepherd’s task the winter long’. But Wordsworth also asked the Victorians to consider Michael and his wife Isabel as ‘a proverb in the vale / For endless industry’, and this preoccupation with work offers an obvious antecedent to the concerns of Victorian novelists such as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Morris also utilised a romantic pastoral mode, placing human labour at the heart of his vision and describing the work done on the land. ‘Under an Elm-Tree; or, Thoughts in the Country-Side’ (1889), for example, echoed the romantic contrast between the broad gaze of a spectator over pleasant landscape, and the harsher, focused view of the labourer from the land.

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16 Entry for 21 July 1855, in The Diary of Ford Madox Brown, ed. Virginia Surtees, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1981, p. 145. See also the entry for 24 August 1856, in which Brown states that ‘Rossetti brought his ardent admirer Morris of Oxford who bought my little hay field for 40 gns’ (p. 185). See also Chapter 4 of Section II below.
18 Boos, Juvenilia, pp. 4, 10.
19 This concern with colour is also an important part of Morris’s work in the decorative arts. See Chapter 3 of Section III below.
20 Wordsworth, The Prelude (1805–06), VIII, line 359.
Romantic attention to detail, however, was also an important part of the 'picturesque' sense of landscape that in the Victorian era came to depend on verifiable local detail. Wordsworth described the picturesque as 'a strong infection of the age', and there are many similarities between Wordsworth's pleasure in recollection and that of theorist and travel guide, William Gilpin. Indeed for many Victorians, Wordsworth was as much the author of a Guide to the Lakes as of The Excursion. Various representations of Tintern Abbey in the Wye Valley, for example, provide a striking example of the convergence of romantic and picturesque attention to the details of landscape. J.M.W. Turner's Interior of Tintern Abbey (c. 1794) gives romantic charm to a crumbling ruin, and reproduces much of the detail that Gilpin noted: the broken outline of Gothic arches, ivy and shrubbery growing out of the walls, rough fragments of shattered stone, a framing arch, a perspective under other arches to the hills that border the valley. Similarly Wordsworth's famous Lines composed 'on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour', though not dwelling on the architecture of the Abbey, impress with the 'scene' of 'orchard tufts', 'groves and copses', 'little lines / Of sportive wood run wild' and 'pastoral farms'.

Visual representation of this sort did much to develop a sensitivity for picturesque architecture and landscape throughout the nineteenth century. Correspondingly, as Victorians learned to recognise the different physical features, customs, and dialects of a variety of regions, writers of 'rural novels', such as Eliot and Hardy, began to exhibit a keen consciousness of locality. Morris never displayed such fine discrimination of regional detail in his prose as either Hardy or Eliot, but it was a knowledge Morris used and possessed. Morris developed a very strong 'sense of place', admitting his bias towards landscapes that had gained meaning for him through personal acquaintance and history. Acknowledging that he loved the earth through the

\[24 \text{ Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850), XII, line 113.} \]
\[25 \text{ See William Gilpin, Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to Which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting (1792).} \]
\[26 \text{ Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798", lines 6, 11, 14, 15-16. For a discussion of these interactions, see Alexander M. Ross, The Imprint of the Picturesque on Nineteenth-Century British Fiction, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 1986, especially pp. 6-11.} \]
\[27 \text{ Ross, The Imprint of the Picturesque, p. 9. See also Tan Britain, 'From the Sublime to the Pastoral: Thomas Gray and the Domestication of the Gothic in English Ideas of Landscape', in History on the} \]
parts of it that he knew best. Morris drew on his understanding of how different environments can shape human nature in prose romances such as *The Roots of the Mountains.* Moreover throughout his life, but particularly in his dealings with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (S.P.A.B.), he developed great sensitivity to the different properties and features of buildings in the landscape and to the use of local materials and styles to form a kind of ‘organic’ relationship with the land.

Concern with ‘provincial’ detail surfaced not only in the literature of the period, but also in the visual arts and especially in photography. Morris’s use of photography was by no means prolific, but on a trip to France in 1855, while his friend Burne-Jones sketched buildings and landscapes, Morris purchased photographs as mementoes of his trip. He also made other uses of the photographer’s art, some of which attest to another Victorian preoccupation: a concern with ‘fact’. The Victorian love of facts about the world around them was most memorably evoked in the work of Dickens, but it can also be linked to the romantics. Blake’s microscopic descriptions of ‘insect Bacchanalia’, for example, reveal both the ‘factual’ eye of a naturalist and the ‘factual’ habit of cataloguing:

The ground Spider with many eyes, the Mole clothed in velvet,  
The ambitious Spider in his sullen web, the lucky golden Spinner,  
The Earwig arm’d, the tender Maggot...  
The Flea, Louse, Bug, the Tape-Worm, all the Armies of Disease...³¹

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²⁸ For Morris’s fondness for the landscape around Kelmscott Manor in the Cotswolds, see Mackail, *Life*, vol. I, p. 225, and Chapter 4 of Section III below.


³⁰ Millard also indicates that however ‘factual’ Victorian photographs might have been, they were also the product of artistic composure.

³¹ William S. Peterson has described, for example, how Morris used enlarged photographs of printed type to aid him in his typographical work for the Kelmscott Press; ‘The Kelmscott *Chaucer*: Pocket Cathedral or Non-book?’, paper presented to the William Morris Centenary Conference, Oxford, 28 June 1996.


29
Morris admired Blake as an observer of ‘realities’, because he ‘drew English poetry from the slough of conventional twaddle in which the 18th century had sunk it’. This ‘realistic’ eye was also one which many of the romantics shared, and which, in turn, influenced a generation of nineteenth-century natural scientists.

Charles Darwin’s descriptions of south American landscape, for example, reflected the aesthetic attention to nature of romantic art alongside the system-building traditions of the geological and natural sciences. In his journal Darwin linked the visual splendour of nature with the schematic organisation of its many forms, suggesting not only that his sense of natural beauty had been shaped by the romantic tradition of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but also that romantic aestheticism continued to colour his developing physical theories of nature. Nineteenth-century scientists also acknowledged their romantic heritage in the leading scientific journal Nature: A Weekly Illustrated Journal of Science, founded in 1869. T.H. Huxley opened the first issue with a translation of Goethe’s ‘Aphorisms on Nature’ and directed the readers to consider whether their own scientific conceptions of nature would outlast those of the German poet. Huxley was, in effect, reminding his readers of the Kantian lesson that science can never fully explain ‘the wonder and the mystery of Nature’, and that, therefore, some intuitive and effective response to nature must always supplement any method of explanation. To reinforce the point, under the dateline of the journal throughout the Victorian era appeared Wordsworth’s ‘To the solid ground / Of Nature trusts the mind which builds for aye’. Morris’s romantic-naturalistic habits included childhood snail and egg collection, admiration and emulation of Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite ‘naturalism’, a love and use of herbs, attention to the habits of fish, birds and insects on rivers, in gardens and other landscapes, and the way all these activities

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were translated into the naturalistic tendencies expressed in his literary and artistic work. In this he both participated in, and was influenced, by the wider Victorian romance of the facts of nature.

Thus although it has been argued that the romantics’ specificity of detail was mitigated by a spiritual rhetoric which dissolved the ‘palpable’,\(^{17}\) the romantic details of nature were a continuing influence on the Victorian conception of the distinct parts of the world around them. Most of the romantics consistently relied on nature as a source of new material, even when it was not directly apparent in their poetry.\(^{38}\) As Raimonda Modiano has argued, placing too much emphasis on statements such as Coleridge’s concern ‘to make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought and thought nature’, reduces the truly wide spectrum of reactions to nature and conceals ‘a vastly troubled history of conflicting attitudes and uncertain aspirations’.\(^{19}\) John Keats justified ‘Nature’s gentle doings’ by asserting that ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’,\(^{40}\) and it was the trees, flowers, birds, brooks, and breezes—‘Nature in the grove’ as Coleridge called it—which, through the romantics, became the most noticed Victorian details of nature.\(^{41}\)

Along with this exploration of the detail of nature, however, went a belief in the natural world as a tranquil, beneficent realm where the human spirit could be

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\(^{38}\) The degree to which romanticism was opposed to the rendition of naturalistic detail is most evident in the work of Blake, in which the senses are often felt to be treacherous and distorting instruments, most notably in Jerusalem. It is, however, this visionary element in Blake that inspires the heightened visual attention to detail of many Victorian artists, both visual and literary. Many, such as the Pre-Raphaelites, follow the same project of seeing in a highly charged way an incandescent truth both within and beyond the object: ‘To see a World in a Grain of Sand, / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour’ (‘Auguries of Innocence’, lines 1–4). The romantics’ concern with the eye and the object and the relation between them should also be understood, at least as far as the Victorians are concerned, both in Blake’s sense that ‘As a man is, So he Sees’, and as an awareness that ‘to see the world aright was to create a new earth’. See M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature, W.W. Norton, New York, 1973 (1971), p. 375.


\(^{40}\) Keats, ‘I stood on tip-toe upon a little hill’, line 63; Endymion: A Poetic Romance, I, line 1. See also ‘Sleep and Poetry’, passim.

rejuvenated through ‘communion’ with nature. In 1798 Coleridge had stated that nature instilled a love of good and could gratify one’s hopes for moral regeneration.42 In ‘The Recluse’ Wordsworth indicated that what he most cherished about Grasmere was ‘the sense / Of majesty, and beauty, and repose’;

A blended holiness of earth and sky,
Something that makes this individual Spot,
This small Abiding-place of many Men,
A termination, and a last retreat,
A Centre, come from wheresoe’er you will,
A Whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself and happy in itself,
Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.43

In large sections of The Prelude and The Excursion Wordsworth repeated this sentiment that any composure attained by the mind was usually a result of its being united with external nature.44

Wordsworth particularly stressed the role of either empathy or sympathetic identification in these moments of repose or composure. He gave ‘every natural form, rock, fruit or flower ... a moral life’, and ‘linked them to some feeling’.45 Of course many of these ‘linkages’ indicated Wordsworth’s imposition of his own feelings upon nature in a fashion that is far too subjective to be considered sympathetic. Wordsworth invested ‘natural forms’ with the potential to invoke ‘kindred impulses’, most commonly ones that stressed moral elevation and discipline.46 He urged a ‘wise passiveness’ as the most appropriate mode in which to face the natural world because

44 David Perkins (The Quest for Permanence: the Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965 (1959), p. 50) has written that Wordsworth’s ideal was ‘an imaginative union so intimate and complete that the mind, instead of being imprisoned and engulfed in its distinctive human qualities, can virtually absorb the tone and characteristics of nature’.
46 Perkins, The Quest for Permanence, pp. 52–60.
only then was one able to benefit from the 'holy calm' of a cherishing nature. In this way nature was able to revive and restore, and to fill the void of personal and political disillusion and disappointment.

The Victorians followed Wordsworth in this respect, though as the nineteenth century wore on the claims of science severely impinged upon the idea of a benevolent, caring and inspiring nature. Still in 1877 J.C. Shairp’s *On Poetic Interpretation of Nature* valued Wordsworth for showing that 'Nature is to man a supporting, calming, cooling, and invigorating power'; and Matthew Arnold, another Victorian editor of Wordsworth, could also recommend the romantic poet’s ‘soothing voice’ and ‘healing power’. Perhaps the best Victorian testimony to the therapeutic effects of nature, however, was by John Stuart Mill. Reflecting on the effect of Wordsworth’s poetry in his autobiography, Mill wrote:

In the first place, these poems addressed themselves powerfully to one of the strongest of my pleasurable susceptibilities, the love of rural objects and natural scenery; to which I have been indebted not only for much of the pleasure of my life, but quite recently for relief from one of my longest relapses into depression... What made Wordsworth’s poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings... I needed to be made to feel that there was real, permanent happiness in tranquil contemplation. Wordsworth taught me this, not only without turning away from, but with a greatly increased interest in, the common feelings and common destiny of human beings...  

Morris also responded to the soothing and invigorating ‘voices’ of nature in so far as he tended to invest nature’s realms with the power to calm and rejuvenate. In the last stanzas of *The Pilgrims of Hope*, for example, the protagonist, after losing his wife on the barricades in Paris, returns to the English countryside with his son ‘to get stout and strong, / That two men there might be hereafter to battle against the

49 Arnold, ‘Memorial Verses’, lines 35, 63.
wrong'.

Morris’s trips to Iceland and weekends at Kelmscott Manor on the upper Thames can be seen as the real life alternatives. Although Morris does not partake of Wordsworth’s spiritual rejuvenation, or experience a strong sense of the moral impulse of nature, the ‘outward beauty’ he perceived reflects experience of the same ‘culture of feeling’ sensed by Mill.

Wordsworth’s invitation to seek solace in nature had broader consequences for the Victorian perception of nature. His desire to be able to entrust himself to nature, to be guided by ‘a wandering cloud’, became during the nineteenth century one of the most considerable rivals to orthodox Christianity. Consequently, as questions about the need for and presence of God in a scientifically explained world were answered in the negative, romanticism often took on the flavour of ‘spilt religion’. One result of the romantic questioning of the relationship of God, nature and the human spirit, therefore, was a tendency to substitute nature for God in many nineteenth-century nature poets. Nevertheless, their search for a ‘higher faculty’ often developed into a kind of mysticism that eventually undermined enthusiasm for nature by pointing back to religion. This was particularly true of the trans-Atlantic ‘transcendentalism’ of the writers centred round R.W. Emerson. But transcendentalism was also an attempt to restore the balance between religious thought and the increasingly dominant scientific culture in the Victorian era. Joseph Beach has argued that with the waning of religious faith ‘the nineteenth century grasped at nature—’

at the great benevolent order of things in which every individual is provided for in the harmonious plan of the whole ... and in whose eternal flux, while he may be lost, he is yet not ineffectual or without significance.

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52 See The Prelude (1850), I, lines 14–18.
54 For the ideas developed in the rest of this paragraph, see Beach, The Concept of Nature, pp. 6–15. See also Chapter 2 below for discussion of the ways in which transcendentalism might have affected Morris.
Furthermore, while Wordsworth's earlier naturalist phase echoed the scientific rationalism of Newton and Locke, his later transcendental phase acceded to religious institutionalism. For our purposes at least, Victorian interpreters of Wordsworth, like Stopford Brooke, were inclined to see a consistently pious body of doctrine in his poems, with no discrimination between the views expressed in earlier and later versions of *The Prelude*. The Wordsworthian faith was interpreted not only as an attempt to save traditional concepts, schemes and values, but also to preserve the relation of Creator to His creature and creation, to reformulate within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, the human mind and its transactions with nature. In the Victorian era, poets such as Tennyson and Robert Browning (both of whom Morris admired), while romantic in impulse and deeply interested in science, were suspicious of naturalistic interpretation and were very clear that 'nature worship' should be supplanted by religious belief in God. A key component of Victorian romantic thought was the idea that the isolated individual could create, through poetry, an almost miraculous 'harmony of words which would reintegrate man, nature and God'.

There is not much evidence in Morris's work of a desire to 'mingle with the Universe'. It is possible to find aspects of the romantic 'landscape of the wild living

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56 The first 'naturalistic' version appeared in 1805-06, while the later 'theistic' rendering was published in 1850.
58 Many have commented on the influence of Tennyson upon Morris. In Mackail's *Life* (vol. 1, pp. 44-6), Canon R.W. Dixon (one of Morris's 'set' at Oxford) recalls that their group were like 'all reading men ... Tennysonians'; that Morris's attitude to the poet was one of 'defiant admiration', and that Morris, shared 'the feeling that after ... [Tennyson] no farther development [in poetry] was possible'. Browning's influence is also frequently cited. Morris reviewed *Men and Women* (1855) for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in March 1856 ('Men and Women' by Robert Browning', in CW, vol. 1, p. 347), and described Browning as 'high among the poets of all time, and I scarce know whether first, or second, in our own'. Furthermore, according to a source cited by Mackail (*Life*, vol. 1, p. 132), Morris acknowledged that the poems which appeared in *The Defence of Guenevere* were influenced by Browning. More recently MacCarthy (*A Life for Our Time*, pp. 142-3) has suggested that Morris's early poems resemble Browning's faerie tale poem *Sordello* 'with its spikiness of language and its complex tricks with time scale'. E.P. Thompson (*Romantic to Revolutionary*, pp. 78-84) also recognised the influence of the two senior poets, and compared and contrasted their influence upon Morris's 'first joust with Victorianism'.
61 Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV, clxxviii, line 8; quoted in Beach, *The Concept of Nature*, p. 35.
intellect, strangely abstract and passionate’ in some of his later prose romances, which are perhaps a legacy of Ruskin’s worship of mountains, and of the wider Victorian passion for Alpine scenery.\[^{62}\] It is more representative to say of Morris’s feeling for nature, however, what George Levine has said of Victorian fiction in general: that it typically ‘lives at low altitudes’\[^{63}\]. Morris, though he never fully replaced his initial romantically inspired naturalistic impulses with religion, never indulged in nature worship.

One final element relating to the romantic positing of nature as a beneficent realm, was that this realm usually had a specifically British or at least English quality. While it has been argued that romanticism established the ‘sentiment of being in England’, it has also been suggested that the sentiment of being in England established romanticism.\[^{64}\] Linking this sentiment to nature, Karl Kroeber has claimed that British romantic poetry reveals a ‘ubiquitous undercurrent’ of ‘natural patriotism’ and cites Coleridge’s ‘Fears in Solitude’ (1798) as paradigmatic.\[^{65}\] The first twelve lines of this poem refer to ‘a green and silent spot amid the hills’, ‘a spirit-healing nook’, sharing geography, climate, localised affection and loyalty with its audience. For Coleridge ‘country’ is a geographical construct upon which social and political community, and ‘[a]ll lovely and all honourable things’ are founded: ‘There lives nor form nor feeling, in my soul / Unborrowed from my country!’\[^{66}\] Thus Coleridge translates ‘local blessings’ into an ideal of the English sanctified by England, a community bound together by the earth.\[^{67}\]

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\[^{62}\] See, for example, David Robertson’s ‘Mid-Victorians amongst the Alps’, and Chaceey C. Loomis’ ‘The Arctic Sublime’, both in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, pp. 113–36, and 95–112 respectively.

\[^{63}\] Levine (‘High and Low: Ruskin and the Novelists’, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, pp. 137–52) has outlined how Victorian literature tended to find its metaphors not in wild and extreme nature but by the hearth and in the field. He argues that the conventions of realism, which both grew from and to some extent supplanted those of romanticism, entailed a ‘self-conscious rejection of the ideal’: that the novel had to come down from the mountains—from Scott’s Highlands and Mary Shelley’s Alps—into ‘the vale of tears’, the ‘valley of humiliation’. In this respect, Levine finds it fitting that the final paragraph of *Little Dorrit* should begin with the phrase ‘went down’—‘went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness’.


\[^{67}\] Kroeber, *British Romantic Art*, p. 89.
Morris also expressed something of this 'natural patriotsm', though with no trace of nationalistic jingoism. In 1886 he wrote:

I am no patriot as the word is generally used; and yet I am not ashamed to say that as for the face of the land we live in I love it with something of the passion of a lover: that is to say, more than its beauty or interest in relation to other parts of the earth warrants.

... [T]o us who are come of the actors of it and live among the scenes where it was enacted it has a special interest which consecrates it.68

Though more subdued, Morris's 'consecrated' England still proclaimed a romantic 'sentiment of being in England'.

The idea of a community bound together by the earth, and of a more general human communion with nature, is also related to the romantic emphasis on the 'organic' relationship within and between nature and humanity. Wordsworth often expressed this sense of organic unity when he described minute or individual phenomena as part of one great whole: 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees'.69 It was also indicated in the way aesthetic reference to natural forms generally passed over into something wider, into the beauty of landscape and a sense of the physiognomy of the earth. Thus while Wordsworth started a stanza by reference to 'A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by', he moved almost inevitably to 'the sound of rain, and bees / Murmuring; the fall of rivers, winds and seas, / Smooth fields, white sheets of water, and pure sky'.70 Similarly in the early poetry of Coleridge, humanity participates in a 'cosmic harmony', discovering in the sights and sounds of natural phenomena an intimation of organic unity with the source of all being. It was Wordsworth's metaphysical notion of the spirit or soul of the universe, however, which represented the most consistent romantic attempt to reject a mechanistic view of natural processes and account for their teleological action. His anima mundi infused each part of nature.71

69 Wordsworth, 'A Slumber did my Spirit Steal', lines 7–8.
70 Wordsworth, 'Sleep', lines 1–4; quoted in Beach, The Concept of Nature, p. 33.
But whereas Coleridge and Wordsworth’s sense of organic unity was eventually broken by a move from naturalistic to theistic interpretations of the world, other romantics consistently expressed this unity, albeit in different ways. Shelley, for example, did so by dwelling on the forces and processes of nature, on phenomena such as electricity, gravity, light, heat, and the growth of vegetation. Keats also observed the processes of change in nature, emphasising that it is only through time that things can work out their latent potentiality. In *Hyperion* (1820) there is the myth that the cosmos evolves more complex forms, while elsewhere Keats stressed ‘new buds unfolding’, ‘swelling leaflessness’, ‘the creeper, mellowing for an autumn blush’, vivifying and dramatising the sense of organic life. What is perhaps most distinctive in Keats is his ‘condensed expression of the entire life’ of natural phenomena in which we gain a sense of ‘the past and future of the object and also whatever other objects might naturally be associated with it’:

Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;  
And mid-May’s eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Keats’s influence on Morris has already been indicated by E.P. Thompson, who argued that the earlier poet profoundly influenced the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, the form of Victorian medievalism, the theory of ‘art for art’s sake’, and ‘every page of *The Defence of Guenevere*’. Morris admired Keats as ‘a poet who represented semblances, as opposed to Shelley who had no eyes’, and the influence of the romantic poet is felt not only in the medievalising *Defence of Guenevere*, but in the seasonal verses to *The Earthly Paradise*, and the sensuous world of Morris’s socialist utopia.

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72 Beach, *The Concept of Nature*, p. 211.
73 Keats, ‘Sleep and Poetry’ line 170; ‘Calidore’, line 34; *Endymion*, II, line 416; quoted in Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence*, p. 198.
75 Keats, *Endymion*, II, line 397.
76 Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, lines 47–50.
77 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 10.
Keats also provides a good example of the romantic understanding of ‘moments’ or ‘instants’ of time as inherently evanescent, existing only within a continuum of constant change. In many ways, this ‘processual’ understanding opposed the conception of instants as autonomous entities, conceiving of them rather as ‘ecologically participative’.\(^7^9\) Thus although *The Earthly Paradise* can be read as a Keatsian endeavour to ‘leave the world unseen’,\(^8^0\) it can also be interpreted as an attempt to gather together the world’s seasons and stories into an organic whole. In Morris’s work, this is an organicism which ultimately developed from an aesthetic view of the world into a socio-political conception of society.\(^8^1\)

There is a similar ‘structure of feeling’ in the more human-oriented poetry of Blake, where history is viewed as a return which is also a progression. In the ‘Ninth Night’ of *The Four Zoas*, he writes of the dawning human recognition that external nature is part of the estranged and dehumanised self:

So Man looks out in tree & herb & fish & bird & beast
Collecting up the scatter’d portions of his immortal body.
... wherever a grass grows
Or a leaf buds, The Eternal Man is seen, is heard, is felt.\(^8^2\)

M.H. Abrams has written of such writing that it

\[\text{set[s] as the goal for mankind the re-achievement of a unity which has been earned by unceasing effort and which is, in Blake’s term, an ‘organised’ unity, an equilibrium of opponent forces which preserves all the products and powers of intelleclion and culture. Like his contemporaries, Blake recognised the strength of civilised man’s yearning for the simple self-unity of the life of infants and of instinctual creatures, and he made a place of it in his geography of the mind: the state he called ‘Beulah’, the lower paradise of unorganised innocence.}^8^3\]

\(^7^9\) Kroeber, *British Romantic Art*, pp. 97, 103, 104. Thus Kroeber argues that Keats’s ‘To Autumn’, although about a temporal period, reveals the coherence of the annual cycle because the reader experiences imaginatively how ‘the season’s abundance consists in evanescence’.
\(^8^0\) Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, line 19.
\(^8^1\) See Chapter 3 of Section III for discussion of Morris’s massed patterns, and Chapter 2 of the Appendix for the ‘organicism’ of *News from Nowhere*.
Morris created much the same ‘simple self-unity’, in his own ‘paradise of unorganised innocence’.  

The idea of a natural order was of course linked to the ‘enlightened’ doctrines of Montesquieu, Quesnay and Rousseau. Wordsworth’s ethical conceptualisation of rural nature was, to a certain extent, drawn from their idea of nature as a norm for human conduct and opinion. Enlightenment concepts of nature were also bound up, however, with the economic doctrines of French physiocrats, whose theory played its part in the work of Adam Smith and, in his repudiation of nature in favour of a ‘humane’ ideal, of John Stuart Mill. Though Morris’s work can in many ways be read as a continuance of enlightenment ideals, he also inherited some of the ‘anti-rational’ romantic tendencies which in Britain came as a reaction to the destructive analyses of Berkeley and Hume. A dominant feature of this aspect of romanticism was a retreat from the type of rationalism that tended to reduce humanity and the world to machines. The romantic rejection of the mechanical materialism of eighteenth-century science arose from a belief that science had transformed the world into a mere laboratory of unrelated studies, and a concern that the scientist’s ‘dry’, mathematical approach had left no room for the imagination. Most memorably, Keats poured scorn on Isaac Newton for having desacralised the rainbow, for knowing ‘her woof, her texture’ as part of ‘the dull catalogue of common things’.  

It is in the work of Thomas Carlyle that we find one of the strongest Victorian senses of this organic world. In particular, Carlyle championed the collapse of the static metaphor and argued for its replacement with one that reflected the processual qualities of living, growing organisms. He emphasised that organisms grew

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84 See Chapter 2 of the Appendix.
85 Beach, The Concept of Nature, pp. 18–19.
88 Keats, Lamia, II, lines 231–3.
89 Peckham, ‘Toward a Theory of Romanticism’, p. 10. I also draw on Peckham for the rest of my discussion of romantic ‘organicism’ and ‘diversitarianism’, see especially pp. 9–11. The classic
organically rather than developing additively, and that they were linked together in a ‘great chain of being’. With this ‘diversitarian’, rather than uniformitarian, romantic perspective, he provided Victorians with a powerful alternative and antidote to the rationalism of the Machine Age; and the particular ways in which he affected Morris are discussed in detail below.

Nevertheless, a sense of isolation can be seen to supplant the romantic sense of organic community during the Victorian period, a sense prominent in thought as divergent as Walter Pater’s solipsism, Matthew Arnold’s cultural humanism, and even Morris’s early description of ‘the idle singer of an empty day’. Even though poets like Tennyson depicted a cultivated, historic countryside, most Victorians, including Morris, did not see themselves as a part of the landscape in the same way as the early romantics. Possibly because they were beginning to understand how much a part of nature they were, nature for the Victorians was often posited as an ‘other’ realm, organic in its own right, and only linked to humanity through the admission of a ‘supra-organicism’ too painful to bear.

Another connotation of nature arose because the romantics frequently associated it with the past, especially their own past, or youth, often leading to an emphasis on the role of retrospect, memory and, by extension, the historical imagination. This tendency was often expressed in a hearkening back to a state of life unsullied by human arts and institutions, most popularly in the widely diffused legend of a Golden Age. In the work of Victorian poets such as Arnold, Browning and Tennyson there is evidence of a belief in a time ‘near the green sources of history, when man possessed himself and at the same time possessed the whole world’.

This notion of an original innocence produced the romantic belief that humanity in a ‘primitive’ state was superior to the sophisticated product of a corrupt civilisation, and that many human ills could be cured by a ‘return’ to the life of the child, the peasant, or even the ‘noble savage’. In particular, what Wordsworth seemed to offer in his account of youth spent with nature was a ‘return of feeling’ and a ‘return to self’, an

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opportunity to cast off "that burden of my own unnatural self". For Morris and many other Victorians, nature and especially the garden offered opportunities for the recovery of an emotional life and of a sense of self, especially in the vast, impersonal city. "Nature's primitive gifts / ... to every sense delicious" are opposed to the 'blank confusion' of the city, providing those who live 'amid the same perpetual whirl / Of trivial objects, melted and reduced / To one identity', a place of escape and renewal.

John Clare had experienced more fully than most other romantic poets what it meant to lose childhood innocence. Born into a class of workers virtually wiped out by enclosure, Clare used his memories of childhood in nature to console himself for the loss. Both romantic and Victorian, Clare's poetry was the product of an intuitive identification with nature easily as powerful as Wordsworth's, and shows romanticism in transition from a romantic to a Victorian phase. In 1848 he recalled that 'Birds bees trees flowers' all talked to him loudly in his 'boyhood Solitude', and in an incomplete autobiography he recollected his rapt pleasure in: 'rushes and thistles and sheep tracks'; 'the wild marshy fen with its solitary hernshaw sweeping along in its melancholy sky'; 'the copper tinted colours of clover in blossom'; and 'the different greens of the woodland trees the dark oak the paler ash the mellow Lime the white poplar peeping above the rest like leafy steeples the grey willow shining chilly in the sun as if the morning mist still lingered in its cool green'. Nevertheless, this reminiscence concerning the loss of a historical landscape in which the source of feeling is as much 'native' as natural is more safely pastoral than his actual poetry. It is in his Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery by 'A Northamptonshire Peasant' (1820) that this childhood Eden was disturbed by 'the hardest emotions of maturity:

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93 See, for example, Andrew Griffin, 'The Interior Garden of John Stuart Mill', in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, p. 172.
94 Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850), VIII, lines 99-100.
dispossession, the ache of labour, the coldness of the available world'. 98 In this respect, Clare’s work can be read as a termination of ‘pastoral poesy’, both because he included the experience of an actual rural world, and because he created, in order to preserve feeling, ‘a language that is ever green’. 99

There is a similar duality of feeling and approach in Morris’s ‘Under an Elm-Tree: or, Thoughts in the Country-Side’, 100 and several other Victorians followed the romantics in their use of history and memory, and the sense of a lost paradise is a frequent and potent image throughout their work. George Eliot, for example, took many pastoral ideas and situations from Wordsworth, including the remembered past recreated as a kind of Golden Age and a faith in the value of childhood memories. She claimed that it was impossible to love the earth intensely without having experienced childhood in it:

These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky... these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind... 101

Generally, however, the Victorians spent little time pondering a childhood spent in nature. 102 While Matthew Arnold, in his 1879 ‘Preface’ to Wordsworth’s poems, stated that his own youth had been spent ‘in veneration’ of this ‘pure and sage master’, he opposed an adult and ‘educated’ Victorian consciousness to Wordsworth’s idealisation of the child as a ‘seer blest’. 103 U.C. Knoepflmacher argues that Arnold’s own ‘To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-Shore’ (c. 1843–44), rather than invoking a ‘child of hope, whose intimations of oneness give joy to adults alienated from Nature’,

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99 Williams, The Country and the City, p. 141.
100 For discussion of this article, see Chapter 4 of Section III below. See also Lindsay’s remarks (Life and Work, p. 8) concerning Morris’s attitudes belonging ‘to a general development going back to the early eighteenth century as the peasantry were uprooted’.
reproduced his own ‘adult despondency over a universe of fragmentation and pain’.\textsuperscript{104} Thus though Wordsworth contended that the ‘Child of Joy’ could lead us back to thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears’,\textsuperscript{105} Arnold asserted that cosmic darkness envelops both child and adult. Even though others produced ‘sentimental and even saccharine’ images of children, Victorian reactions to the Wordworthian child of nature were, at best, ambiguous.\textsuperscript{106}

Consequently, the Victorians did not participate to the same extent as the romantics in the belief in happier origins in nature. Arnold’s conclusion to ‘The Daisy’, for example, explicitly denied this possibility:

Nothing begins and nothing ends,
That is not paid with moan;
For we are born in other’s pain,
And perish in our own.\textsuperscript{107}

Increasingly, Victorians were more likely to empathise with the child’s intimations of impermanence rather than immortality, seen in Hopkins’s ‘Spring and Fall: to a young child’ (1880). It was testament to the power that Wordworth still exerted over many Victorians, however, that poets such as Hopkins retained a faith in the child’s ‘Goldengrove’ of feeling.\textsuperscript{108} We will see that Morris, though aware that innocence was not an option for many Victorian children, still hoped for a world in which children could, in some senses, ‘return to nature’.\textsuperscript{109}

A further romantic signification of nature which resounded strongly for Victorians was a sense, on the one hand, of the threat posed to nature by the powers of urban industry; and, on the other hand, of an eternal nature which in its enormity threatened human achievement. One of the most important axes of this ambivalent feeling was the opposition of the ‘natural’ realm of the countryside to the ‘artificial’

\textsuperscript{104} Knopflmacher, ‘Mutations’, p. 396.
\textsuperscript{105} Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’, lines 34, 205.
\textsuperscript{106} Knopflmacher, ‘Mutations’, p. 400.
\textsuperscript{107} Arnold, ‘The Daisy’, lines 57–60.
\textsuperscript{108} Hopkins, ‘Spring and Fall: to a young child’, see especially lines 1–9.
\textsuperscript{109} See Chapter 2 of the Appendix.
town and city. Writers such as Wordsworth tended to find more of nature in the country than the town, more in peasants than in townspeople. Even though Wordsworth had moments when the city ‘touched’ him with its ‘majesty’, his prevailing feeling was that the city was a ‘monstrous ant-hill’ of ‘modern Merlins’, ‘far fetched perverted things’ and ‘freaks of Nature’. Wordsworth complained in The Excursion of the ‘outrage done to nature’ and bemoaned the fact that ‘some poor hamlet, rapidly produced / Here a huge town, continuous and compact, / Hiding the face of the earth for leagues’. As Jonathan Bate has argued, Wordsworth’s poetry emphasised that ‘[h]umanity only survives in nature’. This was a claim reiterated later in the Victorian era as the threat to nature seemed even greater. In the same year as Morris’s speech at Burslem, Hopkins pleaded:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and wilderness? Let them be left,
Let them be left, wilderness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

The ‘modern Merlins’ at work in the city were part of the threat to nature perceived by the romantics. Wordsworth believed that science played its part in this transformation by turning the ‘beauteous world’ into a mere laboratory. As Denis Cosgrove has argued, the romantics often stressed the divinity of nature in order to combat the ‘dissecting eye and analytical logie’ of those natural scientists whose understanding of nature supported new modes of production. Thus even though the romantics often employed the detailed observational techniques of the natural sciences, they deployed their findings in a pre-positivist mode that often led to metaphysical as well as materialist explanation.

A clear example of this kind of reasoning exists in the work of Blake. Though he could write ‘Great things are done when Men & Mountains meet, / This is not done

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110 See Wordsworth’s ‘Written in London, September, 1802’.
114 Bate, Romantic Ecology, p. 34.
by Jostling in the Street’, Blake’s work was an important commentary on that ‘jostling’. In his poetry Blake railed against the enslavement of ‘the myriads of eternity’ to the ‘mills and ovens and cauldrons’ represented as a mechanised nature. He complained that the machines of the Giant Albion were ‘woven with his life’ and denounced the loss of age-old skills, ‘all the Arts of Life ... chang’d into the Arts of Death’:

The hour-glass contempt'd because its simple workmanship
Was like the workmanship of the plowman, & the water wheel
That raises water into cisterns, broken & burn'd with fire
Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of the shepherd;
And in their stead, intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel,
To perplex youth in their outings & to bind to labours in Albion
Of day & night the myriads of eternity: that they may grind
And polish brass & iron hour after hour, laborious task,
Kept ignorant of its use ...  

In some respects, Blake is not the clearest example of the romantic protest against the ‘outrage done to nature’, but there are important connections between his work and that of Morris. Far from turning to an adoration of nature, Blake frequently expressed his deep abhorrence of what he called ‘the world of Vegetation’. To Blake the world of reality resembled a thin sheet laid across the World of the Imagination, which he called ‘Jerusalem’. He had no use for the cult of nature or ‘natural man’, and asserted that civilisation was emblematic of human superiority to nature. Arguing that ‘Where man is not, nature is barren’, Blake made the central symbol of civilisation the city, and asserted that the world we conceive with our imagination is preferable to the world we see: nature is there for us to transform. This is a transforming impulse that remained strong in Morris.

What is also significant is that Blake’s ideal city was a very different place than that of the nineteenth-century industrial city. Central to Blake’s task of rebuilding Jerusalem upon the soil of modern England were the functions of ‘natural cycles’ of

117 Fragment from Blake’s notebook, Plate 43, 64, lines 1–2.
119 Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Plate 10, line 8.
renewal, of revolution, and of the paradisaical Beulah. In Blake’s Jerusalem there is no longer the malevolent use of reason that had promulgated ‘iron laws’ and condemned humanity to a state of ‘separation and division’; by casting out Newton and Locke with their ‘Philosophy of Five Senses’ humanity could recapture its innocent primeval unity. Furthermore, Blake understood that it was the organisation of the ‘charter’d streets and even ‘charter’d Thames’,—as Williams has it, ‘the submerged connections of this capital system’—that caused him to see the city in a new way: ‘not the riot, the noise or the monstrous wen of earlier and contemporary observation; but an organisation, a systematic state of mind’. Blake heard ‘the Chimney-sweeper’s cry’ and recognised that innocence and vice were not located in separate realms, but were in and of the city (and the country), ‘in its factual and spiritual relations’. In this respect, as Williams has noted, Blake’s work was an important prevision of the novels of Dickens, and, we must add, of Morris.

Nevertheless, Blake quite clearly expressed a sense that nature is not wholly beneficent. In the other romantics, however, this sense emerged in a much more ambiguous fashion. Wordsworth had always been ‘haunted by the enormous permanences of nature’, tending to notice ‘rocks / Immutable, and overflowing streams’. Often these permanences were sensed most powerfully when contrasted with the brevity of human life: the way the ‘[i]mmense … circumambient world’ embraced humanity’s ‘little … doings’. In such expressions the implacable encroachments of time formed a constant background to human life and all that was associated with human nature. Only the ‘living Presence’ of nature was regarded as permanent and undying; human life ‘must perish’. There was, however, a large degree of ambivalence in Wordsworth’s position. His contrast of human life with the immensity of nature allowed him to view human concerns with a detached composure

as nature goes on regardless (most famously in the last lines of later versions of ‘The Ruined Cottage’); and also to glorify nature’s untamed elements:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decay’d
The stationary blasts of water-falls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds...
...
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of the first and last, and midst, and without end.130

Nonetheless, in this passage, though nature is a world retreated to, there is also a sense that it may be a world from which it is necessary to retreat. In a similar vein, for all his derision of ‘modern civilization’, Morris was also wary of untamed nature. Travels in Iceland would reveal to him a land that in many ways defied human appropriation, and part of his reaction was trepidation and horror, eventually supplemented by the resolve to overcome.131 Thus an important element of Morris’s thought was a kind of Blakean insistence, in the face of the untamed elements, that humanity should not ‘stand any nonsense from Nature in their dealings with her’.132

It is not this reading, however, that should be identified as the most prominent romantic influence on Victorians such as Morris.133 Romantic poetry often quite simply gave the Victorians a means of enjoying or enduring life by teaching them to look at and enjoy nature.134 For the Victorians, even those who came to accept scientific explanations of natural phenomena, Wordsworth’s ‘beauteous forms’ were still redolent with meaning. Though they often denied the beneficence of Wordsworth’s nurturing nature, still they extolled his ability to assert ‘the freshness of the early world’. Even deprived of its ‘mysteries’, a romantic nature continued to be cherished as a bulwark against the scientific exploration of a very different natural

129 Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850), V, lines 12–49 passim.
130 Wordsworth, The Prelude (1850), VI, lines 624–40.
131 On Morris in Iceland, see Chapter 4 of Section III below.
132 Morris, News from Nowhere, in CW, vol. XVI, p. 73.
133 Nor should it have much to do with modern interpretation that indicts poets such as Wordsworth for conspiring in a ‘Great Pastoral Con Trick’. See Bate’s discussion of this phenomenon in Romantic Ecology, p. 18.
134 Here I follow Bate’s call for a Johnsonian understanding of how the Victorians read Wordsworth and of reading in general. See Bate, Romantic Ecology, p. 4.
order. It prevented Morris from experiencing the more troubled ambivalence of a Hardy or a Conrad later in the century. As U.C. Knoepflmacher and G.B. Tennyson have observed, for most Victorians, nature remained very much a romantic ‘sanctuary’ of feeling, one they were ‘all too eager to retain’. Though the sanctuary shrank as the century progressed, romantic feeling succeeded in establishing nature as a point of convergence for a great deal of Victorian culture. For Morris the impression of romance marked nature indelibly.

While romantic modes of feeling, thought and expression provided structures by means of which many Victorians experienced nature, the structures themselves were generally founded upon principles and elements derived from a dominant Judeo-Christian religion. Consequently, though threatened in its role as a ‘common context’ for knowledge, religious ideas of the natural world played a central role in the formation of Victorian attitudes to nature.

At first glance, a religious frame of reference might not seem relevant to Morris. Though destined for the Church in youth,\(^1\) by middle age he had professed himself ‘careless of metaphysics and religion’,\(^2\) and had also begun to denounce religious complicity in the exploitation and expansion of a world economy: ‘the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters’.\(^3\) In 1883 he stated that he had never ‘taken to’ the ‘rich establishmentarian puritanism’ of his family,\(^4\) and in the socialist journal *Commonweal* he frequently railed against puritanical Christianity as ‘a slimy superstition ... a dangerous ally of the gigantic robbery of capitalism, which gave it birth’\(^5\). To overemphasise the irreligious or ‘pagan’ Morris, however, is a false move, and would require a misleading denial of the influence of Morris’s evangelical upbringing, Anglo-Catholic schooling, Tractarian university education, as well as the creative tension generated by his battle to maintain faith. Still, it is startling to think of Morris in the terms he described himself to the notoriously atheistic Swinburne in 1869: ‘I am proudly conscious of my position as the Christian poet of the age’\(^6\). This consciousness should not be explained away by the confines of a Victorian upper-

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\(^1\) Even before he left university, Morris had rejected Anglican orthodoxy. On taking is B.A. in 1856, he refused to sign the 39 Articles and, as Eugene D. LeMire has argued (‘The “First” William Morris and the 39 Articles’, *JWMS*, vol. VII, no. 2, Spring 1987, pp. 9–14), his writing at this time manifests an ‘unsteadiness of opinion’ and an ‘extraordinary variety of religious and historical perspectives’.


\(^3\) Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 94–5. See also Morris’s numerous attacks in *Commonweal* on the way ‘God-fearing soldiers’ were used to ‘open up’ overseas markets for British trade, such as his comments upon the unveiling of General Gordon’s statue in October 1888 in ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, vol. IV, no. 146, 27 October 1888, pp. 337–8; in *Journalism*, p. 470.

\(^4\) Morris to Andreas Scheu, 15 September 1883, in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 227.


middle-class education, but should be used to help explain why Morris sometimes looked for ‘truths’ immanent in the natural world, as well as why he ‘converted’ to, or perhaps created, a kind of socialism that allowed human relationships with nature beyond the bounds of industry, beyond the nexus of work.

Judeo-Christian conceptions of nature are of most significance to this study because the idea of God and the order of nature created by these modes of belief were the most widely disseminated religious ideas in Victorian Britain. Clarence Glacken has established that Judeo-Christian religious thought provided ‘a conception of the habitable world of such force, persuasiveness, and resiliency that it could endure as an acceptable interpretation of life, nature, and the earth to the vast majority of the peoples of the Western world until the sixth decade of the nineteenth century.’ In order to understand how these conceptions influenced Victorian views of nature, it will be necessary to outline briefly some of their main tenets.

At the centre of the Judeo-Christian conception of nature lies a myth of creation. This process is described in Genesis, in which there is both an account of the individual acts of God which generate the natural world, and a list of instructions and examples of how ‘man’ should behave toward that creation: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’. Arising from Genesis, therefore, is the idea that ‘man’ holds a position on earth comparable to that of God in the universe, and this has been one of the central themes in nearly all Western thought regarding ‘man’s’ place in nature.

The idea of human dominion over the earth has been translated, on the one hand, into readings emphasising the story of human ejection from the Garden of Eden, which have given rise to understandings of nature as a place of disorder and vice. God

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8 Genesis, 1:28. For an outline of the concept of nature in Judeo-Christian theology, upon which my summary is largely based, see Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, pp. 150–68.
tells Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you", and one can trace a constant feeling of distaste for nature in much Christian thought. In this respect, there emerges the idea of nature-as-wilderness understood in a pejorative sense: as a world of the profane rather than the sacred, as a wasteland, and as "a realm or phase of punitive or purgative preparation for salvation". It is this understanding of nature, as wilderness to be subdued, which has led to the assertion that Judeo-Christian rhetoric "established a dualism of man and nature and insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends".

On the other hand, nature has also been more positively evaluated in Judeo-Christian thought. It has existed as sacred space, as a source of spiritual insight, or as God's realm as opposed to that of humanity. In this sense one finds nature understood as a refuge, a place of meditative withdrawal, as an inner sanctum or 'ground of being', and as the actual location of God. Somewhat paradoxically, the Bible also offers a reading of nature that sees its transformation by human action as a source of redemption. Both the Old and the New Testaments contain passages that celebrate 'controlled' nature. In the Psalms, Job and Sirach, figures of speech reflect life among grain fields, orchards, olive groves, and pastures, and it has been suggested that the creation of a garden from wilderness is the most enduring metaphor in the Bible. Evolving as a powerful image of human accomplishment and moral struggle, this 'theology' of the creation of a garden has been used as a justification for the 'improvement' of land: the clearing of wood and forest, the draining of fen and marsh, and the cultivation of moor and heath.

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9 Genesis, 3:17.
11 Thus Lynn White Jr. has argued that it is this tradition of Christian thought, along with Western science and technology ('cast in a matrix of Christian theology'), that lies at 'the historical roots of our ecologic crisis'. See Machine Ex Deo: Essays in the Dynamism of Western Culture, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, pp. 75-94.
12 Williams, Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought, p. 4.
14 As Short observes (Imagined Country, p. 13), this ideology was used to great advantage by the medieval European Church, which was a major landowner with considerable agrarian interests. See also W.G. Hoskins, The Making of the English Landscape (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1956 (1955), pp. 80-1 and passim) for details of the Church's land development.
Nevertheless, though one cannot directly attribute social action to Christian theology, there are also examples of sound conservationist practice within the Church, frequently grounded on the idea of human ‘stewardship’. There is also the alternative protective and preservationist tradition of St. Francis which has emphasised communion with nature and the joys of rural life. Further evidence of a reverential attitude towards nature can also be gleaned from the whole concept of ‘wisdom’ prevalent in the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{15} Thus alongside contempt for the earthly has gone a ‘natural theology’ that seeks and finds evidence of a beneficent creator in nature.\textsuperscript{16}

It is the more positive strain of attitudes to nature which more accurately characterises Victorian religious cultures of nature. Although often resting on an unexamined or hypocritical destruction and exploitation of nature in social and economic spheres, it would be grossly misleading to suggest that the religious thought of the Victorian era did not, on the whole, extend and cultivate views that emphasised the life, beauty, activity and order of nature. Given this social context, and Morris’s declared personal commitment for at least half of his life, his views on nature could not fail to negotiate, if not attain, a religious perspective. In what remains of this chapter, I shall discuss five streams of Victorian religious feeling which affect Morris’s views of nature: the habit of sacramental or typological thinking; the evangelical spirit of much nature study; the experience of the withdrawal of God from the world; the attempt to posit a new sacramentalism; and the carrying over of religious structures of feeling and views about nature into ‘new religions’.

The pervasive presence of typological thinking in Victorian interpretations of nature has been noted by many. In\textit{ Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows} (1980) George Landow demonstrates that years of exposure to typological interpretation meant that many Victorian thinkers exhibited ‘a habit of mind, an assurance that everything possessed significant meaning if only one knew how to discover it’.\textsuperscript{17} In 1841, for

\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, Proverbs 8:22–31, and also passages in the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiastes of the apocryphal writings.

\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, as Short points out (\textit{Imagined Country}, p. 14), because these views were more often part of a Christian tradition of retreat, withdrawal and contemplation, the subduers have had far more practical environmental influence than those who withdrew into nature.

example, John Keble reminded the many readers of *Tracts for the Times* that ‘The Author of Scripture is the Author of Nature’, and many Victorians, both Tractarian and evangelical, looked to nature for guidance in the same way that they read their Bible.

It has been suggested that the process of understanding nature within a Christian system of significance represents a middle-class Victorian compromise between romantic aesthetics and classical–medieval interpretation of Scripture, and Morris certainly fell under the influence of works which contained a romantic–Tractarian emphasis on sacrament and ritual during his first terms at Oxford. According to Mackail, Morris’s reading at Oxford included: ‘Neale’s “History of the Eastern Church”, Milman’s “Latin Christianity”, great portions of the “Acta Sanctorum”, and of the “Tracts for the Times”, as well as “masses of medieval chronicles and ecclesiastical Latin poetry”, including “Kenelm Digby’s “Mores Catholicici”, and “Archdeacon Wilberforce’s treatises on the Eucharist, Baptism, and the Incarnation” (which culminated in Morris’s joining the Roman communion in 1854). In this respect, for the young, devout Morris nature had meaning both in itself and outside itself, and it is necessary to examine how some of these meanings were constituted.

Prominent among those who sought to maintain religious links to God’s creation was the poet and priest John Keble. G.B. Tennyson has argued that Keble’s *The Christian Year*, published in 1827, was the most popular and influential volume of religious poetry of the Victorian era, and that the reason for its popularity lay largely in its ‘blend of Nature and piety’. Although nature itself was not central to Keble’s

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20 Mackail, *Life*, vol. I, p. 38. Mackail also records the testimony of a member of Morris’s circle at Oxford, the Rev. Canon Richard W. Dixon, that, ‘At this time, Morris was an aristocrat and a High Churchman’ (p. 46).

Tennyson asserts that the book was already a favourite even before Keble’s 1833 sermon launched the Tractarian movement, helping to make the volume almost sacred in High Anglican households. It continued, even after this, to enjoy great popularity in Christian households of all varieties, even non-Anglican, for the remainder of the century. My discussion of Keble’s nature poetry is based largely on Tennyson’s informative essay.
work, he considered feeling for nature to be a positive good because of the Christian lessons it embodied. In *The Christian Year* there are countless instances of nature as theologian and, somewhat less frequently, as an instrument of sacramental grace. Believing that all nature poetry was, by definition, religious, Keble asked: ‘How can the topics of devotion be few, when we are taught to make every part of life, every scene in nature, an occasion—in other words, a topic—of devotion?’

Keble also developed his idea of nature as sacrament in the immensely popular *Tracts for the Times,* and in his *Lectures on Poetry,* delivered between 1831 and 1841 (published in Latin in 1844). ‘May it not be by the special guidance of Providence’, Keble asked, ‘that a love of country and Nature, and of the poetry which deals with them, should be strong, just at the time when the aids which led our forefathers willingly to forgo any claim to poetic taste are far removed from the habits of our daily life?’ Something of this sentiment, or justification—reference to God through a ‘green’ poetry—lay behind much of Morris’s poetry up to and including *The Earthly Paradise.* As a ‘Christian poet’ of his age, his verse is often the ‘unconscious poetry’ of religion, an attempt to assert the ideal as fact.

Indeed Morris was one of many influenced by the ‘theological and sacramental’ character of Keble’s theory and practice. A ‘proximate source’ for much Victorian literature, Keble ‘adapted and updated’ the sacramental nature of historic Catholicism by integrating a romantic love of nature with orthodox theology. In his wake, authors such as Charlotte Mary Yonge wove religious sentiment into their work, including an emphasis on the teachings of nature. In Yonge’s *Heir of Redclyffe*

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24 See, for example, Tract no. 89, ‘On the Mysticism Attributed to the early Fathers of the Church’.
26 See Chapter 2 of Section III below for discussion of the ‘unconscious poetry’ of *The Earthly Paradise.*
(1852), for example, the hero warns against listening to the wrong 'voice of nature', but also of 'being led to stop short at the material beauty, or worse, to link human passions with the glories of nature, and so distort, defile, profane them'.

Read and greatly admired by Morris as a young man (Mackail suggested that Morris adopted the hero's traits 'as a pattern for actual life'), this work can be read as evidence of how the Tractarian mind sought to balance passion with reserve in responding to nature.

Yet, although they counselled against too ardent a response, works such as Yonge's reminded the Victorian reader that God is immanent in nature. Along with the many popular Victorian commentaries on the Bible, such as Patrick Fairbairn's *The Typology of Scripture* (1870), it represented a world infused and suffused with meaning.

Another manifestation of Victorian typological thinking was the more popular development of the meaning or 'language' of flowers. Although it does not appear that Morris endowed the many flowers he designed with any, let alone Christian, significance (though many of his patterns feature the 'humble wayside herbs' so enamoured of these floral sentimentalists), it is possible to find symbolic meaning in the flowers he chose to 'decorate' his poetry. Moreover, because those who so deeply influenced him did 'read' and comprehend a floral 'language', it is necessary to outline the nature of this predominantly moral and religious typological phenomenon.

In a series of lectures *On the Poetic Interpretation of Nature* in 1877, J.C. Shairp stated that the aim of the poet in observing the details of flowers

is to see and express the loveliness that is in the flower, not only the beauty of colour and of form, but the sentiment which, so to speak, looks out from it, and which is meant to awaken in us an answering emotion.

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30 Mackail (*Life*, vol. I, p. 41) writes: 'In this book, more than any other, may be traced the religious ideals and social enthusiasms which were stirring in the years between the decline of Tractarianism and the Crimean War. The young hero of the novel, with his overstrained conscientiousness, his chivalrous courtesy, his intense earnestness, his eagerness for all such social reforms as might be affected from above downwards, his high-strung notions of love, friendship, and honour, his premature gravity, his almost deliquescent piety, was adopted by them [Morris and his circle at Oxford] as a pattern for actual life: and more strongly perhaps by Morris than by the rest, from his own greater wealth and more aristocratic temper'.
To this end, he continued, the poet ‘must observe accurately, since the form and lines of the flower discerned by the eye are a large part of what gives it relation and meaning to the soul’. Much of this ‘reading’ of flowers revolved around romantic themes and used the terminology of the love affair, and Morris was certainly not untuned to the romantic, and even erotic, potential of nature imagery.

There were many poets, however, who intended their ‘flower poetry’ to be highly evangelical in flavour. Frederic Faber’s characterisation of ‘The Cherwell Water-Lily’ is typical of the genre, depicting a natural world packed with the details of theology and ethics. Beverley Seaton’s study of flower books has shown how the Victorians used flowers to communicate moral and spiritual truths, and how an examination of this ‘natural typology’ helps to illuminate nineteenth-century attitudes toward nature. Seaton cites many examples of floral typology, also noting works such as ‘J.L.K.’s’ The Voice of Flowers (1871) which aimed at achieving the experience of conversion through its collection and juxtaposition of remarks on flowers and religion. Many of these works also instructed the reader to turn from the book to nature itself, to ‘go out and “meditate in the fields”’, and to ‘gather truth where other

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33 This form of expression found fullest expression in Le Langage des Fleurs published in 1819 by Charlotte de Latour, which within a year had been translated into English. Incredibly popular and reprinted by the thousand, this book also provoked numerous English imitations, including Mrs. Hey’s Moral of Flowers, Miss Twamley’s The Romance of Nature and Joseph Merrin’s Butterflies with the Poets. See David Elliston Allen, The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History, Allen Lane, London, 1976, p. 75.
34 See, for example, the ‘Song’ from ‘Ogier the Dane’ which begins ‘In the white-flowered hawthorn brake’, in The Earthly Paradise, vol. II, in CW, vol. IV, p. 247.
35 There were in fact three main areas of flower ‘reading’: ‘flower poetry’; ‘the language of flowers’; and moral and religious works in which flowers are the main examples, our main concern here. Beverley Seaton writes that many, especially of the romantic variety, often drew sarcasm from ‘less sentimental’ writers, with Captain Frederick Marryat publishing a parody, The Floral Telegraph, in 1836. Later in the century there also emerged the study of flower folklore. Anne Pratt’s popular The Flowers and Their Associations (1840) was followed later in the century by Hilderic Friend’s Flowers and Folklore (1883), Richard Folkard’s Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics (1884) and T.F. Thielton-Dyer’s The Folklore of Plants (1889). See Beverly Seaton, ‘Considering the Lilies: Ruskin’s “Proserpina” and other Victorian Flower Books’, Victorian Studies, vol. XXVIII, no. 2, Winter 1985, pp. 256–7.
37 Seaton, ‘Considering the Lilies’, p. 255.
eyes see nothing but a painted weed'. They were complemented by a wider religious interest in botany, and a powerful horticultural press dominated by figures such as Loudon, William Robinson, Joseph Paxton and Shirley Hibberd, who combined both a religious and scientific sensibility.

In much the same way, Ruskin also ‘read’ nature for moral meaning, and his work, so important an influence on Morris, reproduced many of the characteristics of the more popular and sentimental flower books. Much of Ruskin’s thinking was deeply rooted in the religious ideas of his day, and his system of aesthetics was structurally predicated upon the foundation that nature was a garden made by God for humanity. He shared with writers such as Hibberd and John Kitto an evangelical background which impelled him to produce visions of nature free of evil. Certain of his works can also be read as an explicit repudiation of the teachings of modern geologists and a retreat into evangelical Biblical literalism. In Modern Painters, vol. IV, for example, Ruskin insisted that the Bible describes the physical acts of creation as they occurred, and charged his readers ‘to follow the finger of God, as it engraved upon the stone tables of the earth the letters and the law of its everlasting form’. He urged them to learn to see a leaf as God’s handiwork, and explained that ‘the love of

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40 John Hutton Balfour, in his Phyto-Theology: or, Botanical Sketches Intended to Illustrate the Works of God (Johnstone & Hunter, London, 1851, pp. 2–3), for example, argued that botany is properly studied with a view to spiritual enlightenment and that ‘all attempts to separate secular from religious knowledge are vain and futile’.
43 Seaton argues in ‘Considering the Lilies’ (pp. 273–5) that in Studies in Wayside Flowers—Prunus—Ruskin was trying ‘to remake science according to morality instead of trying to find moral meaning in the nature revealed by science’. Seaton contends that Ruskin was in fact trying to combat the views of plants and natural processes as described in Charles Darwin’s botanical works bearing titles such as Insectivorous Plants (1875), The Effects of Cross- and Self-Fertilisation (1876), and The Different Forms of Flowers on Plants of The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Worms (1881).
44 Fuller, Theoria, p. 89.
nature’ manifest in Turner or the Pre-Raphaelites, was not ‘connected with the faithlessness of the age’, but revealed ‘for the first time in man’s history ... the true nature of his life, the true field for his energies, and the true relations between him and his Maker’.

Ruskin is also a pivot around which one can establish links between the meaning of flowers in sentimental flower books and in the visual arts, particularly in Pre-Raphaelite art. The meaning of nature for the Pre-Raphaelites will be examined in a subsequent chapter, but this further basis upon which ‘natural typology’ might have influenced the work of Morris should be noted here. The tangled systems by which many in the nineteenth century expressed their spiritual perspective on nature are not immediately apparent in the work of Morris but are present nonetheless. In many ways Morris also ‘gathered truth from nature’. Though he eventually drew a line between morality and nature, his early poetry features nature and natural objects as symbol, emblem and analogy. Poems such as ‘Two Red Roses Across the Moon’, ‘The Gilliflower of Gold’, and even the fragment ‘The Story of a Flower’, indicate that the rose, hawthorn, and ‘gilliflower’ had symbolic implications at this stage of his life. In a song from ‘The Hollow Land’, for example, ‘the apple-blossoms bless / The lowly bent hill side’. As his career progressed, and socio-political consciousness developed, Morris’s natural objects were more often connected to the vision of a moralised humanity than to God. Yet, even in his later work, ‘Flora’ and also trees, animals and seasons ‘speak’ to the reader. They remind us that religious typology was one of the reasons why the Victorian middle classes continued to scrutinise nature.

There were other reasons why Victorians sought and found religious meaning in nature. Just as nature might reveal God’s purpose, the purposes of God were also called upon to vindicate the scrutiny of nature. David Elliston Allen has recounted

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47 Some of the many forms of ‘natural typology’ Seaton identified in ‘Considering the Lilies’, p. 259.
48 See, for example, Vanessa Furse Jackson’s reading of “Two Red Roses Across the Moon”: Reconsidering Symbolic Implications, JWMS, vol. XII, no. 1, Autumn 1996, pp. 29–34.
50 It is Allen’s contention (The Naturalist in Britain, p. 75) that the flower books emerged at a time when ‘the new middle classes were succeeding to dominance’ and helped to keep their gaze on nature. This is, of course, the social grouping to which Morris’s family so firmly belonged.
how the evangelical conflation of the moral and the useful helped to justify increasingly popular ‘nature study’ as a means of revering God’s creation, and as a means of prospering materially. Interests such as flower arranging or butterfly collecting, though without an obvious use, could be defended from the taunts of utilitarians by proclaiming their moral value. To those already engaged in nature study, the evangelical idea of work for work’s sake in turn introduced a new degree of ardour to their endeavours. As Allen has recounted, the new evangelical climate ‘hatched out brood after brood’ of natural lexicologists, list-makers, counters and comparers.

Of course the scientific conceptions of nature aimed at in these studies already substantially derived from the long established tradition of natural theology. According to the main natural theological argument, a close inspection of nature revealed a universe of which the intricately interlocking parts constituted a smoothly running whole. These ideas continued to be reflected, albeit less confidently, at all levels of Victorian science. Even the work of the ‘agnostic’ Huxley retained the strong moral impulses and the proselytising urge of middle-class evangelicalism. For Huxley, as for many others in the 1840s and 1850s, withdrawal from orthodox Christianity was an agonising, guilt-ridden experience. Many scientists, even though they no longer found belief possible, continued to appreciate the value of religion.52

The overwhelming trend during the nineteenth century, however, was one of the gradual undermining of religion as a ‘common context’ for a whole range of Victorian meanings, feelings, beliefs and experiences. This did not mean that religion disappeared as a significant factor in Victorian views of nature; on the contrary, the tension created by various crises of faith throughout the century meant that religion, albeit weakened and undermined, remained a presence in Victorian understandings of the world around them. The growing criticism of orthodox views did, however, destabilise the established hegemony of natural theology. During the 1850s and 1860s

51 ‘How many, many persons’, the author of one local Flora expostulated, ‘for want of some agreeable and instructive employment of their time, turn to idle and vicious habits and perhaps finally come to ruin!’ For this and the other arguments contained in this paragraph see Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, pp. 73–82.
52 ‘The end of man is to act’ he wrote to his fiancée in the 1840s ‘and belief is the source of action’; quoted in T.W. Heyck The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England, Croom Helm, London, 1982, p. 98.
in particular, many Victorians chose to subscribe to a new historical interpretation of
Scripture, and the reasons why they made this decision are not all to do with a growing
preference for scientific accounts of natural phenomena.\textsuperscript{53}

Among the contributing factors to this disintegration of orthodox belief was
revulsion against what a literal interpretation of the Old and New Testaments taught, in
part a result of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism preached salvation for those who
admitted their sinfulness by means of a severe scrutiny of the conscience, and
prescribed the therapeutic value of ‘good works’. This kind of piety heightened the
intensity of the individual conscience and of the drive for personal morality, often
producing the ‘honest doubter’.\textsuperscript{54} When Morris wrote to inform his mother that he did
not intend taking Holy Orders, he still assured her that he agreed that ‘it was an evil
thing to be an idle, objectless man’, and stressed that his new career in architecture
would be a ‘useful trade’.\textsuperscript{55} Of course Morris’s reasons for choosing architecture did
not wholly stem from a desire to perform ‘good works’; indeed evangelicalism’s
implicit criticism of the harshness of certain Christian teachings probably prepared the
way for acquiescence to historical and scientific criticism, and thus to a
reconceptualisation of nature, by Morris and many other Victorians.\textsuperscript{56}

Victorian religious beliefs were also affected by a historical criticism of
Scripture arising as much within theological thought as outside it. In 1846 orthodox
religion suffered a particularly severe blow when George Eliot’s translation of D.F.
Strauss’s critical \textit{Life of Christ} was published. It caused great waves of agnosticism
and disbelief and had a particularly marked effect on the universities.\textsuperscript{57} This mood was
reflected in novels and non-fictional works alike, including J.A. Froude’s \textit{Shadows of
the Clouds} (1847) and \textit{The Nemesis of Faith} (1849), and Francis W. Newman’s \textit{The
Soul} (1849) and \textit{Phases of Faith} (1850). Morris arrived in Oxford in 1853, and at this
stage, in the battle between faith and faithlessness, Morris arrayed himself very

\textsuperscript{53} The impact of science on Victorian views of nature will be examined in the following chapter.
\textsuperscript{54} Heyck, \textit{The Transformation of Intellectual Life}, pp. 83–4.
\textsuperscript{56} Heyck, \textit{The Transformation of Intellectual Life}, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{57} In 1848 the poet A.H. Clough, for example, felt it necessary to resign his post at Oriel College due
to his growing feelings of scepticism. See Katharine Chorley, \textit{Arthur High Clough, The Uncommitted
definitely on the side of faith. Nevertheless, the reaction to historical criticism of the Bible had already sown seeds of doubt and Morris must have been aware of this tension. By the 1880s most theologians had come to terms with this criticism by affirming that the word of God is in the Bible and by denying that the word of God is the Bible.\(^3\) Nature was open, therefore, to wider and more subjective forms of spiritual interpretation.

Even those who were not willing to surrender their belief, however, began by mid-century to find themselves compelled to discard the concept of nature as God’s book. As the natural world now appeared ‘red in tooth and claw’, natural theology and typology became deeply troubled fields. Thus the relation of nature to religion changed so that the world now gained meaning through God’s absence from it. A number of responses to this ‘disappearance of God’ presented themselves in the nineteenth century,\(^5\) many of which affected Morris. Immersed in poetry at Oxford, and under the influence of the aesthetics of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, Morris was most affected by poets such as Browning and Tennyson.\(^6\) Each of these poets, and others such as Arnold and Hopkins, registered the absence of God in their poetry and attempted to return God to the world, either as a benign power inherent in the self, in the human community, or again in nature.

All of these poets were part of the generation that W.K. Clifford described as a group who had ‘seen the spring sun shine out of an empty heaven, to light up a soulless earth’, and ‘felt with utter loneliness that the Great Companion is dead’.\(^4\) Poems by Matthew Arnold, including ‘Quiet Work’, ‘In Harmony with Nature’, and ‘In Ultradeque Paratus’ (all 1849), indicated this felt absence, and by 1867 he was one of many lamenting the withdrawal of a once-full ‘Sea of Faith’.\(^5\) These feelings did


\(^5\) Some have been discussed in Miller’s ‘The Theme of the Disappearance of God’, pp. 207-27.

\(^6\) Canon Dixon, a friend of Morris at Oxford, recalled that ‘all sets of reading men talked poetry. Poetry was the thing’; quoted in Mackail, *Life*, vol. I, p. 44.


\(^5\) Matthew Arnold, ‘Dover Beach’, line 21. In 1850, for example, Mill also articulated this alienation in his essay ‘Nature’, while many other Victorian writers such as Thackeray *Letters and Private
not necessarily lead to outright atheism; as J. Hillis Miller has argued, '[f]or such a man God exists, but is out of reach'. Nevertheless, much verse of this kind represented the disintegration of the ‘communion’ of humanity, God, nature and language, leading the Victorians to produce more problematic images of natural phenomena which thwarted literal biblical interpretation and forced confrontation with religious belief.

Indeed for many who believed God was ‘out of reach’, the meaning found in nature was often that of vicious disregard. Ruskin, who rejected conventional Christianity in the 1860s, began to doubt that there were natural beauties expressive of transcendent reality and natural law. He became tormented by a sense of the failure of nature: ‘Of all the things that oppress me, this sense of the evil working of nature herself—my disgust at her barbarity—clumsiness—darkness—bitter mockery of herself—is the most desolating’. In 1870 he maintained that ‘everything that has happened to me ... is little in comparison to the crushing and depressing effect on me, of what I learn day by day as I work on, of the cruelty and ghastliness of the Nature I used to think so Divine’.

Perhaps the most characteristic impulse resulting from this tension, however, was a mode of expression in which nature figured more neutrally, a mode that neither clung to the belief that it was the living garment of God, nor stressed its hostility. Tennyson, it has been argued, came to see nature as a ‘sphinx-like, dangerous, but ultimately ... mysterious external world’, a world that ‘may yet be a garment of God, but [that]... veils as much as it reveals’. For many who experienced the world in this

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63 In 1864 he proclaimed (Sesame and Lilies, vol. I, in Works, vol. XVIII, p. 67): ‘The Word of God, by which the heavens were of old, and by which they are now kept in store, cannot be made a present of to anybody in morocco binding’. In 1867 he stated (Time and Tide, in Works, vol. XVII, pp. 350–351) that he quoted the Bible only because it had been ‘the accepted guide of the moral intelligence of Europe for some fifteen hundred years; he himself now deduced principles of action ‘first from the laws and facts of nature’. Both passages quoted in Fuller, Theoria, p. 113.


way, the experience of nature no longer counted. What mattered was no longer Wordsworthian ‘natural piety’, but the humanisation of the world and the absence of God. The most obvious manifestation of this humanisation was the city, being the place from which God had been banished most completely. In the poetry of James Thomson, the city featured as a wasteland of materialistic impiety, ‘absorbed in dreams of Mammon-gain’, with ‘great throngs of people heedless’ of religion. With the rise of predominantly urban modes of living came the disintegration of the idea of the organic ‘great chain’ linking human to human to nature and to God.

One aspect of this development of ‘Godless’ urban modes of living, and the destruction of old forms of mediation, was the rise of subjectivist philosophies. Victorians were now confronted by the assumption that humanity must start with ‘the inner experience of the isolated self’, most famously expressed in Tennyson’s record of spiritual conflict, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850). The speaker in this poem not only renounces nature’s design as a source of belief in, and means of communication with, a benevolent creator, but also human reason:

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I found Him not in world or sun,
   Or eagle’s wing, or insect’s eye.
   Nor thro’ the questions men may try,
   The petty cobwebs we have spun...”
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Instead, meditation turned inward towards the self becomes the only possible form of religious consolation. Concomitantly, there are no means of allying this ‘central self’ and the modern world of the city. This self, which is also the fount of poetic inspiration, must be carefully shielded from all infringement. Miller has argued that poems such as Tennyson’s ‘The Poet’s Mind’ and ‘The Hesperides’ represent the ‘effort of self-seclusion by which the poet can remain in ever-ending possession of the sources of power deep within the self and within nature’:

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Passivity and circumscription can then become the guilty self-enclosure in aesthetic beauty of 'The Palace of Art' or the desire for complete relaxation and drifting of 'The Lotus-Eaters'... Stagnant self-enclosure can generate that state of being so poignantly expressed in 'Mariana' and in the fiftieth section of In Memoriam—a mere passive waiting for the return of the divine spirit, a waiting without hope, in utter desolation and dryness of soul. In this imprisonment of the self within itself life, deprived of all impetus, slows down almost to a stop, and the sufferer becomes painfully sensitive to the tiniest motions which remain. In this state 'the blood creeps, and the nerves prick / And tingle ... / And all the wheels of being [are] slow.'

Miller's argument could well be applied to certain passages of The Defence of Guenevere, but more particularly to the monthly 'songs' of The Earthly Paradise. At the centre of these verses appear the characters which Miller finds in much nineteenth-century literature, characters who are in doubt about their own identity and ask, 'How can I find something outside myself which will tell me who I am and give me a place in society and the universe?' The wanderers of Morris's Earthly Paradise repeat these questions in a mythological code which leads only to a more exacerbated experience of the absence of God—empty singing in an empty day. In the same way that Arnold records the self transformed into emptiness and disconnected from the world, Morris begins to wonder at the existence of the world 'beyond the four walls' of his self. And, as Miller argues that '[w]hether by going down toward the deep buried self and finding it infinitely distant, or by going up toward God, Arnold gets not possession of himself, but the final loss of all life and all joy', Morris too only finds '[t]heir death of things, that living once, were fair'. While Arnold learns that this suffering paradoxically brings him closer to God and renders him superior to oblivious, self-sufficient nature, Morris asks 'how can these have part, / These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?'

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73 For this discussion of 'the center of the self', see Miller, 'The Theme of the Disappearance of God', pp. 221-4 (quote on p. 222).
74 See the discussion of 'The Blue Closet' from The Defence of Guenevere in Chapter 4 of Section II, and of the lyric for 'November' from The Earthly Paradise in Chapter 2 of Section III below.
76 See Chapter 2 of Section III below.
77 All quotes concerning Arnold in this paragraph are from Miller, 'The Theme of the Disappearance of God', p. 215.
This redefinition of the autonomous consciousness was also associated with the appearance of a marked historical sensibility, and with its comprehension of the transitory nature of any life or culture. Miller suggests that the poetry of Browning illustrates this tendency. He argues that Browning started his poetic career with a romantic sense of the 'inexhaustible potentiality of the inner life', but that, having witnessed the failure of romantic Prometheanism, Browning chose to write dramatic monologues that 'presuppose a double awareness on the part of the author, an awareness which is the very essence of historicism'. Thus, Miller continues, Browning gave us a 'gallery of idiosyncratic individuals' in poems such as *The Ring and the Book*, which attempted '[b]y multiplying points of view' to 'transcend point of view, and reach at last God's own infinite perspective'. Unfortunately, however: 'This way of dealing with the absence of God ultimately fails because however many of these fragmentary glimpses of God we add up, we shall be no closer to the whole, or to a face to face confrontation with God'.

What is significant here, however, is that Browning was one of the earliest Victorian poets to come close to comprehending that humanity could avoid nihilism and escape into the self if it rejected dualistic thinking, and accepted that 'being and value lie in *this* world'.

This is the knowledge that Morris eventually wrested from his writing of *The Earthly Paradise*.

Nevertheless, because the attitude of historicism accompanied the failure of tradition—the failure of symbolic language, the failure of all the intermediaries between humanity and God—more commonly historicism meant 'the anguish of feeling that one is forced to carry on one's life in terms of a mockery of masks and hollow gestures'.

Certainly this is pretty close to both the form and subject of much of Morris's work, especially the masques and dream-like states of his earlier poetry. Though imbued with a strident historicism, only later did he apply it to a wider range of belief systems and so, like Browning, discover value in what is immediate, tangible and present on earth, and in the fabric of human history.

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82 As noted above, in March 1856 Morris contributed a review of Browning’s *Men and Women* (1855) to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. Although other articles contributed to this magazine reflect a Christian conscience, Morris’s review of Browning’s work ("Men and Women" by Robert
Perhaps the most critical result of all these phenomena (though also a key
component of them) was the erosion of a ‘common context’. By the 1860s most
theatologists concluded that science and religion had to be regarded as addressing
different spheres of human experience. This primary act of specialisation was
illustrated by the famous volume of articles Essays and Reviews (1860). All of the
essayists believed that while truth may ultimately be one, the truth of revelation is
known by moral experience and not by historical or scientific verification.

Alongside those who expressed the difficulties of maintaining belief, however,
were many who began to posit a new kind of sacramentalism in response to these
processes of secularisation; G.B. Tennyson has suggested that Keble’s influence re-
emerges in the later Victorian period, especially in the work of poets such as Hopkins
and Coventry Patmore.83 But if we remember that Keble and his immediate followers
were able to temper emotion with reserve in their responses to nature, such was not
always the case, or even the intention, of later Victorian nature sacramentalists.
Tennyson argues that in the same way as the ‘sober character of Tractarian worship’
was replaced by ‘the sumptuosities of the Ritualist movement’, so too ‘Tractarian
reserve in the imaginative response to nature’ was superseded by ‘more exuberant
expression’ in later writers.84

Hopkins’s work, for example, often combines intensity of religious feeling
with a vivid, ecstatic, almost swooning sense of natural beauty. In The Wreck of the
Deutschland (1875–76) he even interprets ostensibly hostile forces as representations
of God’s grace; ‘storm flakes’ are compared to ‘scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers’.85
Coventry Patmore, who was a friend of Hopkins (and became a Catholic in 1864),

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83 In Hopkins’s poetry, G.B. Tennyson (‘The Sacramental Imagination’, p. 390) finds the same dove,
the Holy Ghost, brooding ‘over the bent / World ... with warm breast and with all bright wings’
(‘God’s Grandeur’, lines 13–14), that in Keble ‘Hovers on softest wings’ over the baptismal font
(‘Holy Baptism, line 4).


85 Hopkins, The Wreck of the Deutschland, II, xxi, lines 8–9; quoted in Susan E. Lorsch, Where
Nature Ends: Literary Responses to the Designification of Landscape, Associated University Presses,
expressed similar metaphysical intimations in _Rod, Root and Flower_ (1895), and both poets were linked with Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite circle, though Hopkins only distantly.86 Morris, who fell much more under the influence of the sensual Rossetti than the sermonising Hunt or moralising Millais, had certainly been influenced by the charged, aesthetic appreciation of sanctity derived from the Oxford movement. One might argue that in relation to poems such as ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (1847) and ‘My Sister’s Sleep’ (1847) Rossetti’s work is more fittingly described as ‘religiose’, with religion not so much an inspiration in itself but more a feature of a medieval ‘dreamscape’ set up to counter the contemporary world. But there is also, both in his poetry and paintings, a sensuality of the sacred, of, for example, a dangerous, engulfing female nature, expressed in the poem ‘Lilith’, and in many of his paintings. Probably these poems, with their sense of religious awakening and drama, go beyond the boundaries of Morris’s experience of spirituality. Nevertheless, religion was definitely present as an aesthetic component of the kind of medievalism idealised and idolised by Morris and his group; it was part of the ‘culture of feeling’ considered appropriate for Morris’s earliest writing.87

This ‘culture of feeling’—with sensuality and passion an inherent part of the response to nature and religion—also opened the way to a much more unorthodox, even radical, ‘re-sacralisation’ of nature. This phenomenon also owed much to a re-emergence of certain forms of transcendentalism. Henry David Thoreau’s _Walden_, originally published in 1854, first appeared in England in 1886. Thoreau’s record of his experience of living in a self-made cabin was suffused with a pantheistic vision which considered all of nature as God’s handiwork. For Thoreau, heavily influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, contact with nature was a way of communication with God, and with oneself. The works of Thoreau, Emerson and Walt Whitman had a

86 Hopkins was a close friend and correspondent of R.W., later Canon, Dixon (Dixon, himself author of _Poems from Christ’s Company_ (1861) and a _History of the Church of England from the Abolition of the Roman Jurisdiction_ (1878–1902), was part of Morris’s Oxford circle and officiated at Morris’s wedding). Patmore had contributed to the Pre-Raphaelite _Germ_, and his work, like much other Pre-Raphaelite imagery, was heavily imbued with what might be described as a religious aestheticism. 87 See, for example, contributions to _The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine_ such as ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’ and ‘The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens’ (discussed below). Of note also is a short untitled poem Morris wrote after reading another poem of his to friends at Oxford in which he indicates that poetry ought to be written by, and be in the service of, the spiritually worthy. See _Boos, Juventilis_, p. 90.
considerable influence on much cross-Atlantic feeling about nature and religion in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1885 Morris wrote that he ‘rejoiced[d] in that nature-loving type of man’.88

The critiques produced by this ‘type of man’ most commonly influenced those already dissatisfied with Christianity and its orthodox forms. In 1874 Edward Carpenter abandoned the Anglican Church because of its ‘falsity and dislocation’ and its identification with the established social order.89 In 1877, and again in 1883, Carpenter visited Whitman, and the spiritual, sensual and passionately democratic writings of the American transcendentalists greatly influenced his subsequent publications.90 Carpenter is important here because his religious appropriation of nature (or, perhaps, natural appropriation of religion) was an inspiration to certain communitarian and socialist groups, especially the ‘back-to-the-land’ movement of the latter half of the century, and because he also directly affected Morris’s conception of what a ‘good life’ might be.91 His emphasis on the unity of living things and the environment can be seen as a reaction to the feeling of separateness felt and expressed by so many (Carpenter wrote of himself as ‘an alien, an outcast, a failure, and an object of ridicule’).92 Peter Gould has written that this feeling is symptomatic of both the mystical and introspective turn of mind of many late Victorians, and of their striving for ‘fellowship’.93 This sense of alienation can in turn partly account for the emphasis on ‘fellowship’ in the works of Carpenter and also of Morris: ‘fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell’.94

88 Morris to Edward Carpenter, 13 September 1885, in Letters, vol. II, p. 453. See also, however, Morris’s criticisms of Walden in Chapter 2 of Section IV below.
90 His series of poems entitled Towards Democracy (1883), couched in a quasi-religious language and predominantly concerned with the restoration of moral values, expressed an idiosyncratic, pantheistic communism, and have been described as a ‘popular hymn to working people, life, love and the future’ in Marsh, Back to the Land, p. 18. England’s Ideal: Papers on Social Subjects (1887) was also clearly modelled on Thoreau’s Walden, and he developed these ideas in Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1889, p. 34), where he argued that the way forward ‘is back to the lost Eden, or rather forward to the new Eden’.
91 Carpenter sent Morris a copy of Walden in 1885. For Morris’s reaction to it, and to Carpenter, see Chapter 2 of Section IV below.
92 Carpenter My Days and Dreams, p. 14. See also, for example, John Trevor’s My Quest for God (1897). Carpenter, of course, also had other reasons for feeling ‘outcast’.
There were many other declarations of the importance of ‘oneness with the whole’, often expressed indirectly by means of reference to Thoreau and Whitman. A generation of spiritualistic ‘back-to-the-landers’, who experienced ‘immense inner transformation[s]’, and ‘dawnings’ of a ‘world consciousness ... within ... [the] soul’, supported Carpenter’s prognosis of a unity between mankind, animals, mountains and constellations not as an ‘abstract dogma of Science or Theology, but as a living and ever-present fact’. Often these ideas drew directly on the pantheistic stream already established within Christian thought. Christian belief was one of the main forces behind the community movement, and a number of influential communitarians espoused notions of Christian pantheism. They argued that civilisation, with its urban squalor and industrial economy, was inimical to the exercise of Christianity, and that the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth involved bringing life closer to nature. Various other forms of Christian ‘nature religion’ also figured nature not only as a revelation of God’s workings, but as a deity itself capable of imparting strength and confidence. Others went further, claiming that it was to nature that ‘pilgrims’ to the ‘shrines’ of wild flowers made their ‘vows’ rather than to any supernatural force.

Concurrent with these more generally middle-class tensions and changes in belief, was the rejection of the orthodox teachings of the Church by growing numbers of the working classes. Many began to see the Church and its doctrines as an upper-class instrument of social control, incapable of addressing their real needs. As a

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95 See W.J. Jupp, Seed-Time, April, 1890 (a study of Whitman was published in 1890 by William Clarke).
96 Havelock Ellis (My Life, William Heinemann, London, 1940, p. 131) discussing the effects of the work of metaphysician and surgeon James Hinton.
98 Carpenter, Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure, p. 70.
102 This feeling was expressed in the work of Roden Noel, who in ‘The Red Flag’ (1872) condemned the Church for its complicity in the misery of the poor, bemoaned a religion ‘relegated to the lower orders, / A panacea for popular disorders, / A pap for babes and women’, and railed against the ‘plethoric gospel of the well-to-do’; lines 388–93, 511–13, 551–4; quoted in Thesing, The London
consequence many looked to or organised alternative belief systems or institutions to fulfil their needs, often of a far more radical, though not necessarily atheistic, nature. Some of these, such as the Chartist Land Plan and the Ruskinian ‘Guilds’, promoted a ‘back-to-the-land’ ethic which, though going out of favour in the 1850s, re-emerged later in the century to form an important strand of British socialist experience. To understand the tone of much British socialism in the second half of the century, it is necessary to acknowledge that the specific or more general substitution of a ‘grand alternative’ for a Christian God resulted largely from a dissatisfaction with orthodox Christianity and its institutional forms.\footnote{Muse, pp. 112–13.}

Many of the new or reconstituted belief systems had an important influence on Morris’s ideas about the politics of nature. Most dramatically, Morris crossed the ‘river of fire’ to the new ‘religion of socialism’. And, at the time Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) in 1883, an eclectic range of ‘New Lifers’, including Henry Salt and James Joynes, lent a decidedly esoteric or theosophic tinge to socialist endeavours.\footnote{Concurrent with this was, as Logie Barrow (‘Determinism and Environmentalism in Socialist Thought’, in Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm, eds. Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983, p. 197) has argued, a ‘highly persuasive’ if limited secularist movement that was ‘the only movement of plebeian independence to bridge the chronological gap between the middle and late nineteenth century’.} Moreover, as Stephen Yeo has indicated, many aspects of British socialism in the late nineteenth century were pervaded by a language and style of religiosity.\footnote{MacCarthy (A Life for Our Time, p. 473) discusses some of these ‘professional cranks’—not a very fair or helpful description—in her biography. See also Chapter 2 of Section IV below.} Yeo’s thesis reveals much about Morris’s understanding of nature: like the more orthodox forms of religious worship of the earlier part of the century, the ‘religion of socialism’ also took nature as a key term.

Many have noted that Morris was ‘prepared’ for socialism by various socio-ethical doctrines he encountered at Oxford. Of particular importance here are the ideas of the early-Anglican ‘Christian Socialist’ thinkers Charles Kingsley and F.D. Maurice.
Reflecting on his early life in 1883, Morris wrote that he was ‘a good deal influenced by the works of Charles Kingsley’, and had ‘got into my head therefrom some socio-political ideas which would have developed probably but for the attractions of art and poetry’.\(^\text{106}\) Kingsley’s works were ‘welcomed gladly’ by Morris’s Oxford set,\(^\text{107}\) works which included *Yeast: A Problem* (1848), the tale of a young graduate who becomes motivated to confront social injustice after encountering rural poverty.

No doubt part of the appeal of *Yeast*, for Morris at least, was its description of a landscape of ‘everlasting hills ... as they had grown and grown for countless ages ... in the milky youth of this great English land’.\(^\text{108}\) But the novel’s romantic nature description is very much of the kind that looks at *and* beyond nature, that sees a ‘mountain of Gothic spires and pinnacles’ in a yew tree’s ‘luscious fretwork of green velvet’, and finds ‘every leaf infinite and transcendental’.\(^\text{109}\) *Yeast* primarily addressed Kingsley’s concern that the ‘mass’ were ‘losing most fearfully and rapidly the living spirit of Christianity’, and signalled his opposition to ‘these Pantheist days’ when ‘authors talk as if Christians were cabbages, and a man’s soul as well as his lungs might be saved by sea-breezes and sunshine, or his character developed by wearing guano in his shoes, and training himself against a south wall’.\(^\text{110}\) Nevertheless, it has been argued that it was Kingsley’s feeling for nature and his ability to describe it that gave him his most effective means of impugning the ‘condition of England’.\(^\text{111}\) The epilogue to *Yeast* provides a striking example of the way Kingsley combined the perception of social and natural corruption:

Do not young men think, speak, act, just now, in this very incoherent, fragmentary way ... with the various stereotyped systems which they have received by tradition breaking up under them like ice in a thaw; with a thousand facts and notions which they know not how to classify, pouring in on them like a flood?—a very Yeasty state of mind altogether, like a mountain burn in a spring rain, carrying down with it stones, sticks, peat-water, addled grouse-eggs and drowned kingfishers, fertilising salts and

\(^{106}\) Morris to Andreas Schu, 15 September 1883, in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 228.


\(^{109}\) Kingsley, *Yeast*, p. 20.

\(^{110}\) Kingsley, *Yeast*, pp. 4, 10.

In many ways novels such as *Yeast, Alton Locke* (1850) and even *The Water Babies* (1863) suggested that the only way to appreciate nature and the countryside was through a concern for humanity. The connection is most explicit in *The Water Babies*, where Kingsley uses Wordsworth as an epigraph to the first chapter of his ‘fairy-tale for a land-baby’:

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think,
What man had made of man.\[13\]

MacCarthy, who argues that Morris appreciated Kingsley’s potent mix of ‘iconoclasm’, ‘courage’, and ‘concern with the right use of one’s talents and resources’, also makes the incisive comment that Kingsley was probably one of the first writers to make Morris conscious of the ‘country as it actually was’.\[14\] Thus Morris could find in Kingsley a moral, socialistic conscience that spoke out against those who, while valuing the natural beauty of the countryside, ignored the condition of the people who lived there.

There are other connections between Morris and Christian socialism. Most significantly, Morris wrote a number of letters to various clergymen in the 1880s, many shortly after his ‘conversion’ to socialism. Of these, the letters to C.E. Maurice, the son of the Christian Socialist leader, are perhaps the most important of all, though Morris also wrote at length to the Rev. George Bainton, and shorter letters to the Rev. Oswald Birchall, the Rev. William Sharman and Stopford Brooke.\[15\] A letter to Bainton of 1888 gives a particularly clear outline of Morris’s understanding of Christianity, and of what religion had come to mean to him as a socialist:

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When I use the word Christianity I do not mean some abstract idea, any more than a set of dogmatic assertions, but an historical phase through which the world of civilization has passed, or, if you will, is passing: I am quite willing to make all allowances for the clinging to tradition which such a great movement must necessarily leave behind it even when its chief function has come to an end: but I see nothing eternal in its differentia, any more than I see in Judaism Zoroastrianism or Ancestor worship, although I admit that it may and probably has embraced higher principles of action than they have. Religion to me means a habit of responsibility to something outside myself, but that something does not always clothe the claim to my responsibility in the same form: if I had lived in former times, I mean, I should have felt the responsibility, but the rules of conduct would not necessarily have been the same; or perhaps not to engage in a logomachy I should not have expressed them in the same way.116

Furthermore, in an article written for Commonweal in 1890 Morris responded to other Christian socialists by granting that ‘all religions which include a system of morality ... [have] something in common with socialism’. He continued by asserting that ‘that morality must not be founded on explanations of natural facts or a theory of life in which people have ceased to believe’.117 Nevertheless, Norman Kelvin has convincingly argued that despite Morris’s professed agnosticism, ‘his earnest searching and explication when writing to clergymen suggesting sympathies perhaps not recognised by him established a link between him and them’. Kelvin goes on to suggest that these letters provided Morris with an opportunity to formulate the definition of political action through ‘external dialogue’, and to engage in an ‘internal’ debate with himself: in other words to examine his conscience.118 It is still striking, however, that he chose this audience.

Christian Socialism was, as Yeo elaborated, a broad term covering an eclectic range of beliefs.119 Many of those with whom Morris had contact, however, were

117 Morris, ‘Correspondence Christianity and Socialism’, Commonweal, vol. VI, no. 217, 8 March 1890, p.77; in Political Writings, p. 467.
119 Yeo (‘A New Life’, p. 18) lists, for example: ‘F.D. Maurice and Anglo-catholic socialism (Kingsley, Hancock and the Guild of St. Matthew), Christ-the-working-man back-to-the-simple-origins Christianity (Conway), socialist demands with the name of religion (Glasier and Brocklehurst), a rooting of socialism in “brotherhood of man, Fatherhood of God” language (Hardie), attempts to articulate and then to organise a “new religion” arising out of the labour movement (Trevor), [and] religion based upon evolutionary determinism (Blatchford).”
Unitarians, such as the Rev. William Sharman and Joseph Edwards, Unitarians, as represented in London by the popular preacher Moncore Conway (also a member of Emerson’s Transcendental Club), stood for a liberal and ‘rational’ approach to Christianity. They rejected the ‘immoral dogmas’ of eternal punishment, inherited guilt and vicarious atonement, and opposed the ‘irrational’ concept of the Trinity. This emphasis on the unity of God also allowed access to a belief in a single spiritual deity existing within nature, rather than a transcendent God standing outside nature. Such immanentism remained rare amongst orthodox Unitarians until the close of the century, but Morris’s connections were rarely orthodox, and when he lectured at Rev. Sharman’s Unitarian Chapel in Preston in 1884, many would have deeply empathised with Morris’s definition of art as ‘beauty produced by ... the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth with all its surroundings’.

Morris’s acquaintance with socialistic clergymen does not, on its own merit, justify an emphasis on the religious dimensions of Morris’s socialism. If these were the only links between Morris and religious thought or feeling at this time, one would be wary of elevating these tendencies over the many disparaging comments he made concerning religious orthodoxy and authority. It is necessary to set such comments against the more subtle kinds of influences discussed by Yeo in his analysis of the

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120 Joseph Edwards, an active Unitarian, also became the first president of the Liverpool Fabian Society in 1892. On 5 May 1893 Morris wrote a letter of greeting and encouragement to Edwards, which was read on Labour Day at the Labour Church Service in Liverpool. This is the church that had been founded by John Trevor, who had become both a Unitarian and a socialist. Trevor founded the first Labour Church in Manchester in 1891 and later reproduced Morris’s greeting in The Labour Prophet. See Letters, vol. III, pp. 41–2n.


123 In 1888, for example, Morris (March 1888, in Letters, vol. II, p. 751) rejected an article for Commonweal, probably by W.H. Paul Campbell (editor of The Christian Socialist), on the grounds that ‘the only terms on which Christianity can avoid attack in [this] paper ... is to be non-theological’. We also know Morris was strongly influenced, and perhaps doctrinally reliant, on the intransigently atheistic Ernest Belfort Bax. See Roger Aldous, ‘Compulsory Baxination’: Morris and the Misogynist’, JWMS, vol. XII, no. 1, Autumn 1996, pp. 35–40; Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, pp. 372–5, 752–4; and entries in Morris’s Socialist Diary, such as those for 16 and 23 February 1887 (pp. 32, 37) that indicate Bax’s influence on Morris’s interpretation of Marx. See also, however, Morris’s letter to Glasier (24 April 1886, in Letters, vol. II, p. 545) in which he states that they should leave the ‘religion–education–family question’ alone during a stage of ‘transitional socialism’.
sympathies and similarities between Christians and socialists. Yeo has indicated that
the term ‘religion of socialism’ is a phrase first used in the 1885 ‘Manifesto of the
Socialist League’, co-authored by Morris and Bax.124 The ‘Manifesto’ appeared in the
first edition of Commonweal and exhorted its readers to

strive ... towards this end of realising the change towards social order, the
only cause worthy the attention of the workers of all that are proffered to
them: let us work in that cause patiently, yet hopefully, and not shrink
from making sacrifices to it. Industry in learning its principles, industry in
teaching them, are most necessary to our progress; but to these we must
add, if we wish to avoid speedy failure, frankness and fraternal trust in
each other, and single-hearted devotion to the religion of Socialism, the
only religion which the Socialist League professes.125

This extract is just one example among many of the language and style of religiosity
which surrounded the entire socialist experience. Words such as ‘evangelist’,
apostle’, ‘disciple’, ‘new birth’, ‘preaching’ and ‘gospel’ were used frequently. As
Yeo points out, the ‘anti-religious’ Morris spoke of ‘the regeneration of the conscience
of man’ as much as the ‘religious’ Hardie spoke of ‘regenerating the character of the
democracy’.126

Yeo also identifies other elements that indicate religious ‘structures of feeling’
and experience in much of the socialism of the late nineteenth century.127 Many of
these elements are relevant to Morris’s experience of socialism. The first element that
Yeo outlines as ‘an active dynamo’ is ‘the experience of the irrationality of the world’,
also singled out by Max Weber as the problematic defining and promoting religion.128
For Morris, as for many others, socialism provided a coherent structure of meaning
and belief once fulfilled by the ‘religion no longer believed in’. Boos has shown how
The Earthly Paradise, by asking ‘deep normative questions’ in ‘a world subject to
physical decay and devoid of grounds for religious faith’, eventually reveals human

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124 Yeo (‘A New Life’, pp. 5–6) states that it is Robert Blatchford, in The Labour Prophet, who
believed this to be the first use of the phrase.
1885, pp. 1–2; in Journalism, p. 8. Bax also published a book later that year entitled The Religion of
Socialism.
community as the only source of hope or grounds for faith.\textsuperscript{129} For Morris, as for many others, however, it was also a response to an irrationality experienced as life’s disparate allotment of cultural and material goods.\textsuperscript{130} In 1881, Morris told his audience at the Burslem Town Hall that he was only too aware that it was

my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings.\textsuperscript{131}

By 1883 he considered socialism a definite remedy for this state of affairs, and explained his position to C.E. Maurice:

in looking into matters social and political I have but one rule, that in thinking of the condition of any body of men I should ask myself, ‘How could you bear it yourself? What would you feel if you were poor against the system under which you live?’ I have always been uneasy when I had to ask myself that question, and of late years I have had to ask it so often, that I have seldom had it out of my mind and the answer to it has more and more made me ashamed of my own position, and more and more made me feel that if I had not been born rich or well-to-do I should have found my position unendurable, and should have been a mere rebel against what would have seemed to me a system of robbery and injustice. Nothing can argue me out of this feeling which I say plainly is a matter of religion to me; the contrast of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor.\textsuperscript{132}

By now Morris understood that ‘man makes religion, religion does not make man’, that Christianity was the ‘logic’ and ‘moral sanction’ of a world which produced ‘robbery and injustice’, and that ‘the critique of heaven’ should become ‘the critique of earth’.\textsuperscript{133}

This is not to argue that Morris acted as though the development of socialism and communism involved a complete ‘rupture with traditional ideas’. Clearly, belief in


\textsuperscript{130} Yes, ‘A New Life’, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{131} Morris, ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’, p. 171.


communism or revolution did not ‘abolish all religion’.\textsuperscript{134} Yeo suggests that many socialists of this era believed a ‘hidden hand’ to be at work; history was inevitably guiding the world towards revolution and communism (thus echoing in many ways some of the ideological inconsistencies implicit in Marx himself). Morris was particularly impressed by the historical analysis outlined in \textit{Capital} and embraced the notion of the immanent collapse of the economy under the weight of its own contradictions. In \textit{News from Nowhere}, the sage figure Hammond explains that the revolution came about because it was ‘all a matter of course, like the rising and setting of the sun’.\textsuperscript{135} Morris spoke of socialism as a ‘religion of humanity’ being reserved for ‘this age of the world’.\textsuperscript{136}

Another element mentioned by Yeo is an intensity or absolutism about commitment which was expressed as doctrine rather than prudential tactical discussion. Morris’s unwillingness to compromise, and impatience with those who advocated parliamentary socialism, led to his increasing isolation towards the end of the 1880s and into the 1890s. Even in the early 1880s he had argued that the S.D.F. should hold itself ‘aloof from every movement which has not the furtherance of socialism as its direct aim’, and warned those who invited him to speak publicly that ‘I am ... bound as by religious conviction to preach that [socialist] doctrine whenever I open my mouth in public’.\textsuperscript{137} The \textit{Workman’s Times} of 20 February 1892 described a reading and review of \textit{News from Nowhere} where ‘a religious feeling seemed to pervade the hall’ with a ‘silence ... so still and death-like that it shows a wonderful power in the book’.\textsuperscript{138} In 1883 Morris wrote that ‘the aim of Socialists should be the founding of a religion, towards which end compromise is no use, and we only want to have those with us who will be with us to the end’, although he did add that ‘if the zealots don’t take care they will blow the whole thing to the winds’.\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{134} See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, \textit{Manifesto of the Communist Party} (1848), in \textit{The Portable Karl Marx}, p. 226.
\textsuperscript{137} Morris to Sarah Anne Unwin Byles, 9 August 1883, in \textit{Letters}, vol. II, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Workman’s Times}, 20 February 1892, p. 6; quoted in Yeo, ‘A New Life’, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{139} Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, 26 August 1883, in \textit{Letters}, vol. II, p. 219.
The particular place of nature in relation to this ‘religion of socialism’ will be examined in a subsequent chapter. As one might expect, however, nature—understood as the land, countryside, agrarian communality, and properties of plants—and all those meanings attributed to the natural world in the Judeo-Christian system figure strongly in the socialist movement as inspiration, sacrament, source of meaning and salvation. Morris’s colleague in the Socialist League Edward Aveling wrote that whereas previously people had bowed before ‘vague and unreal dreams’, now they would worship the visible wonders of the world. In fact, the ‘wonders’ had previously represented those vague dreams: the socialists were often little different from the Christians in finding, reading, and deriving wonder in the world around them.

One general conclusion that can be drawn from this survey of the influence of religion on the Victorian experience of nature has been advanced by David Elliston Allen:

Thus those transcendental moments of ecstasy which earlier romantics had seen as the workings of the life-force were now reinterpreted in orthodox theistic terms. Nature’s charm was still acknowledged and valued for the benefits it brought to the human mind; but the inspiration received was no longer envisaged as sensuous and neutral, but as spiritual and prescriptive... Just as they acquired the taste for Gothic and redirected it from old and crumbling ruins to rising modern edifices, so the Victorians retained the Rousseauist view of nature and translated it into an earnest religiosity.

For Morris, however, ‘nature’s charm’ was always sensuous and rarely prescriptive, especially after he had shaken off the mild religiosity of his youth, and the ‘mournful medievalism’ of his early adulthood. More than any other piece of work, The Earthly Paradise reflects and worked out this transition. Having dismissed the ‘rich establishmentarian puritanism’ of his parents, Morris had found himself attached to a brand of aestheticism which allied nature and truth. In the pages of The Earthly Paradise we find a tempered meliorism instead of the more Christian and conventional optimism expressed in the work of his contemporaries Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins, and of the alienated grief of Arnold’s poetry.

140 E.B. Aveling, The Creed of an Atheist (n.d.); quoted in Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 18. Aveling was also author of The Student’s Darwin (1881).
In this poem Morris discovers and promises hope in natural birth and growth, in the series of small recommencements, renewals, and resurrections that form part of earthly life. Acceptance of these processes became for Morris not just an intrinsic good, but the only plausible morality.\textsuperscript{142} This did not mean that religion was replaced by nature. Nature still frightened as its starkness undercut human demands and yearnings, its vastness seemed more ‘sublime’ than beautiful, and its timelessness a ‘dread eternity’ impervious to human finitude and death.\textsuperscript{143} But Christianity emerged as one limited moral scheme among many.\textsuperscript{144} Reflecting a movement in Morris’s life, The Earthly Paradise eventually developed a stridently moral vision in which humanity knowingly bestows value upon ‘external nature’. In doing so Morris maintained the ‘faith’ that observing and staying close to nature made one a better human being. It was humanity, however, that proved the real surrogate for God. Though struggling to assert itself among a mass of doubts and reversals, the lines for The Earthly Paradise song ‘November’ clearly illustrate the move from faith to nature was not enough:

\begin{quote}
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?

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,
Strange image of the dread eternity,
In whose void patience how can these have part,
These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{141} Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{142} My reading owes much to Boas’s outline of the framework of The Earthly Paradise in her The Design of The Earthly Paradise, see especially p. 372.
\textsuperscript{143} Boas, The Design of The Earthly Paradise, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{144} Boas, The Design of The Earthly Paradise, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{145} Morris, The Earthly Paradise, vol. IV, in CW, vol. V, p. 206. Though we may not draw too much from the comparison, these lines do seem to ‘echo’ (probably unintentionally) Wordsworth’s troubled ‘dim and undetermined sense of unknown modes of being’:

\begin{quote}
o'er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
\end{quote}
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

This comparison with The Prelude (1850, lines 392–400) again reveals the similarities and
dissimilarities between Morris and the romantics. While both partake of a religious ‘structure of
feeling’, Morris does not ultimately need his thoughts and feelings—‘[t]he passions that build up our
human soul’, ‘the mean and vulgar works of man’—purified or sanctified by a higher ‘Spirit’.
Nevertheless, these similarities are striking, especially when one considers that this is Morris’s lyric
for ‘November’ which in the previous stanza compassed days when ‘smoke-tinged mist-wreaths’
descend on ‘a fair dale to make it blind and nought’, and when a silent ‘dead midnight’ becomes akin
to a ‘dreamy noon’. Wordsworth, just after the passage cited above, goes on to recall ‘November
days’: ‘When vapours rolling down the valleys made / A lonely scene more lonesome, among woods / At noon, and ’mid the calm of summer nights’ (lines 16–19).
3. The place of Homer taken by Huxley

Although, for Morris at least, nature provided no real surrogate for God, certain interpretations of nature could and did provide many with an alternative way of understanding the world. Scientific explanation, in particular, was accorded increasing validity as it ‘touched the imagination by its tangible results’. One has only to consider the enormous impact of Darwin’s theory of evolution and the immeasurable consequences of technology on material civilisation to recognise the broad and profound influence of scientific thought in the Victorian era. In 1926 Beatrice Webb asked:

who will deny that the men of science were the leading British intellectuals of that period; that it was they who stood out as men of genius with international reputations; that it was they who were the self-confident militants of the period; that it was they who were routing the theologians, confounding the mystics, imposing their theories on the philosophers, their inventions on capitalists, and their discoveries on medical men; whilst they were at the same time snubbing the artists, ignoring the poets, and even casting doubts on the capacity of politicians?

Though many, including Morris, were not as expansive in their enthusiasm as this ‘scientific’ Fabian, Webb’s views certainly conjure something of the attention and gravity accorded to scientific endeavour in the Victorian era. And though, again like many, Morris initially resisted the challenge to faith implied by this work, he acquiesced eventually to its all conquering tangibility: he often looked at the details of nature in a way similar to the natural scientists; he argued that morality should not be

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2 Although it is necessary to acknowledge that much Victorian science was a contemporary expression of ideas which reached back several hundred years, the expansion and expression of scientific culture in the nineteenth century as a distinct body of knowledge, and as a paradigm for other intellectual pursuits, has been well documented. Heyck’s chapter on ‘The Impact of Science on Victorian Intellectual Life’, in his The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England (pp. 81–119), provides a succinct statement of these developments, particularly regarding the impact of science on the universities. George W. Stocking’s Victorian Anthropology, The Free Press, New York, 1987, also provides an excellent historical outline and ‘multiple contextualisation’ of Victorian evolutionary ideas. Other useful works include the previously cited Victorian Science and Victorian Values, Nature and the Victorian Imagination, Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians, Between Science and Religion, The Naturalist in Britain, and the chapter ‘Darwin’ in Woodring’s Nature into Art (pp. 173–203), as well as William Irvine, Apes, Angels and Victorians: The Story of Darwin, Huxley and Evolution, McGraw Hill, New York, 1972 (1955).
based on ‘explanations of natural facts’ that people had ceased to believe;⁴ and while he wrote that railways were ‘ABOMINATIONS’,⁵ he made extensive use of the lines laid and expanded by remarkable feats of applied science and engineering. Morris believed that in the 1860s ‘the place of Homer ... [had been] taken by Huxley’.⁶

Morris might have overstated the case, but the tensions created by the ‘progress’ of science undoubtedly stimulated some of the most important questions asked about the Victorians’ place in nature, and Morris’s work can be read as an attempt to answer some of these questions. It is essential, therefore, to underline some of the ways in which a scientific perspective may have affected Morris’s culture of nature. In doing so it is necessary to understand that Morris took no direct or particular interest in developments in the scientific community, but that through the changing face of the landscape, his subscription to the leading periodicals of the era, visits to museums, the influence of writers such as Ruskin and Tennyson, and his membership of various societies and committees (many of which had leading scientific figures such as Darwin and Sir James Lubbock as members), Morris had to grapple with a change in nature’s ‘laws’.

It is possible to discern a number of ways in which science affected Victorian conceptions of nature: by the triumph of scientific over theological views of natural phenomena; by the institutionalisation and professionalisation of the ‘natural sciences’; by the extension of scientific knowledge, and the scientific model of inquiry, to other intellectual pursuits and the cultural functions of knowledge in general; and by the impact of science-derived technologies upon landscape and reso
and, most notably, of Darwinian biologists. It can also be seen in the promotion of science as a paradigm for all other kinds of intellectual endeavour, and in the dissemination and popularisation of science in lectures, journals and amateur associations and activities. In this chapter I shall first outline major tendencies within the sciences, and then explore the wider consequences of these developments.

Victorian scientific concepts of nature rested to a large degree on the teachings of natural theology, and thus it is important to acknowledge the continuing influence of a religious culture of nature, even where it would seem most unlikely. Natural theologians believed that the universe consisted of elaborately interwoven parts constituting a ‘Great Chain of Being’, and that this ‘chain’ had been designed by a beneficent ‘deity’.8 In the Victorian era, William Paley’s *Natural Theology; Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) was the foremost example of this way of perceiving nature, with his work exerting a profound influence on scientific thinking well into the nineteenth century.9 Though his ideas were increasingly given a more secular emphasis, it is characteristic of the whole nineteenth-century scientific project that natural phenomena tended to be understood as part of a unified, albeit complex, whole.

Thus in chemistry, although new elements were ‘discovered’ throughout the century, the most prominent exponents stridently affirmed the unity of nature. In 1809 Humphry Davy asserted that ‘Nature infinitely complicated in the minute details of her operations when well investigated is always found wonderfully simple in the grand mechanism of her works’.10 The discovery that organic and inorganic matter were subject to the same chemical laws effectively corroborated Davy’s predictions, and

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9 In *Natural Theology; Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802) Paley argued: ‘The marks of design are too strong to be gotten over. Design must have had a designer. That designer must have been a person. That person is God’; quoted in David B. Wilson, ‘Concepts of Physical Nature: John Herschel to Karl Pearson’, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, p. 205.
meant analogies could be drawn between these formerly separate realms, thus allowing a dual expansion and constriction of the ‘rich economy of Nature’. Similar interpretations characterised the field of physics. Although the physicist and astronomer John Herschel held that the study of nature began with an ‘enumeration’ of nature’s content, he believed that it led on to the formulation of a ‘general and systematic view’, and ultimately the perception of ‘order and design’ imposed by a Deity. His *Outlines of Astronomy* (1849), which followed his cataloguing of binary stars, nebulae and clusters at the Cape of Good Hope in the 1830s, remained a highly popular scientific work throughout the nineteenth century. That is not to say that the physical conception of nature did not undergo substantial changes during the Victorian era. Rather, as David Wilson has argued, Herschel’s evidences of ‘order and design’ in nature were replaced by theories of a physical force that, though increasingly sceptical and secular, was still unified.11

Perhaps the most visible, and controversial, of Victorian physical sciences, however, was geology.14 Although William Buckland’s explanations of erosion and sedimentation by ‘catastrophe’ and ‘deluge’ were still adhered to by many, Victorian views on the composition and history of the earth were really founded on Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth’s Surface, by Reference to Causes now in Operation*, published in three volumes between 1830 and 1833.15 Following upon the earlier work of James Hutton,

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14 R.H. Super (‘The Humanist at Bay: The Arnold–Huxley Debate’, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, p. 236) has argued that the results of scientific theorising and experiments struck the public more forcefully in the Victorian era than ever before ‘partly because the doctrine of evolution could be expressed in a language widely comprehensible (as Newtonian physics, for example, could not), and partly because the broadening of the educational base among the people was very much the work of those dedicated to natural science’.
15 For example, in his 1835 poem ‘A Tour Through France to Chamonix’, Ruskin, a former student of Buckland (along with Thomas Arnold, Charles Lyell and John Henry Newman) followed his former master’s theories (though Buckland himself would announce his adherence to the uniformitarian model only a year later).
Lyell’s first volume contained a vigorous indictment of catastrophism, and the argument that geological phenomena could be explained in terms of natural processes operating gradually over long periods of time, a concept he termed ‘uniformitarianism’. The second volume (1832) dealt with physical processes, such as the behaviour of rivers and volcanoes, and introduced new terms such as ‘metamorphic’ to describe changes observed within nature. By the time the third volume emphasising stratigraphy and palaeontology appeared in 1833, second editions of the first two volumes had already been published, and the work appeared in modified versions through until 1875.

Lyell’s popularity with the Victorians was due in large part to his lucid style.\(^{16}\) His discussion was comprehensive, he included a wealth of detail, and he consistently explained geologic phenomena by relating them to processes which the Victorians could see in action around them. The favourable reception of Lyell’s work registered a major shift in opinion, and brought the reading public face to face with what Tennyson called the ‘terrible Muses’ of geology and astronomy.\(^{17}\) Among this public was Darwin, who was deeply impressed by Lyell’s depiction of the vastness of geologic time, and who remembered Lyell’s work when he came to establish a framework for his theory of evolution.

Thus it was in the 1830s, the decade in which Morris was born, that many were forced to confront a new view of nature that emphasised the vastness of time, space and creation.\(^{18}\) At first, even though chemists, physicists and geologists suggested the linkage between one order of creatures and another, and ideas of evolution suggested that Adam had not been created literally by the hand of God and in God’s image, the threat to human dignity and status was not overwhelming. Yet by the mid-1830s most professional geologists were convinced that the Flood was untenable as science.\(^{19}\) There followed a period of similarly startling ‘revelations’. In

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\(^{16}\) According to Dennis R. Dean ("Through Science to Despair": Geology and the Victorians, in Victorian Science and Victorian Values, p. 114), Victorians ‘bought and read his book as if it was a novel’.


\(^{18}\) In certain respects this view of nature echoed romantic sensibility. Compare, for example, Wordsworth’s ‘enormous permanences of nature’ discussed in Chapter 1 above.

\(^{19}\) Adam Sedgwick recanted in 1831, G.B. Greenough in 1834, and William Buckland in 1836.
1840 Louis Agassiz formally announced his theory that there had been a great ‘Ice Age’, and this was supervened in 1842 by Richard Owen’s equally shocking work on the ‘terrible lizards’, whose large fossil bones were unearthed in southern England in the 1820s.\textsuperscript{20} Owen’s work, and personality, influenced popular conceptions of geology throughout the 1840s and 1850s, with both Carlyle and Dickens going out of their way to meet him.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, in 1844 Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* caused great controversy by acknowledging no creator except time, and raising once again, but more stridently than before, the likelihood that humanity was related to the primates of Africa.\textsuperscript{22}

Hence, by the mid-nineteenth century, many scientific theories, along with the historical criticism of the Bible mentioned above,\textsuperscript{21} had chipped away at both Christian and romantic views of the universe. Considered as units, rather than synthesis, each of the major points that would be enumerated by Darwin had been anticipated:\textsuperscript{24} there had been ‘Origins without Evolution’ and ‘Evolution before Darwin’.\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, the *mortal* damage to natural theology, as the system which still substantially governed popular ideas about nature, did not come until the publication in 1859 of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, or perhaps even until *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871. These works not only revolutionised the way Victorians imagined nature, but also the way they imagined themselves within the natural world, raising fundamental questions about the nature of self and society, as well as religion.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{20} Dinosaur remains were discovered in Sussex in 1822 by Dr Gideon Mantell, who named them *Iguanodon* or ‘iguana tooth’. At about the same time, other fossil teeth and bones were found near Oxford by Buckland. These were called *Megalosaurus* or ‘great lizard’.

\textsuperscript{21} Carlyle in 1842 and Dickens in 1843; see Dean, ‘Through Science to Despair’, p. 119.

\textsuperscript{22} Woodring, *Nature into Art*, p. 177.

\textsuperscript{23} See Chapter 2 above.

\textsuperscript{24} Woodring (*Nature into Art*, pp. 179–80) points out that Erasmus Darwin had tentatively questioned the permanence of design and of species, Lamarck had read fossil evidence and modification by breeders as indicating the transmutation of species, Chambers believed the idea of vestiges no longer functional, and Patrick Matthews had anticipated him by enunciating the principle of change in organisms from change in circumstances.


\textsuperscript{26} George Levine (*Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science Fiction in Victorian Fiction* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, p. 1) has written that ‘Darwin’s theory thrust the human into nature and time, and subjected it to the same dispassionate and material investigations hitherto reserved for rocks and stars’.
Darwin’s hypotheses of evolution by means of natural selection was an account of the development of species which many Victorians found compelling because it conformed to their experience of a changing, progressive, and highly competitive world. But the evidence of the operation of chance, brutality, suffering and extinction also challenged the view of the universe held by many Victorians because it destroyed the reverent and sacred image of the world necessary for natural theology.\textsuperscript{27} When Bishop Samuel Wilberforce taunted Huxley with descent from an ape in 1860, he evidently regarded the suggestion as in fact a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} of the whole case for Darwinism.\textsuperscript{28} But when the \textit{Origin} was followed by \textit{The Descent of Man}, the Victorians found themselves not merely ‘a little lower than the angels’ but part of an ‘emergent world of change’. Nature could no longer be either the supposedly static world of ‘field and forest’, or the direct expression of God’s will.\textsuperscript{29}

Darwin’s work refracted throughout the scientific world, with physicists particularly keen to disallow a separate domain of accident for biology.\textsuperscript{30} Darwin had announced the origin of species to be the absence of law and this emphasis produced a worried insistence upon law and order in its wake, such as the Duke of Argyll’s \textit{The Reign of Law} (1866) and \textit{The Unity of Nature} (1884).\textsuperscript{31} Others attempted to effect a compromise between the theory of natural selection emphasising chance, and philosophies of nature emphasising purpose. In 1872 William Carpenter attacked the idea of natural laws as \textit{vera causa} in a presidential address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science entitled ‘Man the Interpreter of Nature’. Carpenter thought it necessary to draw a distinction between the order of nature described in terms of scientific law, and the agency producing that order, and warned that when science assumed ‘to take the place of Theology’ it would provoke ‘the hostility of those who ought to be his best friends’.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{27} Heyck, \textit{The Transformation of Intellectual Life}, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{28} Irvine gives a good account of this debate in his \textit{Apes, Angels and Victorians}, pp. 3–7.
\textsuperscript{31} Woodring, \textit{Nature into Art}, p. 181.
The most vigorous defender of evolution against this kind of hostility was Huxley, whose work helped to define science and the human place in nature for the literate public.\textsuperscript{31} In \textit{Man's Place in Nature} (1863) Huxley posed one of the most serious, pressing and profound 'question of questions' for the Victorians:

the ascertainment of the place which Man occupies in nature and of his relations to the universe of things. Whence our race has come; what are the limits of our power over nature, and of nature's power over us; to what goal are we tending; are the problems which present themselves anew and with undiminished interest to every man born into the world.\textsuperscript{44}

Huxley's answer, motivated largely by Owen's denial that the \textit{Origin} applied to human beings, was that the closest relatives of humans are the anthropoid apes. He supported this work with lectures and speeches throughout the 1860s. In November 1868 he lectured in Edinburgh 'On the Physical Basis of Life', a lecture that was subsequently published in the \textit{Fortnightly Review} and provoked a storm of criticism in one of the more philosophically inclined quarterlies of the time, the \textit{Contemporary Review}. Over the next four to five years Huxley was forced to defend his thesis, and from 1869 to the mid-1870s waged a strenuous battle in the periodical press.

There is no evidence to suggest that Morris read \textit{Man's Place in Nature} or to indicate that he attended any of Huxley's lectures, though he may have glanced over articles published in the above mentioned reviews. Nevertheless, it is Huxley that Morris focused upon as the paradigmatic 'man of science', and Huxley who most stridently defended evolution at a time when Morris most probably underwent a crisis of faith and a fundamental re-evaluation of the processes of history and of the human relationship to 'external nature'. Much of this tension surfaced in Morris's written


works of the period, particularly *The Earthly Paradise*, the unpublished *Novel on Blue Paper*, and his Icelandic diaries.\textsuperscript{15}

Morris appears to have understood that Huxley believed science should replace religion as a way of understanding both human and natural history; and that religion was the result of human inability to understand natural phenomena in the conditions of primitive culture. He also apprehended that the spread of a scientific mentality, as well as the accumulation of knowledge, was for Huxley the way of the future, bound to extend itself into every area of thought.\textsuperscript{16} The scientific paradigm that Huxley espoused was quite different from that used by other Victorian writers whom Morris admired. Whereas Carlyle and Macaulay most often took their predominant structure from history or biography, Huxley used chronology sparingly. Where Ruskin, Newman and Swinburne used description and discursive logic to argue a logical point or a symbolic insight, Huxley emphasised experiment and observation in the service of scientific logic, utilising the atemporal, the ahistorical and the impersonal.\textsuperscript{17} I argue below that *The Earthly Paradise* can be read as a reaction to this emphasis.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet there was another side to the work of these scientists that Morris could have appreciated and assimilated. Huxley’s scientifically nurtured sense of analogy and syncrude also managed to provide specific passages, and sometimes whole essays, of singular representational clarity and unusual poetic quality.\textsuperscript{19} It has been argued that Huxley’s description of plants on the River Medway has a greater sense of ‘locale, immediacy and vigour’ than Darwin’s more famous ‘entangled bank’.\textsuperscript{20} That Morris read Huxley’s ‘Lacinularia Socialis’ (1851) is highly unlikely, but Morris’s ‘Medway’, an indigo-discharged textile design registered in 1885, shows a similar understanding.

\textsuperscript{15} See Chapters 2 and 4 of Section III below.
\textsuperscript{18} See Chapter 2 of Section III below.
of the vigour, complexity and community of nature’s forms. Fishing on another tributary of the Thames in 1888, Morris noticed

the bank being still very beautiful with flowers; the long-purples [loosestrife] & willow herb [great willow herb], and that strong-coloured yellow flower very close & buttony [tansy? fleabane?] are the great show: but there [is] a very pretty dark blue flower, I think mug-wort [figwort?], mixed with all that besides the purple blossom of the horse mint & mouse-curr & here and there a bit of meadow-sweet belated.

Perhaps more than any other Victorian, Huxley made the Victorian imagination vividly aware of its material framework and drew out some of the implications for individuals and for society in his essays on scientific subjects. Certainly Morris, though his materialism issued from a variety of sources, saw Huxley’s work on the physical basis of life as a new means of relating history. By the time he wrote *News from Nowhere* in 1890, Morris acknowledged physicality in a direct and unembarrassed way, to the extent that one reviewer railed against Morris in a way that might have been reserved for Huxley twenty years earlier:

In sober truth the very pith of the scheme is materialistic... Animal love and animal beauty, ‘the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life’, are very volcanoes, breeding eruption and riot; burning fiercely, they scorch, and may not always be quenched by being let loose.

The ideas and arguments of scientists such as Huxley were able to reach and influence a largely non-scientific person such as Morris because science had, by the

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42 MacCarthy (*A Life for Our Time*, p. 445) has anticipated my suggestion, but instead compares Morris to Darwin, when she refers to Morris’s river chintzes in general: ‘They show Morris at his most thoroughly Victorian: the brother of Darwin in his botanical precision, the scientific exactness of vision; the cousin of Browning in his build-up of complexities of meaning. These are not merely patterns... they are packed, poetic commentaries, edgy intimations of the stretches of the river that had meant so much to Morris since he was a child’. Her ascription of ‘scientific exactness of vision’ to Morris goes further perhaps than I would allow.
1860s, ‘arrived’ as a respectable discipline and profession. In the 1850s scientists had made great efforts toward professionalism, involving not only their intellectual emancipation from theology but also their social and financial independence from aristocratic patronage.\(^ {45}\) This extensive organisational activity gave expression to their collective identification, and helped to promote their intellectual and material interests.\(^ {46}\) As the centre of much of this new intellectual and social activity, the ‘man of science’ became a collaborative thinker with a public life and professional status: a noteworthy and influential symbol of the new age, with an almost priestly power to interpret nature.

As part of the move for greater funding and prestige, scientists naturally sought to gain admittance to the universities. This led to substantial reforms at Oxford and Cambridge as well as the establishment of a number of technical universities. Honours courses in the natural sciences were introduced while Morris was at Oxford, and the number of university positions in science and technology grew from about sixty in 1850 to more than four hundred in 1900. In 1860 Oxford established a Science Museum and in 1872 the Clarendon Laboratory, while Cambridge followed with the Cavendish Laboratory in 1874.\(^ {47}\) Perhaps most significantly, religious tests were abolished at both Oxford and Cambridge in 1871 (Morris had thought twice about taking his B.A. in 1856 because of the Oxford rule of compulsory subscription to the articles of faith of the Church of England).\(^ {48}\) By the end of the century, scientists were fully entrenched in the universities, arguably to the detriment of their relevance to a wider society.\(^ {49}\) Morris’s Socialist League colleague Edward Aveling, who wrote a number of scientific books and pamphlets and was therefore a possible source of information for Morris, had also been a zoologist with a fellowship at University College, London.


The ‘rise of science’ involved not only the defeat of religious orthodoxy and the proliferation of scientific posts, but also the spread to other fields of the scientific ideal of knowledge and its acquisition. Huxley, in the opening number of the new journal *Nature*, defined the development of science as ‘the progress of that fashioning by Nature of a picture of herself, in the mind of man’. This correlation of science and mind had extraordinary consequences for Victorian intellectual life and education. In 1868 Huxley contended:

That man, I think, has had a liberal education who ... does with ease and pleasure all the work that, as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine with all its parts of equal strength, and in smooth working order ... whose mind is stored with a knowledge of the great and fundamental truths of Nature and the laws of her operations...

Matthew Arnold, in his role as educationist, also appreciated that science ‘in the widest sense of the word, meaning a true knowledge of things as the basis of our operations’, was becoming such ‘a power in the world’ that ‘the weight of the nations and men who have carried the intellectual life farthest will be more and more felt’—the place of Greece was to be taken by Britain.

Corresponding to the new educational institutions, academic faculties and professional societies, science also found public expression in popular lecture series given by the most prominent scientists of the day. Victorians flocked to see Faraday, Tyndall, Davy and Lyell, and later Huxley’s lectures on protoplasm, materialism, cerebral injury and the mind–matter controversy. These events played an important role in expanding the middle-class public’s interest in philosophical and scientific issues. As a result, Victorians could not only witness the outcome but also participate in the discussion of both a scientific and, what amounted to, a social revolution.

Other sources of scientific information for the Victorians were the exhibitions and museums that proliferated in this era. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was one climax of this phase, representing the ‘visible triumph of Useful Knowledge’. But museums and public exhibitions made science visible in still other ways. The opening of the British Museum’s mineral collection in 1869, and the foundation of new establishments like the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, displayed an array of unfamiliar objects assembled from all over the world and introduced the important ‘innovation’ of providing accurate explanations and descriptions. This modification, which transformed the museum from a private reserve of curiosities into a centre of public education, made institutions such as the Museum of Practical Geology on Jermyn Street in Piccadilly valuable tools for instruction in the sciences. It also reflected and reinforced changing conceptions of the natural world in more subtle ways, requiring its visitors to retrace, or ‘perform’, evolutionary development in specific itineraries. Yet, although Rossetti encountered ‘the mummy of a buried faith’ at the British Museum, the South Kensington art collections remained more to Morris’s taste.

One of the ways in which Morris would have been forced to confront contemporary scientific ideas was in his reading of papers and periodicals. Several hundred of these flourished in England during the Victorian period, and many provided an effective public forum for the discussion of science and its influence on society. Book reviews were a common means of exchanging controversial scientific ideas, and the discussions were often lively and erudite. These occurred both in specialised journals such as The Zoologist and Natural History Review, as well as more general papers and periodicals, such as The Athenaeum, Macmillan’s Magazine and the Fortnightly Review.

One of the most significant publications to arise during this era was the weekly scientific journal *Nature*, often considered a critical juncture of Victorian culture. First published in November 1869, *Nature* evolved from a previous ‘Review of Literature, Science, and the Arts’ entitled *The Reader*, which had brought together such luminaries as Huxley, Darwin, Tyndall, F.D. Maurice, W.M. Rossetti, Kingsley and Ruskin. *Nature*, though without regular discussions of literature and the arts, aimed to mediate between increasingly diverse and sometimes antagonistic segments of Victorian society—between scientists and artists, between professional scientists and interested amateurs, between scientific generalists and specialists, and between specialists in different fields: ‘to place before the general public the grand results of Scientific Work and Scientific Discovery, and to urge the claims of Science to a more general recognition in Education and in Daily Life’.  

There is no evidence to suggest that Morris read any edition of the weekly *Nature*, but it is pertinent to note that the journal, which appeared at the time Morris was publishing, writing and editing the four volumes of *The Earthly Paradise*, represents in some ways an attempt to conflate the vision of Homer and Huxley. In the first issue Huxley opened with a controversial article, a translation of Goethe’s romantic ‘Aphorisms on Nature’, intended, perhaps, to achieve the journal’s aim of stimulating discussion between scientists and the general public. Huxley’s praise of Goethe’s rhapsodic pantheism probably startled both his public and professional audience, but he directed the response back to that audience by urging them to

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59 Quoted in Roos, ‘The “Aims and Intentions” of *Nature*’, p. 165. Susan Faye Cannon (*Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*, Dawson, Science History Publications, New York, 1978, especially chapter nine) has argued that the publication of *Nature* coincided with the recognition among scientists of the impossibility of maintaining a single norm of truth, and thus can be understood as marking ‘the demise of the truth-complex’ and the acceptance of a relativistic attitude towards culture. Roos (pp. 159–61) maintains, however, that the founders, editors and contributors to *Nature* understood their ‘aims and intentions’ to be cohesive.
consider whether their own ‘scientific’ understanding of nature would outlast that of Goethe (the ‘truth’ Goethe reveals being that nature resists attempts to reduce it to ‘science’). Thus, in effect, Huxley was warning his readers that science can never fully reveal ‘the wonder and the mystery of Nature’, and that ‘some intuitive and affective response to nature must always supplement any method of explanation’.61

Another connection between Morris’s concept of nature and contemporary scientific ideas lay in the continuation and proliferation into the Victorian era of the eighteenth-century interest in field study. As mentioned above, natural history study offered the evangelical character a wide range of outlets for its expression, and Victorian enthusiasts produced astonishing displays of intellectual and physical stamina.62 Amateur collectors and cataloguers amassed a wealth of material and, with the improvement and expansion of roads and the advent of the railway,63 developments in instrumentation,64 and the publication of a number of massive and invaluable reference works,65 the task of the naturalist-collector was made easier, more effective and accurate. As a young child, it appears that Morris was an ‘expert’ on silkworms, fished for pike and perch in the ‘moat’ by the family home, and collected snail shells and birds’ eggs on long ‘rambles’ through the countryside.66 In adult life Morris remained an enthusiastic rambler and fisher, keenly observing the life of the meadows and river banks. Though his collecting activities were largely confined to books and

62 See Chapter 2 above.
63 While, for example, it took eleven hours for the palaeontologist Gideon Mantell to travel to London from Sussex in 1821, a few years later—after the spur in road improvement under the influence of the new surfacing methods of Macadam and others—he could do the same journey in less than half the time. But it was improvements to secondary roads, rather than major highways, which brought the countryside within reach of the towns, and which set off the first ‘invasion’ of amateur botanists who began the craze of collecting everything from fish to ferns. Later in the century a similar ‘revolution’ was affected by the arrival of bicycles. In addition, it has been argued that stage-coach travel provided an important preliminary visual survey for mappers, a fruitful, if unexpected, way of netting insects for entomologists, and a convenient way of pressing plants (under seat cushions) for botanists! See Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, pp. 122–3, 224 ff.
64 Indeed Allen argues that these developments were so effective during the Victorian era that they were in danger of proving ‘lethal’. See Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, pp. 141–57.
65 For example: George Montagu’s Ornithological Dictionary (1801), which transformed the study of birds; A.H. Haworth’s Lepidoptera Britannica (1803–28), which was the first comprehensive account of British butterflies and moths; and James Edward Smith’s English Flora (1824–28), which set a new standard for works on plants. See Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, pp. 94 ff.
manuscripts, a number of these were herbals which he poured over for inspiration in his dyeing and design work.\textsuperscript{66} It could be argued that Morris's designs and drawings of flowers and foliage constitute a thoughtfully compiled, idiosyncratic catalogue of (largely) British flora: in many ways a Morrisian herbal.

Equally central to the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for natural history was the natural history field club, founded in most towns and cities in the 1820s and 1830s. The interests and activities of these multiple and diverse groups were also an important source of the drive for the protection of nature, 'an inversion of the previous collecting tradition',\textsuperscript{67} which in the 1860s developed into a broader concern for conservation. These nature protectionists joined an allied, but separate, amenity movement that had emerged to lobby and coordinate a wide range of voluntary efforts to 'save' 'open spaces', such as Epping Forest, Hampstead Heath and other London commons. When Morris joined the Commons Preservation Society and the Kyre Society in the 1870s, and later the Selborne Society, he could count himself among the ranks of such renowned 'amateur' naturalists as Sir John Lubbock, George John Shaw-Lefèvre, and James Bryce. Along with the emerging creed of 'vitalism' (largely a convergence of religious ideas and evolutionary theory), the activities of these naturalists helped to underpin the movement for social reform later in the century. Similarly, Kingsley's insistence on the cooperative rather than competitive workings of nature, and Ruskin's 'Law of Help', reiterated by Morris and many others, stood as forerunners to the interest in ecology and in the social behaviour of animals.\textsuperscript{68} Though Morris was always more interested in issues related to the human benefits resulting from environmental protection, he was still a part of this intertwining structure of people and organisations which in some part sprang from the concerns of naturalists.

The impact of scientific views of nature ranged far beyond the ever-increasing boundaries of science. During the Victorian era, the scientific model of knowledge and inquiry affected many other intellectual endeavours, helping to re-shape the cultural function and meaning of knowledge. Perhaps most significantly, post-Darwinian

\textsuperscript{66} See Chapter 3 of Section III below.
\textsuperscript{67} Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, p. 196.
\textsuperscript{68} See Allen, The Naturalist in Britain, pp. 195–206.
science delivered severe blows to natural theology, not just as a theological position, but also as an umbrella for knowledge in general. This overthrow was even accepted by most theologians, who concluded that science and religion addressed different realms of human experience. In 1860 the volume Essays and Reviews reiterated this conclusion, explaining that the Bible was not meant to explain the physical world. This ‘erosion’ of the ‘common context’ of public discourse freed nature to be interpreted in a variety of new ways. The extension and growing prestige of scientific method resulted in claims to science arising in many other areas, with significant repercussions for the understanding of nature.

John Stuart Mill’s chief praise of Jeremy Bentham was that he had applied the empirical methods of science to the study of society; and it was this mode of thought that produced the idea of the ‘social sciences’. The evolutionary social theory which emerged in the second half of the century was largely the outcome of tension between positivistic attitudes to science and a romantic reading of history which made philosophical radicalism seem inadequate. Mill’s study of ‘Nature’ reflected these trends. In an essay written in the 1850s but not published until 1874, he argued that nature was essentially inimical to ‘mankind’. He observed that natural forces ‘are often towards man in the position of enemies, from whom he must wrest, by force and ingenuity, what little he can for his own use’; and went on to emphasise that humanity should not set out to participate in a nature characterised by ‘superfluous disregard both of mercy and of justice’. Thus Mill concluded that the duty of humanity was not to cooperate with nature but to bend it to its own will. Morris read Mill shortly after joining the Democratic Federation, and was particularly effected by his ‘Chapters on Socialism’, published posthumously in the Fortnightly Review. It was Mill’s arguments, contrary to Mill’s intentions, which convinced Morris ‘that Socialism was a

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70 See, for example, Baden Powell’s chapter, ‘On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity’, in Essays and Reviews, by Frederick Temple, H.B. Wilson et al., John W. Parker & Son, London, 1860, pp. 94–144.
71 Young discusses this ‘erosion’ in ‘Natural Theology, Victorian Periodicals, and the Fragmentation of the Common Context’, pp. 13–25. Heyck (The Transformation of Intellectual Life, pp. 82, 114) has argued that, ironically, later in the century, science would to some extent suffer a similar fate.
necessary change', and much of Morris’s later work can be read as a rebuttal of Mill’s anti-cooperative bent.\textsuperscript{74} In 1887 he stated that ‘knowledge of the continuity of history’ taught that ‘the intellect of man works cooperatively and collectively’.\textsuperscript{75} To Morris’s mind, ‘a man who would use such a phrase as “natural monopoly” might presently talk about “dry water” without astonishing us much’.\textsuperscript{76}

Perhaps the crudest way of deriving an ethical and political theory from evolutionary sociology was to deduce it from the putative mechanisms of evolution, such as natural selection. This was essentially the method of Social Darwinists: progress only follows the operation of certain laws; thus to ensure continued progress those laws must be allowed free operation. In this regard, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a marked change in the methods and intentions of sociological study as it took evolutionary social theory as its key concept.\textsuperscript{77} In January 1890 an article by Huxley ‘On the Natural Inequality of Men’ appeared in the journal *Nineteenth Century*, followed in the February issue by ‘Natural Rights and Political Rights’.\textsuperscript{78} Morris’s colleague at the Socialist League Andreas Scheu vociferously opposed Huxley’s social Darwinian stance in the March edition of *Commonweal*, and Morris sent Scheu a letter indicating that he ‘entirely agreed’ with his rebuttal.\textsuperscript{79}

As a Marxist, of course, Morris accepted the idea of social and cultural evolution and the importance of historical understanding. He welcomed ‘the growth of ages’, and objected to the way in which the ‘opponents’ of socialism were ‘trying consciously to stay that very evolution at the point which it has reached to-day ... attempting to turn the transient into the eternal’. He believed that history had ‘lessons’ and that it gave ‘both encouragement and warning which we cannot afford to disregard’. ‘The hopes of the industrialism of the future’, he argued, ‘are involved in

\textsuperscript{74} See Morris, ‘How I Became a Socialist’, p. 277; and Chapter 2 of Section IV below.
\textsuperscript{75} Morris, ‘Artist and Artisan As an Artist sees it’, *Commonweal*, vol. III, no. 87, 10 September 1887, p. 291; in *Political Writings*, p. 277.
\textsuperscript{76} A comment by Morris upon Arthur Arnold’s quotation of Mill, in ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, vol. IV, no. 154, 22 December 1888, p. 401; in *Journalism*, p. 494.
\textsuperscript{77} Burrow’s *Evolution and Society* provides an overview of these developments.
its struggles in the past. Such 'struggles' had 'built up the present system, and placed us amidst its struggle towards change, have really forced us whether we will it or not, to help forward that change'.80 But Morris rejected any system that preached the instantaneous application of the doctrine of survival of the fittest to capitalist enterprise and imperial expansion. He condemned the solutions worked out in Podsnap's office, and warned that 'civilization' was 'threatened with a danger of her own breeding: that men in struggling towards the complete attainment of all the luxuries of life for the strongest portion of their race should deprive their whole race of all the beauty of life'.81 Many, however, acceded to a more positivist view of human social development. It has been argued that much Fabian thought was as firmly wedded to positivism as to gradualism.82 In a review of Fabian Essays on Socialism (1890), Morris regretted the 'opportunism' and 'municipal socialism of Mr Sydney Webb' that was so anxious to prove the commonplace that our present industrial system embraces some of the machinery by means of which a Socialist system might be worked, and that some of the same machinery is used by present municipalities, and the bureaucratic central government, that his paper tends to produce the impression of one who thinks that we are already in the first stages of socialistic life.83

Wishing that George Bernard Shaw 'could only forget the Sydney-Webbian permeation tactic', he predicted: 'In times to come we shall need no social philosopher to tell us that if we cannot make our work attractive we shall still be slaves, even though we have no master but Nature'.84

82 Burrow (Evolution and Society, p. 262) contends that the volume Fabian Essays (1889), and particularly the contribution of Sidney Webb, is a highly positivist and evolutionist document. See also Britain, Fabianism and Culture, pp. 96-9, 120-1.
84 Morris, 'Fabian Essays', p. 460.
Nevertheless, the affinities between natural and social evolutionary theory indicate that the idea of nature holding the key to right conduct was very appealing to the Victorians. Marx had viewed the Origin as a powerful support to his own ideas and Engels saw evolutionism as central to the dialectics of nature.\textsuperscript{85} Morris's colleague at the S.D.F. and Socialist League Edward Aveling was also a devotee, publishing The Student's Darwin in 1881, and a translation of Ernst Haeckel's The Pedigree of Man, as well as lecturing on Darwin and Marx for the League.\textsuperscript{86} Others, such as Sir John Lubbock, spoke of nature's retribution in a normative manner, though Lubbock himself believed that 'natural laws' would inevitably conduct humanity to utopia.\textsuperscript{87} J.W. Burrow has suggested that it might be apt to describe nineteenth-century theories of social evolution as 'the temporalisation of Natural Law'; and that theories of social evolution provided many Victorians with 'an intellectual resting-place ... at which the tension between the need for certainty and the need to accommodate more diverse social facts, and more subtle ways of interpreting them, ... reached a kind of temporary equilibrium'.\textsuperscript{88}

Whatever Morris might accept or reject as a social theorist, as a literary artist he had to negotiate the fact that science and its applications were not only transforming the structures of British society, but also redefining the images and values upon which much of the culture had traditionally been grounded. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait have observed that 'as signs of the times, scientific images and ideas

\textsuperscript{85} In The Dialectics of Nature (preface and notes by J.B.S. Haldane, International Publications, New York, 1940, p. 19) Engels wrote: 'Darwin did not know what a bitter satire he wrote on mankind, and especially on his countrymen, when he showed that free competition, the struggle for existence, which the economists celebrate as the highest historical achievement, is the normal state of the animal kingdom. Only conscious organisation of social production, in which production and distribution are carried on in a planned way, can lift mankind above the rest of the animal world as regards the social aspects, in the same way that production in general has done this for men in their aspect as species'; quoted in Levine, Darwin and the Novelists, pp. 241. See also, David McLellan, The Thought of Karl Marx, Macmillan, London, 1978 (1971), p. 124.

\textsuperscript{86} Edward Aveling, The Student's Darwin, Free Thought, London, 1881; Ernst Haeckel, The Pedigree of Man and Other Essays, trans. Edward B. Aveling, A. and H.B. Bonner, London, n.d. It is particularly interesting that Aveling should have been familiar with Haeckel's work as it was this German evolutionary zoologist who is said to have coined the word 'ecology' (Ökologie) in his Generelle Morphologie der Organismen: Allgemeine Grundzüge der organischen Formenwissenschaft, mechanisch begründet durch die von Charles Darwin reformirte Descendenz-Theorie, 2 vols., Reimer, Berlin, 1866. He developed the term in the 1870s as the economy of nature, and was heavily influenced by the work of Darwin. See Robert P. McIntosh, The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 7–8.

\textsuperscript{87} Sir John Lubbock, Prehistoric Times, p. 489; quoted in Burrow, Evolution and Society, p. 271.
became important literary metaphors. Much of the drama in both the prose and poetry of this era derives from the perceived conflict between humanity and nature, and Morris’s works, such as *The Earthly Paradise* and *News from Nowhere*, are no exception. Ideas about nature derived from science provided much more than a background to action in the creative writing of the period. It is this move of science into literature and art that most likely introduced and compounded the lessons of Victorian science to a reticent Morris.

The impact of scientific theories of nature was felt in literary circles far before the advent of Darwin. The materialistic universe of the physicists, astronomers and geologists had provoked Browning’s combination of alchemy and volcanic geology in *Paracelsus* (1835); and conclusions drawn from fossil studies had caused Emily Brontë to write as early as 1842: ‘Nature is an inexplicable puzzle, life exists on a principle of destruction; every creature must be the relentless instrument of death to the others, or himself cease to live’. Dennis Dean’s essay on ‘Geology and the Victorians’ contains a striking list of similar influences: Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—‘the first major British novel to be named for a geological process’; the geological field-trip and scientific jargon of Tennyson’s *The Princess* (Book III); Benjamin Disraeli’s satire upon the geology and transmutation theory of Chambers’ *Vestiges* in *Tancred, or The New Crusade* (1847); Ruskin’s inclusion of geological digressions in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849); and even William Makepeace Thackeray’s novel *Vanity Fair* (1848), which refers to a ‘ladylike knowledge of botany and geology’.

Much of this influence was felt most keenly by early Victorian poets, who asked if the new nature ‘discovered’ by science didn’t seem to ‘balk / All hope of greenness’. Early poems by Arnold, a one time student of the geologist William

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92 Dean, ‘‘Through Science to Despair’’, p. 121.
Buckland, indicate this uneasy apprehension of nature. In 1849 Arnold raised grave doubts about living ‘In Harmony with Nature’, concluding that ‘Man must begin ... where Nature ends; / Nature and man can never be fast friends’.

Tennyson’s early work, much admired by Morris, provides another striking example of Victorian disquiet about scientific views of nature. Like Arnold, Tennyson had first encountered scientific conceptions of nature through his study of geology at Cambridge. In In Memoriam, A.H.H. he detailed his struggles with Lyellian geology and asked whether it was still possible to believe in Providence when God and nature appeared ‘at strife’. Tennyson admitted he now ‘falter[ed] where I firmly trod’:

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope.

Nature, however, was no longer careful of Tennyson’s ‘type’, nor any other.” One who read this poem with Morris, recalled how Morris understood Tennyson ‘as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them’. Tennyson’s ‘stretched] lame hands’ remind us of Morris’s ‘outstretched [but perhaps significantly] feverish’ ones. Perhaps, like Ruskin, Morris began to hear the ‘clink’ of the geologists’ hammers ‘at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses’.

Tennyson’s most serious count against nature, however, was that it rendered ‘human love and truth, / As dying Nature’s earth and lime’. In Maud (1854), a poem also revered by Morris’s Oxford set, ‘nature is one with rapine’, ‘a world of plunder

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1 the grandest things of the kind that I have ever read— are used merely in order ‘to show us a brave man doing his duty, making his way on to his point through all dreadful things’.
2 Arnold, ‘In Harmony with Nature’, lines 7–13. See also ‘Quiet Work’ and ‘In Uturumque Paratus’.
3 Tennyson, In Memoriam A.H.H., l.v, lines 5–20; l.vi, lines 1–4.
5 See Chapter 2 above.
and prey’, heedless of the struggles of humanity. Walter Houghton has written that ‘cosmic isolation and the terror of absolute solitude’ often accompanied the image of an indifferent nature. When Arnold contemplated ‘Dover Beach’, all he could hear was the ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of a once-full ‘Sea of Faith’. Tennyson, indicating the difficulties concomitant with understanding nature as perceived by science, also complained that nature ‘red in tooth and claw / With ravine, shriek’d against’ the model and basis for human morality. Attempts to find Christian morality in a ferocious nature, were duly forfeited by some, like Kingsley:

I have long ago found out how little I can discover about God’s absolute love, or absolute righteousness, from a universe in which everything is eternally eating everything else. Infinite creative fancy it does reveal; but nothing else, unless interpreted by moral laws which are in oneself already, and in which one has often to trust against all appearances, and cry out of the lowest deep (as I have had to do)—Thou art not Siva the destroyer.

Kingsley, also read by Morris and his friends at Oxford, emphasised: ‘The study of Nature can teach no moral theology’. Thus, although Glauceus, or the Wonders of the Shore (1855) and even The Water Babies advocated the study of natural history, Kingsley was vigilant against scientists saying ‘Nature’ when they should be saying ‘God’.

Consequently, though their writing occasionally reflected ‘two voices’, nature for Tennyson, Arnold, Browning, and many others, was by mid-century already equated with the world of science and implied the necessity of finding human destiny and meaning outside the frame of nature. The work of the geologists had taught Victorian writers a number of unforgettable ‘facts’ about nature: time was immensely superior to humanity, a theme often reflected in the work of Morris’s friend

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103 Tennyson, _Maud_, part I, IV, iv, lines 4, 6.
105 Arnold, ‘Dover Beach’, lines 25, 21.
109 See Tennyson, ‘The Two Voices’, lines 449–50, which indicate that fields of flowers ‘[a]nd Nature’s living motion lent / The pulse of hope to discontent’.
107 Beach, _The Concept of Nature_, p. 435.
Swinburne; prehistoric dinosaurs had once ruled the earth and had been completely wiped out, a fact which impressed a number of Morris’s favourite authors, such as Tennyson, Dickens and George Eliot; human civilisation, the human species, and even life itself was in decline, ideas incorporated into Rossetti’s ‘The Burden of Nineveh’ (1870), and Richard Jefferies’s After London (1885), which made a great impression on Morris, and, the earth was dying, a horror at which Swinburne, Meredith, and H.G. Wells hinted, and perhaps even Morris acknowledged in The Earthly Paradise.

When the Origin of Species was published in 1859, therefore, nature could not readily be interpreted as a providential realm of benevolent symbols and images. But if nature had stumbled before, now, in the words of Woodring, ‘Darwin sent it sprawling’. Of course the most traumatic extrapolations from Darwin were the same reached by earlier writers. In The Mill on the Floss (1860), Eliot indicated that a post-Darwinian world was one of grim chance, and outlined the limits of moral revelation to natural disaster:

Nature repairs her ravages—but not all. The upturned trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred; if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of past rending.

In 1870, as already noted, Rossetti was forced to consider ‘the mummy of a buried faith’ at the British Museum; in 1871 Swinburne pronounced with certitude ‘God is

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109 See Tennyson, In Memoriam, A.H.H.; Dickens, Bleak House; George Eliot, Middlemarch; and also Swinburne, ‘The Higher Pantheism in a Nutshell’; listed in Dean, ‘Through Science to Despair’, p. 129.
110 See Chapters 1 and 2 of the Appendix for Jefferies’s impact on Morris.
113 Eliot, ‘Conclusion’ to The Mill on the Floss (1860); quoted in Woodring, Nature into Art, p. 194.
buried and dead to us”; and in 1874 James Thomson portrayed the agony of unbelief in ‘The City of Dreadful Night’.114

Others, however, reacted to Darwin’s work in more positive ways. In 1860 Browning crowded the island in ‘Caliban upon Setubal’ with intricate details of life forms that struggle and spawn, and, though the poem is more directly concerned with natural theology and Calvinism, Darwin’s theories probably encouraged Browning’s rendering of the hierarchical structure of life forms.115 Pauline Fletcher has also observed that Browning’s landscapes often contain references to a ‘basic struggle for life amongst creatures “frisking and twisting and coupling” in the primeval swamps’, or figure the garden as ‘a microcosm of the great world in which various life forms jostle for position, as on Darwin’s tangled bank’.116 Browning, whom Morris viewed as one of the best contemporary poets and acknowledged as a considerable influence, was keenly aware that he was writing poetry in an age of science.117

But apart from detailed representations of nature’s teeming millions, two broad literary trends have been identified as emanating from Darwin, and several studies have explored the manifestation of a Darwinian ‘gestalt’ in Victorian fiction.118 Victorian realism, though linked to many other socio-cultural developments and formations, echoed many evolutionary themes and George Levine has argued that a number of novelistic effects result from the interaction of ‘Darwin and the Novelists’. These include the tendency: to use third person detachment in order to invoke the authority of science in the recording of human life; to use observation as the primary

116 Fletcher (Gardens and Grim Ravines, pp. 124–5) quoting from Browning’s ‘Sibranus Schaftnaburgensia’, part of the poem ‘Garden Fancies’, II, viii, line 2.
117 MacCarty (A Life for Our Time, pp. 142–3) has observed that Morris’s early poetry has a ‘brilliance’, ‘freshness’ and ‘quirkiness’ redolent of Browning’s ‘spikiness of language and its complex tricks with time scale’. As this thesis indicates, Morris’s own concern with the detail of nature derived from a number of sources including the romantics and Pre-Raphaelites.
source of the material of the story so that the observer and the act of observation increasingly become the focus; to depend on causal explanation and on the idea that extremes can be regarded as a consequence of the gradual accumulation of the ordinary; to submit all things to time so that closure is perceived as artificial and inadequate; to emphasise the ordinary and everyday and avoid traditional forms of heroism and character types or categories; to use the multi-plot novel in which it is difficult to determine true protagonists in an ‘entangled’ plot; to reflect an abundant, often overpopulated world or a sense of a newly crowded and complicated life; to unfold ‘naturally’ without external intrusion emphasising adaptation; to explain and analyse mystery and to demonstrate that events are probable and behaviour psychologically explicable; and, though programmatically antagonistic to chance, to resolve narrative problems by just this means, albeit tending to depend on minutiae rather than dramatic events.\(^{119}\)

Many of these attributes of ‘realism’ do not feature at all in Morris’s work, and one might even argue that they describe the antithesis of much that Morris wrote. Of course Morris does at times use observation, ‘entangle’ his plots, and explain or examine the psychology of his protagonists; in 1872 he even began a contemporary novel but left it unfinished.\(^{120}\) He thoroughly enjoyed the work of Dickens, a writer who frequently insisted that he was conveying empirical fact, and whom Morris, in a sense, believed to be doing just that. Morris warned of ‘Podsnap’s drawing room in the offing’ as part of the context for Huxley taking the place of Homer, and part of the reason for his becoming a socialist.\(^{121}\) As a commitment to the world, rather than a desire merely to mirror it, realism also figured as an impulse in Morris’s work. Over

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all, however, it seems that Morris was reluctant to move towards realist modes of expression.\textsuperscript{122} 

This may have been because Morris sensed that the realist writers were part of the development of the kind of psychological subjectivity that would characterise later anti-naturalist writers.\textsuperscript{121} One outcome of the work of the realists was the entrance of psychology into the novel, after which nature, mediated by human perception, tended to become a psychological rather than a physical landscape. In opposition to this tendency, the other literary trend that may be said to owe something to Darwin was that of ‘nature writers’ such as Hardy, Jefferies, and D.H. Lawrence. It has been claimed that these writers were inspired by Darwin to celebrate the variety and abundance of nature, eschewing a ‘dualistic system of mind and inanimate nature’ for ‘monistic’ consciousness.\textsuperscript{124} Roger Ebbatson has written that ‘the efforts of ... [these] novelists is to invent a sort of writing which will encompass both the vastness of natural process and the intricate workings of the human spirit’.\textsuperscript{123} As a largely post-Darwinian author, Morris’s fictional work has more in common with this tradition than that of the realists.

Ultimately, Darwin’s effect on the representation of nature in Victorian literature is highly complex. James Krasner has offered a stimulating interpretation of Darwin’s writing, suggesting that the scientist’s own work offers the reader a vision of nature’s otherness where all other post-Darwinian writers constantly fail. In doing so, Krasner claims, Darwin allows his natural world to mutate continually into new and strange forms, allowing for transgressions of the species boundary. Thus, Krasner continues, Darwin’s portrayal of entangled nature in many ways came just at the wrong

\textsuperscript{122} It is possible to argue that Morris’s later prose romances, in particular, mark a profound break with the realist tradition that, nonetheless, owes something to the entrance of psychology into the novel. In these works Morris merges mind and landscape to develop ‘new worlds’ for his fiction. See Chapter 4 of the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{123} See Morris’s complaint about his own ‘abortive novel’ in note 120 above, and John Aclorn, The Nature Novel From Hardy to Lawrence, Macmillan, London, 1973. Lionel Stevenson (The English Novel: A Panorama, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1960, p. 348) states that by demonstrating ‘that mankind must be regarded on the same basis as all other physical phenomena and that therefore human behaviour is susceptible to scientific analysis’ Darwinian science ‘invaded the territory of fiction’ through the new sciences of psychology and sociology’.

\textsuperscript{124} Ebbatson, Lawrence and the Nature Tradition, p. 5.

time—just when the countryside had been enshrined as a locus of stability and nostalgia in a rapidly changing industrial world. Although we have already seen that Darwin was not the first to challenge the stability of this world, his work did disturb the ‘nature writers’ who, so Krasner argues, subsequently sought to reimpose the ‘green control’ the English countryside had long expressed. The argument continues that this, ironically, is what causes nature to cease to be a significant artistic concern just when it is at the centre of cultural debate; nature writers restore nature to predictable representational modes in their attempts to perceive the familiar face of landscape in Darwin’s entangled nature.\textsuperscript{126} I shall suggest below that this might be where Morris’s prose romances depart from more conventional naturalist writing.\textsuperscript{127}

Artists’ views of nature, of course, were also influenced by the work of scientists as earlier ‘cosmic visions’ were brought to trial against the ‘cosmic facts’ of astronomy, geology, physics and biology. The ‘truth to nature’ required by Ruskin had obvious forebears in history and genre painting, but were also heavily influenced by the line drawings reproduced in scientific books, journals and encyclopedias.\textsuperscript{128} The significance of science to art, however, rested much more on its authority to fix the limits of natural space. Here, again, Darwin’s work played a significant role, though earlier studies had paved the way. Reflecting the system-building traditions of geological and natural scientists, Darwin’s view of landscape was in part one of physical detail organised into biological and geological classes: ‘[sorting] the elements of the landscape into categories of fact’.\textsuperscript{129} But the landscapes evoked in Darwin’s work also indicate that he was strongly influenced by romantic aesthetic idealism, and James Paradis has detailed how the ‘entangled bank’ which appears at the end of the \textit{Origin}, was initially conceived as an ‘entangled mass’: ‘a Romantic landscape image of a complex moment in life’.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{126} Krasner, \textit{The Entangled Eye}, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{127} See Chapter 4 of the Appendix.
\textsuperscript{128} See Woodring, \textit{Nature into Art}, pp. 133–42; and Chapter 3 of Section II below, for discussion of the central figure of Ruskin.
\textsuperscript{129} Paradis, ‘Darwin and Landscape’, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{130} Paradis (‘Darwin and Landscape’, pp. 97–9) argues that both Darwin’s journals and the \textit{Origin} borrow copiously from the romantic lexicon, making frequent use of such words as ‘savage’, ‘gloom’, ‘grandeur’, ‘sublime’, ‘wildness’, ‘vivid’ and ‘solitude’. In a similar vein, House (‘Man and Nature’, pp. 222–3) has indicated that the influence of Darwin can be detected in the Victorian love of ‘literatism’ and of ‘exaggerated sentiment’.
Paradis argues that the effect of Darwin's 'double representation ... is to link the visual splendour of natural landscape with the schematic organisation of its many specific forms'. To follow Darwin, it has been suggested, it was necessary to 'see above all, ... the whole surface of the earth at all times', and this was arguably a tendency that reached expression in the early work of the Pre-Raphaelites. Morris, an ardent admirer of Pre-Raphaelite painting, purchased works that were the result of considerable attention to surface detail. This kind of emphasis, in which 'every object becomes woven into a surface pattern', indicates the mid-century interest in the application of scientific knowledge to art. In 1850 art critic and founder member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood F.G. Stephens urged that the artist follow the scientist's example. If 'adherence to fact, to experiment and not theory', he suggested, 'has added so much to the knowledge of man in science; why may it not greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts?' Though Morris's careful study of forms direct from nature eventually gave way to more historical, poetic and decorative styles, his great interest in massed surface pattern certainly reflects an interest in and ability to record nature as a Darwinian 'map' of 'varied and animated figures'.

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111 Paradis, 'Darwin and Landscape', p. 86. At the end of his journals referring to the voyage of the Beagle, Darwin himself wrote that: 'The map of the world ceases to be blank, it becomes a picture full of the most varied and animated figures'; quoted in Paradis, 'Darwin and Landscape', p. 87.
113 One should note the qualifications imposed on this kind of representation by artists such as Holman Hunt (Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 2 vols., Macmillan, London, 1905, vol. 1, p. 150): 'I think art would have ceased to have the slightest interest for any of us had the object been only to make a representation ... of a fact in nature. Independently of the conviction that such a system would put out of operation the faculty making man "like a God", it was apparent that a mere imitator gradually comes to see nature cluylike and finite... Art dominated by this spirit makes us esteem the world as without design or finish, unbalanced, unfitting, and unlovely, not interpretted into beauty as true art makes it'.
114 Allen Staley (The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973, p. 40) records that the detail in one of these—Ford Madox Brown's The Hayfield—reflects the painter's labours on the site for almost three months. See also Chapter 4 of Section II below.
115 Staley writes that there was a 'flurry' of publications in the 1850s which reflected this interest and cites many examples that examine 'the laws of those phenomena in nature which have an immediate connexion with art, especially painting, and with which the artist must be acquainted in order to produce a truthful representation of nature'; John Sweetlove, 'The Natural Philosophy of Art' (1852); quoted in Staley, The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape, p. 183.
117 See note 131 above.
The importance of science to visual representations of nature, therefore, rests largely on its power to define natural space. ‘[R]epetitiveness of form’ and ‘geometries of organisation’, though hypothetical, were represented by scientists as fundamental natural truths. As they carefully noted ‘proportional numbers and kinds’, it became much more difficult for a tree to be a romantic symbol of harmony. Yet this did not mean that the aesthetic possibilities of nature were destroyed. Paradis has argued that Darwinian science opened up new possibilities for the portrayal of space in natural landscape. Concepts such as fluidity of form bound the hidden factors of time and space together in the energy and immensity of organic development. Darwin saw ‘dimensions in nature that could only be approximated in language’, and in many ways he ‘freed’ the objects and spaces of organic nature. This established an independence of natural form which would start to be expressed in Morris’s designs for textiles, wallpaper, and the borders of the Kelmscott Press.

That Victorian attitudes to nature were also part of a culture of science is, of course, a conclusion which needs to acknowledge that science is shaped by the ideals and organisations of society at large. It is necessary to recognise, for example, that science at this time was still deeply influenced by religious eschatology and romantic aesthetics. For every Huxley who challenged the religious hierarchy, there was a Carpenter who combined scientific rigour with mystical belief. As Levine has argued, Victorian science is ‘a historically locatable response to questions of particular urgency among the Victorians’. ‘[Q]uickly absorbed into the narratives by which the culture defined itself and its sense of the real’, Darwinian science in particular asked questions about sources of authority, about the relationship between the personal, the

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141 Though Paradis (‘Darwin and Landscape’, pp. 106–7) states that it ‘would take art fully half a century to follow [Darwin] into the labyrinth of lines and patterns he had discovered in the familiar landscape’, I argue below (Chapter 3 of Section III) that Morris’s intricate patterns comprise a text and context for both nature and art.
142 Thus geologists spent a great deal of time challenging the Biblical interpretation of the earth’s age, genesis and diluvial history; and the first interpretations of glacial history were stimulated by romantic interest in the Alps. See Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, p. 237.
143 Indeed, as Knopflmacher and Tennyson (‘Alterglow and Aftermath’, in Nature and the Victorian Imagination, p. 499) have suggested, the reappearance of teleology in modern ecological thought suggests that some still search for the middle course that others have thought impossible.
social and the natural, about origins, progress, and endings, and about biological and social organism. Roger Smith has also indicated how the theories and empirical work that led to the formulation of the idea of natural selection ‘had a distinctly British flavour, emphasising concepts of utility, design, and Malthusian struggle appropriate to both humanity and nature’.

But the scientific work of Lyell, Faraday, Darwin, and Huxley did play an important part in codifying nature and determining the way in which it would be perceived. Perhaps most important of all was the part given to humanity in that codification. When, having dwelt on the cyclical nature of change in The Earthly Paradise, Morris came to consider ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’ in 1885, he drew on his understanding of ‘man’s place in nature’ garnered from the natural sciences:

in the early days of the history of man he was the slave of his most immediate necessities; Nature was mighty and he was feeble, and he had to wage constant war with her for his daily food and such shelter as he could get. His life was bound down and limited by this constant struggle; all his morals, laws, religions, are in fact the outcome and the reflection of this ceaseless toil of earning his livelihood.

This position was reasserted and clarified in News from Nowhere, which confidently proclaimed that humankind’s past miseries were ‘bored’ or ‘a life which was always looking upon ... “nature” ... as one thing, and mankind as another’. This is not to say that Morris accepted any proclamation of the objective and eternal validity of nineteenth-century science (though it should put to the lie C.P. Snow’s characterisation of Morris as a ‘Natural Luddite’). Morris understood that the ‘facts’ of one generation might prove untenable to the next: that science at present might be ‘too much in the pay of the counting house’; but also that it was ‘inexhaustible’ and would

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144 Levine, Darwin and the Novelists, p. 2.
147 Morris, News from Nowhere, p. 179.
148 C.P. Snow, The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution, The Rede Lecture, 1959; quoted by Peter Faulkner, ‘William Morris and the Two Cultures’, JWMS, vol. II, no. 1, Spring 1966, p. 9. As Faulkner indicates, Morris’s questioning of scientific progress remains valuable because he asked the most incisive question about his society—how far does it promote the happiness of all its members?—and asked it in a spirit at once critical, constructive, and urgent’ (p. 12).
continue to ‘excite by its conquest of difficulties’ even in a utopian future.149 It is difficult, however, to imagine Morris being able to give up the idea that humanity was at the centre of nature; for Morris, ‘the crown of nature’ was ‘the life of man upon the earth’.150 Ultimately, the Darwinian understanding of the organic realm forced the ‘sacrifice’ of nineteenth-century concepts of nature and humanity ‘for a wilderness of subjective possibilities which ... led out of the present into a world of “indefinite departure”’.151 Morris, however, was one of those Victorians who, as Gillian Beer has argued, were able to find some comfort in Darwinian science because it replaced ‘foreknown design’ with ‘inherent purposiveness’, and retained ‘the idea of natura naturans ... in its figuring of Nature’.152 This figure and purpose is revealed in the detailed yet linked and flowing patterns that Morris designed for fabric and wallpaper from the 1860s on; and his work is, therefore, another example of the way in which the Victorian ‘specimen’ was rarely isolated from the ‘spectacle’ of a broader nature.153

149 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 98. In 1877 Morris argued in ‘The Lesser Arts’ (in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, in *CW*, vol. XXII, p. 25) that science ought to be able to teach ‘Manchester how to consume its own smoke, or Leeds how to get rid of its superfluous black dye without turning it into the river’. In ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’ (in *Signs of Change*, in *CW*, vol. XXIII, p. 115) he insisted that, correctly applied, science would be able ‘to get rid of refuse, to minimize, if not wholly to destroy, all the inconveniences which at present attend the use of elaborate machinery, such as smoke, stench, and noise’. See also Chapter 1 of Section IV below.


152 Beer (Darwin’s *Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983, pp. 117, 16, 9, 51–57, 102) argues that Darwin’s language tends ‘to suggest more or other than ... [he] meant to say, to make the latent actual, to waken sleeping dogs’, and to persuade ‘through lassitude, through ... inattention’.

153 Birmingham has used the terms ‘specimen’ and ‘spectacle’ to indicate two important Victorian significations of nature in *Landscape and Ideology*, pp. 174–84.
4. The dream of London

By the time Morris reached adulthood, each of the orientations to nature mentioned above—romantic, religious and scientific—contributed to and operated within a more dominant influence: the experience of the urban. The most common environmental experience by mid-century in England,¹ life in a town or city entailed the development of substantially different ways of understanding nature. In and from the town or the city, Victorians increasingly contrasted a natural rural realm with unnatural urban experiences, and thus nature came to be understood as something outside the usual experience of many Victorians: the dream of an urban world.

Raymond Williams’s examination of perspectives in and of ‘the city and the country’ shed much light on this development. He indicated that understanding the country as nature’s realm, and the city as that of human society, is complicated by the signification of ‘country’ as both the nation, or whole society, and its specifically rural areas. This association, he suggested, points to the deep-seated sense of a connection between the land, from which directly or indirectly we all get our living, and human achievement in general. Yet he argued that whenever this connection is not made, the separate spheres of country and city accumulate different sets of values. On the one hand, the country comes to mean a ‘natural way of life’, and is associated: with ideas of peace, innocence, and virtue; with a nostalgic regard for childhood and the past; with tradition and often ‘backwardness’ and ignorance; with and as sites/sights of leisure and lasitude; with places apart from the everyday world; and thus with flights of fancy and imagination. The town or city, on the other hand, draws meaning from its sense as an achieved (non-natural) centre: of endeavour, learning, communication, and light, but also of noise, worldliness, ambition, corruption, mechanisation, capital and,

ultimately, civilisation. Williams's identification of these separate spheres of meaning, and the contradictions and inconsistencies which emerge, provide a useful way of starting to think about Victorian experiences of nature in the city.²

Nature was not, of course, entirely external to the city: Victorians did not have to leave the town to experience the natural world. Besides being the resource and quite literal building block upon which the town or city was constructed, nature was present in a variety of ideas, shapes and spaces. It was encountered as resource to be appropriated, transformed, sold, counted, purchased, and exported; it was also experienced in parks, gardens and greenhouses, zoos and suburbs, and as trees and waterways. What nature had come to mean in terms of the experience of 'the country and the city', particularly the experience of the country in the city, and the experience of the country from the city, is the subject of this chapter. Having established why such insights are relevant to Morris, it will explore nature manifested briefly as resource, and then as various types of landscape in the city, before analysing attitudes to the countryside.

Though Morris grew up in an area that could still be considered rural, it was a landscape rapidly seceding space to 'the march of bricks and mortar' that was the growth of London.³ Moreover Morris was aware from an early age that his family's country existence was funded by the hill-broking activities of his father in London; occasionally he would accompany William Morris Senior on his daily journey to Sanderson & Co. and observe the city as a place of trade. And, on one level, this is what the city would always mean to Morris, the place in or near which he was required

² It should be noted that Williams (The Country and the City, especially pp. 1–2) indicated that the 'real history' of the contrast between city and country was 'astonishingly varied' and that neither are static concepts, but living, shifting entities. He demonstrated how one finds oneself on an ever-receding 'escalator' if one tries to find a British 'golden age' or an organic culture or community that has disappeared in a recent past; and that directly or indirectly most towns seem to have developed as an aspect of the agricultural order itself. He also noted, however, that as processes in a city become in some respects self-generating, especially in the course of foreign conquest and trade, there is often a new basis for the contrast between one order and another: agents of power and profit become, as it were, alienated, and in certain political situations can become dominant. Consequently, over and above the interlocking exploitation, there can develop a factual exploitation of the country as a whole by the city as a whole. See also the etymologies of 'country' and 'city', in Williams's Keywords, pp. 55–7, 81–2.
³ A reference to George Cruickshank's cartoon 'London going out of Town or The March of Bricks and Mortar' (1829).
to live in order to carry out business. After he left Oxford (itself a rapidly growing city), he spent only five out of the remaining forty years of his life living outside a ten kilometre radius of Trafalgar Square. In 1879, returning from his rented ‘country house’, he wrote that his ‘playing at living in the country’ must come to an end and admitted that he was, after all, ‘a town-bird’.

In many ways, therefore, Morris’s life was one that reflected the experience of many Victorians: he moved from a rural area to the city for reasons of work; he spent most of his time in the city, but nurtured memories of a rural childhood; he visited the countryside to unwind and renew his energies, making use of the rapidly expanding railway network; and he also enjoyed the small manifestations of the countryside in the city, such as parks, gardens, trees, birds and rivers. In this experience of the country and the city, however, it is an urban and more specifically still a Londoner’s perspective that prevailed and ultimately structured the way in which Morris thought about and encountered nature. Both his ‘dream of London, small, and white, and clean, / The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green’, and his later vision of England in *News from Nowhere*, were shaped by this perspective.

Though one refers largely to Morris’s experience of the capital when describing his culture of nature as urban, it is also necessary to remember that Morris experienced the urban in a number of other ways and forms that affected his dealings with it. His experience of towns and cities such as Oxford, Birmingham and Glasgow, and of visual and literary representations of cities such as the London of Doré and Dickens, allowed him to conceive of the urban in a broader and richer way. As a ‘town-bird’, Morris inhabited a realm that centred upon, but also extended beyond, the boundaries of Victorian London to incorporate a more general conception of urbani,

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4 In 1856 Morris moved to 1 Upper Gordon Street, Bloomsbury; later that same year he moved round the corner to 17 Red Lion Square and stayed until 1860; 1860–65 was the one brief period in which he lived outside of London at Bexleyheath in Kent (itself a kind of proto-dormitory suburb); 1865–72 found him living back ‘above the shop’ at 26 Queen Square, Bloomsbury; from 1872–78 he resided at Horrington House in Turnham Green; and from 1872 until his death in 1896 he lived at 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith.


6 See Chapter 1 of Section II below for a discussion of Morris’s childhood experiences in rural Essex and his recreation of, and reflection upon, these experiences in his work.

of a ‘dominion over nature gained’.8 Though at times Morris differentiated between different kinds of cities (most memorably when he did away with ‘the big murky places which were once ... the centres of manufacture’, but ‘rebuilt’ London and preserved ‘pre-commercial’ Oxford in *News from Nowhere*), most of his observations heaped together the ‘huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling dens’.9

It is necessary to differentiate temporally more than geographically Morris’s Victorian experience of the urban. In Morris’s mind, and as a matter of fact, Victorian cities were different cities from those that had gone before (and, indeed, from those that would develop later). Views of nature originating within the Victorian town or city were founded upon a relatively new experience of urban life: of new forces transforming established institutions, modes of thinking and social relationships.10 Perhaps the most significant condition or effect of such a society, however, was the concentration of large-scale industry and the labour force required to work it, and hence greater spatial differentiation. London was not a focal point for heavy industry, but its position as the capital, as the centre for trade and finance, as a major port and storehouse, and as a general hub of communication and administration meant it also grew as a result of expansion linked to industrial development. While it should be recognised that London was also an exceptional centre, it should not be excluded from wider socio-economic and cultural processes of capital and industry that made it for Morris an aggregate of consummation, ‘the counting-house on the top of a cinder heap’.11 To the extent that nature came to mean the countryside in the nineteenth

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8 Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, VIII, line 211. It is here that Wordsworth bestows the ‘outrage done to nature’ ‘at social Industry’s command’ (lines 153, 117).
10 As early as 1840, William Cooke Taylor noted that these new kinds of cities exhibited ‘a system of social life constructed on a wholly new principle, a principle yet vague and indefinite by developing itself by its own spontaneous force, and daily producing effects which no human foresight had anticipated’; *The Natural History of Society* (1840); quoted in Forsyth, *The Last Pattern*, p. 73.
11 Morris, ‘How I Became a Socialist’, p. 249. Gareth Stedman Jones’s chapter on ‘London as an Industrial Centre’, in *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971), outlines some of the ways in which the economic, social and political structure of industrial London remained distinct from those of other nineteenth-century industrial cities. It is not my intention to question this point, but merely to suggest that, as a social and environmental critic, Morris largely failed to distinguish between the two because he believed that the relations produced by ‘capital’ were reproduced throughout the country.
century, it meant something structured in opposition to the urban industrial capital of Victorian Britain.\(^\text{12}\)

Nature was also, of course, the fundamental material upon which British capital industrial urbanity was based. It was the powering energy of industry and the raw material of commodity production. Urban prosperity and development relied on power derived from, and in turn utilised to exploit, the resources of home and empire. In the first half of the nineteenth century, power over nature was most obviously displayed in the projects of Telford, Rennie, Fairbairn, the Brunels and the Stephensons. During this period, the London–Holyhead road, the Thames tunnel, the Caledonian Canal, the Clifton suspension bridge and the Great Western Railway testified to the scientific and technological prowess of Victorian industry and its ability to subdue and transform nature. As a consequence, technology captured a large part of the Victorian imagination as a short-cut if not to Eden then at least Eldorado. In his essay for T. Humphry Ward’s jubilee volume on *The Reign of Queen Victoria* in 1887, Huxley claimed that

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\text{[It] the most obvious and most distinctive feature of the History of Civilisation, during the last fifty years, is the wonderful increase of industrial production by the application of machinery... By this rapid and vast multiplication of the commodities and conveniences of existence, the general standard of comfort has been raised; the ravages of pestilence and famine have been checked; and the natural obstacles, which time and space offer to mutual intercourse, have been reduced in a manner, and to an extent, unknown to former ages...}
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This revolution—for it is nothing less—in the political and social aspects of modern civilisation has been preceded, accompanied, and in great measure caused, by a less obvious, but no less marvellous, increase of natural knowledge, and especially of that part of it which is known as Physical Science, in consequence of the application of scientific method to the investigation of the phenomena of the material world.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) This is a point Williams makes in his section on ‘Nature’ in *Keywords*. Also of interest is his tracing of the development of ‘country’ from its Latin root *contra*, meaning against (pp. 223, 81). A useful anthology of the complex and various perceptions of nature during the processes of industrialisation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is Alasdair Clayre’s *Nature and Industrialisation: An Anthology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.

This 'increase of industrial production' and 'multiplication of commodities' encompassing the 'reduction' of 'natural obstacles' involved the implicit, if not always explicit, understanding of nature as that which was milled, woven, or machined in workhouses, factories and workshops, and stocked, sold and profited upon in warehouses, shops and stock offices. It was evident at the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations of 1851, which taught optimists like Kingsley that man was now in a position to conquer and civilise Nature, to master his environment, and to lay the foundations of a new society, in which cities would no longer appear as diseased patches soiling the purity of the landscape, but as nuclei of organisations shining with the brightness of their regenerated state.\(^\text{14}\)

Certainly Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, covering more than nineteen acres of Hyde Park, provided a striking symbol of the vigorous, confident and rapid way in which industry could transform the environment. Inside were just those manufactures which had changed the landscape of Britain: 'Cotton fabrics from Lancashire, woollens from the West Riding, knives from Sheffield, guns from Birmingham, castings from Coalbrookdale, pottery from North Staffordshire, copper and tin ores from Cornwall, lead from the Pennines, hosiery from Nottingham, coal from Derbyshire and the North-East were displayed in abundance'.\(^\text{15}\) For William Morris Senior, financier, bill broker and share market speculator, nature was the copper extracted (in appalling conditions) by the workers of the Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Co. in the valley of the Tamar River near Tavistock;\(^\text{16}\) it was the wealth upon which the family fortune was based, the source of Morris's initial 'independence' and livelihood in London.\(^\text{17}\)

For most Victorian city dwellers, however, nature was understood as landscape. For them, it was the site and sight of nature that made up the natural realm,


\(^{17}\) Morris kept a stake in Devon Great Consols until 1877 and served as a director of the business between 1871 and 1875. For the Morris's family finances, see Charles Harvey and Jon Press, 'The City and Mining Enterprise: The Making of the Morris Family Fortune', *JWMS*, vol. IX, no. 1, Autumn 1990, pp. 3-14; and the early chapters of their book *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1991.
and it was this site and sight of nature that was increasingly missed as nature became something other than or outside of the town. The questions asked and problems posed concerning this lack of nature in the city, and especially attempts to return it in various shapes and spaces, form part of the experience of Victorian urbanity which contributed to Morris’s understanding of the uses and meanings of nature. Though the perception of the town as somehow unnatural was not new, throughout the Victorian era a critique of this unnaturalness shaped ideas about what should and should not be considered natural.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, life in a rapidly industrialising Britain entailed viewing and inhabiting some dramatically changed, and changing, landscapes. Of course the British landscape had been substantially transformed over thousands of years, but the rapid development and expansion of major extractive industries, of chemical processing, of concentrated production in factories, and of aggregated housing altered both the pace, type and dimension of change, producing effects of a new and extraordinary kind. Early reactions to these changes ranged from the triumphal to the shocked and dismayed, but from 1815 onwards the industrial landscape was most often referred to as a ‘source of shame both as a physical existence and as a symbol of morality’.

This was largely a result of various ‘inspection effects’ set in motion by debate on the ‘Condition of England’, effects that included a whole series of investigations and reports that uncovered ‘facts calculated to illustrate the Condition and Prospects of Society’. These ‘facts’ familiarised the reading public with conditions of poverty and deprivation, and drove many to recognise contrasts not only between city and country, but also between areas within the city. Particularly in the economically depressed 1870s and 1880s, concern grew over squalid conditions in the crowded East

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18 For the transformation of the British landscape over a much longer period of time, see Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*.
End. In 1885 the *Pall Mall Gazette* began to publish the results of the researches of the S.D.F. (findings that prompted Charles Booth to begin his statistical survey of the *Life and Labour of the People in London* because he doubted their veracity). As a result of reading these disclosures, Morris participated in protests and demonstrations and ensured that *Commonweal* covered these events. Moreover when the Socialist League acquired new headquarters in Farringdon Road, Morris was forced to confront the actualities behind the ‘facts’. Though the emphases of various investigations differed throughout the century, and Morris expressed doubts on the value of ‘fact’ gathering, ‘factual’ reportage and analysis definitely stimulated a new awareness of other landscapes and livelihoods within the city.

Not all critics of the city, however, engaged in statistical exposure. Nor were all impressed by the conclusions which statisticians often reached about the inherent possibilities for ‘improvement’ postulated in their works. Social critics such as Carlyle and Ruskin and novelists such as Dickens spurned statistics. They typically argued that there could be as much evasion and misrepresentation as disclosure in the work of statisticians, that individuals counted far more than averages, and that statistics were a symptom of the diseased obsession with ‘fact’. Each drew a distinction between

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22 Later ‘factual’ accounts of the city included: John Hollingshead’s *Ragged London in 1861* (1861); James Greenwood’s *A Night in a Workhouse* (1866) and *The Wilds of London* (1874); George Sims’s *How the Poor Live* (1883); the Rev. Andrew Mearns’s *Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883); the researches of the Social Democratic Federation published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885; Walter Besant’s *Children of Gibbon* (1886); Charles Booth’s seventeen volume *Life and Labour of the People in London, A Study of Town Life* (1889–1903); the work of the Salvation Army recounted in William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890); and Arthur Morrison’s *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894).

23 On 22 August 1885, for example, Morris stood with the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League at the mass Demonstration for the Protection of Girls in Hyde Park. In a *Commonweal* article entitled ‘Meeting on the Recent Exposures’ (vol. 1, no. 8, September 1885, p. 78; in *Jonnalism*, p. 27), Morris was quoted as saying: ‘Whatever is unhappy is immoral. It is unhappiness that must be got rid of. We have nothing to do with the mere immorality’.

24 In 1885, for example, he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones (27 May 1885, in *Letters*, vol. II, p. 438) that a visit ‘Stepney way’ had ‘intensely depressed’ him as ‘these Eastward visits always do: the mere stretch of houses, the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventfulness, sits upon one like a nightmare’.

25 In response to Walter Besant’s call for information on the wages and living conditions of working women in 1887, Morris reasoned: ‘The result may be useful, or it may not be. In the first place it will be useless if the information is not thoroughly genuine, if it is allowed to be influenced by the spirit that often creeps into such collections of “information”: the spirit that tries to create the impression that things are not very bad, and that even if they are bad they can easily be altered for the better a little, and that—there, that will do’. He insisted that ‘[i]t will be absolutely no use unless it is used ...
questions of quality and quantity: it was not the sum of products but the quality of a people’s happiness which constituted the wealth of a community. Initially, at least, this was the kind of criticism of the city to which Morris was drawn and in which he engaged. It is also in this kind of criticism that the condemnation of the city as ‘unnatural’ is most strenuously voiced.

One way of understanding negative critiques of the city is to appreciate that they were often based upon an idea of the city as the site and sight of pollution. In this kind of criticism the city is figured both as a physical presence—a foul, unclean, contaminated and contaminating environment—and as a symbol of economic, social and demographic processes that destroy the ‘purity and sanctity’ of human, animal and plant life. Few harnessed this physical condition to such a thoroughgoing critique of the city as Ruskin. It was largely Ruskin, alongside the broadly romantic tradition which he took up, Morris’s favourite nineteenth-century novelist Dickens, and, to a lesser extent, Carlyle, Kingsley and Engels, who provided Morris with what one might call a physically apprehended, moral-political critique of the city.

Key romantic criticisms of the city have been discussed above, and it is enough to note here that a similar anti-urban bias is a feature of the literary and artistic work of many Victorians. Even Rossetti, who as a Pre-Raphaelite was supposed to express ‘truths’, continued to suggest that corruption was a consequence of urban existence, to affirm the purity of country life, and thus repeat patterns of opposition found in Wordsworth’s Michael. Morris’s injunction to ‘Forget six counties overhung with smoke, / Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke’, and his use of

for the purpose of putting both sexes of workpeople into a totally different position from their present one”; ‘Notes on News’, Commonwealth, vol. III, no. 82, 6 August 1887, p. 249; in Journalism, p. 259.
27 In this respect, the symbol of the city was similar to that of the machine, providing a focus for feelings which, though often exhilarating, were also bewildering and frightening. See the various responses surveyed in Herbert Sussman, Victorians and the Machine: The Literary Response to Technology, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.
conventional images of the city as a place of ‘confusion’ or as a ‘prison’, are to a certain extent the product of his immersion in this tradition.

It is in Ruskin’s work that one finds examples of the most extreme anti-urbanism. In 1865 he dismissed industrial cities as ‘mere crowded masses of store, and warehouse, and counter’, and denounced the ‘great foul city of London’ as ‘a ghastly heap of fermenting brickwork, pouring out poison at every pore’. One of the bases for Ruskin’s criticism of the modern city was a sense of the city as unnatural: as an inorganic entity gradually blighting all of God’s creation. ‘[T]he great cities of the earth, he wrote in 1879

have become... loathsome centres of fornication and covetousness—the smoke of their sin going up into the face of heaven like the furnace of Sodom, and the pollution of it rotting and raging through the bones and the souls of the peasant people round them...’

As a consequence, Ruskin believed that nothing of beauty could be conceived in such a city. He felt that ‘true’ architecture was impossible in London because ‘[a]ll lovely architecture was designed for cloudless air’; and contrasted

cities in which the object of men is not life, but labour; and in which all chief magnitude of edifice is to enclose machinery; cities in which the streets are not the avenues for the passing and procession of happy people, but the drains for the discharge of a tormented mob, in which the only object in reaching any spot is to be transferred to another; in which

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10 Thesing (The London Muse, p. 129) has noted the use of these conventions in The Pilgrims of Hope, first published in Commonwealth in 1885-86. See especially pp. 371-2.
12 George Levine develops this theme in an essay entitled ‘From “Know-no-Where” to “Nowhere”: The city in Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris’, in The Victorian City, vol. II, pp. 495-516. Levine cogently argues that Ruskin, Carlyle and Morris reject the city because the metaphor determining the way in which they valued, saw and articulated experience tends to be that of natural growth, and that, for them, the ‘artificial’ was always inferior to the ‘natural’. I do not agree, however, that ‘Morris chose to take nature simply as a very beautiful model’ (my emphasis) and to focus ‘his attention not on its tooth and claw but on its forms and textures, the curve of the leaf, the colours of the fields, the movement of the waters’ (pp. 496-7). Nor would I concur with Levine’s conclusion that ‘Morris was no more capable than Ruskin or Carlyle of imagining the city... of building on the peculiar strengths of urban aggregation to develop new values or to modify the old romantic ones’ (p. 515). I argue, in both this and subsequent chapters, that it is Morris’s desire to inscribe nature as part of the realm of the human, and specifically to bring it into aggregated human communities, that enables him to imagine and campaign for a better urban environment.
existence becomes mere transition, and every creature is only one atom in
a drift of human dust, and current of interchanging particles, circulating
here by tunnels underground, and there by tubes in the air...

'[F]or a city such as this', he argued, 'no architecture is possible—nay, no desire of it
is possible to their inhabitants.' When Morris exhorts science to teach 'Manchester
how to consume its own smoke, or Leeds how to get rid of its superfluous black dye
without turning it into the river', we hear the influence of Ruskin.

Linked to Ruskin's understanding of the modern city as unnatural was the
observation of the city as the hub of an immoral political economy. In the city Ruskin
observed the conditions of work and the consequences of those conditions, and he
argued that Britain's cities were simply the most glaring manifestation of the evils of a
society based on machine production and the division of labour. He insisted on the
vacuity of productivity as an aim in itself and, as one scholar argues, 'recognised that
there is an intimate connection between the conditions in which we work and the way
in which we live with nature'. Moreover, in an attempt to find solutions to these
problems, Ruskin chose to champion an ideal of pastoral harmony. This found visible
form during the 1870s in his Guild of St. George and the agricultural community it
started near Sheffield. The experiment quickly broke down, but it became, along with
his writings, an important source of inspiration to a number of late Victorians who
were in flight from urban and industrial society. Though Morris eventually, and
absolutely, rejected any notion of flight from the urban, it was his reading of Ruskin
that led him to the conclusion: 'It is the lack of pleasure in daily work which has made
our towns and habitations sordid and hideous, insults to the beauty of the earth which
they disfigure'.

54 Ruskin, 'The Study of Architecture in Schools', p. 24. One result of his rage against the city on
behalf of nature has been the recent characterisation of Ruskin as an 'exemplary English ecologist';
Bate, Romantic Ecology, p. 51. Ruskin's environmental thinking is also discussed by Bernard
Richards in 'Ruskin and Conservation', The Texas Quarterly, no. 21, 1978, pp. 65–73; and in the
essays collected in Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Michael
56 Bate, Romantic Ecology, p. 51.
58 Morris, 'The Worker's Share of Art', Commonweal, vol. I, no. 3, April 1885, pp. 18–19; in
Political Writings, pp. 84–7. Ruskin's influence on Morris is considered in more detail in Chapter 3
of Section II below.
Ruskin's understanding that the society in which he was living had undergone a change from moral to political economy was shared by many during the early to mid-Victorian period. Carlyle was also a virulent critic, though his response to the city was initially somewhat ambivalent: his early letters from London record his sense of shock, but also awe, at the 'wild, wondrous chaotic den of discord ... of men and animals and carriages and wagons, all rushing they know not whence'.

He soon developed, however, a deep hostility to conditions in the industrial and commercial city. His assault on utilitarianism and the 'mechanical spirit' was directed at the types of thought and behaviour which he believed the city encouraged. Works Morris greatly admired such as Past and Present (1843) both explicitly and implicitly denounced the cruelties and injustices of the Victorian industrial city, and drew parallels with the 'starved sieged cities, in the uttermost doomed ruin of old Jerusalem'.

This view of the city as Babylon was often linked with the view of the city as the site of enthronelement of capitalism, and thus urban areas became for many social critics an important point of attack. Friedrich Engels's The Condition of the Working Class in England, first published in Germany in 1845 and in England in 1892, linked the emerging economic order with developing urban conditions. Of course Engels did not attack the existence of the city in the same way as Ruskin, maintaining instead that urban industrial life 'forced the workers to think for themselves and to demand a fuller life in human society'. But although he believed that workers had taken the first step towards 'liberation' when they ceased to 'vegetate happily' in the countryside, he did observe the appalling consequences of that move. His descriptions of the working-class districts of St. Giles, Whitechapel and Bethnal Green in London, and especially of Little Ireland in Manchester, emphasised the foul environmental and living conditions. Thus, although he found purpose in this environment, there is resistance to the 'foul

air’, ‘confined’ conditions and ‘unplanned wildernesses’ of city slums.45 ‘[O]nly the modern industrial age’, he argued, ‘has built over every scrap of ground’ and ‘undermine[d] the health of thousands’.46 Morris’s links with Engels have been described by Thompson and more recently by MacCarthy, and certainly during the mid to late 1880s Morris was much involved with the Marx–Engels ‘family’.47 Though it is unlikely that Morris read Engels’s work before this period, in March 1885 Engels’s ‘England in 1845 and 1885’ appeared in the second issue of Commonwealth, an article that was subsequently included in the preface to the English edition of The Conditions of the English Working Class. Though more forceful in its commitment to the ‘revival of the East End’, the essay maintains that it is still ‘an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation’.48

Perhaps more central to Morris’s initial awareness of landscape and conditions in the city, however, was the work of Dickens, one of Morris’s favourite nineteenth-century novelists. Dickens provided vivid pictures of the city as the ‘embodiment of an unfeeling materialism, a concern with profit at the expense of human feeling and social community’.49 Dickens also emphasised the extent to which ‘Coketown’, for example, was ‘unnatural’ and how it had

a black canal in it and a river that ran purple with evil-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and a rumbling all day long, and where the pistons of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.50

Later in the century, George Gissing re-emphasised the unnatural ugliness of Dickens’s London, calling it a ‘great, gloomy city, webbed and meshed’.51

44 See, for example, his description of the Irwell and Irk in The Condition of the Working Class, p. 60.
46 Engels, The Condition of the Working Class, p. 64.
47 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, pp. 370–2, 422, 751–2, 780–2; MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, pp. 507–9.
49 Short, Imagined Country, p. 83.
50 Charles Dickens, Hard Times (1854); quoted in Woodring, Nature into Art, p. 127.
Dickens also fuelled Morris's intense dislike of railways by detailing the disruption and division caused by earthworks and embankments. In *Dombey and Son* (1846–48) he outlined processes that reflected the construction of the London–Birmingham line through Camden Town in 1836, and there are many other observations pertaining to the railways in Dickens's work. Asa Briggs has noted how these 'iron roads' dramatically changed the urban landscape, usually in the poorer areas of the city, and quotes many others who were effected by these changes. Manby Smith, for example, in his *Curiosities of London life* (1853), described with disdain 'the deep gorge of a railway cutting, which has ploughed its way right through the centre of the market-gardens, and burrowing beneath the carriage-road, and knocking a thousand houses out of its path, pursues its circuitous course to the city'. Thus, although railways were often symbols of progress, their construction also provided a symbol and a landscape of destruction and the unnatural. Forgetting the 'snorting steam and piston stroke' was central to forgetting the 'hideous town'.

Nevertheless, while authors such as Dickens endeavoured to reveal conditions in the city, many only mentioned this landscape as an 'other' place: 'unknown' and 'unexplored'. As cities expanded and disparate residential areas emerged, the

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54 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 3.
56 Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Populations of Great Britain* (1842), for example, noted that 'persons of the wealthier classes' found the facts he uncovered 'as strange as if they related to foreigners or the natives of an unknown country'; quoted in Short, *Imagined Country*, p. 82. A similar note was struck in works of the 1870s and 1880s. Blanchard Jerrold, for example, wrote of the 'unknown country' within the city in the text to accompany Gustave Doré's *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872); quoted in Thesing, *The London Muse*, pp. 94–5.
‘frightened’ middle and upper classes replaced the ‘primitive other’ with the ‘urban other’; and by the 1880s had begun to talk of ‘darkest London’. In 1888 Morris argued that ‘the condition of life in the East end slums’ was ‘quite enough to account for’ the Whitechapel murders. Whereas the ‘unknowing’ began to perceive areas of London as the site of an emergent brutish nature—an urban ‘jungle’—Morris, though well aware of the tensions caused by the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty, was always aware of the constructed nature of this ‘jungle’. Moreover, any apprehensions Morris may have harboured concerning ‘strife’ were coloured by a political vision that enabled him to see in urban discontent ‘the flag of an ancient people to the battle-breeze unfurled’. Thus, unlike writers such as James Thompson, Morris did not develop a dread-full, nightmare vision of the urban environment. Whereas Thompson’s fear of ‘anxious crowds’ allowed him to see only misery and death in the city conceived as an unnatural embodiment of a flawed cosmic plan, and while the city was often a central metaphor for the ‘dis-ease’ Morris railed against, the city was never the disease itself.

In discussing Victorian critiques of the city, therefore, it is also necessary to recognise that Morris was influenced by more ambivalent appraisals of urban phenomena. This ambivalence also mirrored a tradition of Victorian commentary. In 1845 Léon Faucher had written of Manchester as both ‘the most extraordinary settlement’ and ‘the most monstrous that social progress had yet produced’. In 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville had expressed the same ambivalence, noting how a disrupted

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57 Short, Imagined Country, pp. 82–3. The appellation ‘darkest London’ was intended to provide a contrast with the ‘darkest Africa’ just explored by Henry Morton Stanley. His Through the Dark Continent appeared in 1878.
59 In The Pilgrims of Hope he wrote of ‘strife stalking’ the streets of London, where ‘gaudy shops displayed / The toys of rich men’s folly, by blinded labour made’, while ‘still from nought in nothing the bright skinned horses drew / Dull men and sleek-faced women with never a deed to do’ (p. 374).
60 Morris, The Pilgrims of Hope, p. 374.
62 Forsyth (The Lost Pattern, pp. 9, 71–96) has argued that ambivalence towards the city was a characteristic trait of many Victorian writers, and that it acted as a ‘psychological protection’ in the development of awareness of urban ways of life.
landscape could produce both a ‘filthy sewer’ and ‘the greatest stream of human industry flow[ing] out to fertilise the whole world’.

64 The reports of Faucher and de Tocqueville would have been of little or no interest to Morris. Early in his life, he avoided ‘politic-sozial subjects’ because he felt he had ‘no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree’.

65 He did encounter ambivalent attitudes towards the city, however, in the literary and fictional works which were so important a source of his early values and interests. The observations of Faucher, de Tocqueville and of the British chroniclers and commentators were reflected in the growth of the city as ‘the controlling landscape of modern fiction’, and the slow decline of pastoral as a mode of literary expression.

66 Morris would have been familiar with Dickens’s Count Smollett, the ‘famous foreigner’ who visited London to gather material for his ‘great work on England’.

67 He would also have been aware of the way in which many writers were struggling towards new ‘structures of feeling’ based on a conscious turning from the countryside to the city as the centre of contemporary life.

Browning was one such writer whom Morris admired, and it is possible that the poet’s figuring of urban/human and rural/natural space had a considerable influence on the undergraduate Morris.

68 Often described as a poet of the suburban rather than the urban, Browning’s ‘Up at a Villa—Down in the City’ (c. 1853) is nonetheless a poem that takes delight in the city and its crowds, preferring the bustle and gossip of the square to the ‘bare’ and boring countryside.

69 Though the beauties of rural landscape are acknowledged in many if not most of his poems, Browning tended to displace earlier Wordsworthian emphases on the truths to be gained from nature by

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66 Morris to Cornell Price, July 1856, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 28.


68 As suggested by MacCarthy in *A Life for Our Time*, p. 111. The reference is, of course, to Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1836–37).


70 For Browning’s influence on Morris, see Chapters 1 and 3 above.

concentration on individual reactions to it. ‘[N]o longer an all-wise and pervasive educator’, nature ‘is realised at most in brief flashes as a medium for God’s power and grace or as a mirror for change in ourselves’. Furthermore, Browning’s view of the city in relation to nature is often as a bright ‘spot of life’ wrested from a dark and sinister natural world. Thus it is possible that Morris discovered in this poetry a concern with relationships and community, an ambivalent awareness of nature and the urban.

Robert L. Patten has argued that Dickens’s novels also increasingly incorporate within an urban community, often at the hearth, the power of renewal traditionally associated with the natural countryside. Indeed Patten even asserts that there is no necessary distinction between city and country in Dickens, and that, although the countryside is often more pleasant than the town, ingratitude, illness, corruption, and death appear equally in both. According to Patten, Dickens’s work contains no ambiguities ‘about whether Nature or civilisation is the better place for man’. Pattens’s assessment reworks Williams’s observation that Dickens shows the physical world as unavoidably human: made, manufactured and interpreted in the processes of industry; satirically, that ‘[t]he earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in’. Dickens suggested:

It might be worth while sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural. Could any son or daughter to one idea ... and what is nature to the willing captive who has never risen up upon the wings of a free mind ... to see her in her comprehensive truth! Alas! are there so few things in the world, about us, most unnatural, and yet most natural in being so?

Nature’s place in the new kind of social order that Dickens projects in his vision of Coketown and London is not ‘illustrated by topography or local instance’ but in a consciousness of ‘recognitions and relationships’ seen even through the ‘dense black

72 Browning, ‘Ivan Ivanovich’, line 23.
cloud hanging over the city', whereas Ruskin raged against Dickens’s ‘fimetic art’, whereas Morris appreciated him as a ‘master of life’. His immersion in and use of Dickens’s work enabled him to understand and imagine the possibilities for human community in the city, to understand something of human nature.

Dickens was also part and precursor of an emergent ‘realist’ tradition intimately involved with the urban realm, which, to a lesser extent, influenced Morris. For the most part, this new form involved pushing conventional nature description to the side to make way for social observation, commentary and critique. Although some writers such as George Eliot turned an eye on the countryside and others looked back to a rural past, for many the realist mode also represented a commitment to the urban present. While these were not major influences on the work of Morris, we do know that he read the works of Disraeli, Eliot, Gaskell, Gissing, Hardy, and even Zola, and that he looked closer at the city because of them. Though he considered Zola’s works ‘horrible’, he acknowledged that they were ‘undoubtedly powerful’ and aimed ‘to show modern Society what a foul beast it is’.

Neither was Morris particularly drawn to realist representations of the city in the visual arts, although many of these contained an ambivalence and sublimity which linked them to romantic understandings of natural phenomena. Yet we are told that

\[\text{Dickens, Dombey and Son (1846–48); quoted in Williams, The English Novel, p. 46.}\]
\[\text{Williams, The Country and the City, pp. 154–6.}\]
\[\text{Ruskin, Fiction, Fair and Foul, in Works, vol. XXXIII, pp. 268–70.}\]
\[\text{Morris frequently used characters and situations from Dickens’s novels to embroider and augment his prose: ‘Gradgrindism’ (Hard Times) as a metaphor for utilitarianism; ‘Podsnap’s office’ (Our Mutual Friend) as a vision of capitalist hell; and often phrases such as Joe Gargery’s ‘Wot larks!’ (Great Expectations) in letters to friends and relatives.}\]
\[\text{On these ‘realist’ conventions, see Woodring, Nature into Art, pp. 121–2; and Linda Nochlin, Realism, Penguin, New York, 1975, p. 13.}\]
Morris 'chanted rather than read' Ruskin's descriptions of Turner; that he 'declaimed' the lines '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'. 81

But Morris had not seen a painting of Turner's when he read these lines, and it is doubtful, given his preference for Pre-Raphaelite 'naturalism', whether he would really have appreciated such works as Rail, Steam and Speed (1844) or Keelman heaving in Coals by Night (c. 1823). In these paintings Turner broke the conventions of realist art as then understood to capture nature's power and the immensities of space and distance. Morris would find other ways, namely pattern-making, to blend the study and representation of form and process; he did not develop an urban aesthetic that could appreciate 'the great tawny weltering fog' that Elizabeth Barrett Browning saw 'liInvolve the passive city, strangle it / Alive, and draw it off into the void'. 83 Morris considered this 'dull', 84 and, like visitors to the Royal Academy, the organisers of exhibitions and the producers of art journals, he tended to favour conventional images of an ordered and contented countryside over industrial or urban views. 85 He preferred Ford Madox Brown's image of a rustic Hayfield (1856) to his rendering of 'navvies' engaged in urban Work (1852–65).

If criticism and ambivalence of the kinds mentioned above prevented Morris from uncritically celebrating an urban aesthetic, it also shielded him from the positivist enthusiasm of those who saw the nineteenth century as 'pre-eminently the age of great cities'. 87 In October 1881, at the same time Morris was calling for a 'reasonable share in the beauty of the earth ... as the right of every man', Joseph Cowen, M.P., was

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82 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh, III, lines 195–6.
83 Morris in conversation with Sydney Cockerell, 28 November 1892; quoted in Mackail's notebooks, held by the William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow. It should be noted, however, that Morris greatly admired Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, which, according to Mackail (Life, vol. I, p. 58), provided models for some of his earliest poems.
84 See Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, p. 241, and E.D.H. Johnson, 'Victorian Artists and the Urban Milieu', in The Victorian City, vol. II, p. 449. Johnson writes that of more than 1,600 oils and watercolours listed in the catalogue for 'The Exhibition of the Art Treasures of the United Kingdom', held in Manchester in 1857, there are virtually no industrial views, and indicates that the same is true of the catalogue of the International Exhibition of 1862 in London, and the pages of leading art periodicals such as Art Journal, Magazine of Art, and Portfolio.
inveighing against ‘[t]hose who can only detect beauty in pastoral and primitive
pursuits, those who can only find sentiment in struggling streams and dreamy sunsets’.
He argued instead that one should turn to the city ‘to trace the broad outlines of a
mighty poem of moving human interest in those bellowing blast-furnaces and grimy
workshops’:

They are carving out of raw materials the means of social elevation,
amelioration and enjoyment. They are breaking down old asperities,
indefinitely adding to the usefulness of existence, linking town to town,
uniting in the bonds of amity long-estranged and oft-embattled lands, and
binding all classes in the rough but genial poetry of real life.88

Cowen was not alone. Others found the city a centre of light and learning’, a ‘delight’,
a ‘Great City of the Midnight Sun / Whose day begins when day is done’; a place
where nature was replaced by ‘iron lilies’ and ‘jewelled eyes’.89 For Henry James, also
writing in 1881, London was not ‘exempt from reproach’, but it was ‘magnificent ...
the biggest aggregation of human life, the most complete compendium of the world’.90

Morris, on the other hand, found no ‘genial poetry’ or magnificence in
Victorian London. In response to an essay of James’s in the Century Magazine,91 he
lashed out at ‘the clever historian of the deadliest corruption of society, the laureate of
the flirts, sneaks, and empty fools’:

Mr. Henry James ... has been writing an ingenious paper on the
impression made by London on his feelings; but as a matter of course, the
impression made by the monstrosity is taken from the stand-point of the
superior middle-class person, who looks upon the working-classes as an
useful machine, and, having no experience of their life, has not imagination
enough to realise the fact that the said machine is composed of millions of
men, women, and children who are living in misery... It is this from which
is born the ‘dreadful delight’ on which clever but dull Mr. James
expaniates so ingeniously.

88 Joseph Cowen, M.P., ‘The Rise and Strength of Great Towns’ (1881); quoted in Thesing, The
London Muse, p. xi.
90 Henry James; quoted in Briggs, Victorian Cities, pp. 75-6.
91 James, ‘London’, (1888); reprinted in Essays in London and Elsewhere, James R. Osgood,
Melvaine & Co., London, 1893, pp. 1-46. Morris may also have read James’s story ‘A London Life’
published in Scribner’s Magazine between June and September of that year.
Morris called instead for ‘a true tale of the City of Dreadful Delight’ from ‘one who had been under its sharp-toothed harrow’. He stipulated, however, that ‘he should not be a man born and bred in the slums, nor even “used” to them, nor a man born poor anywhere, but someone who once lived in a pleasant place with hope beside him’.92

The way Morris eventually wrote this tale demonstrates that he was also able to imagine cities of delight.93 The sources of his positive feelings about the city, however, were somewhat different than James’s. On the one hand, Morris drew on a long tradition of writing about the city as past or potential Jerusalem, a tradition that stretched from the Book of Revelation to the works of Blake, Browning and Carlyle. Even Ruskin acknowledged that there were cities ‘to be proud of’. In Verona he saw ‘no necessity … to dwell on the blue river or the burning hills’ as ‘[t]he heart and eye have enough to do in the streets of the city itself; they are contented there’.94 He admired also, the city ‘which presented itself … to a designer of the Gothic school of Pisa’, a city of ‘gardens, courts, and cloisters’ and ‘scenery of perfect human life’.95

Morris, though less Mediterranean in his tastes, was also a great admirer of the physical contours of the medieval city. For him, Oxford was a ‘jewel’ and England’s most beautiful and important town.96 He compared it to the French cathedral towns which he read about in Ruskin and visited when on holiday, admiring their ‘mingled beauty, history, and romance’. Indeed in 1886, he wrote that visiting Rouen ‘was the greatest pleasure I have ever had’, and reflected:

At that time I was an undergraduate of Oxford. Though not so astounding, so romantic, or at first sight so mediaeval as the Norman city, Oxford in those days still kept a great deal of its earlier loneliness; and the memory of its grey streets as they then were has been an abiding influence and pleasure in my life, and would be greater still if I could only forget what they are now…97

93 See Chapter 2 of the Appendix.
Oxford was the first urban environment in which Morris lived and the first place outside the family that he found friendship and community; it had an effect on him that was both social and aesthetic; it provided both beauty and belonging. Its 'abiding influence' was so great that when Oxford was threatened by change or development, Morris took it personally:

A kind of terror always falls upon me as I near it; indignation at wanton or rash changes mingles curiously in me with all that I remember that I have lost since I was a lad and dwelling there...98

There was nothing unique or unusual about this affection. Morris’s feelings were in line with many others who bemoaned the coming of the railway, the town’s 'commercialisation' and the spreading suburbs.99 Oxford lay ‘steeped in sentiment’ for many, ‘spreading her gardens to the moonlight, and whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the middle ages’.100 Arnold, Lionel Johnson, and Morris’s friend Edward Burne-Jones, all remembered that ‘the city ended abruptly, as if a wall had been about it, and you came suddenly upon the meadows’.101 Perhaps most memorably, Hopkins emphasised the fact that it had been ‘branchy between towers; / Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmed, lark-charmed, rook-racked, river-rounded’, but had now ‘a base and brickish skirt’ which ‘sours / That neighbour-nature thy grey beauty is grounded / Best in’, a ‘graceless growth’ that had ‘confounded / Rural rural keeping—folk, flocks, and flowers’.102 The ‘river-rounded’, nature-grounded town, full of ‘folk’, ‘flowers’ and even ‘rural keeping’ was a model Morris would use when he came to imagine better cities for the future: earthy Jerusalems built in an English green and pleasant land.103

99 Mackail (Life, vol. I, pp. 28-9) described Oxford as ‘still in main aspect a medieval city’ when Morris first moved there in 1853, but went on to detail how in the 1890s ‘meshes of suburbs, hidden in gaunt brickwork and blue slate... now envelop three sides of Oxford’.
102 Hopkins, ‘Duns Scotus’s Oxford’ (1879), lines 1–8.
103 See Chapters 2 and 3 of the Appendix.
Reference to Blake also indicates the other strand of positive thinking about the city that Morris drew upon: the theme of the city as a place of liberation. Apart from its physical attractiveness, Morris also admired the medieval city for its social cohesion, and looked back longingly with Ruskin, Kropotkin and others to the spirit of cooperation they imagined in a city organised as a ‘federation of both small village communities and guilds’. From at least 1878, however, when he wrote ‘Wake, London Lad!’, Morris realised that any hope for a changed society of the future would need to tackle and not reject the present conditions of urbanity. By the early 1880s he had accepted Marx and Engels’s analysis that the ‘rule of towns’ had rescued many from the ‘idiocy of rural life’ and had made the working class aware of its own interests. Certainly Morris had most sympathy with Marx’s argument that the separation of town and country was the ‘most crass expression of the subjection of the individual under the division of labour’, and that the abolition of this antagonism would be ‘one of the first conditions of communal life’. In nearly all of his socialist writings, however, Morris recognised that political life began in the city, and that the good life could also be made there.

In this respect, Morris’s response departed from a more common literary fear of the city in the years 1870-90, especially among those concerned with ‘natural order’. Among authors such as Hopkins and Patmore, the response to the ‘Four Violent Years’ and to urban unrest in general was one of fear and panic. In poems such as ‘Tom’s Garland: Upon the Unemployed’ and ‘A London Fête’ they recoiled from the ‘anarchy’, ‘poverty’ and ‘bestiality’ of the city’s ‘residuum’. Morris’s

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105 Morris wrote ‘Wake, London Lad!’ (at the prompting of Henry Broadhurst) to be sung at the ‘Workmen’s Neutrality Demonstration’ at Exeter Hall on 16 January 1878. The meeting was held to protest against Disraeli’s alliance with Turkey following revelations of atrocities committed by Turkish mercenaries against Christians living in Bulgaria.
108 Thesing, The London Muse, pp. 100–7. Thesing’s chapter on ‘The Urban Volcano, 1870–90’ also contains an especially useful discussion of Morris’s The Pilgrims of Hope and Chants for Socialists which I have drawn upon here (pp. 121–34). See also Hall, Cities of Tomorrow, pp. 14–31.
reactions to the siege of Paris, and to events such as the free speech demonstrations of
1886, 'Bloody Sunday', and the 1889 dock strike, however, were entirely different.
He saw these events as reasons for hope, and celebrated the Paris Commune—
described by William Thesing as 'the most extreme example of the separation of a
great city from its surrounding and supporting countryside'—as a valiant socialist
struggle. In The Pilgrims of Hope (1887) Morris described how '[t]he city's hope
enwrapped' his characters, and in his non-fictional commentary emphasised that this
feat of the 'city proletariat' had made the 'hope of today possible'. Even the 'songs'
collected as Chants for Socialists (1884–92), which rarely celebrate urban or industrial
conditions, sing the praises of 'the lovely city' in 'the days that shall be'.

Morris was not content, however, to wait for revolution to construct 'the
lovely city'. On his journeys through London and to Glasgow, Edinburgh,
Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, he encountered appalling conditions of
deprivation and squalor which he felt required immediate attention. Morris's
involvement in the nineteenth-century urban reform movement coloured many of his
ideas on the relationship of nature and the city, and he, in turn, influenced many of its
schemes. Though the groups with which Morris became involved were often part of
broad and diverse efforts to build the 'good' city—to supervise and 'safeguard' the

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109 Thesing, The London Muse, p. 94.
111 Morris and Bax, 'The Paris Commune of 1871, and the Continental Movement Following it',
Commonweal, vol. II, no. 38, 2 October 1886, p. 210; in Political Writings, pp. 558–62; and Morris,
'Why we Celebrate the Commune of Paris', Commonweal, vol. III, no. 62, 19 March 1887, pp. 89–90;
in Political Writings, pp. 232–5. For Morris on the free speech demonstrations of 1886, see: 'Our
Commonweal, vol. II, no. 29, 1 July 1886, p. 137; and 'The Abolition of Free Speech in the Streets',
Commonweal, vol. II, no. 32, 18 August 1886, p. 161; all in Political Writings, pp. 122–7, 168–71,
177–9. Letters to Henry Halliday Sparling (9 February 1886), John Glasce (10 February 1886), John
Carruthers (25 March 1886), and John Lincoln Mahon (4 September 1886) also reflect on these
incidents (all in Letters, vol. II, pp. 519, 520, 533–5, 570). For Morris on 'Bloody Sunday', see:
'London in a State of Siege', Commonweal, vol. III, no. 97, 19 November 1887, pp. 369–70; in
Political Writings, pp. 302–6; and News from Nowhere, pp. 41–2, 129. On the Whitechapel murders,
September 1889, pp. 281–2; in Political Writings, pp. 450–4.
112 Morris, 'The Day is Coming', lines 23 and 31, in Chants for Socialists, The Socialist League,
London, 1885, p. 4. For discussion of Morris's 'chants', which appeared in three separate collections
between 1884 and 1892, see Christopher Waters, 'Morris's Chants' and the Problems of Socialist
Culture', in Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris, eds. Florence S. Bons and Carole
morals of the urban poor, to assert and maintain social control, and to celebrate the
city as a site of 'progress'—many were organised around the idea that what the urban
dweller lacked was the site and sight of nature. In 1857 Kingsley had argued that only
when there had been 'a complete interpenetration of city and country, a complete
fusion of their different modes of life, and a combination of the advantages of both'
would it be possible to 'build better things than cities'.\textsuperscript{114} Though Morris understood
that their efforts could only offer partial solutions, he believed that the movement
focused attention on the inadequacy of the urban environment, and that it might
ultimately indicate the need to reshape the socio-economic reality behind it.

Nineteenth-century debate on the place of nature in the urban environment
was largely related to questions of 'beauty' and 'relaxation'.\textsuperscript{115} It was stimulated by
the report of the Select Committee on Public Walks in 1833 and was developed within
and alongside reports on health and sanitation.\textsuperscript{115} Social reformers such as Kingsley
argued that 'the moral state of the city' depended on its 'physical state ... on the food,
water, air and lodging';\textsuperscript{116} John Arthur Roebuck, M.P., urged parliament to curtail
speculative building in order to allow people access to parks and gardens for health

\textsuperscript{114} Charles Kingsley, 'Great Cities and their influence for Good and Evil' (1857), in \textit{Sanitary and

\textsuperscript{115} The main sources for my discussion of the 'open spaces' movement in Victorian cities are:
XXIII, no. 4, Summer 1980, pp. 479–501; Gould, \textit{Early Green Politics, passion}; and John Ranlett,
"Checking Nature's Desecration": Late-Victorian Environmental Organisation", in \textit{Victorian Studies},

\textsuperscript{116} Walter I. Creese ('Imagination in the Suburb', in \textit{Nature and the Victorian Imagination}, pp. 58–9) has argued that the Parliamentary Report on Public Walks of 1833 is the document in which nature
first takes 'its place in the public conscience'. Edwin Chadwick's \textit{Report ... on an Inquiry into the
Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain} (1842) is discussed in R.A. Lewis,
\textit{Edwin Chadwick and the Public Health Movement 1832–1854}, Longmans, London, 1952; and for a
'psychological dimension', Richard L. Schoenwald, 'Training Urban Man: A hypothesis about the
sanitary movement', in \textit{The Victorian City}, vol. II, pp. 669–92. Schoenwald's essay also contains
cartoons and sketches from \textit{Punch} and \textit{Illustrated London News} illustrating awareness of the need for
sanitary reform in the 1840s and 1850s.

\textsuperscript{116} Kingsley, 'Great Cities', pp. 187–222.
and recreational purposes, and Joseph Paxton incorporated trees, earth mounds and paths into the design for Birkenhead Park near Liverpool.

As indicated above, the motives of those involved in these activities frequently derived from concerns relating to social instability, public disorder and perceived moral laxity. The provision of parks, gardens and open spaces was viewed as a means of providing ‘safety valves for the mind’, and of bringing people ‘into a closer relationship to and contemplation of the wonders of creation’. Octavia Hill, one of the most prominent campaigners for open spaces (whose activities in housing reform began in 1864, with the financial assistance of Ruskin), campaigned for ‘the healing gift of space’: for public access to ‘the beauty of earth and sky, trees and flowers’ in the service of Christian morality. To a certain extent, the encouragement of ‘rational recreation’ and the establishment of parks and gardens was a form of control which sought to educate the urban working class in ‘the ethics of an industrial order’.

Of the groups concerned about the place of nature in the city, Morris was most involved with the Commons Preservation and Kyre Societies, though he was also a member of the Selborne Society for the Preservation of Birds, Plants, and Pleasant Places, and of the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising. All of these groups sought, in some form or another, to promote both ‘the picturesque simplicity of rural and river scenes’ and ‘the dignity and propriety of our larger towns’. The Commons Preservation Society (C.P.S.), formed in 1865, was a largely

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119 William Cooke Taylor, Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire (1842); quoted in Gaskell, ‘Gardens for the Working Class’, p. 481.
120 F.G. Heath, The Fern World (1877); quoted in Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 95. Gould also cites a review in The Spectator, which notes that those who read Heath’s Our Woodland Trees (1887 edition) would be able ‘to raise their minds from gorgelling things to the contemplation of something better’.
121 Enid M. Bell, Octavia Hill, Constable & Co., London, 1942, pp. 147, 141.
123 For further discussion of Morris’s involvement with the C.P.S., see Chapter 1 of Section IV below.
middle-class organisation which sought to preserve the open spaces in and around London and the Home Counties. It campaigned to prevent Epping Forest being turned into a formal park, to conserve roadside verges and to preserve open spaces in central London. In seeking to promote 'the health and happiness of large towns', the Society emphasised that 'oases of nature, in striking contrast to their surroundings', offered 'reservoirs of fresh air and health' and 'something of the sense and beauty of nature'. This concern for the physical well-being of the city dweller, however, was often linked to a preoccupation with moral reform and the defence of the social and political status quo. In a speech at Shoreditch, leading C.P.S. member George Shaw-Lefevre stated that the provision and preservation of urban parks and gardens was an 'absolute necessity', because 'every wise Conservative knows very well that these free spaces are the great safety valves which protect property from that dangerous pressure which is daily becoming more severe'.

The work of the Kyrle Society complemented the efforts of the C.P.S. but put more emphasis on 'the diffusion of Beauty'. Based on the belief that spiritual poverty and civic unrest were largely a result of 'ugliness', the Society's primary target was the provision of 'the sight of grass and trees and sky' in the densely populated areas of London, Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester, Liverpool and Nottingham. Members planted trees, collected flowers for poor households, and campaigned for 'smoke abatement', the preservation of commons and playing fields, the conversion of disused burial grounds into parks and gardens, and the opening of city squares during summer evenings. To a large extent, the work of the C.P.S. and the Kyrle Society was responsible for the Commons Act of 1876, which stipulated that every enclosure had to promote the health and comfort of nearby dwellers.

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125 See Reports of the Commons Preservation Society (1870–76), pp. 13–14, 26; quoted in Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 90.
127 Quoted in Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 90.
129 See Gould, Early Green Politics, pp. 91–2.
130 The organisations were also supported by the press, who were generally sympathetic to their cause (especially later after the publication of Maurns's Bitter Cry of Outcast London). See Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 97. For statements in favour of 'smoke control', see also H.D. Rawnsley, 'Sunlight or Smoke?', Contemporary Review, no. 57, 1890, pp. 521–4.
The character of green enclosures campaigned for by the C.P.S., the Kyrie Society, and other groups, such as the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, also tells us about Victorian attitudes to nature in the city. Victorian garden design was eclectic, but it has often been argued that if any one principle dominated it was that gardens ought to be considered works of art rather than attempts to copy the 'natural' landscape. The 'gardenesque' style, which emerged in the early years of the century, isolated plants in order to enhance display, and was well suited to the confined spaces of city and suburb. In this respect, Victorian gardens acted as a means of controlling space, and, with their encircling bedding schemes and protecting hedges, signified a sheltered world.

Though more commonly true of private gardens, public parks could also fulfil this protecting function. Andrew Griffin has argued that Victorian public parks and private gardens had 'great power to soothe and heal' and were commonly 'bowers and oases in a desert of brick and mortar; havens from and protests against a world fabricated, functional, and dead'. Griffin contends that there was 'an internalisation of the Romantic process' in the Victorian period such that 'the self was “most itself”, not freely wandering but enclosed, shielded, withheld'. Arnold's 'Lines Written in Kensington Gardens' (1852), for example, show the garden as a place of retreat from 'the huge world, which roars hard by' (though here 'the girdling city' is so close that Arnold is forced to retreat even further). Thus one can describe the Victorian construction of nature in the city park or garden as mainly 'refuge-dominant'.

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112 Perhaps the ultimate expression of the 'gardenesque' style was the Victorian conservatory where, as Cosgrove (*Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, pp. 235–6) has argued, 'the green and blossoming treasures of colonial territories' were displayed in an entirely artificial environment in which natural processes had come to depend completely on human control. On the 'domination' of nature in gardens, see also Yi-fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984, *passim*, but especially pp. 21–4. On the protective character of the 'gardenesque' style, see Derek Clifford, *A History of Garden Design*, Faber & Faber, London, 1962, p. 192.
113 Griffin, 'The Interior Garden', p. 171.
It was not simply, however, the physical entity of the garden for which reformers campaigned, but the actual process of gardening. In the wake of assertions of the benefits of contact with nature, and of the more practical demands of middle-class ‘villadom’, the early years of the nineteenth century saw a considerable growth in knowledge of and interest in the subject. J.C. Loudon, author of *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion* (1838), promoted involvement in the physical activity of gardening, emphasising the advantages to be gained from performing its different operations. Industrialists ‘demonstrated’ the benefits which would accrue to the working class, and thus indirectly to the employing class, claiming that through self-help would come not only self-improvement but also a diminution of the threat to society and a lessening of the social burden. By the 1870s gardening was claimed to be one of the most popular and beneficial of activities of life, and to be increasingly available to all. By this time also, particularly among the middle classes, the concept of a ‘supra-class community’ based on the virtues of gardening had many exponents. Lord Brabazon, who founded the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in 1882, believed that gardening would counteract ‘the debasing influences of city life, where men can find nothing higher to contemplate than the works of his fellow-man’.

Where did Morris stand with regard to these various measures aimed at bringing nature into the Victorian city in the form of parks and gardens? In some respects his responses echo those of the campaigners against ugliness. He emphasised the importance of the ‘possession of space and pure air’, of ‘town-houses being made proper dwellings for human beings’ and of the need ‘not to live in the midst of ugliness’. But Morris followed these demands with a warning that it was ‘no use asking our masters for these necessaries: they cannot give them to us’. Morris was only too aware of the limits of philanthropy and was for substantive change rather than

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139 Lord Brabazon, *Social Arrows* (1886); quoted in Gould, *Early Green Politics*, p. 94.
palliative measures. Thus, though he referred to Octavia Hill as 'a well intentioned, disinterested and kindly person', and 'the most practical' of philanthropists, he also indicated the limits of her crusade. He complained that in 'a letter written by ... [Hill] to the Pall Mall Gazette ... she actually allows herself to say that after all it is not so bad as one might think for a whole family to live in one room', and stated that the limitations of her vision stand 'as an indictment of our present society'.

Similarly, when a 'People's Palace' was proposed for London's East End, Morris's reaction was in sharp opposition to those philanthropists who applauded the move because it was 'not so much relief from actual distress that the people ... require as some contrast with the grinding monotony of their lives'. ‘What's the use’, Morris asked, 'of building a People's Palace in Hell, or putting up a Mosaic picture on the walls of the devil's scullery'?

Morris's solutions were also far more radical than most proposed by the members of the C.P.S. or the Kyrle Society. In an attack on 'The Housing of the Poor' in 1884, he attempted to 'give our masters the philanthropists some idea of what we consider decent housing for the working classes':

It might be advisable, granting the existence of huge towns for the present, that the houses for workers should be built in tall blocks, in what might be called vertical streets, but that need not prevent ample room in each lodging, so as to include such comforts of space, air and privacy as every moderately-living middle-class family considers itself entitled to; also it must not prevent the lodgings having their due share of pure air and sunlight... This gathering of many small houses into a big tall one would give opportunity for what is also necessary to decent life, that is garden space around each block. This space once obtained, it would be a small matter to make the gardens far more beautiful, as they would be certainly

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113 Morris, 'The Housing of the Poor', pp. 4–5.
114 Anon., 'A real Jubilee offering', Saturday Review, 23 April 1887, p. 574.
far more cheerful, than the square gardens of the aristocratic quarters of
the town now are...  

Nor did Morris have any patience with schemes that sought to promote
gardening as a benefit to the Victorian working classes in their current position. When Salisbury's Conservative government introduced the Allotment Bill in 1887, Morris argued that it would merely allow 'the labourers to work to pay their own poor rates', and that the Bill was 'really in the interests of the employing farmers and the rack-renting landlords'. The scheme, he complained, would 'create an aristocracy of labour', which would act as a cushion between the working classes and the middle classes, and which would also impede the development of class consciousness.

On the whole, Morris's position was similar to that of other socialists who gave only limited support to the various open spaces campaigns. Many were wary of the movement's links to the Liberal Party, and derided their work as paternalistic charity or palliatives that merely perpetuated belief in the benevolence of those in authority. When the London Corporation purchased Highgate Woods, Commonweal objected strongly to the 'spectacle of people pompously and elaborately giving away what never belonged to them'.

There was some compatibility between the work done by the open spaces movement and socialist groups. Many socialists, and Morris was among these, gave limited support to the movement for the short-term relief they brought to those in direst need. Some also argued that any move towards the common ownership of land,

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145 Morris, 'The Housing of the Poor', pp. 4-5.
146 When the position of the working classes had been radically improved, however, Morris believed that '75 out of every 100 people will ... take delight in gardening—-the pleasantest and most innocent of all occupations'; 'A Factory as it Might Be', Justice, vol. 1, no. 18, 17 May 1884, p. 2; in Political Writings, pp. 32-5.
147 Morris, 'Notes on News', Commonweal, vol. III, no. 84, 20 August 1887, pp. 265-6; in Journalism, pp. 266-8. The Allotment Bill sought to provide rural labourers with land in order to supplement their wages by growing their own food. See Gould's chapter on 'The "Three Acres and a Cow" Campaign', in Early Green Politics, pp. 104-23.
148 For the C.P.S.'s respect for property rights, see Shaw-Lefèvre, Commons, Forests and Footpaths, p. 318; and Frederick Pollock's letter to The Times, 23 November 1885; noted in Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 180, note 36. For examples of socialist criticism of charity, see Justice (1 March, 30 August, 29 November, 13, 20 December 1884); Commonweal (7 May 1887); Labor Leader (21 November 1891); Clarion (17 August 1895); noted in Gould, Early Green Politics, p. 180, note 38.
however tenuous, was a step in the right direction, and would facilitate the nationalisation of land at a future stage. On the whole, however, socialist groups tended to organise their own outdoor recreational activities so that members would enjoy nature independent of ‘charity’ and commercial profiteers.\textsuperscript{150} Nevertheless, Morris praised the Kyrle Society’s ‘valiant attempt both to save open spaces from bricks and mortar, and to make them open in another sense, from bolts and locks’, expressing ‘gratitude to any man who has saved for us in London so much as one tree or one plot of grass’.\textsuperscript{151} Guarding what little was left of nature in the city, and making it freely available, was in the end justification enough for Morris to throw his support behind these groups.

Another ‘movement’ that organised around the idea of the lack of site and sight of nature in the city was that which sought both to extend the city to include ‘greener’ areas, and to rebuild established areas with more ‘green’ in them. Largely a phenomenon organised by and for the benefit of the middle classes, Walter Creese has drawn attention to the way the idea of the garden suburb derived from a romantic wish ‘to flee into woodland alleys and places of nesting green’.\textsuperscript{152} The suburb often acted, Creese argues, as a nostalgic recollection of ‘real’ rural villages, rendering the Wordsworthian ‘escape’ into nature ‘domesticated, stabilised, brought in close’.\textsuperscript{153} Quite commonly, of course, the suburban residence was merely a measure of affluence, with the country estate being a common prototype for many of the early planned suburbs.\textsuperscript{154}

Morris’s response to the garden suburb was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, he criticised suburban living as an exercise in bourgeois individualism, with

\textsuperscript{150} The Clarion Fellowships were the most conspicuous examples. See Gould, \textit{Early Green Politics}, p. 180, note 44.
\textsuperscript{152} Creese, ‘Imagination in the Suburb’, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{153} Leigh Hunt, ‘Hampstead VII: Description of the Village’, \textit{The Examiner}, 12 November 1815; quoted in Creese, ‘Imagination in the Suburb’, p. 53. See also, Frederick E. Pierce, \textit{Currents and Eddies in the English Romantic Generation}, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1918, pp. 169–70. See also, however, the work of those who questioned whether this desire to escape to nature was entirely genuine, such as H.D. Traill’s article ‘In Praise of the Country’, \textit{Contemporary Review}, no. 52, October 1887, pp. 479–81.
land ‘exploited and artificialized for the sake of the villa-dweller’s purses’.

Yet he admired suburbs such as Bedford Park (begun in 1875), which were laid out to avoid destroying trees and other natural features. His vision of London in News from Nowhere seemed to repeat many of these elements; and it was this vision of nature in the city which later town planners often drew upon. Unlike Ebenezer Howard and many of the other suburb builders or town planners, however, Morris was not willing to use nature merely to erase or conceal inequity in the city. He did not believe that the ‘injustices and dislocations’ of the Victorian city could ‘be mitigated by Nature, adjusted within Nature, and finally healed over by Nature’. He did not approve of nature in the city or the suburbs being used, to borrow Creese’s most appropriate metaphor, ‘[I]ike the lace curtain in the front parlour’.

There were, of course, those who sought ‘relief from soot and starkness’ by fleeing city and suburb entirely. In the late nineteenth century, particularly, a number of groups attempted to develop small, cooperative communities well away from the influence of the city. Inspired by a number of historical precursors, social theorists, and a rash of works that argued that a return to earlier social forms based on tribe and village was desirable, most of these ‘agrarian communes’, ‘cottage farms’ and ‘farm

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155 London (The Suburban Gardener, p. 8) stipulated that ‘a suburban residence’ should contain ‘all that is essential to happiness, in the garden, park, and demesne of the most extensive country residence’.


157 See Morris to May Morris, 4 September 1879, in Letters, vol. 1, p. 519. According to the London Daily News, Bedford Park was a suburb where the streets appeared to be ‘closed at the end by trees and houses, and from a succession of views, as if the architect had taken a hint from Nature, who, when in a pleasant lazy mood, will dispose such mighty rivers as the Rhine and Hudson to form a series of lake views’ (5 May 1880); quoted in Creese, ‘Imagination in the Suburb’, pp. 60–1. Morris also had some respect for the ‘factory villages’ of and inspired by Robert Owen—a different phenomenon, but with some common foundations. For discussion of these various schemes, see Walter Creese, The Search for Environment, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1966. The impact of Robert Owen’s ‘environmentalism’ on Morris is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 of Section IV below.

158 Ebenezer Howard’s proposals to build a ‘garden city’, as well as the work of Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, owed much to Morris’s vision. See Ebenezer Howard, Tomorrow: a peaceful path to social reform (1898; reissued in 1904 as Garden Cities of Tomorrow); Hall, Cities of Tomorrow, pp. 86–112; and Robert Fishman, Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, pp. 27–75.

159 Creese (‘Imagination in the Suburbs’, p. 67) commenting on Henrietta Barnett’s opinion of Hampstead Garden Suburb.


161 Some of the later communities were inspired by Ruskin’s writings and his earlier experiments with the Guild of St. George near Sheffield. See Fors Clavigera, vol. II, in Works, vol. XXVIII, passim;
colonies' were organised around the rallying cry of 'back to the land'. Many were also anarchists influenced by the writings of Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin. Kropotkin was a friend of Morris and his work inspired Morris's hopes for the future, even if they did not convince him of the means of attaining it. His series of articles published in 1888, arguing against the expansion of heavy industry and world trade, and for self-sufficiency, 'mutual aid', and federated village communities based upon his conception of the medieval city, inspired many communally-minded anarchists. In *News from Nowhere*, the 'historical' prose romances, and even certain chapters of 'Socialism from the Root Up', Kropotkin's influence is apparent. On the whole, however, Morris had little time for those who attempted to set up model or alternative communities in the current political climate. He showed nothing but contempt for the 'home colonisation' scheme inaugurated in 1887 by Herbert Mills and inspired by 'beggar colonies' in Holland and Germany. In *Commonweal* he argued that the German project had been a 'scheme of slavery' and dismissed Mills's proposals on the grounds that such schemes were an 'evasion' of the need to destroy the entire capitalist system.

Ultimately Morris was convinced that a posture of militant socialism was the only viable response to the squalor in the cities that industrial capitalism continued to foster. He blamed the economic and social structure of the city for making it 'unnatural', for making the workers 'beggar ghosts of ... the gold-crushed hungry

and Armytage, *Heavens Below*, pp. 289-440. The ideas of Peter Kropotkin were also important; he detailed the material and moral benefits of many 'primitive' communities in *Freedom*, and it is possible that some of these articles influenced the writing of Morris's historical prose romances.


162 Despite shared sympathies and friendships with Sergius Stepniak and Edward Carpenter as well as Kropotkin, Morris consistently rejected anarchism. See, for example, Morris to Jenny Morris, 26 July 1883, and to John Glasoe, 23 May 1886, in *Letters*, vol. II, pp. 210, 658-9; and 'Correspondence: Communism and Anarchism', *Commonweal*, vol. V, no. 188, 17 August 1889, p. 261; in *Political Writings*, pp. 445-9. See also Hulse, *Revolutionists in London*, pp. 33-4, 40.

163 See Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1898), and *Mutual Aid* (1902).

164 See, in particular, 'The Industrial Revolution in England', *Commonweal*, vol. II, no. 31, 14 August 1886, pp. 156-8; in *Political Writings*, p. 540-5. See also Chapter 2 of Section IV below.

165 Mills proposed that a fund be established to purchase cheap land on which to settle the poor. The 'colonists' were to work three hours a day and supplement subsistence wages by the cultivation of a small plot of land. Their lives were to be strictly regulated, and Mills advocated vigorous social control administered along evangelical lines. See Gould, *Early Green Politics*, pp. 124-41; and Marsh, *Back to the Land*, pp. 93-138.
hell', but engaged with it so that 'the voice of toil' might be liberated from its 'iron master'.

He also looked forward to the day when city crowds would make up a vital element of the new order, and there was '[s]un and wind in the street'. Nonetheless, he regretted that the pleasure of nature was largely gone from the city, and that in 'one of the best pasture countries of the world' people had been 'rack-rented', 'expropriated', and 'driven off the land into the towns'. In looking forward, therefore, Morris emphasised that 'some of us ... cannot help thinking that our experience ought to have taught us that such [large] aggregations of population afford the worst possible form of dwelling-place, whatever the second-worst might be'.

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This 'second-worst' place referred to by Morris was the countryside and its villages that had become the 'mere servants of the great centres of civilization'. Yet the countryside was the place Morris and most other townspeople usually designated as the realm of the natural: the ultimate locus of Victorian nature. How do we explain this?

One of the most common ways of looking at the country from the town was through a form of writing based on the stereotype of the countryside as a changeless Arcadia, where it exists as little more than picturesque backdrop, or is associated with 'concepts of possession and by extension of power, and also with a sense of permanence and security'. Frances Trollope's *Town and Country* (1848), Frances and Mortimer Collins's *The Village Comedy* (1878) and Margaret Oliphant's *A Country Gentleman and his Family* (1886) are all typical of this kind of fiction; and, as Raymond Williams noted, most urban Victorian readers turned to this literature for the

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167 These lines are from 'The Day is Coming' (line 38) and 'The Voice of Toil' (line 13), in *Chants For Socialists*, pp. 5, 6–7.
same reasons that they sought the countryside itself—for refreshment and renewal, as a haven from the pace of city life.172

On the whole, these were not the kinds of novels that Morris enjoyed. He preferred the more ‘vigorous’ works of authors such as George Borrow and R.S. Surtees, whose works were mentioned on Morris’s list of books that had ‘profoundly impressed’ him.173 Indeed Mackail noted that Morris ‘placed Surtees in the same rank with Dickens as a master of life’.174 What Morris enjoyed particularly was the emphasis on the country as a place of lively and strenuous activity. Morris revelled in works such as Surtees’s *Jorrocks Jaunts and Jollities* (1838) and *Handley Cross* (1843) because they made visible the vital lives of those who inhabited the country; he preferred ‘the real country, with cows and sheep and farm-houses, the work-a-day world’ to ‘a lacquey’s paradise’.175 There is no evidence to suggest that he had any time for the kind of ‘country life’ that referred to the environment and habits of the middle and upper classes; nor for the kinds of ‘nature writing’ in which ‘country life’ meant only the habits and environment of creatures and plants, with no mention of the activities of the people that lived there.176

Morris did, however, find time for depictions of the countryside racked and threatened by social pressures and physical change. By no means a new

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173 Williams, *The English Novel*, p. 155. Williams’s most considered discussion of this question is in *The Country and the City*, where he argues that, as myth, the countryside has always been a ‘counterpoint’, and that its ‘simple life’ has always been praised in contrast with something else: the convention of the court, the brutality of the market or the anonymity of the city. Ultimately Williams asserts that this pastoral myth is false because what happens in the town is actually generated by the needs of the dominant rural class: “The English country, year by year, had been made and remade by men, and the English town was at once its image and its agent (honest or dishonest, as advantage served)... And it was precisely at this point that the “town and country” fiction served: to promote superficial comparisons and to prevent real ones” (pp. 53–4). Other works that offer a critical appraisal of rural nostalgia include: Michael Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape*, Routledge, London, 1994; Fraser Harrison, *The Strange Land, The Countryside: Myth and Reality*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1982; and *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, eds. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989.
174 This list was supplied, on request, to the *Pall Mall Gazette* and appeared on 2 February 1886. See *Letters*, vol. II, pp. 514–18.
177 The ‘nature writing’ of Richard Jefferies, for example, which included works such as *The Gamekeeper at Home* (1878), *Wild Life in a Southern County* (1879), *Wood Magic* (1881) and *The Life of the Fields* (1884).
phenomenon, such themes were a major preoccupation of nineteenth-century writers on rural life. Disraeli in *Sybil*, Kingsley in *Yeast*, and Eliot and Hardy in many of their novels, were all concerned to portray a society which included 'illiteracy and illegitimacy, starvation wages, unemployment, exploitation and fear'. One of the nineteenth century’s earliest writers in this tradition was William Cobbett, a writer Morris admired and enjoyed. As Crabbe had done in the past, and Eliot and Hardy would do later, Cobbett brought ‘into focus a persistent rural disturbance that had previously been excluded or blurred’.

In order to appreciate fully this strand of urban concern for the rural realm, it is necessary to acknowledge the substantial changes to the countryside that occurred during the Victorian era. Victorian reactions were not merely nostalgic, sentimental or misplaced: they often represented genuine concern over real change and serious damage. By the last decades of the century the towns could boast twice as many people as the countryside, and agriculture, once the mainstay of the nation, had now lost its pre-eminence. Spatial losses were also significant, most often in the midlands and the north, where ‘countryside’ sometimes signified a mere green belt squeezed between growing towns. It seemed to some that cities were like ‘giant octopuses ... running out their suckers ... into the surrounding country’. Moreover, great heaps

177 See Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), and Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1769). This is, of course, the ‘problem of perspective’ underlined by Williams (*The Country and the City*, pp. 9–12), and in any discussion of changes to the rural landscape in England it is necessary to acknowledge that agriculture had profoundly altered the landscape, to both positive and negative effect, before the nineteenth century, and even before the advent of capital or industry. ‘Countryside’ was a relatively recent term for the non-urban, replacing ‘landscape’ as Victorians continued, and in some respects hastened, the centuries-long process of the taming of space. My argument follows Williams assertion (*The Country and the City*, p. 293) that capitalist production is, nevertheless, the most powerful agency for affecting these kinds of physical and social changes.

178 Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England*, Macmillan, London, 1972, p. 192. Williams points out that this ‘realist’ tradition had been building up since at least the eighteenth century, and can be seen in the early verse of Stephen Duck, in George Crabbe’s *The Village* (1783), in parts of Wordsworth, and in the careful observations of John Clare (pp. 192–3).

179 See the more extended discussion of Cobbett in Chapter 2 of Section IV below.

180 Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 166. Williams argues that Cobbett’s consciousness of class and detailed observations of the countryside marked a ‘transitionary phase’ or ‘change of convention’ from the descriptive to the crusading (pp. 109, 112).


182 Mingay (*Introduction: Rural England*, p. 9) gives some idea of the expansion of suburbs into the countryside by indicating that between 1871 and 1901 the population of the central city fell by 48,000 or 64%, that of Holborn by 34,000 or 36%, and that of Westminster by 65,000 or 25%.

of waste from mining and other industries, as well as disused pit-shafts and quarries, sheets of stagnant water known as ‘flashes’, derelict and motionless canals, and railway earthworks and embankments, had transformed the face of many areas.\textsuperscript{184} Copper mining activities in Devon and Cornwall (from which Morris drew an income until 1875) produced slag heaps that are still visible and river water that is still coloured as a result of pollution.\textsuperscript{185} These mining activities were also accompanied by the rapid growth of established communities, which entailed the construction of factories and dwellings where once were trees and meadows. Thus Burslem, the town in which Morris called for ‘a reasonable share in the beauty of the earth’, developed from a village centred on a green surrounded by a number of small farms with bottle ovens in several of the crofts in 1750,\textsuperscript{186} to ‘labyrinths of small, undistinguished, unpaved streets, the houses ... built of smoke-grimed brick’ in 1849.\textsuperscript{187}

Some of the greatest effects on the rural landscape, however, were wrought by the great depressions in agriculture between 1875 and 1884, and 1891 and 1899. While free trade legislation had allowed foreign produce into England in the 1840s, steam travel greatly increased the flood of imports. Subsequent price cuts meant that farmers, many of whom had already been hit hard by a series of poor harvests, were often forced off the land. Corn acreage diminished as did the numbers of people employed there, with mechanisation contributing to this trend. Many were badly hit by these circumstances, with much farm land reverting to ‘waste’, and arable allowed to ‘deteriorate’ into pasture. Moreover, as population, markets and production were centralised in larger towns, many of the country trades and ‘cottage industries’ that had provided alternative sources of income declined in importance. Thus in the 1870s the countryside became, perhaps for the first time, a place where little save agriculture was conducted. In some places, ruinous economic and social depression left a virtually

\textsuperscript{184} Hoskins, \textit{The Making of the English Landscape}, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{185} Trinder, \textit{The Making of the Industrial Landscape}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{186} Trinder, \textit{The Making of the Industrial Landscape}, p. 36. See also ‘A map of Burslem, Staffordshire, in 1750’, plate 10, reproduced between pp. 68–9.
\textsuperscript{187} Head, \textit{Stokers and Pokers}; quoted in Trinder, \textit{The Making of the Industrial Landscape}, p. 186. In Burslem, most of the changes took place in the late eighteenth century when master potters began to break down the different stages of manufacture. Thomas, John and Josiah Wedgwood developed the first pottery factories, and bells began to be used to summon employees to work. See Trinder, \textit{The Making of the Industrial Landscape}, pp. 83–4.
empty countryside—which could then be offered as ‘landscape’ to magnates living in
the towns.\textsuperscript{188}

Most often, Victorians responded to these changes in terms of a natural order
being disturbed by reckless human intervention, and complained of the ‘outrage done
to nature’.\textsuperscript{189} Works such as Hopkins’s ‘Binsey Poplars’ (1879), which lamented the
felling of trees that bordered the Thames west of Oxford, signalled the fragility of the
rural environment and warned against the damage done the natural world. Hopkins’s
poem is typical of the kind of romantic outcry against changes to a ‘sweet especial
rural scene’, expressed in urban writing of the time.\textsuperscript{190} One of the most vigorous
complainants was Ruskin, whose work bitterly, and often hysterically, attested to the
impact of industry on the rural environment. Writing in the Lake District in 1879,
Ruskin fumed that the air quality was ‘one loathsome mass of sultry and foul fog, like
smoke’ and attributed it to the ‘exhalations’ from ‘Manchester devil’s darkness’.\textsuperscript{191} In
\textit{The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century} (1884), he argued that the signs of the sky
were signs of the times: ‘Blanced Sun,—blighted grass,—blinded man’.\textsuperscript{192} There is
certainly something akin to these feelings in Morris’s observations of changed
landscapes, though his responses tended towards action and anger rather than lament
or hysteria.\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{188} For the issues covered in this paragraph, see the essays in \textit{The Victorian Countryside}, especially:
vol. 1, p. 115; B.A. Holderness, ‘Agriculture and Industrialisation in the Victorian Economy’, vol. 1,

\textsuperscript{189} Williams explored a range of these responses in \textit{Culture and Society} and \textit{The Country and the City}, and in ‘Socialism and Ecology’ (p. 212) wrote of their emergence in the ‘ecological movement’
as an in-built tendency to contrast the damaging industrial order with the undamaging, natural, pre-
industrial order.

\textsuperscript{189} See Hopkins’s ‘Binsey Poplars’, lines 9–24.

\textsuperscript{190} Ruskin, \textit{The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century}, in \textit{Works}, vol. XXXIV, p. 37.

\textsuperscript{191} Ruskin, \textit{The Storm-Cloud}, p. 40. For a discussion of this extraordinary work, see Wheeler, \textit{Ruskin and Environment}, passim; Bate, \textit{Romantic Ecology}, pp. 61, 83; and Denis Cosgrove and John E.
Helm, London, 1981, pp. 20–46. Cosgrove and Thomas point out that the levels of smoke and
sulphur dioxide peaked in London and the rest of Britain around 1880 (p. 39).

\textsuperscript{192} See Chapter 1 of Section IV below.
Ruskin also particularly loathed the railway lines, cuttings and embankments that had begun to make their mark on the landscape as early as the late 1830s. He was a key figure in focussing anti-railway agitation and complained in numerous letters and articles that the ‘iron roads’ had torn up the surface of the land, and diminished ‘its various life, its rocky arms and rural heart’. In the 1880s Morris supported Ruskin’s campaign to prevent the building of a railway through the Lake District, writing editorials and letters to the press. Following Ruskin’s lead, he asserted that ‘no sane man with a sense of beauty’ could deny that railways were ‘destructive, as they are made and conducted at present’: ‘If they run along the bottom of a dale they quite ruin it; if they run along the hillside, they leave a frightful scar’. Yet Morris also provided what he described as a ‘Socialist view’ of the situation. Opposing the ‘Utilitarian Radicals’, he contended that

a community which refused its duty of preserving the beauty of the face of the country as part of its wealth would so far be proving its own degradation, because a sense of beauty is a heritage of the human race, and those that lack it have no more right to make their misery a standard for the conduct of unmutilated human beings than those have who have been born blind, or deaf and dumb.

It was on this basis that he objected to ‘the beauty of the Lake country, and the natural wish that people have to see it and enjoy it’, being ‘handed over to be exploited without limitation by a company who looks upon the public as so much more material for exploitation’. He worried that the capitalists who built railway lines would turn such country into ‘a mere appendage to their filth-heaps’, and believed that

the presence of the railway in a new district is not a benefit to it; it brings more trade to it, more employment, and therewithal more competition for employment; it cheapens one thing and raises the price of another; or, if it cheapens things generally, it is clear that it will lower the wages of the

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194 See Hoskins, _The Making of the English Landscape_, p. 199; and also Jack Simmons, _The Victorian Railway_, Thames & Hudson, London, 1991. Simmons’s work highlights four ways in which the railway companies acted as ‘vandals’: by destroying residential property, by intruding into natural landscape, by causing pollution and by destroying historic sites (pp. 155–73).


196 Morris to the Editor of the _Pall Mall Gazette_, (published) 22 February 1887, in _Letters_, vol. II, p. 621.

197 Morris to the Editor of the _Pall Mall Gazette_, (published) 22 February 1887, in _Letters_, vol. II, p. 620.
labourers, though doubtless it will increase the incomes of those who live on them, which once more is its object.\textsuperscript{198}

In other words, Morris's emphasis was that '[s]hort-sighted brutality wherever it is met with ... is unsocial'.\textsuperscript{199} While more inclined to turn aside from such brutality earlier in his life, by the 1870s he had begun to campaign against it, and by the 1880s was berating his urban middle-class audiences for not knowing 'what the standard of livelihood is for our field-labourers'; for not knowing that you have made the beautiful garden-like country-side of England into a mere hell of barrenness for the people who feed you! A hell from which the country people flee to that other hell of the city slums, to make for you fresh entanglements of that 'social problem' that you gable about continuously—with no real intention of trying to solve it.\textsuperscript{200}

His 1889 'Thoughts in the Country-Side' were even more specific, and are worth quoting at length. He asked:

What will happen ... with all this country beauty so tragically incongruous in its richness with the country misery which cannot feel its existence? Well, if we must still be slaves and slaveholders, it will not last long ... it will vanish year by year (as indeed it is now doing) under the attacks of the most gawling commercialism. Yet think I to myself under the elm-tree, whatever England, once so beautiful, may become, it will be good enough for us if we set no hope before us but the continuance of a population of slaves and slave-holders for the country which we pretend to love, while we use it and our sham love for it as a sitting-horse for robbery of the poor at home and abroad. The worst ugliness and vulgarity will be good enough for such sneak and cowards.\textsuperscript{201}

\textsuperscript{198} Morris, editorial on the Ambleside Railway Bill, Commonweal, vol. III, no. 61, 12 March 1887, p. 85; in Journalism, pp. 206–7. Thus, even though train travel allowed him his precious moments at Kelmscott, to feel 'elated' by the beautiful landscape between Carlisle and Settle, and to visit seaside resorts and lecture all over the country on behalf of the Socialist League, Morris tended not to see the various benefits of improved transportation. He failed to appreciate that the railways allowed many Victorians greater access to the countryside, and the opportunity to experience a sense of regional consciousness, to recognise not just a generalised countryside but a series of different areas. He did not understand that railways were as likely to develop recognition as to change a landscape beyond it.


\textsuperscript{201} Morris, 'Under an Elm-Tree', p. 429.
Yet he also urged his audience to consider 'a new picture', and not to heed his
'Socialist friends' who believe that '[t]his is all that can come of ... country life':

Turn the page I say... 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...202

Such was the urban vision of a man who on returning to the city—'this beastly
congregation of smoke-dried swindlers and their slaves (whom one hopes one day to
make their rebels)—knew he was not 'in love with London'.203

Morris always returned, however, recognising that he was 'for evermore a
bird of this world-without-end-for-everlasting hole of London'.204 Nevertheless he
continued to insist, even though he recognised the necessity of his work in the city
(both revolutionary and capitalist), that London was not 'growing better':

London is better is it? ... At least it is bigger, and who can really doubt
but that with its size its suffering has increased? But if it is bigger, why is
it bigger? Because the riches (far be it from me to say the wealth) of the
country has increased enormously. Will anyone say that the improvement
of London, 'vast' as it may be, is at all proportioned to that increase in
riches? If he does say so he lies. What has been done then with that
increase of riches, which should have been used for the bettering of
London, i.e., for the welfare of those who made it? It has gone the way of
all riches, it has been wasted by the rich. We have been laborious,
ingenuous, and commercially successful—what for? That we might remain
unhappy, and sing songs of triumph over the cheapening of cat's-meat for
human beings. In a word, we are slaves still, for all our 'vast
improvement'.205

Thus Morris realised, to paraphrase Williams, that although the exploitation of people
and nature, which took place in the country, was realised and concentrated in the city,
there should be no simple contrasts between wicked town and innocent country,
because town life merely made evident and repellent the relationships in which people
actually lived. He understood that the solution could never be a 'visitor's morality of

202 Morris, 'Under an Elm-Tree', p. 430.
205 Morris, 'Notes on News', Commonweal, vol. V, no. 156, 5 January 1889, pp. 4–5; in Journalism,
plain living and high thinking, or a babble of green fields'; it had to be a change of social relationships and socio-economic morality.206

Thus the ideas, images and realities of country and city had a great impact on Morris's conception of nature. The character of this impact will become more apparent as they are pursued through the development of Morris's own ideas on nature. Evidently, however, the contrast of the country and city was one of the main ways in which Morris became conscious of a central part of his experience, of the crises of his society, and of the place and role of nature within and without these matrices. Morris recognised, as Williams wrote in the 1970s, that capitalism—"[i]ts abstracted economic drives, its fundamental priorities in social relations, its criteria of growth and of profit and loss—is the basic process of most of what we know as the history of country and city.207 Though in some respects Morris's work reflects the tendency to use the countryside as an integrative cultural symbol or the locus for a set of alternative values, it was not the 'psychic balance wheel' described by Williams or Martin Wiener.208 Morris's country was a landscape of the future as much as the past; and his city was increasingly radical and revolutionary.

Yet his conceptions of the nature of both town and country mirrored those of a wider Victorian culture of nature. He too was 'eager to preserve the harmony posited by a sacramental and humanistic conception of Nature' as he 'nonetheless endeavoured to accommodate the more fragmented views of Nature increasingly urged ... by scientific scepticism'.209 He too was aware of the paradox that just as Victorians were becoming aware that they were products of nature 'their disposition was being formed rather by the fact that they were then taking the greatest steps in subduing

206 Williams, The Country and the City, pp. 46–54. Williams argues eloquently, and persuasively, that the 'true history' of the English countryside is centred in problems relating to property, social and working relationships (p. 60). In this way we see that the English countryside is a 'landscape of power whose mythic properties are comparatively recent in origin', and that, in the words of another critic, 'the typical English countryside, the supercharged image of English environmental ideology ... is in reality the imprint of a profit-based exercise which destroyed the English peasantry and replaced a moral economy of traditional rights and obligations with the cash nexus of commercial capitalism'; Short, Imagined Country, pp. 66–7.
207 Williams, The Country and the City, p. 302.
natural forces to their will, in applied science and the industrial revolution.\textsuperscript{210} He regretted also that among many this had led to the dangerous assumption that whatever direction civilisation might take was the direction of nature itself, which included the error of projecting industrial power over nature into nature itself and assuming future survival was assured.\textsuperscript{211} As Denis Cosgrove has so perceptively recognised: "This moral gulf, exposed by Darwin's revelation that humankind itself was a product of nature at the very summit of Victorian confidence about human control over nature, in many ways still remains unbridged."\textsuperscript{212}

So Morris struck what was often an uneasy balance between romance and utilitarianism, science and religion, the country and the city. Knoepflmacher and Tennyson have identified the tensions in the wider imagination of nature as those between 'innovation and tradition, individualism and convention, new meanings and older forms', and claimed that in 'such efforts the Victorians display most vividly their characteristic drive towards synthesis yet reveal the divided mind that so often lay behind such undertakings'.\textsuperscript{211} The nature of Morris emerges, at its most fundamental level, as a synthetic processing of all these encounters and imaginings. Morris's life's work, however, was not slave to the structures imposed by this Victorian inheritance. Rather, within this framework, his work turned on the realisation that solutions to the problems of Victorian nature should rest on a definition of nature that was inclusive of human life, that would involve the radical imagining of a different kind of culture.

\textsuperscript{210} Canon V. A. Demant develops this idea in ‘Man and Nature’, in Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{211} Demant, ‘Man and Nature’, pp. 238-9
\textsuperscript{212} Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, p. 238.
\textsuperscript{213} Knoepflmacher and Tennyson, ‘Introduction’, p. xxii.
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Title: A reasonable share in the beauty of the Earth: William Morris's culture of nature

Date: 1998


Publication Status: Unpublished

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/37876

File Description: Front matter-Part I