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The ‘greening’ of William Morris, the English artist, writer and socialist, has been a significant feature of Victorian studies over the last three decades. Since the late 1980s in particular, Morris has been seen by many as a fellow ‘green’ with whom it is possible to share a sense of crisis about the future of a deeply loved but increasingly complex ‘nature’. It has been claimed that Morris’s thought prefigures that of ‘deep ecologists’, ‘eco-feminists’, ‘eco-activists’ and resource planners, and that his views and writings echo the belief structures of ‘non-growth-driven cultures’ that are less environmentally destructive. But do such claims and appropriations ‘fit’ an artist, writer and socialist who preferred to describe himself as a communist? What happens when we re-read ‘Morris the communist’ against ‘Morris the green’?

To those familiar with the broad field of ‘Morris studies’, the greening of William Morris probably comes as no great surprise; the twentieth-century in fact enjoyed a variety of Morrises, due in no small part to the wide range of activities undertaken by this extraordinary figure of the British Victorian age. To provide a brief catalogue of these activities is to indicate why analyses of Morris’s work have spawned such a variety of treatments (and tended to exhaust those who undertake them). Morris studied art under the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and produced a volume of what might be called Pre-Raphaelite poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere* in 1858. With Philip Webb, he designed the Red House, a modern building based on an English vernacular style which some critics have heralded as the beginning of modern architecture. He was one of the leading and most popular poets of the Victorian era, composing perhaps the longest poems in the English language, the 42,000 line *The Earthly Paradise*, and was offered, but rejected, the chair in poetry at Oxford. He was a prolific designer, artist and craftsman who created hundreds of designs for wallpaper, textiles, stained glass, tiles, tapestries, and carpets, which were hugely popular in his own time and which retain a market today. He also founded and managed a successful decorating firm, Morris & Co., to ply his artistic wares and is considered a founding figure of the late nineteenth-century arts and crafts movement. He played

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1 I have discussed in greater depth elsewhere the problems of dealing with ‘nature’. See Sara Wills, ‘Writing About Morris’s Nature’, *Raiding Clio’s Closet*, ed. Martin Crotty and Doug Scobie (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1998), 219-30. The definition I use includes what has been called ‘surface nature’: ‘landscape’, ‘countryside’, ‘rurality’ and ‘wilderness’; the green spaces created in urban and industrial environments; the ‘nature’ we threaten and attempt to conserve. It also covers the ‘concept through which humanity thinks of its difference’, as well as the ‘structures, processes and causal powers that are operative within the physical world’. See Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 155-6.

a significant part in the revival of the art of vegetable dyeing in order to obtain beautiful and lasting colours for textiles. He founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877, and was an active figure in the early conservation and preservationist movements. He was a revolutionary socialist who joined the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1883, founded the Socialist League in 1884 and represented British socialists at the Second International in Paris in 1889, attending the Marxist congress rather than the Possibilist one. He edited the socialist newspapers *Justice* and *Commonweal*, and wrote over 200 lectures that he delivered the length and breadth of Britain in the 1880s and 1890s at over 600 meetings. He was the author of the utopian novel, *News From Nowhere*, of socialist songs and other prose and poetic works inspired by his socialist beliefs. He was a typographer and printer, whose Kelmscott Press not only had considerable influence on commercial printing but also gave birth to the prolific private press movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was a writer of what today we might call fantasy literature, long questing prose romances from which writers such as W.B. Yeats, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Ursula LeGuin have gained inspiration. He was also far from happily married to the famous Pre-Raphaelite model, Jane Morris, and was the devoted father of invalid-epileptic Jenny and of May Morris, who followed him into the socialist movement and who after his death collected and edited his works.

Thus it is understandable that studies of Morris have given us ‘Morris the artist’, ‘Morris the poet’, ‘Morris the craftsman’, ‘Morris the businessman’, ‘Morris the preservationist’, ‘Morris the utopian’ and ‘Morris the red’. ‘Morris the green’ is, in this respect, the latest of a long list of appropriations. Yet, while those responsible for the ‘green’ label are certainly not the first to recognise that ‘nature’ was important to Morris, recent reconstructions of Morris’s relationship to nature, and reactions to this ‘greening’ of Morris, have been more celebratory than critical; enthusiastic where they could have been analytical. While on the one hand it is possible to appreciate Morris’s very innovative thinking on human interactions both with and within nature, it is also concerning that an emphasis on ‘Morris the green’ has obscured fundamental political aspects of his thinking. What stands out when one takes Morris’s work as a whole is not the fact that one can approximate his ideas to those of ‘deep ecologists’ or ‘eco-spiritualists’, but his thinking about the ways in which nature might be ‘reasonably shared’ in and between human societies. An examination of his lectures and letters of the 1880s reveals that Morris’s fully developed political priorities were not with nature *per se*, but with ‘decent surroundings’ and nature as an object and subject of human work. His avowedly socialist writings of the 1880s elicit a concern for nature as part of a broader agenda for social change, but it is the

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3 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. For a review of this literature, covering work from the late-nineteenth through to the late-twentieth century, see Wills, ‘Writing About Morris’s Nature’, 219-30.

concept of ‘livelihood’ that emerges as a key concern. What follows is an analysis of how these concerns developed through Morris’s work from the time of his first socialist lectures of the 1880s, and, in particular, of what happened to the concept of nature in this work.

COMMUNISM AS COMPLETED NATURALISM

It has been well-established that during the mid to late 1870s and into the 1880s Morris became increasingly involved in public political debate, and that in lectures and letters to the press he began to produce an educating, agitating discourse formulated initially upon his ‘hopes and fears for art’, and soon developing into an openly acknowledged socialist position. To understand Morris’s mediation between nature and socialism, therefore, it is necessary to outline the ways in which Morris adopted and utilised Marx.

What lies at the root of Marx’s concept of nature, and at the heart of most interpretations, is a ‘double’ concept of nature. On the one hand, nature was for Marx the totality of all existing reality, comprising human beings and ‘external nature’. On the other hand, he also conceived nature as only truly existing for human beings when they enter into a transformative relationship with it; that is, when it becomes the object of their work. Indeed, he argued that:

It is in the working over of the objective world that man first really affirms himself as species-being. This production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as his work and his reality.

This emphasis on the dialectic of production is more strongly asserted in the following formulation, again with a qualifying inversion:

Industry is the real historical relationship of nature … to man. If then it is conceived of as the open revelation of human faculties, then the human essence of nature or the natural essence of man will also be understood.

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6 Hopes and Fears for Art is the title of the first volume of lectures published by Morris in 1882. Although it should no longer be necessary to argue Morris’s Marxian credentials, one is still often required to put the case that Morris’s commitment to socialism did not begin and end with the moralising of Ruskin or the utopian News from Nowhere. For those still unwilling to see continuities between Marxian and Morrisian socialism, and for an outline of Morris’s activities during these years, see E. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (New York: Pantheon, revised edition, 1976), 192–274; and Fiona MacCarthy, William Morris: A Life for Our Time (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 375–461.
9 Marx, ‘Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts’, 150.
Thus, if nature is the object of work, it is also, for Marx, an instrument of human self-creation:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature ... by thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature.10

This passage indicates the prevalent tendency in Marx’s thought for humanity to be the dominant term in this relationship, and for nature to be socio-historical.11 In an extreme dualistic formulation of this position Marx argued: ‘nature ... taken abstractly, for itself—nature fixed in isolation from man—is nothing for man’.12 This instrumental approach to nature, which rests on unquestioned human alienation from, and domination of, nature was central to Marx’s analyses of modes of production. All production, for Marx, involved the transformation of nature by human beings within and through definite forms of society. Human freedom was the movement out of ‘natural necessity’ by means of the domination of nature: ‘man’ had to master nature so that it was no longer a threat. Thus Marx welcomed the capitalist mode of production as a civilising influence that destroyed the illusive deification of nature and traditional ways of life of ‘primitive’ societies.13

Nevertheless, there is also a prominent strain, particularly in the early works of Marx, which laments this ‘alienation’, and emphasises the degree to which humanity exists in unity, as well as in struggle, with nature. In The German Ideology (written in 1846), Marx argued that the ‘unity of man with nature has always existed in industry and has existed in varying forms in every epoch’.14 Moreover Marx’s earlier works criticised the ‘actual despising and degrading of nature’ under the contemporary system of production. They reveal a Marx who believed that a capitalism in which private property and money were dominant caused ‘man’ to view nature as ‘an alien and hostile world opposed to him’.15 In his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (written in 1844), Marx developed this notion of alienation, arguing that the alienated labour of capitalist production resulted in the alienation of nature from humanity and of humanity from itself:

12 Marx quoted in Grundmann, Marxism and Ecology, 93.
13 See, for example, Marx’s view of Indian villages in ‘British Rule in India’, in Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (London: Fontana, 1969), 517; and on capitalism as a stage where nature becomes an object of utility, see David McLellan (ed.), Marx’s Grundrisse (London: Macmillan, 1971), 94.
14 Marx quoted in Grundmann, Marxism and Ecology, 61.
Man lives by nature. This means that nature is his body, with which he must constantly remain in step if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is tied to nature means no more than that nature is tied to itself, for man is a part of nature.

In alienating (1) nature and (2) man himself, his own active function, his life activity, from man, alienated labour alienates the species from man. It converts the life of the species, for him, into a means of individual life.  

Such passages reveal a Marx who believed that it was essential to establish appropriate relationships between humans and their environment in order for humans to express their social being. Even the industrialist Engels, in his *Dialectics of Nature* (probably written between 1872 and 1882), cautioned his readers: ‘Let us not ... flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest over nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us’. ‘[W]e by no means rule over nature like a conqueror’, he argued, ‘we, with flesh, blood, and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst’. Morris’s understanding of this relationship will be examined in greater depth further on. It is salient to note here, however, a similar interpretation in the series of articles on the history of socialism written for *Commonweal* by Morris and his co-author E. Belfort Bax, later published as *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1893). While Morris and Bax do not discuss the ‘externalising’ or ‘alienating’ process in their commentary on Marx (whose earlier work would probably have been unfamiliar to them), they do, in conclusion, discuss the way in which nature has become alienated from humanity through the development of religion. That Morris should concentrate on the ethical implications of the rise of capitalism is hardly surprising. What is striking, however, is the extent to which the examination of *Capital* culminates in a discussion of ‘distinctions’:

[With] the development of material civilization from the domination of things by persons to that of persons by things, and the consequent falling asunder of Society into two classes ... arose a condition of Society which gave leisure to the possessing or slave-holding class...As a consequence of this a process of reflection arose among this class which distinguished man as a conscious being from the

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19 There is not space here to discuss the ways in which Morris’s reading of Marx was both generally mediated by his grounding in Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin; his recent reading of William Cobbett and John Stuart Mill; political texts such as John Carruther’s *Communal and Commercial Economy* (1883), J.L. Joynes’s *The Socialist Catechism* (1884), F.A. Sorge’s *Socialism and the Workers* (1884); and more specifically by discussions among contemporary socialists such as Edward Aveling, E. Belfort Bax and H.M. Hyndman. It should be noted that Morris’s knowledge of Marx was mediated from the start by such authors, and in particular by commentaries such as Hyndman’s *England for All* (1881) and *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England* (1883). For further commentary, see the chapter ‘The Land for the People’, in Sara Wills, ‘A Reasonable Share in the Beauty of the Earth: William Morris’s Culture of Nature’, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1998, 372-88.
rest of nature. From this again arose a dual conception of things: on
the one hand was man, which was familiar and known, on the other
nature, which was mysterious and relatively unknown.20

All of which is not to suggest, however, that Morris discovered a ‘green’
Marx lurking beneath the ‘red’ one, but merely to propose that Marx was
concerned to imagine a solution to the antagonism between humanity and
nature, and that Morris was probably alert to it. Marx believed that when
the productive forces of nature were owned, and were able to be exploited
by all, society would have reached a perfect state of communism.21 In
1844 he wrote:

Communism as completed naturalism is humanism and as
completed humanism is naturalism. It is the genuine solution of the
antagonism between man and nature and between man and man.22

This conceptualisation of the dialectical process in which labour
‘humanises’ nature and ‘naturalises’ humanity suggests that the early
Marx, at least, recognised that humanity participates organically in
nature, and that society and nature penetrate each other within a ‘natural
whole’.23 For this Marx, to be fully human is to work, and to work is to
transform natural things into human things and so to humanise all of
nature and to integrate material nature with human nature. It underlines,
as Schmidt has stated, that Marx understood that society ultimately was
natural: ‘The dialectic of Subject and Object is for Marx a dialectic of the
constituent elements of nature’.24

It is possible to see this ‘natural dialectic’ within the work of Morris
and his co-author Bax. In Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome, they argue
that:

The relation between the capitalist and the labourer is a
conventional and not a natural one; nature does not produce men
who from the first are possessors of money which it is their business
to turn into capital, nor on the other hand does she produce men who
are possessors of labour-power which they are compelled to sell in
the free and open market.25

Quoting Capital, Morris and Bax also underlined ‘the historical tendency
of capitalism to work out its own contradiction’; that ‘capitalistic
production begets with the inexorability of a law of Nature its own
negation … the negation of negation’.26

20 William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, ‘Socialism Triumphant’, Political Writings: Contributions to
22 Marx, ‘Economico-Philosophical Manuscripts’, 148.
1977), 10; Schmidt, The Concept of Nature in Marx, 80.
24 Schmidt, The Concept of Nature in Marx, 16.
25 Morris, Political Writings, 583.
26 ibid., 599-600.
At the very end of their discussion of Capital, however, Morris and Bax provide their own picture of ‘what Socialism in its turn will evolve’:

[The] elevation of the whole of the people to a level of intelligent happiness and pleasurable energy, which at present is reached, if at all, only by a chosen few at the expense of the misery and degradation of the greater part of mankind.\(^{27}\)

Human ‘pleasurable energy’ is, therefore, the focus of Morris and Bax’s work. Fundamentally human-centred, Marx valued nature only in so far as it was the setting for the liberation of humanity, and Morris adopted this sense of privileged human participation in nature. Morris’s break with this thinking, as many have noted, is his view of work as essential and pleasurable; a point at which he ‘takes hold of Carlyle, Ruskin and Marx, and out of their ideas in combination makes something radically new’.\(^{28}\) For Morris, industry remained the insufficiently problematised key term in Marx’s conception of the relationship of the human and natural world. He believed that the task, the joy, of ‘completing’ nature—of transforming it not from nature into something other-than-nature, but into a combination of (privileged) human nature and external nature—was essential to life. ‘Man’ was not just Homo faber, but Homo artis, and the natural beauty of the earth was reproduced ‘by the labour of man both mental and bodily’; by ‘the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth with all its surroundings’.\(^{29}\) Thus, while Morris accepted the explanatory power of Marx’s critique of the capitalist mode of production, he was perhaps as much or even more interested in Marx’s explanation of the ways in which labour was made uninteresting, unjoyful and, therefore, unartistic. For Morris, Marx explained why labour no longer produced ‘the beauty of the earth’. In the preface to Signs of Change, a collection of his lectures on art and industry first published in 1888, Morris underlines this link:

My ordinary work has forced on me the contrast between times past and the present day, and has made me look with grief and pain on things...it compelled me once to hope that the ugly disgraces of civilization might be got rid of by the conscious will of intelligent persons: yet as I strove to stir up people to this reform, I found that the cause of the vulgarities of civilization lay deeper than I had thought, and little by little I was driven to the conclusion that all these uglinesses are but the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which we are forced by our present form of society...Whatever I have written or spoken on the platform, on these social subjects is the result of the truths of Socialism meeting

\(^{27}\) ibid., 622.
my earlier impulse, and giving it a definite and much more serious aim.  

THE TRANSITION BETWEEN WORKS OF NATURE AND ART

In the 1880s, as ‘the truths of Socialism’ met his ‘earlier impulse’, Morris devoted less attention to ‘outward uglinesses’ and more to the ‘moral baseness of society’. An enthusiastic Marxian socialist, Morris accepted that the transformation of nature was an essential part of human ‘species-being’ and that communism was the ‘solution’ to the discord between humanity and nature and between humans themselves. Yet Morris’s socialism was not identical to that of Marx, and he did not simply accept Marx’s understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature. Communism was completed naturalism for Morris, but he focussed on the character of the work that brought about the ‘transition between works of Nature and Art’.  

Morris concurred with Marx (or at least the early Marx) that humans were a part of, and not separate from, nature, and that the mediating term between human life and the rest of nature was labour. He believed that humans were governed by ‘the law of nature which bids all to labour in order to live’, and that human history was entrenched in the natural environment and vice versa. Thus, though he disapproved of the capitalist transformation of England from ‘a country of tillage cultivated for livelihood’ to ‘a grazing country farmed for profit’, he argued that nature was there to be transformed. A Socialist League pamphlet, entitled ‘A Straight Talk to Working-Men’, asserted that everyone should ‘have equal opportunity to use the great gifts of Nature according to their needs’. The pamphlet emphasised that ‘ALL WEALTH IS PRODUCED BY LABOUR OF HEAD OR HAND, APPLIED TO NATURAL RESOURCES’.

Morris particularly valued this kind of wealth and was well aware that such labour meant it was now difficult to speak of ‘simple unblended works of Nature’. Yet Morris believed that the interaction between humanity and the natural world, the ‘transition between works of Nature and of Art’, ‘when they are happily harmonised, produce the greatest pleasure that the eye can have, and appeal most directly to the imagination’. Even so, it is necessary to note that, after reading Marx in the early 1880s, Morris spoke much more often than previously of nature as an ‘enemy’ to be ‘struggled’ with or ‘conquered’. In 1885, for example, he described human history as a contest with nature, in which ‘man’ had ‘almost completely conquered Nature’. By 1886 he had come to the belief that:

[In] order that his labour may be organized properly ... ['man'] must have only one enemy to contend with—Nature to wit, who as

33 Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 22, 308.
34 The Socialist League, London, c. 1888; Socialist League Archives, microfilm.
it were eggs him on to the conflict against herself, and is grateful to
him for overcoming her; a friend in the guise of an enemy.  

Morris found himself ‘bound to preach’ socialist principles because ‘they
are no mere foolish dreams … but reasonable rules of action, good for our
defence against the tyranny of Nature’.  

On the other hand, Morris’s lectures and essays also suggest that he
considered nature a force or set of laws that broadly guided the ‘natural
progression’ of human history. This is demonstrated in a lecture of 1886,
where his remarks betray the fact that he had absorbed the evolutionary
racism of his century. Though Morris found it ugly and immoral, he
considered that the ‘victory over Nature’ of urban industrial capitalism
was, inevitably, a more historically advanced state. The Indian, the
Javanese and the South Sea Islander, Morris argued:

[Must] leave his canoe-carving, his sweet rest, and his graceful
dances, and become the slave of slave: trousers, shoddy, rum,
missionary, and fatal disease—he must swallow all this civilization
in the lump, and neither himself nor we can help him, not till social
order displaces the hideous tyranny of gambling that has ruined him.

He believed that the natural evolution of society indicated that change
would come from ‘the working-classes, the real organic part of society’.  

Yet, as is clear from his description, Morris was loathe to forego
‘sweet rest’ and ‘graceful’ art and worked out his own priorities within
the Marxian schema. In particular, Morris was concerned that both the
process of transforming nature, as well as its results, should be, as far as
possible, pleasurable and ‘natural’. This was the ‘great question’ to which
so much of Morris’s work was addressed in the 1880s: ‘How can men
gain hope and pleasure in their daily work?’

Under the present system, Morris contended, humanity would find no
joy in its ‘victory over nature’ because it had abused this privilege and
failed to conquer or understand its own nature: ‘[“man”] still has to think
how he will best use those forces which he has mastered. At present he
uses them blindly, foolishly, as one driven by mere fate’. Under
industrial capitalism, he argued, human interaction with nature had
become ‘wasteful, misdirected and unrewarding for the majority’. Even
the luxurious ‘puffery’ of the few, he insisted, was waste, not wealth.
Wealth, he stressed:

[Is] what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out
of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, the fresh
air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment and housing

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37 ibid., 133.
38 ibid., 125.
39 ibid., 95–6.
40 ibid., 8-9, 26.
42 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 23, 14-15
43 ibid., 217.
necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and
the power of disseminating it; means of free communication
between man and man; works of art, the beauty which man creates
when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful … This is
wealth.44

Most could never enjoy such wealth under the present system because:

[The] fruits of our victory over Nature [have been] stolen from us, thus has
compulsion by Nature to labour in hope of rest, gain, and pleasure been
turned into compulsion by man to labour in hope—of living to labour!45

In order to counteract this human folly, and maintain a useful struggle
against the ‘tyranny of Nature’, Morris contended that humanity must
look to a ‘new epoch’.46 It would never be free of ‘that terrible phantom
of fear of starvation’, or ‘its brother devil, desire of domination’, he
maintained, until the land was nationalised,47 and people had learned ‘to
do away with competition and build up co-operation’.48 ‘The conquest of
Nature is complete’, Morris argued, ‘and now our business is … the
organization of man who wields the forces of Nature’.49

It is the nature of cooperative labour in a new era which differentiates
Morris’s conception of the human/nature nexus from that of Marx. Unlike
Marx, Morris did not posit two separate realms of work: one governed by
‘necessity’ and another by the ‘development of human powers as an end
in itself’.50 Morris held that human joy lay precisely in what he believed
to be the ‘natural’ necessities of life. Indeed, he believed that nature had
made such labour pleasurable; it was only the organisation of such work
under capitalism that made it drudgery. He argued that labour could and
should be useful, personally meaningful work, and that it could and
should carry within it ‘the hope of pleasure in the rest, the hope of the
pleasure in our using what it makes, and the hope of pleasure in our daily
creative skill’.51 The processes of most work, he argued, are pleasurable
if they are done in the right way. As indicated above, Morris believed that
most work could in fact be art, and that this was ‘a gift of nature’.52 In
other words, Morris considered art to be beauty produced by interest in,
and love of, life; that it arose naturally out of the human struggle with
nature. And it was this conception of art, or rather the ‘transition between
works of Nature and of Art’, that helped him towards answers to the
questions he posed about how people could find hope and pleasure in

44 Ibid., 103.
45 Ibid., 105.
46 Ibid., 122-5.
47 As a central tenet of socialism, land nationalisation was a crucial feature of Morris’s vision of a
communist society. Socialist League pamphlets decried the monopoly of land and questioned the
effectiveness of current land use, cultivation, and agriculture. See, for example, ‘Are We Over-
Populated?’ (London: Socialist League, 1890).
49 Ibid.
50 Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth:
51 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 23, 100.
52 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 22, 42.
their work. ‘It is the province of art’, he argued in 1894, ‘to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life … a life to which the perception and creation of beauty … shall be felt to be as necessary to man as his daily bread’.  

Morris believed that the eradication of the division of labour was crucial to the achievement of this full working life. This was not simply a result of his reading of Marx, but of his own observation of the kind of culture produced and reproduced under a capitalist system. Morris believed the division of labour had ‘expropriated’ people from the land, and pitted ‘man against man’ in quantitative or competitive rather than qualitative or cooperative work that destroyed individual creativity. Like Owen and Fourier before him, Morris emphasised ‘not selfish greed and ceaseless contention, but brotherhood and co-operation’, and strove to develop Fourier’s doctrine of making labour both meaningful and enjoyable. Thus, in lectures such as ‘The Hopes of Civilization’, ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, and ‘The Beauty of Life’, Morris called for the elimination of the division of labour because it infringed on what he considered to be a basic human need for a satisfying, high quality work experience (and also because it embodied productivist assumptions about maximising output). To a certain extent, he managed to achieve some of these ideals in his own workshops at Merton. His manager, Thomas Wardle, recalled that although Morris did not turn the works into ‘a little communistic society’ (because ‘you cannot have socialism in a corner’), ‘It was in the contentedness and cooperation of his workmen that Mr. Morris looked for any success he might have’.  

One result of Morris’s concern about the nature of work was his anxiety about the use of mechanical power in the workplace. If an item could be made well, and pleasurably, by hand, he reasoned, why use a machine? He never tired of emphasising that he believed the phrase ‘labour-saving machine’ to be elliptical: that what it really meant was machinery that saves the cost of labour. Morris did believe, however, that humans should be freed from ‘necessary reasonable work of mechanical kind’. Indeed Morris believed ‘machines can do everything’, with the crucial proviso, ‘except make works of art’. They could not, Morris insisted, produce items that testified as art to human pleasure in their creation; could not produce definite signs, or material evidence, of a person’s desire or sensuous creativity. Machines interfered in the processes of human joyful energy-becoming-art. Art, both as object and process, was, for Morris, invariably organic: tied up and embedded in creation, from selection of materials to contemplation of the finished

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56 ‘Once a year at least’, Wardle recalled, ‘there was a meeting to discuss the balance sheet and the state of the business. In this way, though the formal communism of convent or phalanstère was not observed, there was practical communism: an identity of interest and solidarity’. ‘Memorials of William Morris’, Appendix 1, in Charles Harvey and Jon Press, Art, Enterprise and Ethics: The Life and Work of William Morris (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 108, 110.  
58 Ibid., 20.
product (the enjoyment of which had, for Morris, more to do with understanding the pleasurable course of its creation, than any form of appreciation ‘free’ from such considerations). This is why Morris urged workers not to ‘let yourselves be made machines, or it is all up with you as artists’. 59

These were the processes which Morris considered reproduced the beauty of the natural world. Beautiful surroundings were, for Morris, an indication of workers’ pleasure in labour, and it was his belief that this kind of labour should be applied to all the ‘externals of our life’, because:

[Every] one of the things that goes to make up the surroundings among which we live must be either beautiful or ugly, either elevating or degrading to us, either a torment and burden to the maker of it to make, or a pleasure and a solace to him. 60

This is why, in the 1880s, he asked his audience to consider their own treatment of the environment:

How does it fare therefore with our external surroundings in these days? What kind of account shall we be able to give to those who come after us of our dealings with the earth, which our forefathers handed down to us still beautiful, in spite of all the thousands of years of strife and carelessness and selfishness? 61

Not just for the sake of nature, but because the environment under industrial capitalism was unable to provide the conditions of pleasurable labour or to allow for regenerative rest, Morris demanded ‘pleasant, generous, and beautiful’ surroundings for work. 62 Morris described exactly what he meant by this:

1. good lodging; 2. ample space; 3. general order and beauty. That is: 1. Our houses must be well built, clean, and healthy. 2. There must be abundant garden space in our towns, and our towns must not eat up the fields and natural features of the country; nay, I demand even that there be left waste places and wilds in it, or romance and poetry, that is Art, will die out amongst us. 3. Order and beauty means that not only our houses must be stoutly and properly built, but also that they be ornamented duly: that the fields be not only left for cultivation, but also that they be not spoilt by it any more than a garden is spoilt. 63

Thus Morris’s imagined ‘Factory as it Might Be’ stands ‘amidst gardens as beautiful as those of Alcinous, since there is no need of stinting it of ground, profit-rents being a thing of the past’. It also ‘[makes] no sordid

59 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 22, 166.
60 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 23, 164-5.
61 ibid., 165.
62 ibid., 21.
63 ibid., 209–10.
litter, [befouls] no water, nor [poisons] the air with smoke’. Unlike the conditions that ensued under nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, work would not have a separate place in the landscape distinct from ‘recreational nature’. The human environment, and thus human labour, would be an extension of nature’s realm: ‘evidence of man helping in the work of creation’. By nature, ‘man’ was not just *Homo faber* but *Homo artis*. This was the natural state for humanity, Morris argued; human ornamentation of the world was a natural result of ‘pleasure in the hope and sense of power and usefulness which men felt in the making of things in the childhood of the world’. This is one of the crucial differences between Morris and Marx.

Another is the degree and kind of autonomy and authority Morris allowed ‘external nature’. In Morris’s work, nature is considered a source of human pleasure, and, consequently, Morris insisted that the natural world should be, as far as possible, maintained and protected as a locus of value. This strain of thought is more persistent and more variously considered in Morris than in Marx, and through it Morris adds an entire extra dimension to socialism. Morris’s broadly sympathetic view of ‘external nature’ caused him to concede that he could ‘sympathize with … a craving to escape sometimes to mere Nature’, and to find life’s interest in ‘the face of the country, the wind and weather, and the course of the day’. Morris suggested that humanity appreciate the sensuous joys provided by nature. When imagining the advent of a communist society, Morris envisaged nature ‘recovering her ancient beauty and … teaching men the old story of art’.

This appreciation of nature meant that his call to preserve the beauty of the earth, begun in his earlier conservationist phase, continued throughout his socialist lectures of the 1880s and 1890s. In his first speech as a proclaimed socialist, he complained:

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64 Morris, *Political Writings*, 32-5.
65 Wilson distinguishes ‘recreational nature’ as ‘a place of leisure on weekends and summer holidays’ attached to ‘the schedules and personal geography of an urban society’. It was, he argues, part of the nineteenth-century idea of leisure, ‘introduced by a culture that defined work itself as a separate sphere of life, an activity that had its own politics and increasingly its own place in the landscape’. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 25, 20.
66 ibid., 51.
67 ibid., 142. Many, if not most, of Morris’s socialist colleagues did not follow him in this assertion of the moral value of beauty. While Beatrice Webb did ‘not wish it to be thought that simplicity of daily life means ugliness and lack of order and charm’ and went ‘to Morris’s for papers and furniture’, she could still understand why ‘the enemy … blaspheme’ and say ‘[t]hey do not see much socialism in that’. ‘Efficiency’, the Fabian Webb confided to her diary, ‘only demands plenty of nourishing food, well-ordered drains, and a certain freedom of petty cares—it is somewhat softening to contend that you need beautiful things to work with. It may be desirable to have them, but it requires a lot of proving!’ Norman and Leanne MacKenzie (eds), *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, vol. 2 (London: Virago, 1983), 38. See also the hostile Fabian review of *Signs of Change* in Peter Faulkner (ed.), *William Morris: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 316.
69 ibid., 94.
70 From the late 1870s Morris was involved with a number of societies with broadly environmentalist aims, including the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Commons Preservation Society, the Kyrle Society, the Selborne Society and the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising. See Wills, ‘A Reasonable Share in the Beauty of the Earth’, 342-71.
Not only are London and our other great commercial cities mere masses of sordidness, filth, and squalor, embroidered with patches of pompous and vulgar hideousness, no less revolting to the eye and the mind when one knows what it means: not only have whole counties of England, and the heavens that hang over them, disappeared beneath a crust of unutterable grime, but the disease, which...would seem to be a love of dirt and ugliness for its own sake, spreads all over the country, and every little market-town seizes the opportunity to imitate, as far as it can, the majesty of the hell of London and Manchester.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 23, 170.}

Though he now considered what such outward signs \textit{meant}, he was still concerned with the ugly ‘crust’ that stifled nature, reserving special venom for its creation of the industrial city. The profit motive of capitalist industrialism, Morris argued, with its voracious appetite for nature as resource and dumping ground, had entrenched human alienation from nature and spoiled any chance of decent urban surroundings:

\begin{quote}
It is profit which draws men into enormous unmanageable aggregations called towns ... without gardens or open spaces, profit which won’t take the most ordinary precautions against wrapping a whole district in a cloud of sulphurous smoke; which turns beautiful rivers into filthy sewers.\footnote{ibid., 22.}
\end{quote}

Profit forces us to:

\begin{quote}
[Cut] down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse...that is all that modern commerce, the counting-house forgetful of the workshop, will do for us herein.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 22, 24.}
\end{quote}

Thus during his socialist campaigning, Morris took time to rail against those who would curtail any pleasure in nature. In \textit{Commonweal} he attacked Lord Brownlow, ‘who is setting about robbing [the locals] ... of some of the open ground on the beautiful chalk headlands of the Chiltern Hills’, and railed against the ‘curmudgeon’ who was planning to enclose and restrict access to certain stretches of the River Mole.\footnote{Nicholas Salmon (ed.), \textit{Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal 1885-1890} (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 56, 640.} ‘The external beauty of the country is part of its wealth’, he insisted, ‘and every citizen has a right to the enjoyment of it to the full extent of his capacity’.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 2, 620.} Morris also supported opposition to the Ambleside Railway Bill, and was wary of the intentions of railway companies in general.\footnote{See Morris on the Ambleside Railway Bill in \textit{Journalism}, 206–7; and comments on the function of railways in India in \textit{Journalism}, 242.} He argued that one of the first steps ‘toward the fresh new-birth of art must interfere with
the privilege of private persons to destroy the beauty of the earth for their private advantage, and thereby to rob the community’. 77

Moreover in his socialist campaigning Morris also insisted that such profiteers endeavour to keep pollution to a minimum, and indicated that he thought scientists should be able to tackle some of the problems. 78 Though he understood that nineteenth-century science was ‘in the pay of the counting-house’, he nevertheless urged scientists 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’, rather than making ‘devices for killing and maiming our enemies present and future’. 79

Morris’s reservations about science, mechanisation, and industrialism in general were as much a result of his romantic disposition and sympathies with the Victorian ‘pastoral impulse’ or ‘cult of the countryside’, 80 as a consequence of considered analysis. This romantic, ruralist disposition affected both the activities and aesthetics of his socialism during the 1880s. Although it would be misleading to suggest that the Socialist League was anything other than an urban-based organisation, it often looked to the countryside for pleasure and a release from town life, organising outings similar to those of the Clarion Clubs in the 1890s. 81 On 14 June 1886, for example, a group of Leaguers took the train to Box Hill Station, walked to Burford Bridge and then took a path up Box Hill to Swiss Cottage and on to Bletchworth Clump. ‘[T]he view from each place’, a flyer announced, expanded ‘over different counties, but each of equal beauty’. 82 F.W. Jowett recalled that Morris’s ‘chants for socialists’ were sung on some of these outings. ‘[I]n country lanes or on river bank’, he remembered, we ‘tramped together to spread the gospel’. 83 Many of these ‘songs’ look forward to the days when everyone has regular access to ‘the wastes and the woodland beauty, and the happy fields we till’. 84

While some of the activities of the Morrisian socialists had a rural or pastoral flavour, nearly all of the pamphlets, posters and inter-branch communiques announcing these schemes were ornamented by naturalistic designs created by Morris. Indeed many of Morris’s socialist texts, from SDF or League membership cards to the covers and frontispieces of

81 The Clarion Clubs believed in getting away from the towns and cities into the fresh air of the country in order ‘to bring the town dweller more frequently into contact with the beauty of nature; to help forward the ideal of the simpler life, plain living and high thinking’. D. Prynn, ‘The Clarion Clubs, Rambling and Holiday Associations in Britain since the 1890s’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 2 (1976): 65–77.
82 See the pamphlet ‘Socialist League Excursion. Box Hill & Dorking’ (London: Socialist League, 1886). A few League branches even considered establishing rural communities. At a meeting of the Croydon, Mitcham and Merton branches in 1887, a proposal was put ‘to raise capital to purchase one of the many beautiful estates hereabouts, now fast falling into the hands of the jerry builders’. This land, it was suggested, would provide members with ‘a release from town life’. Morris was to be one of the convenors at a meeting for further discussion, but it seems that the plan was never realised. See the pamphlet ‘To Socialists and Friends of the Cause’ (London: Socialist League, 1887).
books, were decorated with the same kinds of free-flowing patterns that he designed for fabric and walls. These ‘[amalgams] of the Gothic and the nineteenth-century demotic’, which ‘set a kind of house style for late-nineteenth-century Socialist graphics’, 85 seem also to say that ‘socialism is natural’. The sturdy oaks, spreading branches, twining growth, fruit and floral blossoms, all support, surround and suggest the natural bases and growth of these ideas.

That Morris conceived of his socialist endeavours in such a way—that is, as an activity founded upon the principles of nature and promoting a more natural way of life—is also apparent from the kind of people drawn to his version of socialism. Some of Morris’s closest friends and comrades were socialists of a somewhat unorthodox, often nature-loving character. In part this was due to the fact that the ‘religion of socialism’ was ‘thoroughly permeated by the religion of nature’. 86 Both the SDF and the League had a small but noteworthy vitalist contingent. Drawing on the organicism of Ruskin and Kingsley, they argued that the workings of nature offered alternative, more hopeful insights than the sterile, mechanistic interpretations prevalent in society at large. As David Elliston Allen has noted, vitalism played an important role in the resurgence of interest in the protection of nature in the 1880s, and it brought this interest to bear on socialism. 87

It also lent a mystic or transcendental tinge to certain socialists’ pronouncements. Morris’s friend and socialist colleague George Bernard Shaw was a self-proclaimed believer in ‘transcendental metabiology’ who vigorously rejected the ‘hideous fatalism … [and] ghastly and damnable reduction of beauty and intelligence, of strength and purpose, of honour and aspiration’ he read in Darwin’s theory of natural selection. Shaw refused to believe that nature ‘is nothing but a casual aggregation of inert and dead matter’ in which ‘the stars of heaven, the showers and dew, the winter and summer, the fire and heat, the mountains and hills … modify all things by blindly starving and murdering everything that is not lucky enough to survive’. 88 And although Morris’s work generally espouses a material, sensuous and earthly understanding of nature, he felt a great deal of sympathy with much that these vitalists said. He was opposed to the view expounded in a hostile Fabian review of his lectures, which asserted that ‘antagonism is the law of the world’. 89 Moreover, though he was wary of the ‘faddist’ element among many of these ‘back to nature’ enthusiasts, 90 his imaginative writing of the late 1880s and 1890s, reveals that many of these enthusiasms were ones held in common.

85 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, 484.
87 V Vitalism has been described as a ‘creed [that] issued largely from the wreck of orthodox religion left by the triumph of evolutionary theory’, and followers built a positive and optimistic creed upon the Darwinian insight that humans are merely another biological species: ‘in and of nature, not above and outside it’. See David Elliston Allen, The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History (London: Allen Lane, 1976), 201-4.
89 Faulkner, Critical Heritage, 315.
90 There was, for example, an interest in vegetarianism among the readers of Commonweal and Morris’s socialist circle, including Shaw, Edward Carpenter, James Joynes, and Henry and Kate Salt. Morris, although sympathetic, felt it necessary to remind the readers of Commonweal that ‘a man can
Furthermore, there were those among these enthusiasts whom Morris greatly admired and respected. In 1883 he met Edward Carpenter when Carpenter donated £300 for the launch of the SDF’s *Justice*. Carpenter’s passionate *Towards Democracy* appeared in the same year, which promoted ‘back to the land’ alternatives to industrialism. Carpenter, who complained that ‘the source of all production’ lay neglected, had set up a market garden business in Chesterfield in 1882, and called upon all men and women ‘to come close to the Earth itself and those that live in direct contact with it’.  

In a later work, *England’s Ideal* (1887), Carpenter used Marxian socialism to analyse history and censor capitalism, calling for an assimilation of consumer and producer: for self-sufficient communities of limited wants and needs, with ‘The vast majority of mankind [living] in direct contact with nature’.  

Although not close, either personally or doctrinally, Morris felt that Carpenter’s was ‘the real way to enjoy life’. When he visited Carpenter in 1884, he:

[Listened] with longing heart to his account of his patch of ground … he says that he and his fellow can almost live on it: they grow their own wheat, and send flowers and fruit to Chesterfield and Sheffield markets: all that sounds very agreeable to me.

The visit caused Morris to reflect that all life’s ‘necessary ordinary details’ should be a source of pleasure, and that one of the most serious indictments of ‘modern civilization’ was that it ‘huddles them out of the way, has them done in a venal and slovenly manner till they become real drudgery which people can’t help trying to avoid’.

During this visit, Carpenter lent Morris his copy of Thoreau’s *Walden*. Morris wrote to tell Carpenter he found it ‘very interesting’, but had serious reservations:

[It] seems to me that he…looks on human life as a spectator only. That’s a convenient and pleasant position to take up; but quite apart from the question of whether one ought to do so or not, very few people can … I know from experience what a comfortable life one might lead if one could be careful not to concern oneself with persons but with things; or persons in the light of things. But nature won’t allow it, it seems.

In this letter, among others, Morris’s emphasis upon humanism underlines his differences with people such as Thoreau and Carpenter. Nevertheless, a certain empathy flows through their letters, and

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*ibid.*, 430.
Carpenter’s *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure* (1889) provides an interesting contextual parallel to *News from Nowhere*. Moved by Carpenter’s adherence to a simple lifestyle and land ethic, Morris drew on this practical example for his vision of the future.95

In a similar way, but for different reasons, Morris was also drawn to Peter Kropotkin, one of the many political refugees sheltering in England in the 1880s. After meeting at a commemoration of the Paris Commune in 1886, Morris invited Kropotkin to lecture at the Hammersmith Branch of the League on several occasions, and appears, at one stage, to have hoped that he might become a member.96 Yet Kropotkin was a committed anarchist who believed that anarchism was not simply a matter of faith, but an observable tendency in nature. Though he believed that ‘the conquest of bread’ had to involve human ‘conquest over nature’, Kropotkin maintained that nature ‘was the first ethical teacher of man’,97 and in *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, published in 1899, argued for a harmonious balance between agriculture and industry. Kropotkin’s vision of a decentralised society made up of ‘an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees’,98 held a deep appeal for Morris. In ‘The Society of the Future’, delivered at Ancoats in Manchester in 1888, Morris held out a similar vision of ‘a society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, to forgo some of the power over nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical, and willing to sacrifice something to this end’.99

This kind of openness to contemporary alternatives to Marxian socialism meant that Morris’s own brand of socialism was never orthodox or rigidly ‘scientific’. While Morris drew on the letter of Marx for his analysis of ‘How We Live’, he often called on the spirit of utopians, anarchists or ‘back to nature’ enthusiasts for his imagination of ‘How We Might Live’.100 In considering the relations between labour and nature, therefore, Morris conceived of humanity, nature and work in ways that are qualitatively different from those of Marx. In his emphasis on process, and in his desire for ‘a reasonable share in the beauty of the earth ... as the right of every man’, rather than an emphasis on the necessity of massive and expansive production at any cost, Morris not only looked for solutions to the exploitative relationships that ensued between human beings, but also to those between humanity and the natural world. By transcending the capitalist emphasis upon production for profit, and subduing the Marxian emphasis upon the subjugation of nature, Morris

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95 The influence ran both ways. Carpenter wrote of Morris as ‘one of the finest figures of this century’, and described his contribution as ‘the impulse of growth which ... has been one of the most potent, most generous and humanly beautiful, of all the many impulses ... of modern Socialism’. Faulkner, *Critical Heritage*, 401–3.
developed a culture of nature which allowed space for both culture and nature.

Yet in the end, all of Morris’s interest in, and endeavours to preserve or protect, nature were in order to be ‘thoughtful of man’s pleasure and rest, and to help so far as this, her children to whom she has most often set such heavy tasks of grinding labour’.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 23, 170.} With nature, however problematic the definition, acting as a guide or standard in the inspiration of the object, in the materials used to make it, in the fashion in which it was made, in the environment in which it was made, and in the relationships which ensued when it was made, Morris arrived, as Lindsay argued, at a point that Marx had set out in 1844:

\begin{quote}

The \textit{human} essence of nature exists only for \textit{social} man; for only here does nature exist as the foundation of his own \textit{human} existence … Thus \textit{society} is the unity of being of man with nature — the true resurrection of nature — the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfilment.\footnote{Jack Lindsay, \textit{William Morris: His Life and Work} (London: Constable, 1975), 380.}
\end{quote}

It is in his combination of concerns, in the linked ideas of nature and human labour, that Morris’s thinking is most useful today. Thus when Lindsay argues that Morris ‘was pioneering a century ago in the comprehension of problems which have only recently risen into the general consciousness’,\footnote{ibid., 382-3.} we need to be aware also of the ways in which his thought was a product of his age and primarily concerned with problems of the life processes of humanity. And we need to acknowledge Morris’s difference to both those more ‘deeply green’ and ‘lightly’ conservationist activists of today. Morris argued that if we put our work relations and material priorities—our livelihood—right, then nature would stand the best chance of surviving in something like the form in which we most appreciate it. It was for this reason that Morris entreated his contemporaries ‘to strive to enter into the real meaning of the arts, which are surely the expression of reverence for nature, and the crown of nature, the life of man upon the earth’,\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 22, 124-5.} To do this today it is still necessary, as Morris noted over one hundred years ago, and as has also been articulated recently, for us to attempt ‘to stitch work and labour together again … both conceptually and practically’.\footnote{Donald Brook, ‘Rent-a-Crowd: a Nocturnal Meditation on the Engine of History’, \textit{Overland}, no. 151 (1998): 37.} Morris’s work is useful to think with in this respect because he helps us to re-conceptualise some of the changed relationships needed, both between humanity and nature, and between work done by those who devise and control their own ends, and a labour force seen only as a means.

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