

WOODS BEYOND WORLDS? THE GREENING OF WILLIAM MORRIS

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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? (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 1: 170)

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,¹ 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.

What Morris intended is in part the subject of this essay. The phrase a “reasonable share in the beauty of the earth” suggests Morris’s concern with sharing and social justice, responsibility and “natural” limits, pleasure and work. But it also crucially reflects an aggregation and formulation of ideas about “nature,” and it is on this aspect of Morris’s work – on the ways a “reasonable share in the beauty of the earth” was informed by the key concept of what is “natural” or “of nature” – that I have focussed over the last ten years, and which has become a central feature of Morris studies.² Many have come to the obvious conclusions that Morris’s work

¹ F.B. Head described Burslem as “smoke-grimed” in his *Stokers and Pokers* (1849), quoted in Trinder 186. Trinder’s work also contains many descriptions and images of the nineteenth-century potteries’ landscapes that testify to the accuracy of such a description.

² I have discussed in greater depth elsewhere the problems of defining and dealing with “nature” (“Writing” 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” (Soper 155-56). Although useful as devices warning against the assumption of a stable and coherent entity, quotation marks from here on are omitted from around nature. Constant use of them throughout this essay would be clumsy both in a literary and conceptual

abounds with references to natural spaces; that nature is reproduced in a variety of shapes and texts, and that an understanding of his culture of nature significantly enhances comprehension of the moment of Morris's appeal.

It is not my intention to outline here the different manifestations and permutations of nature in Morris's work; I have examined them at length elsewhere (Wills 1998). Rather, this is a reflective piece that explores the refashioning of the Morris legacy and the remaking and relabelling of this legacy as "green." It is also an argumentative essay that seeks to engage and question the cultural acts of commemoration that have led to this "greening of Morris." In a limited space it is not possible to represent arguments in full, but the purpose here is more rhetorical anyway, born of the desire to suggest more appropriate uses of this in so many ways monumental Victorian.

The "greening" of Morris has been an 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 common crisis about the future of a complexly constituted but still deeply loved nature. Such readings were partly the result of historical conjunctions emanating from the increasing social, cultural and political impact of "green" thinking in the early 1990s. In this context, Morris's work was considered to manifest an interest in and concern for nature that mirrored or prefigured many of our own anxieties at the end of the twentieth century. But they were also the result of earlier readings that in a more general way had recognised the significance of nature to Morris. Many biographers, art and literary historians and critics, as well as social commentators, had commented on the ways in which images and ideas of nature suffuse Morris's work. From the first studies of Morris at the turn of the century by family and socialist colleagues (Glasier, Mackail, Vallance); through E.P. Thompson's landmark use of Morris to fill the "silences" of Marx; through Raymond Williams's claim that Morris had brought socialist and ecological thinking together; and through a 1970s "discovery" of an environmental Morris and a 1980s assimilation of his thought to "early green politics";³ it was apparent that nature had stood as an important concept in the interpretation and analysis of his work. Nobody had done a comprehensive study of Morris's concept of nature, but by the 1990s it is fair to say that Morris scholarship was well down the path from red to green.

During the 1990s this path was made explicit, extended and diversified. It was claimed that Morris's works contain "a detailed analysis of [. . .] environmental disruption," and of how "revolution would lead to major *ecological* change" (O'Sullivan, "Struggle" 5). Studies argued that his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* was "a vision for *our* time" and that it provided a document that "sets out

sense; a sophisticated approach to Morris's work requires a flexible, sometimes even ambiguous, understanding of the word.

³ In the mid-1970s, E.P. Thompson detected "the first signs of a 'thaw' in the icy resistance to Morris," and could point to the recent "(remarkable discovery!) that he is a pioneer of responsible 'ecological' consciousness" (801). See Lindsay; Gould, "William Morris"; Gould, *Early Green Politics*; Faulkner; Hanna; Marsh, *Back to the Land*.

and explores how environmental ideas could operate in a future society" (O'Sullivan, "Ending" 181). Others insisted that Morris's life and work offered solutions to the problems posed by the possibility of "world climatic disaster" (Thompson, *Why William Morris* 5). And many appropriated Morris for a back-projected history of "green" discourse which saw him as a someone whom one could turn to for answers to questions about "the end" or "the death" of nature. Both popular and scholarly studies of his work reflected this preoccupation.

This theme was reflected in events surrounding the centenary of Morris's death in 1996. In Britain these events included the Victoria and Albert Museum's blockbuster retrospective "William Morris 1834–1896," where visitor expectation was shaped by green acanthus leaf advertisements, and Morris's interactions with nature and landscape were established as themes at the entrance to the exhibition (video technology transformed images of "real" trees and flowers into Morris designs, and such "nature into art" motifs were a prominent feature in promotional material). Here Morris was displayed as aesthetic conservationist, someone born with a sense of "the romance of nature," who remembered this romance throughout his work, and was motivated to campaign for the conservation of landscapes because of it. Yet, while suggestions of Morris's "greenness" were implicit throughout the exhibition, it was only discussed obliquely on a small panel at the end. This seemed to be symptomatic of the wider, substantially unexamined current of thought that "of course Morris was green."

There were some, however, who *were* prepared to examine the contours of "Morris the Green." In the key-note lecture delivered to the Morris Centenary Conference at Exeter College Oxford in 1996, it was argued that Morris's thought prefigured that of "deep ecologists," "eco-feminists," "eco-activists" and resource planners, and that his views also echoed the belief structures of "non-growth-driven cultures," such as those of Native Americans (Boos, "Morris the Green"). As we read *News from Nowhere*, it was suggested, we should note the ways in which characters "anticipate" "deep" or "spiritual ecologists", and mimic the actions of "tree-huggers." Surprisingly, given the author's earlier work on Morris, this conference paper seemed to crystallise much of the considerably less critical thinking and identification of Morris with environmentalism, "eco-centrism" and "green" thinking in general.⁴ Moreover, for many it was not simply a case of both/and but either/or. Discussions with those involved in "green" politics in England often turned on the question of whether Morris was really a "red" *or* a "green," and this ardent conference paper seemed to articulate a certain amount of this thinking.

As a result, I can identify almost to the minute when I decided that nature was not the most important category in Morris's work. Having encountered the totality of Morris's work – his poetry, art, Icelandic journals and translations, lectures, letters,

⁴ Apart from valuable studies of *The Earthly Paradise* and her editing and annotating of *William Morris's Socialist Diary* (1982), Boos has published a number of papers on the importance of Morris's "red" (as opposed to his "green") thought. Certainly her later version of the paper, re-titled "An Aesthetic Ecocommunist: Morris the Red and Morris the Green," qualified her pronouncements in significant ways.

politics and fiction – and attempted to read it in appropriate historical context, it was immediately apparent that much more allowance needed to be made for the fact that Morris had done his work in the century of Wordsworth, Blake, Tennyson, Darwin, Huxley, Ruskin, Carlyle, Rossetti and Marx, and at a time when all these currents of thought jostled up against and wrestled each other in deeply problematic, uncomfortable and historically distinct ways. In fact the Morris centenary events crystallised for me that Morris's social thought and prescriptions were undeniably pre-green in expression, and that the importance of Morris's work lay not in the fact that one could approximate his ideas to those of "deep ecologists" or "eco-spiritualists," but in his thinking about the ways in which nature might be "reasonably shared" in and between *human* societies.

Indeed, it seemed that one needed to ask just how useful a description "eco-centric" was, when one had immediately to qualify that description by asserting he was of the communalist rather than Gaian type (O'Sullivan, "Ending" 181). Clearly there was nothing "eco-centric" about Morris if being "eco-centric" means caring for landscape, plants and animals more than, or even as much as, caring for human life; or even if it means putting the whole "eco-system" above its human parts. Nor did it appear to me that a work such as *News from Nowhere* was best appreciated as a text that provides "radical environmentalists with a document setting out many of their basic ideas" (O'Sullivan, "Ending," 181; Pepper 63). While it seemed reasonable to ask "What key features of Morris's work have led to important attitude change in the past, and what key concepts appear to be useful in environmental discourse today?", the question "How green was Morris?" did not seem very helpful.⁵ And when Morris was viewed simply as the starting point for a "line of romantic critics" that extended through "Lewis, Tolkien, many CNDers and eco-activists" to E.F. Schumacher, or simply as a romantic ecologist (Bate 55-56), something important in his thought seemed to be lost. Trajectories such as "fantasy, the bomb, and the 'greening' of Britain"⁶ appeared to preclude an understanding of "the Morris who reads us" (Kelvin 344). Once more, it seemed, we were "re-valuing" a Victorian by claiming that he was like us (Armstrong 7). As Jeffrey Spear observed at the end of *Dreams of an English Eden*, "neither Ruskin nor Morris imagined mankind being driven into Eden by a fiery sword, and the circumstances that have brought their visions of harmony with nature back into vogue are not those from which they began. *Ecology* is not their word" (238-39).

Ecology was not only not Morris's word because it was not of his time, but also because he failed to consider in enough detail many of the issues that are central to ecological discourse today: questions relating to population, resources, bio-diversity, ecological systems, and a whole range of other green concerns. Thus far, I have not attempted to define the term, but Morris seems a problematic green no matter how one

⁵ Wheeler makes this distinction concerning questions about Ruskin in his *Ruskin and Environment* (3).

⁶ Veldman 305. I do not dispute that this is how Morris may have been read and used by those who participated in these movements, but merely that there is much more to Morris than this. Thus I consider Veldman's work useful as an essay in the reading habits of post-Second World War Britain, rather than an analysis of Morris *per se*.

fixes the limits of this position. Morris is obviously not merely a “light green,” “shallow ecologist,” conservationist or environmentalist because fundamental socio-economic and political change was a crucial part of his agenda. Where “light greens” eschew radical political initiatives (property is to remain private and so on), as well as class and social equity issues, such questions were central to Morris’s politics. Still less is he a “deep green” or “deep ecologist” when such terms refer to those who trace environmental problems to humanity’s lack of “ecological consciousness” and to their predilection for dominating other species and exploiting natural resources. Unlike Bill Devall, Arne Naess et al., Morris was not fundamentally opposed to human domination of nature.

“Eco-centrism,” “bio-centrism,” or the moral equivalence of all species, were not his concepts, let alone his words. Humanity was for Morris the “crown of nature,” and he unfailingly gave priority to it. Anthropocentrism, of a kind that appreciated human material dependency upon nature and advocated that it be celebrated in a natural, yet orderly, aesthetic throughout society, is the more appropriate term. He welcomed and celebrated the ways in which certain forms of human activity transformed the environment, seeing nature as historical rather than static. No matter how expansive the consciousness of the earth-loving characters of *News from Nowhere*, Morris drew his vision from a philosophical materialism rather than “eco-spiritualism.” And thus his context is more properly materialism and culture, rather than spiritualism and nature. This is positing a dichotomy between the two that Morris strove to soften or diminish. It does not obscure the fact, however, that he also consistently acknowledged the need for humanity to “conquer” nature and act as “reasonable sharers” of it. It was a desirable thing, Morris argued, that “in order that his labour may be organized properly [. . .] [‘man’] must have only one enemy to contend with – Nature [. . .] who as 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” (*Works* 23: 133) – hardly the metaphor of an eco-feminist.

It is by accepting rather than ignoring such statements that we can use Morris’s thought most helpfully. It is from this angle that we can build a critique of Morris that acknowledges certain elements of “absolutism,” “paternal dictatorialism” and “unacceptable determinism” in his thought.⁷ And it is also in this perspective that we can read Morris not, as some have suggested, “as a post-postmodernist,” but in the

⁷ Greenhalgh 25. Although Greenhalgh’s reservations about Morris are worth noting, some have taken this critique to ludicrous extremes. Deyan Sudjic, for example, has described Morris as “an inspiration both for the Khmer Rouge and for the World of Interiors,” and argued that Morris’s “real significance” is the injurious role he has played “in the decline of the industrial spirit.” Morris’s career, he considered, was merely a series of “petulant episode[s] in a lifelong inability to see the wood from the trees on a truly monumental scale” (6). Sudjic’s diatribe sits uneasily with the democratic impulse in works such as *A Dream of John Ball*, where Morris describes history as a process in which people fight for what they believe in, fail, find they have actually achieved something of what they wanted, but that it was not what they meant and so others pick up the struggle once more under a different name. It seems to me that such commentators, for whom the Victorians often seem excessively moralistic, are haunted by the Victorian plenitude of content which eludes their own work.

post-postmodern “moral and aesthetic space” where we might wish to debate questions about work and pleasure, politics and ethics, self and society.⁸

Out of this we might develop Morris’s critique and concern that “the vision fair” had to be just before it could be beautiful; and his corresponding appreciation of humanised, social and historical landscapes where environmental, and what today we would call ecological problems, are acknowledged as social problems, and their true solutions are sought in focussing upon social causes rather than symptoms. We might consider Morris’s belief that it was necessary to develop the *relationship* of society to nature, the reasons why this relationship is able to destroy the natural world, and, alternatively, the reasons why it has and still can enhance and foster natural development. These beliefs point to similarities between Morris’s thought and more recent thinkers such as Murray Bookchin (24-25), and to why Morris belongs (if anywhere) at the “social justice” rather than “deep ecologist” end of an “eco-socialist” spectrum, where the emphasis is on the need for any kind of “red–green” confluence to include Marxian perspectives (see Pepper 179-85). Always of greatest importance to Morris was “the terrible crime we have fallen into of using our control of the powers of Nature for the purpose of enslaving people” (*Works* 23: 24). Thus we might remember his call to those who loved the nature and history of England – those “who are come of the actors of it and live among the scenes where it was enacted” – to “keep it in order by cultivating our sense of justice to other nations” (*Unpublished Lectures* 158-59); and to be aware that western civilization had been “too apt to thrust her blessings on [. . .] people 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” (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 1: 170). Only then, he argued, might “our insight and interest in the history of the whole world,” and our “affection for [our] own parish and the people of it,” come to be “useful to us and others” (*Unpublished Lectures* 158-59).

But perhaps the most important thing we might learn from Morris’s culture of nature was that it had a semantics of pleasure, self-empowerment and joy. A share in the fullness of human life was what Morris desired most for “every honest and industrious family,” and the most important thing in life, for Morris, was meaningful work, and the expression of joy in labour, which was his (and Ruskin’s) definition of art. Morris’s re-imagining of work is one of the ways in which we might start to think about crucial questions of social and natural order. Discussing these problems in 1984, Raymond Williams argued that “[t]he deepest problems we have now to understand and resolve” are in the “relations of nature and livelihood.” In doing that, he continued, one of the most important changes that needs to be made “is in the received and dominant concept of the earth and its life forms as raw material for

⁸ I refer here to Kelvin’s discussion of “The Morris Who Reads Us” (351). Always one of the more astute Morris commentators, Kelvin suggests that Morris can return us to politics if we perceive “the desire for pleasure as the starting-point for imagining the good society for everyone” (349). See also, however, Peter Beilharz’s argument that Morris’s famous passage on the movement of history and politics in *A Dream of John Ball* is one of the best expressions of “postmodern socialism” (115).

generalised production.” Morris seems to me useful at the point where Williams qualifies this last point:

in the equally necessary perspective of [. . .] an apparently unmediated nature – the living world of rivers and mountains, of trees and flowers and animals and birds – it is important to avoid a crude contrast between “nature” and “production”, and to seek the practical terms of the idea which should supersede both: the idea of “livelihood” within, and yet active within, a better understood physical world and all truly necessary physical processes. (237)

Morris was not “practical” enough for Williams. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is in these terms, in the idea of “livelihood” that Morris’s thinking is most important today. If one gets livelihood right, nature stands a much better chance of surviving in something like the forms that so appealed to Morris and to us still. This was one of the reasons why, believing in the “beneficent progress of civilisation,” 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” (*Works* 22: 124-25). To do this it will be necessary to cease the division between work done by those who devise and control their own ends, and a labour force seen only as a means; in other words, once notions of work and labour in general are completely overhauled. More than anything, perhaps, the amount of space work occupies in our lives and the way it informs our sense of worth and identity, as well as the ethical value we place in the effort of working, are issues that need to be given serious consideration. It will be necessary, as Morris noted over 100 years ago, but as has also been articulated recently, “to stitch work and labour together again [. . .] both conceptually and practically.”⁹

Morris is a useful person to think with in this respect because he helps us to form new ideas that might lead us to consider the possibility of new relationships within work and between work as production and nature. And it is, I believe, more helpful to do it on Morris’s terms, and to accept Morris’s life and work not principally as a vision *for* “our time” but *of* his, allowing this past to question our attempts to reduce it to order. Morris’s vision of the natural world and the place of human society and work in it took shape at a time of startling new physical descriptions of the world and of new religious, literary and cultural reconceptions of nature in light of this. Like many newly urbanised Victorians, Morris grappled with a culture of nature that put human life firmly within nature at the same time many felt increasingly distant from it. This was a dichotomy of effect that he strove to reject, but to which he also gave expression. In his epic poem *The Earthly Paradise*, for example, he acknowledged his terror at the “changeless sea of change” and “strange image of dread eternity” that were the outcome of the work of scientists such as Lyell, Darwin and Huxley. Morris asked: “In whose void patience how can these have part, / These outstretched feverish

⁹ Brook 37. In these “meditations” on the recent Maritime Union dispute in Australia, Morris is now mentioned as “not quite the perfect fool.”

hands, this restless heart?" (*Works* 3: 206). And this Victorian cultural context for nature also needs to be understood alongside more personal, idiosyncratic meanings that meant Morris's vision of nature developed through his own imaginings of an "organic" Middle Age: through tangled overgrown poetry, verdant chintzes and floral cottons, to a rural Thames Valley, the almost "ecotopian" Nowhere, and on into fantastic "woods beyond worlds."

Which is to invoke the title of one of Morris's last prose fantasies, *The Wood Beyond the World*, and the question of this paper. Did Morris desire woods beyond worlds? Did he care about nature apart from human content, and, when he took a step back from his more active socialist campaigning in the 1880s to write prose romances in the 1890s, did it represent a disillusionment with socialism and a desire for something beyond—for something more like our recent green dreams? A necessarily brief discussion of his late prose romances will serve to answer this question, and to draw out further limitations to understanding Morris as in any way "green."

At first glance, it may seem to be the case that the prose romances of the 1890s constituted a definite break with Morris's political engagement of the 1880s. Along with his "typographical adventure" that saw the production of elaborate, exclusive and often arcane books for the Kelmscott Press,¹⁰ these works comprised Morris's last major literary and imaginative output, and appear in some respects to mark a retreat from the revolutionary back to the romantic. Moreover while the romances in some ways resemble Morris's earlier attempts to portray imagined yet "natural" landscapes in works such as *News from Nowhere* (1890), the various worlds described in these tales also reveal a greater tendency towards the wilful conjuring of woods *beyond* worlds, or a landscape of escape and desire (many have noted the "very obvious sexual mythopoeia" apparent in these texts).¹¹ Indeed, if the titles are taken as an indication of content, it might be construed that each of these works told the story of a landscape itself. The titles suggest the ways in which a desire for unnatural landscapes are the central focus of the tales: *The Story of the Glittering Plain or the Land of the Living Men* (1890), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood* (both published posthumously in, respectively, 1897 and 1898).

This, however, is not the case. Each is a tale about a human journey – a quest in which Morris's description of nature, of both real and imagined landscapes, is governed by his need to provide a suitable environment for the deeds of his protagonists. Each is both a story *of* and *in* a series of landscapes, but the story *in* the landscape is more important. The natural world is portrayed as the setting for the physical and emotional adventures of humanity and is often sublimated into signs for subjective states (Talbot xix). Thus there is an emphasis on imagining worlds in which the fulfillment of human potential is the most important goal. In *The Wood Beyond the World*, as in many of the other stories, the central character chooses to

¹⁰ See Peterson and Sparling. Morris's designs for capitals and foliate motifs and borders are also striking examples of how he conventionalised nature in his work: many of his wood-cut motifs are as complex and luxuriant as many of his designs for wallpaper and textiles (see Wills, "Green Borders").

¹¹ Frye 306. See also Mineo *passim*, and Marsh, "Erotic Dream" *passim*.

leave an enchanted realm in order to inhabit a world where human action can help to determine natural growth. All such forms of paradise or haven are clearly signalled as alien to humanity. All the imagery suggests that a meaningful life can only be found by returning, as one of the characters declares, "To the Earth, and the World of Manfolk!" (*Works* 20: 83). All seek community rather than paradise, and, as Amanda Hodgson suggests, it is as if Morris says to those who seek paradise

[b]y all means [. . .] seek an ideal and make it your motivating force. But remember that ideals must be tested and applied in the real world if they are to be life-giving rather than attenuating or destructive. When this practical setting of the ideal at the service of reality is achieved, the Earthly Paradise is attainable not in fantasy but in actuality. By this means, man may join with the unfettered powers of nature to make time and change benevolent [. . .]. (194)

Yet perhaps this is not *quite* the right emphasis to draw from these stories. E.P. Thompson and John Goode have argued that Morris's later prose romances reveal doubts about socialist determinism or evolutionism. Such a process would be, they noted, merely "a pseudo-resolution of the problem of alienation: a resolution (or "Revolution") 'achieved by forces outside himself: man's alienation will be brought to an end by alien forces'" (Thompson, *Romantic* 795-96, quoting Goode 270). Rather, the emphasis in Morris's tales is that the answers are not in paradise or outside one's society, but that one needs to take the journey to know it; that it is the province of dream to teach the limits of one's history. This is the value of imagining beyond it. As Goode has insisted, Morris's aim in writing romance was "to find a mode in which the creative mind can be portrayed in its determined and determining relationship to historical actuality," in which people themselves may be seen "as a determining as well as a determined force" (270).

In doing this, the late prose romances have a slightly different function than does *News from Nowhere*. These romances do, in fact, depart from the point where *News from Nowhere* had to cease. Morris had a far different purpose in writing *News from Nowhere* and probably a different audience in mind. Whereas this earlier romance was written for a widely socialistic audience in order to detail certain possibilities for a future England, the later romances seem to be an imaginative bequest. More wide-roaming and less committed to definite endings, they exhibit "the moral ordeal of the revolutionary mind unprotected by determinist rationalisation" (Goode 265), but they still affirm "the responsibility of dream" (Goode 239). They do indeed reflect Morris's preoccupation with vision in the 1890s – with the "vision of a real Socialist party at once united and free" (*Letters* 3: 381 – but also his acknowledgment of the need for engagement: of the benefits of London County Council elections (*Letters* 3: 381), of the need for a Joint Committee of Socialist Bodies; and of "the efforts of the workers themselves" in the Coal Miners' Strike of 1893, "small as is the actual gain which they are claiming" (*Letters* 4: 104). Thus, in the last article on socialism to appear in print during his lifetime, Morris argued that "the tokens that this great change in society is on the way are no longer merely the

spread of academic discussion, or the setting forth of Utopias with their roots in the air, but the attempts to deal with 'practical' questions concerning the present daily life of the greater part of the population" (*Letters* 4: 398). Yet still Morris asked his audience to learn, and to learn in order to teach the desire for new and for better things: "You that are not Socialists, therefore, learn, and in learning teach us, that when we know, we may be able to act, and so realize the new order of things, the beginnings of which we can already see, though we cannot picture to ourselves its happiness" (492).

Which is why I would answer my previous questions in the negative, and argue that the romances are both part of his learning and lesson. Morris's imagination of woods beyond worlds represents both "the revolt of the 'magic' of imagination banished from the capitalist [and increasingly the socialist] world" (Sayre 58), and the work of someone still trying to "make Socialists," and to do so by developing what Trollope called "a confidence in vision."¹² The best description of the function of such writing is still E.P. Thompson's borrowing from Miguel Abensour:

in such [writing] [. . .] two things happen: our habitual values [. . .] are thrown into disarray. And we enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*. This is not the same as "a moral education" towards a given end; it is, rather, to open a way to aspiration, to "teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way." (790-91)

But what do they teach us to desire, and in particular to desire for and about our relationship to nature? Some have claimed that such moves into fantasy fiction, and the emergence of an introspective mode that recognised nature only as the mirror of internal reality, marks a place "where nature ends." Yet this was not the case. In the same way that we can argue that Morris's employment of magically real modes does not represent a movement from the revolutionary back to the romantic in terms of his orientation to society and politics, his creation of magically real landscapes does not reflect the emptiness of nineteenth-century nature. Rather it was a way of facing and challenging the late nineteenth-century depiction of a "designified nature" (Lorsch 26), or a nature drained of meaning by the exigencies of science. As Susan Lorsch has argued, nature for Victorians such as Morris was "still very much 'out there,'" and this compelled writers "to mirror external reality in their art neither as a function of the mind nor as a background to human interaction but as a powerful presence in human life" (Lorsch 13). Morris also balanced "nature as fact and nature as symbol," and in doing so we recognise him, unlikely as it may seem, as a contemporary of

¹² "There are two kinds of confidence which a reader may have in his author [. . .]. There is confidence in facts and a confidence in vision. The one man tells you accurately what has been. The other suggests to you what may, or perhaps what must have been, or what ought to have been. The former requires simple faith. The latter calls upon you to judge for yourself, and form your own conclusions" (Trollope 112). The phrase was used by Spatt in his discussion of "William Morris's Late Romances" (126).

Hardy.¹³ For both, nature can *seem* “kindly” and “malevolent,” but is really neither. Both writers also emphasise not the division between humanity and nature but the continual lived proximity between the two. And Morris always acknowledged that his passion for the English landscape was a result of his “habit of looking at things that pass before my eyes [. . .] and connecting their present outward seeming with times gone by and times to come” (*Unpublished Lectures* 158). Nature is in this respect for Morris not a static scene or panorama, but, borrowing a phrase from Bookchin, a “cumulative, *history* of natural development” (36).

Thinking programmatically, or looking forward to a “greener” future, therefore, it is not that we need to understand what kind of nature Morris was invoking when he posited it as a central value for a certain kind of culture, but what kind of culture. The distinctions Morris draws between good and bad society, between good and bad art, are not between culture and nature, but between different types of culture.

Still, by telling tales of woods beyond worlds, Morris indicated his wish to make the view on the road from Nowhere both beautiful and “decent”: fair places which provide for the development of both humanity and nature in a history which preserves mind in the landscape and land in the mind-scape. Attempting to re-enchant the landscape, not as a “faery land forlorn,” but so that it once more becomes a place of possibility rather than alienation or ennui, Morris sought to educate his readers to desire more and better for *themselves* by desiring more and better for the landscape. Morris’s ideas were only proto-green to the extent that they highlighted the importance of a cultural revolution being an integral part of a socio-economic one, a revolution in which an aesthetic sensitivity to nature would shape priorities in production. And yet one cannot ignore that a ‘reasonable share’ in the beauty of nature remained a key feature of what Morris believed a communist society would achieve, and that he was one of the first to recognise the importance of the nexus between environment, work and pleasure.

At the Burslem Town Hall in 1881, therefore, the reason that Morris’s call for a “reasonable share in the beauty of the earth for all” was so valuable and yet so difficult for the audience to fully appreciate was not because they needed to develop their ecological consciousness, but because Morris was calling for them to strive to express what he described as “the real meaning of art” (*Works* 22: 124-25): that they revere the beauty of the earth as a function rather than backdrop or outcome of very active human livelihood.

Works cited

¹³ Morris, in fact, admired some of Hardy’s work. In 1891 he wrote to the younger author to thank him for sending a copy of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and stated: “I have read two of your books with much pleasure, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, & *The return of the Native*. The first one is the most pleasing and I suppose you would look upon it as the most typical of your works. But there is a great deal of close study of nature, (I mean human save of that ilk) in the return, besides the beauty of the *mise en scène* which with you is a matter of course” (*Letters* 3: 367). As with all Morris quotations used here, the grammatical eccentricities are Morris’s own, including the *accent aigu*.

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