A Resource of Hope or a Religion No Longer Believed In?

The Religious Nature of a "Green" William Morris

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Introduction

> I am proudly conscious of my position as *the* Christian poet of the age.
> (Morris 1984: 1.101)

[1] It is startling to think of the nineteenth-century artist, writer, and socialist William Morris in the terms he described himself to the notoriously atheistic Algernon Charles Swinburne in 1869. Though destined for the Church in youth,<1> by middle age he had professed himself "careless of metaphysics and religion" (1910: 23.279) and had also begun to denounce what he saw as religious complicity in the exploitation and expansion of a world economy: "the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters" (1910: 23.94-95). In 1883, he declared that he had never "taken to" the "rich establishmentarian Puritanism" of his family (1984: 2.227), and in the socialist journal *Commonweal* he frequently railed against puritanical Christianity as "a slimy superstition . . . a dangerous ally of the gigantic robbery of capitalism, which gave it birth" (1996: 616). Consequently, when we think of Morris today we associate his beliefs with a kind of naturalistic wallpaper, or with that "other religion" that emerged with particular force in the nineteenth century, "the religion of socialism."

[2] Of course, those who have studied Morris's life and ideas have developed broader terms of reference for this extraordinary figure of the British Victorian age. The twentieth century has enjoyed a variety of "Morrises," due in no small part to the wide range of activities undertaken by this nineteenth-century Renaissance man. Morris worked as artist, poet, translator, designer, craftsman, calligrapher, dyer, businessman, preservationist, socialist, editor, lecturer, utopian novelist, fantasy writer, typographer, and printer. 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."

[3] What happened to "*the* Christian poet"? While of interest in itself, this question should engage us now because of one of his more recent appellations, "Morris the Green." Since the late 1980s in particular, Morris has been seen by many as a fellow "Green," one with whom it is possible to share a sense of common crisis about the future of "nature" and the environment.<2> It has been claimed that Morris's thought prefigures that of "deep ecologists," "eco-spiritualists," "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 (Boos 1996). Yet while 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 other crucial aspects of his thinking and in particular the contexts in which he developed his ideas. Exploration of such contexts reveals that an emphasis on a "Green Morris" obscures some of his crucial arguments about the ways in which nature might be "reasonably shared" in and between human societies. One of these contexts is the culture of religious thought, belief and feeling about the natural world: the profoundly religious "nature" of nineteenth-century Victorian England. What follows is an exploration of these ideas about nature that helped to shape the "Green Morris." Though threatened in its role as a "common context" for knowledge, religious ideas of the natural world played a

central role in the formation of Victorian attitudes to nature, and had a crucial impact on Morris's efforts to develop new "resources of hope."<3>

Romancing Creation

[4] Morris's romantic heritage has been long recognized. Most famously, E. P. Thompson noted Morris's transit "from romantic to revolutionary" as part of an effort to discover how "Blake's Jerusalem might yet be built" in Victorian England (273). Yet while many have rightly emphasized the romantic structures of feeling, thought, and expression that influenced Morris, the structures themselves were generally founded upon principles and elements derived from a dominant Judeo-Christian religion. It was the idea of God and the order of nature created by Judeo-Christian beliefs that were the most widely disseminated views of nature in early Victorian Britain. As Clarence Glacken noted, such ideas provided "a conception of the habitable world of such force, persuasiveness, and resiliency that it could endure as an acceptable interpretation of life, nature, and the earth to the vast majority of the peoples of the Western world until the sixth decade of the nineteenth century" (168). In order to understand how these conceptions influenced Victorian views of nature, it will be necessary to review briefly some of the main tenets.

[5] At the center of the Judeo-Christian conception of nature lies the idea of creation. This process is described in Genesis, in which there is both an account of the individual acts of God which generate the natural world, and a list of instructions and examples of how "man" should behave toward that creation: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (1:28; Glacken: 150-68). Arising from Genesis, therefore, is the idea that "man" holds a position on earth comparable to that of God in the universe, and this has been one of the central themes in nearly all Western thought regarding "man's" place in nature.

[6] The idea of human dominion over the earth has been translated, on the one hand, into readings emphasizing the story of human ejection from the Garden of Eden, which has in turn given rise to understandings of nature as a place of disorder and vice, as God tells Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you" (3:17). One can also trace a constant feeling of distaste for nature in much Christian thought. There emerges the idea of nature-as-wilderness understood as a world of the profane rather than the sacred, as a wasteland, or as "a realm or phase of punitive or purgative preparation for salvation" (Williams 1962: 5). It is this understanding of nature, as wilderness to be subdued, which has led to the assertion that Judeo-Christian rhetoric "established a dualism of man and nature and insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White: 75-94).

[7] However, nature has also been more positively evaluated in Judeo-Christian thought. It has existed as sacred space, as a source of spiritual insight, or as God's realm as opposed to that occupied by humanity. In this sense, one finds nature understood as a refuge, a place of meditative withdrawal, as an inner sanctum or "ground of being," and as the actual location of God (Williams 1962: 4). Somewhat paradoxically, the Bible also offers a reading of nature that sees its transformation by human action as a source of redemption. Both the Old and the New Testaments contain passages that celebrate "controlled" nature. In the books of Psalms, Job, and Sirach, figures of speech reflect life among grain fields, orchards, olive groves, and pastures; it has been suggested that the creation of a garden from wilderness is the most enduring metaphor in the Bible. Evolving as a powerful image of human accomplishment and moral struggle, this "theology" of the creation of a garden has frequently been used to justify the "improvement" of land (Short: 10-15; Hoskins: 80-81). While such improvement has now been questioned by many (and one cannot directly attribute social action to Christian theology), there are also examples of sound conservationist practice within the Church, frequently grounded on the idea of human "stewardship." Further evidence of a reverential attitude towards nature can also be gleaned from the concept of "wisdom" in the Old Testament. There is also the alternative protective and preservationist tradition of St. Francis of Assisi, which has emphasized communion with nature and the joys of rural life. Thus, alongside contempt for the earthly has existed a "natural theology" that seeks and finds evidence of a beneficent creator in nature (Short: 14).

[8] It is the positive attitudes to nature that more accurately characterizes Victorian religious cultures of nature. Although often resting on an unexamined or hypocritical destruction and exploitation of nature in social and economic spheres, it would be grossly misleading to suggest that the religious thought of the Victorian era did not, on the whole, extend and cultivate views that emphasized the life, beauty, activity, and order of nature. Given this social context, and Morris's declared personal commitment for at least half of his life, his views on nature could not fail to negotiate, if not outright attain, a religious perspective. Moreover, it is possible to discern five streams of Victorian religious feeling which affect Morris's views of nature: the habit of sacramental or typological thinking; the evangelical spirit of much nature study; the experience of the withdrawal of God from the world; the attempt to posit a new sacramentalism; and the

carrying over of religious structures of feeling and views about nature into "new religions." Other scholars have drawn attention to and analyzed such phenomena in a general Victorian context, and what follows is in part a synthesis of such work in relation to Morris. Nevertheless, it is necessary to re-examine such analyses in order to understand fully the nature of a "Green" Morris.

A Typological Nature

[9] The pervasive presence of typological thinking in Victorian interpretations of nature has been noted by many. In *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (1980) George Landow demonstrates that years of exposure to typological interpretation meant that many Victorian thinkers exhibited "a habit of mind, an assurance that everything possessed significant meaning if only one knew how to discover it" (118). In 1841, for example, John Keble reminded the many readers of *Tracts for the Times* that "The Author of Scripture is the Author of Nature" (1841: 6.166), and many Victorians, both Tractarian and evangelical, looked to nature for guidance in the same way that they read their Bible.

[10] It has been suggested that this process of understanding nature within a Christian system of significance represents a middle-class Victorian compromise between romantic aesthetics and classical-medieval interpretation of Scripture (Todorov: 161-164). Morris certainly fell under the influence of works that contained a romantic-Tractarian emphasis on sacrament and ritual during his education at Oxford. According to his first biographer, J. W. Mackail, Morris's reading at Oxford included Neale's "History of the Eastern Church," Milman's "Latin Christianity," great portions of the *Acta Sanctorum,* and of the *Tracts for the Times,* as well as "masses of medieval chronicles and ecclesiastical Latin poetry," including "Kenelm Digby's *Mores Catholici,* and Archdeacon Wilberforce's *Treatises on the Eucharist, Baptism, and the Incarnation* (the reading of which resulted in Morris's joining the Roman communion in 1854; 1.38). In this respect, for the young, devout Morris, nature had meaning both in itself and outside itself, and it is necessary to examine how some of these meanings were constituted.

[11] Prominent among those who sought to maintain religious links to God's creation was the poet and priest John Keble. G. B. Tennyson has argued that Keble's *The Christian Year,* published in 1827, was the most popular and influential volume of religious poetry of the Victorian era, and that the reason for its popularity lay largely in its "blend of Nature and piety" (371).<4> Although nature itself was not central to Keble's work, he considered feeling for nature to be a positive good because of the Christian lessons it embodied. In *The Christian Year* there are countless instances of nature as theologian and, somewhat less frequently, as an instrument of sacramental grace. Believing that all nature poetry was by definition religious, Keble asked: "How can the topics of devotion be few, when we are taught to make every part of life, every scene in nature, an occasion - in other words, a topic - of devotion?" (1877: 2).

[12] Keble also developed his idea of nature as sacrament in the immensely popular *Tracts for the Times* and in his *Lectures on Poetry,* delivered between 1831 and 1841. "May it not be by the special guidance of Providence," Keble asked, "that a love of country and Nature, and of the poetry which deals with them, should be strong, just at the time when the aids which led our forefathers willingly to forgo any claim to poetic taste are far removed from the habits of our daily life?"(1912: 272). Something of this sentiment - justification of God through a "Green" poetry - lay behind much of Morris's poetry up to the 1870s. As demonstrated below, as a Christian poet of his age, his verse is often the unconscious poetry of religion, asserting the ideal as fact.

[13] Indeed, Morris was one of many influenced by the "theological and sacramental" character of Keble's theory and practice. A "proximate source" for much Victorian literature, Keble "adapted and updated" the sacramental nature of historic Catholicism by integrating a romantic love of nature with orthodox theology (Tennyson: 373-76). In his wake, authors such as Charlotte Mary Yonge wove religious sentiment into their work, including an emphasis on the teachings of nature. In Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe* (1852), for example, the hero warns against listening to the wrong "voice of nature," but also of "being led to stop short at the material beauty, or worse, to link human passions with the glories of nature, and so distort, defile, profane them" (2.126-27). Read and greatly admired by Morris as a young man (Mackail suggested that Morris adopted the hero's traits "as a pattern for actual life"),<5> this work can be read as evidence of how the Tractarian mind sought to balance passion with reserve in responding to nature (Tennyson: 382-87). Yet, although they counseled against too ardent a response, works such as Yonge's reminded the Victorian reader that God is immanent in nature. Along with the many popular Victorian commentaries on the Bible, it represented a world infused and suffused with meaning.

[14] Another manifestation of Victorian typological thinking was the more popular development of the meaning or "language" of flowers. Although it does not appear that Morris endowed the many flowers he designed with any, let alone Christian, significance (though many of his patterns feature the "humble

wayside herbs" so enamored of these floral sentimentalists), it is possible to find symbolic meaning in the flowers he chose to "decorate" his poetry. Moreover, because those who so deeply influenced him did read and comprehend a floral "language," it is necessary to outline the nature of this predominantly moral and religious typological phenomenon.

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

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

To this end, he continued, the poet "must observe accurately, since the form and lines of the flower discerned by the eye are a large part of what gives it relation and meaning to the soul" (House: 227). Much of this "reading" of flowers revolved around romantic themes and used the language of the love affair (Allen: 75); Morris was certainly not unattuned to the romantic, and even erotic, potential of nature imagery.

[16] There were many poets, however, who intended their "flower poetry" to be highly evangelical in flavor. Beverly Seaton's study of flower books has shown how the Victorians used flowers to communicate moral and spiritual truths, and how an examination of this "natural typology" helps to illuminate nineteenth-century attitudes toward nature (255-67). Seaton cites many examples of floral typology, also noting works such as "J. L. K.'s" *The Voice of Flowers* (1871), which aimed to achieve an experience of conversion through its collection and juxtaposition of remarks on flowers and religion. Many of these works also instructed the reader to turn from the book to nature itself, to "go out and "meditate in the fields"," and to "gather truth where other eyes see nothing but a painted weed" (Kitto: 87-88). They were complemented by a wider religious interest in botany, and a powerful horticultural press that combined both a religious and scientific sensibility.<6>

[17] In much the same way, the great Victorian art critic John Ruskin also read nature for moral meaning. His work, so important an influence on Morris, reproduced many of the characteristics of the more popular and sentimental flower books. Much of Ruskin's thinking was deeply rooted in the religious ideas of his day; his system of aesthetics was structurally predicated upon the foundation that nature was a garden made by God for humanity (Fuller: 5). He shared with writers such as Hibberd and John Kitto an evangelical background which impelled him to produce visions of nature free of evil.<7> Certain of his works can also be read as an explicit repudiation of the teachings of contemporary geologists and a retreat into Biblical literalism with evangelizing as its aim (Fuller: 89). In *Modern Painters,* for example, Ruskin insisted that the Bible describes the physical acts of creation as they occurred, and charged his readers "to follow the finger of God, as it engraved upon the stone tables of the earth the letters and the law of its everlasting form" (1903: 6.116-17). He urged them to learn to see a leaf as God's handiwork, and explained that "the love of nature" manifest in the art of Turner or the Pre-Raphaelites, was not "connected with the faithlessness of the age," but revealed "for the first time in man's history . . . the true nature of his life, the true field for his energies, and the true relations between him and his Maker" (1903: 5.379-80).

[18] Ruskin is also a pivotal source to establish links between the meaning of flowers in sentimental flower books and in the visual arts, particularly in Pre-Raphaelite art. The meaning of nature for the Pre-Raphaelites is complex (Fletcher: 42-45, 140-50; Meisel: 310-11; Staley: *passim*), but this further basis upon which "natural typology" might have influenced the work of Morris should be noted here since Morris was connected to this group of artists. The tangled systems by which many in the nineteenth century expressed their spiritual perspective on nature are not immediately apparent in Morris's work, but are present nonetheless. In many ways, Morris also "gathered truth from nature." Though he eventually drew a line between morality and nature, his early poetry features nature and natural objects as symbol, emblem and analogy (Seaton: 259). Poems such as "Two Red Roses Across the Moon," "The Gilliflower of Gold," and even the fragment "The Story of a Flower," indicate that the rose, hawthorn, and "gilliflower" had symbolic implications at this stage of his life (Jackson: 29-34). In a song from "The Hollow Land," for example, "the apple-blossoms bless / The lowly bent hill side" (1910: 1.276). As his career progressed, and socio-political consciousness developed, Morris's natural objects were more often connected to the vision of a moralized humanity than to God. Yet, even in his later work, "Flora," trees, animals, and seasons "speak" to the reader. They remind us that religious typology was one of the reasons why the Victorian middle classes continued to scrutinize nature.<8>

An Evangelical Nature

[19] There were other reasons why Victorians sought and found religious meaning in nature. Just as nature might reveal God's purpose, the purposes of God were also called on to vindicate the scrutiny of nature. David Elliston Allen has recounted how the evangelical conflation of the moral and the useful helped to justify increasingly popular "nature study" as a means of revering God's creation, and as a means of prospering materially. Interests such as flower arranging or butterfly collecting, though without an obvious use, could be defended from the taunts of utilitarians by proclaiming their moral value. To those already engaged in nature study, the evangelical idea of work for work's sake in turn introduced a new degree of ardor to their endeavors. As Allen has recounted, the new evangelical climate "hatched out brood after brood" of natural lexicologists, list-makers, counters, and comparers (73-82).

[20] Of course, the scientific conceptions of nature aimed at in these studies already substantially derived from the long-established tradition of natural theology. According to the main natural theological argument, a close inspection of nature revealed a universe of which the intricately interlocking parts constituted a smoothly running whole (Lovejoy). These ideas continued to be reflected, albeit less confidently, at all levels of Victorian science. Even the work of the "agnostic" T. H. Huxley retained the strong moral impulses and the proselytizing urge of middle-class evangelicalism. Many scientists, even though they no longer found belief possible, continued to appreciate the value of religion (Heyck: 98).

[21] The overwhelming trend during the nineteenth century, however, was one of the gradual undermining of religion as a "common context" for a range of Victorian meanings, feelings, beliefs, and experiences. This did not mean that religion disappeared as a significant factor in Victorian views of nature; on the contrary, the tension created by various crises of faith throughout the century meant that religion, albeit weakened and undermined, remained a presence in Victorian understandings of the world around them. The growing criticism of orthodox views did, however, destabilize the established hegemony of natural theology. During the 1850s and 1860s in particular, many Victorians chose to subscribe to a new historical interpretation of Scripture; their decision was not only the result of a growing preference for scientific accounts of natural phenomena.

[22] Among the contributing factors to this disintegration of orthodox Christian belief was revulsion against what a literal interpretation of the Old and New Testaments taught, in part a result of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism preached salvation for those who admitted their sinfulness by means of a severe scrutiny of conscience and accepted the necessity of "good works" for salvation. This piety heightened the awareness of the individual conscience and intensified the drive for personal morality, ironically often producing the "honest doubter" (Heyck: 83-84). Thus, when Morris wrote to inform his mother that he did not intend taking Holy Orders, he still assured her that he agreed that "it was an evil thing to be an idle, objectless man," and stressed that his new career in architecture would be a "useful trade" (1984: 1.24-25). Of course, Morris's reasons for choosing architecture did not wholly stem from a desire to perform "good works." Indeed, evangelicalism's implicit criticism of the harshness of certain Christian teachings probably prepared the way for acquiescence to historical and scientific criticism, and thus to a reconceptualization of nature by Morris and many other Victorians (Heyck: 83).

[23] Victorian religious beliefs were also affected by a historical criticism of scripture arising as much within theological thought as outside it. In 1846, orthodox religion suffered a particularly severe blow when George Eliot's translation of D. F. Strauss's critical *Life of Christ* was published. The publication of this work caused waves of agnosticism and disbelief, reflected in novels and non-fictional works alike (Dean: 120-21). It also had a marked effect on the universities, but when Morris arrived at Oxford in 1853, he allied himself very definitely on the side of faith against faithlessness. Nevertheless, the reaction to historical criticism of the Bible had already sown seeds of doubt and Morris must have been aware of this tension. By the 1880s, most theologians had come to terms with this criticism by affirming that the word of God is in the Bible and by denying that the word of God is the Bible (Chadwick: 2.97-111). In result, nature therefore became open to wider and more subjective forms of spiritual interpretation.

God Without Nature, Nature Without God

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

community, or again in nature.

[25] All of these poets were part of the generation that W. K. Clifford described as a group who had "seen the spring sun shine out of an empty heaven, to light up a soulless earth," and "felt with utter loneliness that the Great Companion is dead" (2.250). Poems by Matthew Arnold, including "Quiet Work," "In Harmony with Nature," and "*In Utrumque Paratus*" (all 1849), indicated this felt absence, and by 1867 he was one of many lamenting the "withdrawing roar" of a once-full "Sea of Faith" (Dean: 123). These feelings did not necessarily lead to outright atheism; as J. Hillis Miller has argued, "[f]or such a man God exists, but is out of reach" (Miller: 207-8). Nevertheless, much verse of this kind represented the disintegration of the "communion" of humanity, God, nature and language, leading the Victorians to produce more problematic images of natural phenomena which thwarted literal biblical interpretation and forced confrontation with religious belief (Landow 1977: 345-54).

[26] Indeed, for many who believed God was "out of reach," the meaning found in nature was often that of vicious disregard. Ruskin, who rejected conventional Christianity in the 1860s, began to doubt that there were natural beauties expressive of transcendent reality and natural law.<9> He became tormented by a sense of the failure of nature: "Of all the things that oppress me, this sense of the evil working of nature herself - my disgust at her barbarity - clumsiness - darkness - bitter mockery of herself - is the most desolating" (1903: 37.30). In 1870, he maintained that "everything that has happened to me . . . is little in comparison to the crushing and depressing effect on me, of what I learn day by day as I work on, of the cruelty and ghastliness of the *Nature* I used to think so Divine" (1903: 37.154).

[27] Perhaps the most characteristic impulse resulting from this tension, however, was a mode of expression in which nature figured more neutrally, a mode that neither clung to the belief that it was the living garment of God, nor stressed its hostility. Tennyson, it has been argued, came to see nature as a "sphinx-like, dangerous, but ultimately . . . mysterious external world," a world that "may yet be a garment of God, but [that] . . . veils as much as it reveals" (Landow 1977: 361). For many who experienced the world in this way, what mattered was no longer Wordsworthian "natural piety," but the humanization of the world and the absence of God. The most obvious manifestation of this humanization was the city, being the place from which God had been banished most completely. In the poetry of James Thomson the city featured as a wasteland of materialistic impiety, "absorbed in dreams of Mammon-gain," with "great throngs" of people "heedless" of religion (Thesing: 134-46). With the rise of predominantly urban modes of living came the disintegration of the idea of the organic "great chain" linking human to human to nature and to God (Miller: 209).

[28] One aspect of this development of "Godless" urban modes of living, and the destruction of old forms of mediation, was the rise of subjectivist philosophies. Victorians were now confronted by the assumption that humanity must start with "the inner experience of the isolated self" (Miller: 210), most famously expressed in Tennyson's record of spiritual conflict, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850). The speaker in this poem not only renounces nature's design as a source of belief in, and means of communication with, a benevolent creator, but also human reason (stanza 124, lines 5-8). Instead, meditation turned inward towards the self becomes the only possible form of religious consolation. Concomitantly, there are no means of allying this "central self" and the modern world of the city. This self, which is also the fount of poetic inspiration, must be carefully shielded from all infringement. Miller has argued that poems such as Tennyson's "The Poet's Mind" and "The Hesperides" represent the "effort of self-seclusion by which the poet can remain in ever-ending possession of the sources of power deep within the self and within nature":

> Passivity and circumscription can then become the guilty self-enclosure in aesthetic beauty of "The Palace of Art" or the desire for complete relaxation and drifting of "The Lotus-Eaters." . . . Stagnant self-enclosure can generate that state of being so poignantly expressed in "Mariana" and in the fiftieth section of *In Memoriam* - a mere passive waiting for the return of the divine spirit, a waiting without hope, in utter desolation and dryness of soul (221-24).

[29] Miller's argument could well be applied to Morris's early poetry, and this argument is developed below. But it is worth noting here that at the center of Morris's poetry appear characters that Miller finds in much nineteenth-century literature, characters that are in doubt about their own identity and ask, "How can I find something outside myself which will tell me who I am and give me a place in society and the universe?" (209-10).

[30] This redefinition of the autonomous consciousness was also associated with the appearance of a marked historical sensibility, and with its comprehension of the transitory nature of any life or culture. Miller suggests that the poetry of Browning illustrates this tendency. He argues that Browning started his

poetic career with a romantic sense of the "inexhaustible potentiality of the inner life," but that, having witnessed the failure of romantic Prometheanism, Browning chose to write dramatic monologues that "presuppose a double awareness on the part of the author, an awareness which is the very essence of historicism." Thus, Miller continues, Browning gave us a "gallery of idiosyncratic individuals" in poems such as *The Ring and the Book,* which attempted "[b]y multiplying points of view" to "transcend point of view, and reach at last God's own infinite perspective." Unfortunately, however: "This way of dealing with the absence of God ultimately fails because however many of these fragmentary glimpses of God we add up, we shall be no closer to the whole, or to a face to face confrontation with God" (217-19). What is significant here, however, is that Browning was one of the earliest Victorian poets to come close to comprehending that humanity could avoid nihilism and escape into the self if it rejected dualistic thinking, and accepted that "being and value lie in *this* world" (227). This is the knowledge that Morris eventually wrested from his work in the 1870s.

[31] Nevertheless, because the attitude of historicism accompanied the failure of tradition - the failure of symbolic language, the failure of all the intermediaries between humanity and God - more commonly historicism meant "the anguish of feeling that one is forced to carry on one's life in terms of a mockery of masks and hollow gestures" (Miller: 210). Certainly this is pretty close to both the form and subject of the masques and dream-like states of Morris's earlier poetry. Though imbued with a strident historicism, only later did he apply it to a wider range of belief systems and so, like Browning, discover value in what is immediate, tangible and present on earth, and in the fabric of human history.

[32] Perhaps the most critical result of all these phenomena (though also a key component of them) was, as many have noted, the erosion of a common context. By the 1860s, most theologians concluded that science and religion had to be regarded as addressing different spheres of human experience. This primary act of specialization was illustrated by the famous volume of articles *Essays and Reviews* (1860). All of the essayists believed that while truth may ultimately be one, the truth of revelation is known by moral experience and not by historical or scientific verification.

A New Nature

[33] Alongside those who expressed the difficulties of maintaining belief, however, were many who began to posit a new kind of sacramentalism in response to these processes of secularization. G. B. Tennyson has suggested that Keble's influence re-emerges in the later Victorian period, especially in the work of poets such as Hopkins and Coventry Patmore (390). But if we remember that Keble and his immediate followers were able to temper emotion with reserve in their responses to nature, such was not always the case, or even the intention, of later Victorian nature sacramentalists. Tennyson argues that in the same way as the "sober character of Tractarian worship" was replaced by "the sumptuosities of the Ritualist movement"; so too "Tractarian reserve in the imaginative response to nature" was superseded by "more exuberant expression" in later writers (387-88).

[34] Hopkins' work, for example, often combines intensity of religious feeling with a vivid, ecstatic, almost swooning sense of natural beauty. In *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875-76) he even interprets ostensibly hostile forces as representations of God's grace; "storm flakes" are compared to "scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers" (Lorsch: 15). Coventry Patmore, who was a friend of Hopkins (and became a Catholic in 1864), expressed similar metaphysical intimations in *Rod, Root and Flower* (1895), and both poets were linked with Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite circle, though Hopkins only distantly.<10> Morris, who fell much more under the influence of the sensual Rossetti than the sermonizing Hunt or moralizing Millais, had certainly been influenced by the charged, aesthetic appreciation of sanctity derived from the Oxford movement. It has been argued that Rossetti's poetry and paintings evince a sensuality of the sacred, as well as a dangerous, engulfing, female nature expressed in poems such as "Lilith" and in many of his paintings (Fletcher: 150; Staley: 82). These poems, with their sense of religious awakening and drama, probably go beyond the boundaries of Morris's experience of spirituality. Nevertheless, religion was definitely present as an aesthetic component of the kind of medievalism idealized and idolized by Morris and his group; it was part of the "culture of feeling" considered appropriate for Morris's earliest writing (Boos 1983: 90).

[35] This "culture of feeling" - with sensuality and passion an inherent part of the response to nature and religion - also opened the way to a much more unorthodox, even radical, "re-sacralization" of nature. This phenomenon also owed much to a re-emergence of certain forms of transcendentalism. Henry David Thoreau's *Walden,* originally published in 1854, first appeared in England in 1886. Thoreau's record of his experience of living in a cabin he made by hand was suffused with a pantheistic vision that considered all of nature as God's handiwork. For Thoreau, heavily influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, contact with nature was a way of communication with God, and with oneself. The works of Thoreau, Emerson and Walt Whitman had a considerable influence on much cross-Atlantic feeling about nature and religion in the

latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1885, Morris wrote that he "rejoice[d] in that nature-loving type of man" (1984: 2.453).

[36] The critiques produced by this "type of man" most commonly influenced those already dissatisfied with Christianity and its orthodox forms. In 1874, Edward Carpenter abandoned the Anglican Church because of its "falsity and dislocation" and its identification with the established social order (1918: 52-53, 58). In 1877, and again in 1883, Carpenter visited Whitman, and the spiritual, sensual, and passionately democratic writings of the American transcendentalists greatly influenced his subsequent publications. Carpenter is important here because his religious appropriation of nature (or, perhaps, his natural appropriation of religion) was an inspiration to certain communitarian and socialist groups, especially the "back-to-the-land" movement of the latter half of the century; he also directly affected Morris's conception of what a "good life" might be. His emphasis on the unity of living things and the environment can be seen as a reaction to the feeling of separateness felt and expressed by so many (Carpenter wrote of himself as "an alien, an outcast, a failure, and an object of ridicule"; 1918: 14). Peter Gould has written that this feeling is symptomatic of both the mystical and introspective turn of mind of many late Victorians, and of their striving for "fellowship" (26). This sense of alienation can in turn partly account for the emphasis on "fellowship" in the works of Carpenter and of Morris: "Fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell" (1910: 16.230).

[37] There were many other declarations of the importance of "oneness with the whole," often expressed indirectly by means of reference to Thoreau and Whitman. A generation of spiritualistic "back-to-the-landers," who experienced "immense inner transformation[s]," and "dawnings" of a "world consciousness . . . within . . . [the] soul" (Ellis: 131; Gould: 26) supported Carpenter's prognosis of a unity between mankind, animals, mountains, and constellations not as an "abstract dogma of Science or Theology, but as a living and ever-present fact" (1889: 70). Often these ideas drew directly on the pantheistic stream already established within Christian thought. Christian belief was one of the main forces behind the community movement, and a number of influential communitarians espoused notions of Christian pantheism. They argued that civilization, with its urban squalor and industrial economy was inimical to the exercise of Christianity, and that the establishment of God's kingdom on earth involved bringing life closer to nature (Armytage; Hardy). Various other forms of Christian "nature religion" also considered nature not only as a revelation of God's workings, but as a deity in its own right, capable of imparting strength and confidence. Others went further, claiming that it was to nature that "pilgrims" to the "shrines" of wild flowers made their "vows" rather than to any supernatural force (Gould: 26, 19).

New Religion?

[38] Concurrent with these more generally middle-class tensions and changes in belief was the rejection of the orthodox teachings of the Church by growing numbers of the working classes. Many began to see the Church and its doctrines as an upper-class instrument of social control, incapable of addressing their real needs (Thesing: 112-13). In consequence, many looked to or founded alternative belief systems or institutions to fulfill their needs, which were often of a far more radical, though not necessarily atheistic, nature. Some of these, such as the Chartist Land Plan and the Ruskinian "Guilds," promoted a "back-to-the-land" ethic which, though falling out of favor by the 1850s, re-emerged later in the century to form an important strand of British socialist experience. To understand the tone of much British socialism in the second half of the century, it is necessary to acknowledge that the substitution of a "grand alternative" for a Christian God resulted largely from dissatisfaction with orthodox Christianity and its institutional forms.

[39] Many of the new or reconstituted belief systems had an important influence on Morris's ideas about the politics of nature. Most dramatically, Morris crossed the "river of fire" to the new "religion of socialism." At the time Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation (S.D.F.) in 1883, an eclectic range of "New Lifers," including Henry Salt and James Joynes, lent a decidedly esoteric or theosophical tinge to socialist endeavors (MacCarthy: 473). Moreover, as Stephen Yeo has indicated, many aspects of British socialism in the late nineteenth century were pervaded by a language and style of religiosity (5-56). Yeo's thesis reveals much about how Morris understood nature: like the more orthodox forms of religious worship of the earlier part of the century, the "religion of socialism" also adopted nature as a key term.

[40] Many have noted that Morris was "prepared" for socialism by various socio-ethical doctrines he encountered at Oxford. Of particular importance are the ideas of the early-Anglican "Christian Socialist" thinkers, Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice. Reflecting on his early life in 1883, Morris wrote that he was "a good deal influenced by the works of Charles Kingsley," and had "got into my head therefrom some socio-political ideas which would have developed probably but for the attractions of art and poetry" (1984: 2.228). Kingsley's works were "welcomed gladly" by Morris's Oxford set (Burne-Jones: 1.118), works which included *Yeast: A Problem* (1848), the tale of a young graduate who becomes

motivated to confront social injustice after encountering rural poverty.

[41] No doubt part of the appeal of *Yeast,* for Morris at least, was its description of a landscape of "everlasting hills . . . as they had grown and grown for countless ages . . . in the milky youth of this great English land" (21). But the novel's romantic description of nature is very much the kind that looks at and beyond nature, that sees a "mountain of Gothic spires and pinnacles" in a yew tree's "luscious fretwork of green velvet," and finds "every leaf infinite and transcendental" (20). *Yeast* primarily addressed Kinsley's concern that the "mass" were "losing most fearfully and rapidly the living spirit of Christianity," and signaled his opposition to "these Pantheist days" when "authors talk as if Christians were cabbages, and a man's soul as well as his lungs might be saved by sea-breezes and sunshine, or his character developed by wearing guano in his shoes, and training himself against a south wall" (4, 10). Nevertheless, it has been argued that it was Kinsley's feeling for nature and his ability to describe it that gave him his most effective means of impugning the "condition of England" (Beer: 247-54). The epilogue to *Yeast* provides a striking example of the way Kingsley combined the perception of social and natural corruption:

> Do not young men think, speak, act, just now, in this very incoherent, fragmentary way . . . with the various stereotyped systems which they have received by tradition breaking up under them like ice in a thaw; with a thousand facts and notions which they know not how to classify, pouring in on them like a flood? - a very Yeasty state of mind altogether, like a mountain burn in a spring rain, carrying down with it stones, sticks, peat-water, addled grouse-eggs and drowned kingfishers, fertilising salts and vegetable poisons - not alas! without a large crust, here and there, of sheer froth (342-43).

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

> To her fair works did Nature link
> The human soul that through me ran;
> And much it grieved my heart to think,
> What man had made of man (lines 5-9).

MacCarthy, who argues that Morris appreciated Kinsley's potent mix of "iconoclasm," "courage," and "concern with the right use of one's talents and resources," also makes the incisive comment that Kingsley was probably one of the first writers to make Morris conscious of the "country as it actually was" (64-65). Thus Morris could find in Kingsley a moral, socialistic conscience that spoke out against those who, while valuing the natural beauty of the countryside, ignored the condition of the people who lived there.

[42] There are other connections between Morris and Christian socialism. Most significantly, Morris wrote a number of letters to various clergymen in the 1880s, many shortly after his "conversion" to socialism. Of these, the letters to C.E. Maurice, the son of the Christian Socialist leader, are perhaps the most important of all, though Morris also wrote at length to the Rev. George Bainton, and shorter letters to the Rev. Oswald Birchall, the Rev. William Sharman and Stopford Brooke (1984: 2.199-204, 763-71, 776-78). A letter to Bainton in 1888 gives a particularly clear outline of Morris's understanding of Christianity and of what religion had come to mean to him as a socialist:

> When I use the word Christianity I do not mean some abstract idea, any more than a set of dogmatic assertions, but an historical phase through which the world of civilization has passed, or, if you will, is passing: I am quite willing to make all allowances for the clinging to tradition which such a great movement must necessarily leave behind it even when its chief function has come to an end: but I see nothing eternal in its differentia, any more than I do in Judaism Zoroastrianism or Ancestor worship, although I admit that it may and probably has embraced higher principles of action than they have. Religion to me means a habit of responsibility to something outside myself, but that something does not always clothe the claim to my responsibility in the same form: if I had lived in former times, I mean, I should have felt the responsibility, but the rules of conduct would not necessarily have been the same; or perhaps not to engage in a logomachy I should not have expressed them in the same way (1984: 2.777).

Furthermore, in an article written for *Commonweal* in 1890, Morris responded to other Christian socialists by granting that "all religions which include a system of morality . . . [have] something in common with socialism." He continued by asserting "that morality must not be founded on explanations of natural facts or a theory of life in which people have ceased to believe" (1994: 467). Nevertheless, Norman Kelvin has

convincingly argued that despite Morris's professed agnosticism, "his earnest searching and explication when writing to clergymen suggesting sympathies perhaps not recognized by him established a link between him and them." Kelvin goes on to suggest that these letters provided Morris with an opportunity to formulate the definition of political action through "external dialogue," and to engage in an "internal" debate with himself: in other words to examine his conscience (Morris 1984: 2.xx-xxi). It is still striking, however, that he chose to write to clergymen.

[43] Christian Socialism was, as Yeo elaborated, a broad term covering an eclectic range of beliefs (18). Many of those with whom Morris had contact, however, were Unitarians, such as the Rev. William Sharman and Joseph Edwards.<11> Unitarians, as represented in London by the popular preacher Moncore Conway (also a member of Emerson's Transcendental Club), stood for a liberal and "rational" approach to Christianity. They rejected the "immoral dogmas" of eternal punishment, inherited guilt and vicarious atonement, and opposed the "irrational" concept of the Trinity. This emphasis on the unity of God also allowed access to a belief in a single spiritual deity existing within nature, rather than a transcendent God standing outside nature. Such immanentism remained rare amongst orthodox Unitarians until the close of the century, but Morris's connections were rarely orthodox, and when he lectured at Rev. Sharman's Unitarian Chapel in Preston in 1884, many would have deeply empathized with Morris's definition of art as "beauty produced by . . . the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth with all its surroundings" (1969: 94).

[44] Morris's acquaintance with socialistic clergymen does not, on its own merit, justify an emphasis on the religious dimensions of Morris's socialism. If these were the only links between Morris and religious thought or feeling at this time, one would be wary of elevating these tendencies over the many disparaging comments he made concerning religious orthodoxy and authority.<12> It is necessary to set such comments against the more subtle kinds of influences discussed by Yeo in his analysis of the sympathies and similarities between Christians and socialists. Yeo has indicated that the term "religion of socialism" is a phrase first used in the 1885 "Manifesto of the Socialist League," co-authored by Morris and Bax (5-6). The "Manifesto" appeared in the first edition of *Commonweal* and exhorted its readers to:

> strive . . . towards this end of realising the change towards social order, the only cause worthy the attention of the workers of all that are proffered to them: let us work in that cause patiently, yet hopefully, and not shrink from making sacrifices to it. Industry in learning its principles, industry in teaching them, are most necessary to our progress; but to these we must add, if we wish to avoid speedy failure, frankness and fraternal trust in each other, and single-hearted devotion to the religion of Socialism, the only religion which the Socialist League professes (1996: 8).

This extract is just one example among many of the language and style of religiosity that surrounded the entire socialist experience. Words such as "evangelist," "apostle," "disciple," "new birth," "preaching" and "gospel" were used frequently. As Yeo points out, the "anti-religious" Morris spoke of "the regeneration of the conscience of man" as much as the "religious" Hardie spoke of "regenerating the character of the democracy" (17).

[45] Yeo also identifies other elements that indicate religious "structures of feeling" and experience in much of the socialism of the late nineteenth century (19 ff). Many of these elements are relevant to Morris's experience of socialism. The first element that Yeo outlines as "an active dynamo" is "the experience of the irrationality of the world," also singled out by Max Weber as the problematic defining and promoting religion (138-50). For Morris, as for many others, socialism provided a coherent structure of meaning and belief once fulfilled by the "religion no longer believed in." Boos has shown how *The Earthly Paradise,* by asking "deep normative questions" in "a world subject to physical decay and devoid of grounds for religious faith," eventually reveals human community as the only source of hope or grounds for faith (1991: 21). For Morris, as for many others, however, it was also a response to an irrationality experienced as life's disparate allotment of cultural and material goods (Yeo: 19). In 1881, Morris told his audience at the Burslem Town Hall that he was only too aware that it was

> my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings (1936: 1.171).

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

> In looking into matters social and political I have but one rule, that in thinking of the condition of any body of men I should ask myself, "How could you bear it yourself? What would you feel if

you were poor against the system under which you live?" I have always been uneasy when I had to ask myself that question, and of late years I have had to ask it so often, that I have seldom had it out of my mind: and the answer to it has more and more made me ashamed of my own position, and more and more made me feel that if I had not been born rich or well-to-do I should have found my position *un*endurable, and should have been a mere rebel against what would have seemed to me a system of robbery and injustice. Nothing can argue me out of this feeling which I say plainly is a matter of religion to me: the contrast of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor (1984: 2.202).

By now Morris understood that "*man makes religion,* religion does not make man," that Christianity was the "logic" and "moral sanction" of a world which produced "robbery and injustice," and that "the critique of heaven" should become "the critique of earth" (Marx 1983a: 115-16).

[46] This is not to argue that Morris acted as though the development of socialism and communism involved a complete "rupture with traditional ideas." Clearly, *belief* in communism or revolution did not "abolish all religion" (Marx 1983b: 226). Yeo suggests that many socialists of this era believed a "hidden hand" to be at work (32): history was inevitably guiding the world towards revolution and communism (thus echoing in many ways some of the ideological inconsistencies implicit in Marx). Morris was particularly impressed by the historical analysis outlined in *Capital* and embraced the notion of the immanent collapse of the economy under the weight of its own contradictions. In *News from Nowhere,* the sage figure Hammond explains that the revolution came about because it was "all a matter of course, like the rising and setting of the sun." Morris spoke of socialism as a "religion of humanity" as being reserved for "this age of the world" (1910: 16.104-29, 132-33).

[47] Another element mentioned by Yeo is an intensity or absolutism about commitment that was expressed as doctrine rather than prudential tactical discussion. Morris's unwillingness to compromise, and impatience with those who advocated parliamentary socialism, led to his increasing isolation towards the end of the 1880s and into the 1890s. Even in the early 1880s he had argued that the S.D.F. should hold itself "aloof from every movement which has not the furtherance of socialism as its direct aim," and warned those who invited him to speak publicly that, "I am . . . bound as by religious conviction to preach that [socialist] doctrine whenever I open my mouth in public" (1984: 2.214). The *Workman's Times* of February 20, 1892, described a reading and review of *News from Nowhere* where "a religious feeling seemed to pervade the hall" with a "silence . . . so still and death-like that it shows a wonderful power in the book" (Yeo: 32). In 1883 Morris wrote that "the aim of Socialists should be the founding of a religion, towards which end compromise is no use, and we only want to have those with us who will be with us to the end," although he did add that "if the zealots don't take care they will blow the whole thing to the winds" (1984: 2.219).

[48] The particular place of nature in relation to this "religion of socialism" is not the subject here. As one might expect, however, nature - understood as the land, countryside, agrarian communality, and properties of plants - and all those meanings attributed to the natural world in the Judeo-Christian system, figure strongly in the socialist movement as inspiration, sacrament, source of meaning, and salvation. Morris's colleague in the Socialist League, Edward Aveling, wrote that whereas previously people had bowed before "vague and unreal dreams," now they would worship the visible wonders of the world (Gould: 18). In fact, these "wonders" had previously represented those vague dreams: socialists were often little different from Christians in finding, reading, and deriving wonder in the world around them.

An Earthly Paradise

[49] Allen has advanced one general conclusion that can be drawn from this survey of the influence of religion on the Victorian experience of nature:

> Thus those transcendental moments of ecstasy which earlier romantics had seen as the workings of the life-force were now reinterpreted in orthodox theistic terms. Nature's charm was still acknowledged and valued for the benefits it brought to the human mind; but the inspiration received was no longer envisaged as sensuous and neutral, but as spiritual and prescriptive. . . . Just as they acquired the taste for Gothic and redirected it from old and crumbling ruins to rising modern edifices, so the Victorians retained the Rousseauist view of nature and translated it into an earnest religiosity (74).

For Morris, however, "nature's charm" was far more complex. It was sometimes sensuous, sometimes prescriptive, but by no means based on orthodox beliefs. This becomes obvious by the time he had embraced the "religion of socialism," but perhaps the clearest indication of what this meant is provided by

the epic poem *The Earthly Paradise,* published in four volumes between 1868 and 1870. Written as he began to shed the overt religiosity of his youth and the "maundering medievalism" of his early adulthood, it reveals precisely what happened to the Christian poet.

[50] Comprising some 1250 pages of rhymed verse, *The Earthly Paradise* is an immense narrative mythology loosely constructed around the storytelling of a group of "Wanderers" who spent their lives searching for paradise. It relates the tales they tell when they arrive in "some Western land," each of which draw on Morris's extensive reading of eastern and western mythology, and describes a variety of different landscapes. Yet, as many have noted, although *The Earthly Paradise* is a huge and complexly constructed work, its representation of these landscapes and of nature in particular is often languid and monotonous. While passages of *The Earthly Paradise* promise hope in natural birth and growth, in the series of small recommencements, renewals, and resurrections that form part of earthly life (instead of the more Christian and conventional optimism expressed in the work of Tennyson, Browning, and Hopkins, or of the alienated grief of Arnold),<13> the "unearthly" appeal of Morris's poetry not only established him as a poet of "perfect repose" among middle-class Victorians, but marked him as a purveyor of escapism through art (Faulkner: 114). Present also is an impulse to "re-harmonize" the world: to re-animate nature with the visions and mysteries of myth and folklore. In some respects, this attempt to organize parts into an organic whole marks Morris as part of the romantic "bridging" effort outlined by Miller: as an "isolated individual [who], through poetry, can . . . create through his own efforts a marvelous harmony of words which will reintegrate man, nature and God" (211-12).

[51] Perhaps this was what Morris intended when he set out to write this work. But by the late 1860s, many Victorians had begun to find "fantastic" constructions of nature less easy to accept. As Miller argued, many Victorians no longer possessed Wordsworth's "sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" (211-12). And this eventually underlines Morris's effort; he fails to construct a convincing "bridge" between "man," God and nature, and *The Earthly Paradise* finally represents just that: the *earthly* realm.

[52] One of the reasons we are brought closer to earth by Morris is an intermittent tension, aptly described by Thompson as the "undertow of death" (131). This "undertow" is most frequently encountered as fear, though it appears in the poetry in more ways than one. In the prefatory "Apology," for example, the narrator warns readers that the "isle of bliss" he attempts to create through writing the poem cannot make "quick-coming death a little thing," that "sweet days die," and that his "isle of bliss" will be "shadowy" and "[m]idmost the beating of the steely sea." Moreover the reader is also reminded that though the poet can "sing" of spring, summer and autumn, the "drear wind" of December still blows outside: the days of "earth's cold leaden sleep" are the ultimate reality (1910: 3.1-2; 5.1). In the "Prologue," the Wanderers leave their plague-ravaged homeland in search of a land of immortality, of "gardens ever blossoming . . . where none grew old" (3.7), but death also lurks within the monthly verses that link the tales they tell. March is welcomed as the "first redresser of the winter's wrong," but we are reminded that it is "Death himself" who "begetteth the storm of bliss" (3.82). Even in "August," signs of approaching decline are signaled in the verse. With the "fulfillment of the year's desire" comes "heavy-headed" wheat "dreading its decay" (4.188), and even in the tales told "of names remembered, / Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead," the reader is often on the verge of "waking from delight / Unto the real day void and white (4.95); the tales often seem "Like to the middle of some pleasant dream, / Which, waked from, leaves upon the troubled mind / A sense of something ill that lurked behind" (5.19). More often than not, this "something ill" is death.

[53] Why was death written so closely beneath certain lines of *The Earthly Paradise*? A good deal of the answer to this question lies in what was being written about nature, and about humanity's place within it at this time. The poem was published between 1868 and 1870. These were the years that saw a barrage of attacks on religion and the promotion and defense of evolutionary theory. In 1869, Huxley coined the word "agnostic" at a meeting of the newly founded Metaphysical Society. This year also saw the founding of the weekly scientific journal, Nature, which contributed to "the demise of the truth-complex" and the often very public disillusionment of leading intellectual figures. Shortly after in 1871, came the publication of Darwin's *Descent of Man,* the abolition of religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge, Huxley's suggestion that one could be either a clergyman or a scientist but not both, and Rossetti's contemplation of the "mummy of a buried faith" at the British Museum (Dean: 126). All these events are indicative of the ideas fermenting as *The Earthly Paradise* was being written and published.

[54] Most significantly, the writing and publication of *The Earthly Paradise* coincided with the years in which Huxley most vociferously defended the theory of evolution. In November, 1868, Huxley gave a lecture in Edinburgh titled, "On the Physical Basis of Life," that was subsequently published in the *Fortnightly Review.* This article provoked a storm of criticism in the *Contemporary Review,* and over the next four or five years, Huxley was forced to defend his thesis, waging a strenuous battle in the periodical

press. While there is no evidence to suggest that Morris read this work or attended Huxley's lectures, it is Huxley that Morris focused upon as the paradigmatic "man of science" at a time when Morris underwent a crisis of faith and a fundamental re-evaluation of the processes of history and of the human relationship to "external nature." In retrospect, Morris reflected that this was the period of his life when he became aware of the "eyeless vulgarity" and "sordid, aimless, ugly confusion" of the Victorian world: that he was living in "a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap," with "the pleasure of the eyes . . . gone from the world, and the place of Homer . . . taken by Huxley" (1910: 23.279).

[55] Perhaps Morris was most concerned by Huxley's posing of one of the most serious, pressing, and profound "question of questions" for the Victorians in *Man's Place in Nature* (1863). Huxley pondered

> the ascertainment of the place which Man occupies in nature and of his relations to the universe of things. Whence our race has come; what are the limits of our power over nature, and of nature's power over us; to what goal are we tending; are the problems which present themselves anew and with undiminished interest to every man born into the world (52).

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

> has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusions, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry (1-3).

In some respects, *The Earthly Paradise* was the defense of poetry and, by extension, of a transcendental view of nature and the world. Thus, at this time Morris is still able to tell Swinburne that he is aware of his status as a Christian poet; even so, he admits to his friend that "I must risk that position . . . by impugning the statement of holy writ, "Blessed are those that seek, for they shall find," at least in my case" (1984: 1.101). Though written in response to a jest by Swinburne, Morris was certainly aware of those who praised "his Christian viewpoint" and that he led his readers "with all good faith into a delightful no-man's land, where nothing is improbable, where nature exists but has left her laws behind her" (1984: 1.101; Faulkner: 105).

[56] For *The Earthly Paradise* also indicates that, for Morris, secular, evolutionary nature was threatening and "accurst." For Morris, as for many others, this nature also diminished human life, since humanity could no longer consider itself distinct. Even more disturbing were the questions asked by poets such as Tennyson, who felt compelled to consider, albeit briefly, whether humanity as a whole, not just the individual, was destined for extinction. In his early work, much admired by Morris, Tennyson detailed his struggles with Lyellian geology and asked whether it was still possible to believe in Providence when God and nature appeared "at strife." In *In Memoriam, A.H.H.,* Tennyson famously admitted he now "falter[ed] where I firmly trod": "I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope, / And gather dust and chaff, and call / To what I feel is Lord of all, / And faintly trust the larger hope (stanza 56, lines 1-4).

[57] R. W. Dixon, a close friend of Morris while at Oxford, recalled how Morris understood Tennyson "as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them" (Mackail: 1.46). Tennyson's "stretch[ed] lame hands" prefigure a similar gesture in *The Earthly Paradise* of "outstretched [but perhaps significantly] feverish" ones. *The Earthly Paradise* was in effect Morris's *In Memoriam:* a remembrance of life in the presence of death. It sought to black out despair by the recreation of worlds in which "man" still had a special place in nature.

[58] Yet while *The Earthly Paradise* maintains the "faith" that staying close to nature made one a better human being, the lines for *The Earthly Paradise* song "November" clearly illustrate the move from faith to nature was not enough:

> Look out upon the real world, where the moon,
> Half-way "twixt root and crown of these high trees,
> Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon,

> Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze
> Died at sunset, and no images,
> No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth -
> Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?
> Yea, I have looked, and seen November there;
> The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
> Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
> Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,
> Strange image of the dread eternity,
> In whose void patience how can these have part,
> These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?<14>

This is one of the most powerful pieces in *The Earthly Paradise,* in which we break away from the slack and languorous poetry of the stories that are soothingly but also tediously unreal. It indicates that knowledge of the world and of all living things has been tainted by the "void patience" of a "Dread eternity." As Boos has noted, in this passage "nature's unity and constancy frighten; its starkness undercuts thought of human demands and yearnings. Vastness and permanence are not beautiful but "sublime . . . impervious to human finitude and death" (1991: 138). This is ultimately the poetry of retreat, in which the overall impression gained is that Morris feels

> better is it resting in a dream
> Yea, e'en a dull dream, than with outstretched hand,
> And wild eyes, face to face with life to stand,
> No more the master now of anything,
> Through striving of all things to be the king -
> Than waking in a hard taskmaster's grasp
> Because we strove the unsullied joy to clasp -
> Than just to find our hearts the world, as we
> Still thought we were and ever longed to be,
> To find nought real except ourselves, and find
> All care for all things scattered to the wind . . . (1910: 5.205).

[59] Morris's experience of the absence of God at this stage is probably best described in terms suggested by Miller: not a state of blank atheism, but "living without God in the world" (210). As suggested above, the mythological tales can be read as attempts to write mystery and wonder back into nature, but the frame of the work, and some of the stories, seems to reflect more the splitting apart of this communion, to acknowledge that God is no longer immanent in nature. The fact that Morris began the poem in the city, for example, points to his acknowledgement of "the humanisation of the world." As Miller states "[l]ife in the city is the way in which many men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world" (210); and at the start of *The Earthly Paradise* it is this environment that Morris asks his readers to forget.

[60] Morris's biographer Mackail noted how *The Earthly Paradise* finished by outlining "his deepest thought on the mystery of things" (1.210). The last lines quoted by Mackail and some of the last of the poem illustrate this:

> Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
> Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere,
> Though still the less we know of its intent;
> The Earth and Heaven though countless year on year,
> Slow changing, were to us but curtains fair,
> Hung round about a little room, where play,
> Weeping and laughter of man's empty day (1910: 5.333).

Nature has become a curtain, but human life is still "little." Moreover, the final reiteration of the phrase "empty day" seems to echo feelings of emptiness expressed after the completion of *The Earthly Paradise.* Morris confessed to his wife that he was "dull now my book is done," and that "one doesn't know sometimes how much service a thing has done till it is gone." *The Earthly Paradise* had not helped Morris to decide on a future course of action. He merely hoped "something else of importance will turn up soon" (1984: 1.127).

[61] Living at the center of the world's largest "counting-house," Morris would wait another decade before finding "something else of importance" to galvanize his faith. He had tried, by writing *The Earthly Paradise,* to reinstate Homer, to defy the rationalism that had made the world empty. While apologizing

for being the "idle singer of an empty day," and noting that a vast, impersonal nature lurked behind the "curtain," Morris also "sang" of the "green leaf" and the "sere," and thus indulged his readers lasting love of nature. There were warnings, and the sense of unease was present, but most of the flowers of Morris's *Earthly Paradise* brought back "fragrance of old days and deeds . . . to folk weary" (5.333). Not until the 1880s would Morris deliver different "news from nowhere," with new emphasis on the "green leaf" but still built on the foundations of "a religion no longer believed in." Thus, while a religious frame of reference does not appear immediately relevant to Morris in this later period, to overemphasize the irreligious or "pagan" Morris would be to falsely characterize him, and would require a misleading denial of the influence of Morris's evangelical upbringing, Anglo-Catholic schooling, Tractarian university education, as well as the creative tension generated by his battle to maintain faith. His one-time consciousness as a Christian poet should not be explained away by the confines of a Victorian upper-middle-class education, but should be used to help explain why Morris sometimes looked for "truths" immanent in the natural world, as well as why he "converted" to, or perhaps created, a kind of socialism that allowed human relationships with nature beyond the bounds of industry, beyond the nexus of work, and why he struggled to maintain nature as a "resource of hope."

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