
*Inhaling All the Forces of Nature ~
William Morris's Socialist Biophilia¹*

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“The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!”² These words from the utopian tale *News from Nowhere* (1890) by William Morris – Pre-Raphaelite poet, writer of fantasy novels, leading member of the Arts and Crafts movement, designer of wall-papers, fabrics, and typefaces, founder of the Kelmscott Press, and political radical – suggest the author’s passionate concern with the natural world. This concern is apparent in Morris’s designs, which over and over incorporate the organic patterns of leaves and flowers. The enduring appeal of this work was reflected in a major exhibition in 1996, the centenary of Morris’s death, at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London³, following by three years a major exhibition of work by Morris and his circle, from Canadian collections, at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto⁴.

Despite the appeal of his art, Morris has received little attention from the environmental movement or from philosophers interested in

¹ This essay was published in *The Trumpeter* 14 (1997): 207–09.

² William Morris, *Three Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), p. 392.

³ See the comprehensive accompanying volume by the curator: Linda Parry (ed.), *William Morris* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

⁴ See Katharine A. Lochnan, Douglas E. Schoenherr, and Carole Silver (eds.), *The Earthly Paradise: Arts and Crafts by William Morris and His Circle from Canadian Collections* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and Key Porter Books, 1993).

environmental ethics. This is unfortunate, since in his writings and lectures Morris sought to describe the connections among capitalism, daily work, and environmental degradation. His key insight was that the project of improving human life through conquering nature is incoherent because human well-being cannot be divorced from the well-being of the natural environment. Appreciating what he called “the natural fairness of the earth” is a vital need, one that can be fully satisfied only with the dismantling of industrial civilization.

Morris called himself a communist. He wrote articles and co-authored a volume (*Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*) sympathetically expounding, and elaborating on, Marx’s ideas.⁵ In the 1880s he was a political colleague of Eleanor Marx, Karl’s daughter, in the Social Democratic Federation and then in the Socialist League. Yet Morris was an anomaly among socialists, his commitment to radical social change growing out of a visceral and uncompromising opposition to the values of the industrial age. His unorthodox understanding of the relation of humankind to nature can be appreciated by contrasting it with the ecological perspective of Frederick Engels, Marx’s colleague. Morris and Engels knew each other, though Engels, unimpressed with Morris’s grasp of political issues, called him a “sentimental socialist”. If both men were Marxists (something Marx claimed he himself was not), they were Marxists of very different stripes. Morris was even more radical than Marx and Engels; unlike those two in their later years, he rejected the possibility of the working class attaining power through peaceful parliamentary means. (A memorable line in *News from Nowhere* informs us that in post-revolution Britain the Houses of Parliament are preserved as a storage place for manure.) More than this, he rejected not just capitalism, but industrial society in any form.

Although the seeds of an ecological understanding of the human condition are centrally present in Marx, they never really see the light of day in his writings on history and society. The subject of Marx’s view of history is the human being with “feet firmly on the solid ground ...

⁵ Morris's relation to Marx's ideas is detailed in E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

exhaling and inhaling all the forces of nature....”⁶ Marx describes how ideology is shaped by the modes in which societies utilize and transform their natural environments. But non-human nature, except as it is in the process of being transformed by humanity, hardly engages his attention. He says little about the ways in which particular material environments limit and channel social change, or about the often destructive effects of human activity on nature. Marx’s general theory of history does not allot a central role to matter, whether in the form of geography, natural resources, climate, or human biology. Indeed, it can be argued that Marxism has not been nearly materialist enough, in that it has recognized neither the significant constraints imposed on human agency by ecology and biology, nor the human need for a flourishing natural environment.⁷

The ecological implications of Marx’s perspective were articulated, in very different ways, by Engels and by Morris. What unites the two is their emphasis on the link between the social hierarchy and competitiveness of capitalism and the harmful interaction of capitalist society with the natural environment. Engels sees this harm in terms of self-defeating attempts to control and shape the environment on the basis of inadequate scientific knowledge and private economic gain. Better (that is, dialectical/ecological) science and socialized economic planning can correct things, thus permitting the fullest possible exploitation of the natural world.

In his writings Engels displays a keen awareness of what Jean-Paul Sartre called the “counter-finality” often involved in human projects, where short-term successes on the part of individuals rationally pursuing their personal goals lead to negative collective results. For example, citing the textile-industry districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, Engels notes that, in order to escape from the polluted water supply of the factory town, capitalists strive to transfer their industrial enterprises to the countryside – thus bringing into being new towns with the same

⁶ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 134.

⁷ That Marxist thinking is awakening to the need for an ecological perspective is evident in, for example, Ted Benton (ed.), *The Greening of Marxism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996).

problem. Only the abolition of the capitalist character of modern industry, he says, can put an end to this vicious circle by allowing the breakup of large towns, and the dispersal of industry over the countryside in a manner best adapted to its own development. Further, “Only the fusion of town and country can eliminate the present poisoning of air, water and land, only such fusion will change the situation of the masses now languishing in the towns, and enable their excrement to be used for the production of plants instead of for the production of disease.”⁸

The bursting of the bonds imposed by capitalism, then, is the solution to the problem of pollution and at the same time “is the one precondition for an unbroken, constantly accelerated development of the productive forces, and therewith for a practically unlimited increase of production itself.”⁹ In terms of Marx’s image, Engels shows us humanity *exhaling* the natural forces it has assimilated, so that with these appropriated and remoulded forces it impresses itself upon its surroundings. His perspective appears surprisingly relevant to an understanding of the environmental crisis of capitalism, yet contributes little to moving beyond it.

By contrast, Morris rejects the whole productionist mentality. The proper task ahead of us is the remaking of society, not in order to increase productivity but to allow us to exercise our faculties in communion with nature. For Morris, it is not primarily a matter of humanity’s impressing its mark on nature, but of being impressed by nature: of humanity’s *inhaling* all the forces of nature in order to feel its unity with nature. His ideal communist society is not only decentralized, but de-industrialized. “It is a society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, to forgo some of the power over nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical, and willing to sacrifice something to this end.”¹⁰

⁸ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p. 385.

⁹ Marx and Engels, *Selected Works in One Volume* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p. 425.

¹⁰ A. L. Morton (ed.), *Political Writings of William Morris* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), p. 201.

Like Marx, Morris looks forward to an end to the detailed division of labour (the breaking-up of a given production process into a multitude of simple operations carried out by different workers, each of whom has little knowledge of, or control over, the complete process). The guest in Morris's future utopia is told by his hosts that "we pass our lives in reasonable strife with nature, exercising not one side of ourselves only, but all sides, taking the keenest pleasure in all the life of the world."¹¹ But where Marxist orthodoxy looks to automation and high productivity to free workers from alienation, Morris believes liberation can be realized through a return to small-scale craft production, in a future where hi-tech is a last, not a first, resort.

Like Engels, Morris advocates the abolition of large towns and the dispersal of the population more evenly over the countryside. The difference is that in Morris's future this is to accompany the abolition of large-scale industry itself. The natural environment will then be able to recover from the destruction wrought by humanity, and humanity will recover its sense of oneness with the natural environment. The desire to enslave the natural environment technologically, he believes, is closely related to the desire to avoid the mechanical toil of daily work under capitalism, and reveals a profound alienation. "It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make 'nature' their slave, since they thought 'nature' was something outside them."¹²

Morris notes how, under capitalism, technology has done little, if anything, to lighten the burden of work. Useful work, not useless toil, is the proper form of engagement with nature, and artistic creation is the characteristic expression of joy in work. Morris's view is that "everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her...."¹³ In this regard he has little good to say about modern civilization, which has impoverished the human spirit (and often the human body) in the midst of its material riches:

¹¹ Morris, *Three Works*, p. 239.

¹² Morris, *Three Works*, p. 367.

¹³ Morton (ed.), *Political Writings of William Morris*, p. 33.

Shall I tell you what luxury has done for you in modern Europe? It has covered the merry green fields with the hovels of slaves, and blighted the flowers and trees with poisonous gases, and turned the rivers into sewers; till over many parts of Britain the common people have forgotten what a field or a flower is like, and their idea of beauty is a gas-poisoned gin-palace or a tawdry theatre.¹⁴

Three things are necessary, says Morris, for a decent life. First, there is “honourable and fitting work”, work that is both worth doing in social terms and pleasant to do; second, there is what he calls “decency of surroundings”; and third, there is “leisure”, that is, ample time after work for rest of the mind and body. Under “decency of surroundings” Morris includes well built and aesthetically pleasing houses, towns that have abundant green spaces within them and that do not sprawl unnecessarily into the countryside, and a general prohibition against degrading air, water, or land with smoke, litter, or other waste.¹⁵ However, this list of requirements fails to convey adequately the emphasis Morris places on the need for feeling at one with the natural environment. In Morris’s utopia the narrator is told that “The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves...”¹⁶ To fail to cherish the beauty of the natural environment, as in the bad old days, is to be self-destructive. “How could people be so cruel to themselves?” is the rhetorical question from Ellen, the travelling companion of Morris’s alter ego in *News from Nowhere*.¹⁷

For Morris there is an ideal merging of the human and the natural. This is evident when Ellen and her guest from the nineteenth century arrive at what must be Morris’s own Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire: “She led me up close to the house, and laid her shapely sun browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, ‘O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it – as this has done!’”¹⁸

¹⁴ Morton (ed.), *Political Writings of William Morris*, p. 193.

¹⁵ Morton (ed.), *Political Writings of William Morris*, pp. 127-128.

¹⁶ Morris, *Three Works*, p. 317.

¹⁷ Morris, *Three Works*, p. 376.

¹⁸ Morris, *Three Works*, p. 391.

The landscape of Britain, and particularly southern England, where he lived, no doubt inclined Morris to think of nature less in terms of primeval wilderness than in terms of a marriage of human settlements with the land that supports them. In *The Earthly Paradise* (1868), before his political awakening, Morris looked back with favour to the kind of harmony he imagined existed between settlements and their environments in pre-industrial times:

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green....¹⁹

In a somewhat similar vein, *News from Nowhere* offers us a picture of post-industrial Britain as a great garden, with the occasional wilderness area. This is not to say that Morris in his later years desired a return to the Middle Ages. In *A Dream of John Ball* (1886), a story of the English peasants' revolt of 1381, he makes clear his opposition to the oppressive social order of that time. And his utopian future includes not only smokeless factories, but also "force vehicles" of advanced technology for moving heavy loads by land or water.

In one of his essays Morris goes so far as to speak of the "murder" of trees. However, it is neither nature apart from human beings that concerns Morris, nor nature as an instrument of human self-creation, but nature as the ground and context of human life. Running as a unifying thread through Morris's writings is the idea that a flourishing natural environment is for humans a vital need – a need rooted in our very nature. This has more recently been articulated as the concept of biophilia, the hypothesis that human beings have a profound emotional affinity for the planet's other living organisms, which constitute the web of life within which *Homo sapiens* has evolved.²⁰ Morris goes further, by

¹⁹ *A Choice of William Morris's Verse*, selected with an introduction by Geoffrey Grigson (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 97.

²⁰ See Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), and Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (eds.), *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington: Island Press, 1993).

calling our attention to the way industrial society has thwarted satisfaction of the vital need for a flourishing natural environment. To prosper, he says, we must work to undo previous destructive human intervention in the environment and must free ourselves from the system of production that furthers this destruction. Morris urges his audience “to set yourselves earnestly to protecting what is left, and recovering what is lost of the Natural Fairness of the Earth: no less I pray you to do what you may to raise up some firm ground amid the great flood of mechanical toil, to make an effort to win human and hopeful work for yourselves and your fellows.”²¹

Whether destructive interference with the natural environment can be halted within a capitalist framework is a question that now confronts us as never before. Beyond this, it must be asked whether industrialism itself is worth pursuing under any social regime. The Soviet Union and its imitators in state socialism rejected capitalism but not industrialism – the project of organizing society in the interest of maximum productivity. They failed in no small measure because ultimately capitalism proved to be the more efficient industrial mode. Indeed, the competitive drive for capital accumulation inherent in the system makes the phrase “post-industrial capitalism” a contradiction in terms.

Human beings have a rational interest in the historical development of their productive powers. Yet it is rational, even on anthropocentric grounds, to circumscribe the ways of employing those powers when the possibility exists of satisfying everyone’s vital needs, and when certain kinds of interference with the natural environment become threats to the quality of life. Recognition of our duty to respect the well-being of non-human life on this planet can only reinforce this message. Morris is adamant that the very project of remaking the environment on a massive scale is destructive of human happiness. And yet, limiting our material production and consumption does not require an end to creative endeavour: even in utopia, he says, science and art are inexhaustible.

The significance of Morris’s contribution to the emerging debate over the viability of industrial society lies in his insistence that the issue of

²¹ William Morris, *On Art and Socialism* (London: John Lehmann, 1947), p. 269.

human modification of the environment transcends economics, and relates ultimately to what is good for us as natural beings. If we are truly natural beings, inhaling as well as exhaling all the forces of nature, then we can flourish only when the rest of the world flourishes.

