Class Consciousness in the Design of William Morris

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So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilization the seeds of a great chance, what others call Social-Revolution, were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery. – William Morris, ‘How I Became a Socialist’, Justice, 16 June 1894.

Introduction: From Shame to Socialism

In the biographies of some eminent Victorians, there is found a measure of shame that is nearly indistinguishable from criticism. Aware from youth that their privilege, behaviour, words and appearance could bring them dishonour, these men and women – and I am thinking especially of the generation discussed in Part one of Raymond Williams’s Culture and Society – scrutinised not just their own actions, but those of others. Their shame was not only individual, it was collective. They became critics, novelists, philosophers and reformers, and generally believed it was ‘the endowed classes’, in George Eliot’s words, not the ‘unendowed multitude’ that were entrusted with the responsibility to end the morally ‘vicious’ social and economic practices of modern England.

William Morris made a more radical judgement than his contemporaries about the path to social transformation. In 1883, he wrote a letter to his friend, the Christian Socialist Charles Edmund Maurice, explaining his motivation in joining the Democratic Federation, a secular Socialist party based on Marxist principles:

In looking into matters social and political I have but one rule, that in thinking of the condition of any body of men, I should ask myself, ‘How could you bear it yourself? What would you feel if you were poor against the system under which you live?’ I have always been uneasy when I had to ask myself that question, and of late years I have had to ask it so often, that I have seldom had it out of my mind; and the answer to it has more and more made me ashamed of my own position, and more and more made me feel that if I had not been born rich or well to do I should have found my position unendurable, and should have been a mere rebel against what would have seemed to me a system of robbery and injustice. Nothing can argue me out of that feeling, which I say plainly is a matter of religion to me: the contrasts of rich and poor are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor. Now it seems to me that feeling this, I am bound to act for the destruction of the system which seems to me mere oppression and obstruction; such a system can only be destroyed by the united discontent of number; isolated acts of a few persons of
the middle and upper classes seeming to me (as I have said before) quite powerless against it.\(^3\)

Morris's letter outlines the development of his thought: from shame at 'my own position', to criticism of 'the condition of the body of men'; and from sympathy for the poor to animosity toward a 'system of robbery and injustice'. It is a change from charitable individualism to revolutionary socialism, from voluntary acts by 'a few persons of the middle and upper classes', (Eliot's 'endowed classes') to the 'united discontent of number'. It is also a passage from what Frederick Engels—with an excess of doctrinal confidence—called 'utopian' to 'scientific' socialism: the one seeks to liberate all of society at once, the other a single class at a time.\(^4\)

As remarkable as Morris's conspicuous embrace of the Socialist faith was also his capacity to synthesize politics and art. The same radical commitment and 'class-consciousness' that motivated his leadership of the Socialist League and the founding of *Commune* also propelled his great design innovations of the later 1870s and early 1880s.\(^5\) During these years, Morris created and marketed two-dimensional designs of unprecedented vitality, dynamism and intellectual sophistication. These textile and wallpaper patterns represent a realm of nature at once more fertile, enveloping and consoling, and more overwrought, confining and oppressive than any the artist had seen in life or studied in his many medieval, Islamic and contemporary design sources. This uniquely dialectical art by a 'pioneer of modern design', was stimulated, I believe, by Morris's observation of heedless modernisation in his native Essex, and shame at his personal participation in the capitalist development of Cornwall.\(^6\) Indeed, it was the very vividness of Morris's early engagement with nature that exacerbated his moral 'unease' and led to a politics and art increasingly radical and incisive. What I offer in this article is a reading of Morris's design work in relation to influences from his youth and in relation to the development of his political consciousness.

**Intimacy with Nature**

William Morris was born in 1834 at Elm House, a large Georgian mansion in Walthamstow parish, in the county of Essex, about ten miles north-east of London, between the River Lea on the west and Epping Forest on the east. In 1840, the Morris family moved from Walthamstow to nearby Woodford and bought Woodford Hall, another modern pile distinguished most of all by its impressive size and open prospect to the north. Young William Morris inhabited these homes like a lord and a ghost—he was master of all he surveyed, but left little imprint on his surroundings. He was solitary, bookish, dreamy, unforgiving of his own failings and prone to night terrors. By age 7, he had read all of Walter Scott and sought to transform himself into a knight errant. He dressed in suits of armour and rode ponies through Epping and Waltham Forests.\(^7\) He visited the local historical sites: a spring at Woodford Wells, once thought to have medicinal properties; Waltham Abbey, supposed to be the burial place of King Harold; and the Fairlop Oak in Hinault Forest, said to be a thousand years old and beneath whose 'eleven vast arms' a popular fair was held on the first Friday of each July.\(^8\)
Fig. 4. *Brother Rabbit.* Printed cotton, 1881–2. Photo: Roman Stansberry.

Fig. 5. *Strawberry Thief.* Printed cotton, 1883. Photo: Roman Stansberry.
He spent many hours alone exploring the local fields and forests, developing an amateur's detailed knowledge of the geology, flora and fauna of the region.

This enjoyment and understanding of plant and creature life was put to good use in later years – it has often been stated – in the printed cottons such as *Brother Rabbit* (1880–81) [Fig. 4] and *Strawberry Thief* [Fig. 5]. These designs are notable most of all for their humour, animation, and fidelity to nature. By careful use of colour and tonal difference, and through the contraposition of diagonals and horizontals, the birds and animals in each design are made to stand out in considerable relief. The finches in *Strawberry Thief*, for example, are brightly silhouetted against a darker field of indigo, blue and green, and seem to be testing or depicting the verisimilitude of the adjacent fruits and vines. The motif recalls the story in Chapter 10 of Pliny’s *Natural History* – well known to Morris from his prized copy of Philemon Holland’s great translation (1601) – concerning Zeuxis’s painting of a boy carrying a basket of grapes: the artist is lavishly praised for having made a work so lifelike that birds rush to consume the fruit, but Zeuxis demurs by saying that if the boy were better painted the birds would have been frightened away. Like Zeuxis, Morris struggled to master the human figure, while achieving renown for the representation of flora. His *Strawberry Thief* design is thus anecdotal and autobiographical, while at the same time possessing the abstract symmetry and simple pattern of repeats that was then deemed essential for effective flat decoration; the subtlety of the effect can only be the product of Morris’s intimacy and facility with both his technique and chosen natural subject.

Morris was no less familiar in his youth with local plants and trees than birds and animals, and they are treated in his art with equal vividness. Late in life Morris boasted to the *Daily Chronicle* that as a boy he knew the Hornbeam Forests of Epping from south to north and east to west: ‘yard by yard from Wanstead to the Theydons, and from Hale End to Fairlop Oak’. He was, in his own words, ‘a lover of sad lowland country . . . and the wide green sea of Essex marshlands’. He often trudged through the swamps of the Thames estuary, studying the river’s channels and currents, and observing the clouds of insects that drifted across the flat, marshy planes and lighted on the surface of the waters. All of these experiences and observations, all this intimacy with the form, colour and animation of nature, informed his later designs and writing. ‘We were walking one day,’ the artist’s daughter May remembered, ‘by our little stream that runs into the Thames, and my father pointed out the detail and variety in the leaf forms, and soon afterwards this paper was done, a keenly observed rendering of our willows that has ennobled many a London living room’. This particular wallpaper, *Willow Bough* (1887), appears to occupy a single plane, unlike many of Morris’s other paper patterns from the 1880s. But it also confounds first impressions by suggesting multiple possible points of view: it represents willow branches against a clear sky, seen either from below or from the sides. In addition, the light comes from several directions. Once again, the achievement of this complex perspective effect demonstrates the accumulation of repeated observations over many years, from childhood to maturity.

Morris examined the movement of water as much as the play of light and shade. The inventor of *Evenlode, Medway, Kennet, Cray, Wandle, Windrush* and *Wey* – chintz patterns named for tributaries of the Thames, and all designed from
1883–84 — understood about tides and eddies, jets and vortices, small whirlpools and sudden inundations. The meandering diagonal in each of these printed cottons seems to describe the main current of a river, and the smaller, branching forms — vines, flowers and leaves — the organic debris carried along by the water’s flow or cast up on the banks. ‘One of the chintz blocks [I am working at this afternoon],’ Morris wrote in 1883 to his daughter May, ‘is such a big one that if it succeeds I shall call it Wandle; the connection may not seem obvious to you as the wet Wandle is not big but small, but you see it will have to be very elaborate and splendid, and so I want to honour our helpful stream’.13 [Fig. 6] The River Wandle supplied the water and turned the wheels at Merton Abbey, where the cotton fabric of Morris and Co. had been woven and printed since 1881. The stream gave the cotton energy and nutrients; it was the very form and substance of
the pattern and so fit to be honoured. The pattern is especially riverine in the
dominant blue colourway, with the thick, flat candycane stalks and over life-sized
flowers appearing to glide with the strong current.

In thus basing a series of textile designs upon rivers of England, Morris was
establishing his position in the great English tradition of naturalist literature
and art extending from Edmund Spenser to John Ruskin. These watery cotton
fabrics specifically recall Canto XI from Spenser’s *The Fairie Queen*. (We can be
certain of Morris’s familiarity with Spenser – apart from his general literacy, the
Kelmscott Press republished *The Shephearde’s Calendar*). In 23 sprightly stanzas
(nos. 24-47), Spenser honoured the tributaries of the Thames through narrative
and personification, describing each of them as draped in fabulous cloths. Morris
must especially have enjoyed the description in stanzas 46-47 of the wedding dress
that adorned Medway:

Then came the bride, the lovely Medua came,
Clad in a vesture of unknown geare . . .
On her two pretty handmaidens did attend,
One called the Theise, the other called the Crane,
Which on her waited things amiss to mend,
And both behind upheld her spredding traine . . .
And her before there paced Pages twaine,
Both clad in colors like and like array,
The Doune and eke the Frith, both which prepared her way.

Morris’s *Medway* design also resembles a parade or procession: the repeating
plant forms consist of large, weld-yellow flower heads trailed by slender stems
attended by broad green and blue leaves and yellow-white daisies. Small white
flowers, fruit clusters and tendrils form a ‘spredding traine’ in the background
[Fig. 7]. Naturalism and narrative are fused in Morris’s mature design.

Indeed, Morris’s narrative poetry and prose, as much as his flat designs, often
seem to have been fed by nature and by his intimacy with the geography of his
childhood. In the early story ‘Lindnern Borg Pool’ his language has the authority
born of direct observation of the Essex marshes:

Fierce as the wind was, it could not raise the leaden waters of that fearful pool,
defended as they were by the steep banks of a dripping yellow clay, striped
horribly here and there with ghastly uncertain green and blue. They said no
man could fathom it; and yet all round the edges of it grew a rank crop of
dreary reeds and segs, some round, some flat, but none ever flowering as other
things flowered, never dying and being renewed, but always the same stiff array
of unbroken reeds and segs, some round, some flat.14

In *The Sundering Flood*, written at the end of his life, Morris’s concern with the
imitation of nature was equally great. He begins the book by describing the great
eponymous river flowing from steep crags southward to a ‘great and rich city’ and
then to the sea. Along part of its route,
the land betters yet, and is well grassed, and in divers nooks and crannies
groweth small wood of birch and whiles of quicken tree; but ever the best of the
grass waxeth nigh unto the lips of the Sundering Flood, where it rises a little
from the Dale to the water; and what little acres land there is, and it is but little,
is up on the knolls that lie nearer to the bent, and be turned somewhat
southward; or on the east side of the Flood (which runneth here nigh due north
to south), on the bent-side itself, where as it windeth and turneth, certain slopes
lie turned to southward.15

Here Morris records – as precisely as his archaic diction will allow – the direction
of the Flood, the grasses on the adjacent lands, the ‘whiles of the quicken tree’,
(_pyrus aucuparia_), and the effect of the waters upon the shape and form of the
river valleys and uplands. The prose is jagged and rocky; it is formed by stops and
starts, jets and eddies, dips and turns of direction, like the very Sundering Flood
itself. Nature was for Morris, as it was for his mentor and friend Ruskin, the
fount of honest design.

The picture of Morris I have been drawing here is the more or less widely
accepted one of an artist whose golden youth, spent amid the unspoiled beauties
of nature, supplied him with models, dreams and visions sufficient to supply a lifetime of poems and wallpaper designs. But the image is incomplete because it overlooks the sparks - as I shall show - that ignited Morris's antipathy to the 'filth of modern civilisation', and understates the disturbing originality of his designs. Indeed, Morris's art is not only based upon nature and mimesis. Even in the early printed cottons such as *Jasmine Trellis* (1868–70), the patterns are at once too flat and regular, and too abstract and dynamic for them to be understood as based upon scientific naturalism of the sort preached by Ruskin and practised by the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Similarly, the language of his prose - both early and late - is too structured, dramatic, and jarring, and too much marked by the repetition of words or sounds, to be based upon the rhythms and syntax of natural or everyday speech.

From the very start then, Morris's designs and writings had not so much a mimetic as a dialectical relationship to nature: they articulated critical distance as well as closeness, an ironic reserve as much as intimacy. But the formal tension grew more acute and compelling with each succeeding decade and design. By the early 1880s, Morris's printed and woven patterns had a dramatic intensity that was unprecedented in nineteenth-century decorative art. They were energetic and even ironic. For example, *Brother Rabbit* graphically restates Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, translated by Holland: 'that every Hare is both male and female, and that . . . Nature hath shewed her bounty and goodnesse, in that she hath given this creature (so good to eat, and so harmlesse otherwise) the gift of fertilitie and fruitfull wombe'. The fecundity represented by Morris's design is humorous, but also a bit frightening, suggesting an uncontrolled surge or flood tide of rabbits.

The basis of this ornamental contradiction between naturalism and nightmare, it seems to me, lay in Morris's growing recognition of the historical antagonism between nature and development. In fact he participated in the conflict as his family owned and operated the most profitable copper mine in the world.

**Destruction of Nature**

Perhaps the most significant fact of young Morris's life is that he was rich. In 1843, the Morris family began to invest heavily in the Devon Great Consol copper mine, located between the Tamar and Lumborn Rivers on the Devon border of Cornwall. The mine complex (or *sett*) was established on agricultural lands belonging to the Duke of Bedford and quickly expanded to cover about 150 acres, not counting the water sources and the miles of new railway line. In 1844, shares in the concern rose in value from £1 to more than £800, making it the world's most profitable copper mine, and the Morris's fortune was made. Four years later a new pit was named Emma, after William's mother, and a few years after that a particularly deep mine shaft was dubbed 'Morris's Engine Shaft' after Thomas Morris, William's uncle and the resident director. William himself received dividends from the concern starting in 1855, and served a term on its board of directors from 1871–75.

Work in the mine was dirty and dangerous: each month 200 tons of coal and 4,000 pounds of gunpowder were consumed. The ends of each horizontal tunnel
were short of air and cave-ins were frequent. Minute arsenic particles – a byproduct of copper smelting – regularly wafted through the air and settled on adjacent lands, animals and humans. (The miners stuck cotton in their noses and ears, and smeared their skin with oil to protect themselves from the poison.) Indeed, the production of arsenic was so prodigious that the company soon established a business selling it, too. Even today, nearly a century after the mines closed, the land and waters of the region are a toxic stew. I have been told by friends from Plymouth that local descendents of the miners remain angry at Devon Great Consols, and insist that it was William Morris, ‘the great Socialist’ who refused to spend company money to install the scrubbers that might have removed the poisons (there appears to be no factual basis for this belief).

In 1861, there were 1,230 people employed in the mine; about half were children, evenly divided between boys and girls. Miners at Devon Great Consols, like miners elsewhere, were poorly paid, fed and housed. They were governed by the ‘month in hand’ rule, which required them to work a full month – actually two in the special case of Devon Great Consols – before receiving any wage at all.

Miners also accumulated huge debts to their employers. In 1849, according to a later parliamentary inquiry, a typical DGC ‘tut-worker’ (the term is derived from the German todt), was credited for his two months of labour the sum of £68, 5s and 9d, and debited for expenses – candles, blasting powder, saws, grinders, etc. – the sum of £63, 18s and 2d, leaving a total of just £4, 7s and 7d for two months work. Many months however, miners received no payment at all because of their high costs, and if they complained they were fired. So the miner who worked for DGC, if he was very lucky, might earn at most £20-25 a year. (In 1855, Morris began to receive his share in the profits. That year, he made £74 without lifting a hammer, or entering an office; in 1857, he made £819.) Copper miners became increasingly militant with the rise of unionisation. They walked off the job at DGC in 1878 and 1879 to protest wages and conditions of labour. They went on strike again a decade later, protesting the elimination of ‘Maze-Monday’, that is, the traditional holiday following payday.

From the beginning, Morris could hardly have been unaware of the brutal nature of mining in general and copper mining in particular. The success of Devon Great Consols was an international phenomenon and the certain basis of his own wealth and ease. He made several allusions to mining in his early poetry and prose, and avidly imbibed Dickens’s *Hard Times* when it first appeared, with its sympathetic account of the life of the miner Stephen Blackpool. Morris’s enormous enthusiasm for John Gerard’s *Herball, or General History of Plants* (1597) may also be an expression of his interest in and concern about the family mining business. Morris came across the great botanical compendium in his father’s library while still a child. In the book’s preface, Gerard offered a stirring apologia: he contrasted the national and personal riches earned from mining to the greater sensual and moral wealth derived from the study of plants and nature:

> Although my pains have not been spent (Courteous reader) in the gracious discovery of golden mines, nor in the tracing after silver veins, whereby my native country might be enriched, with such merchandise as it has most in request and admiration: yet hath my labour, (I trust) been otherwise profitably
employed, in describing such harmless treasure of herbs, trees, and plants, as
the earth frankly without violence offers unto our most necessary uses . . .
nothing can be confected, either delicate for the taste, dainty for smell, pleasant
for sight, wholesome for body, conservative or restorative for health, but it
borroweth the relish of an herb, the flavour of a flower, the colour of a leaf, the
juice of a plant, or the decoction of a root.²²

The *Herball* became Morris’s bible; even in later life, his daughter May writes, he
would pull down the thick tome and read aloud the descriptions of plants in order
to recount ‘their virtues and uses’. May adds, ‘we came to know our Gerard
well’.²³
Morris's early glass and tile designs, including *Daisy* (c. 1862) and *Primrose* (1862–5), and wallpapers such as *Daisy* (1864) and *Fruit–Pomegranate* (c. 1866) possess the directness, frontality, proportion and schematic clarity of illustrations in Gerard's *Herball* but they also draw upon other sources. *Daisy* [Fig. 8] was specifically derived from an illuminated fifteenth-century Froissart manuscript in the British Library (MS 4380, fol. 1) filtered through Gerard.24 [Fig. 9] The pattern was particularly dear to Morris. He employed it in embroideries hung in his rooms at Red Lion Square in 1857, and then in Morris and Co. tiles, wallpapers, and woven curtains; it is also represented in the background of his first – and only – surviving painting, *La Belle Iseult* (London, Tate Britain, 1858). Undoubtedly the 'virtues and uses' of the flower were also well known to Morris: Gerard asserted that a broth derived from the daisy 'asswageth [sic] the cruel torments of the gout', a disease from which the artist long suffered.25

Gerard's discussion of mining in the preface to the *Herball* echoes an account found in another book cited earlier – Holland's translation of Pliny's *Naturall History* – that Morris also read avidly according to his own statements and those of his daughter.26 In the Proemee to the 33rd Book, 'Of Mettals and Minerals', the author warns that it is folly to hollow out the body of the earth, 'our blessed mother', or 'descend into her entrails' in pursuit of gold, silver, copper and brass. The passage must have been especially arresting to Morris given that one of the DGC tunnels was named after his mother. Pliny continues:

> She hath furnished us sufficiently with wholesome drougs and medicinable simples growing above it and fit for our hand without digging deeper for the matter. But the things that she hath hidden and plunged (as it were) into the bottom, those be they that presse us downe, those drive and send us to the devillian hell...How far thinke we, will covetous minded men pierce and enter into the earth? . . . Oh how innocent a life, how happie and blessed, nay how pleasant a life we might lead , if we coveted nothing else but that which is above the ground?27

Young William Morris, a stockholder in the most profitable copper mine in the world, may well have been struck by the phrases of Gerard and Pliny and could have found in them the rudiments of a moral economy opposed to greed and exploitative labour. He would have seen in their texts reason for both personal shame and hope: shame that his own material comfort was based upon the 'tracing of . . . veins' and the grinding work of men, women and children in the 'devillian hell' of Devon Great Consols; and hope that he could choose an alternative way of life that would involve the interrogation and representation of nature, and the cultivation of an 'innocent' and 'pleasant life'.28

Morris's feelings of shame and hope could also have been abetted by at least one other naturalist unmentioned in the biographical and critical literature but regularly cited in his letters: William Cobbett, author of *The American Gardener* (1820), *The Woodlands* (1825) and *Rural Rides* (1830), among other works.29 Cobbett was a radical politician, journalist, pamphleteer and lexicographer as well as a naturalist, who was lionised by republicans and loathed by Tories during his heyday from about 1810 until his death in 1836. His idiosyncratic books and
The Daisie bringeth forth many leaves from a thready root, smooth, fat, long, and round about, very slightly indented about the edges, for the most part lying upon the ground: among which rise up the flowers, every one with his own slender stem, almost like the stem of Camomill, but less, of a perfect white colour, and very double.

The double red Daisie is like unto the precedent in every respect, being in the colour of the flowers: for this plant bringeth forth flowers of a red colour, and the other white as before said.

These double Daisies are of two sorts, that is either smaller or larger, and these again either white or red, or of both mixed together, wherefore I have given you in the first place the figure of the small, and in the second that of the larger.

Furthermore, there is another pretty double Daisie which differs from the first described only in the flower, which at the sides thereof puts forth many seed stalks carrying also little double flowers, being commonly of a red colour, so that each stalk carries as it were an old one and the breed thereof; whence they have fally termed it the childling Daisie.

1. Bellis minor multiplex flore albo rubro. The lesser double red or white Daisie.

2. Bellis media multiplex flore albo rubro. The larger double white or red Daisie.

4. The wilde field Daisie hath many leaves spread upon the ground like those of the garden Daisie; among which rise up tender stems: on the top whereof do grow small single flowers like those of Camomill, set about a bunch of yellow thums, with a pale of white leaves, sometimes white, one and then red, and often of both mixed together. The root is thready.

5. There doth likewise grow in the fields another sort of wilde Daisie, agreeing with the former in each respect, differing that it is somewhat greater than the other, and the leaves are somewhat more cut in the edges, and larger.

6. The Drew Italian Daisie hath many small thready roots, from the which rise up leaves like these.

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pamphlets – one promotes the widespread planting of Indian Corn in England – combine popular wisdom, eccentricity and political insurgency. Cobbett’s little book Cottage Economy (1822) for example, was at once a dictionary of plants and a radical tract written in support of a subsistence economy: ‘The doctrines, which fanaticism preaches’, Cobbett wrote in the Introduction, ‘and which teach men to be content with poverty, have a very pernicious tendency, and are calculated to favour tyrants by giving them passive slaves. To live well, to enjoy all things that make life pleasant, is the right of every man who constantly uses his strength judiciously and lawfully’. Where Gerard was apologetic that his botanical treatise contributed little to the national wealth, Cobbett was certain that cottage wisdom (combined with laws that reined in the power of the rich) was the best solution for restoring national well being. With Pliny, Gerard and Cobbett in his head – supplemented after 1853 by Ruskin’s Stones of Venice – Morris would have understood that profit from mining was utterly at odds with ‘describing the harmless treasures of nature’, and in Cobbett’s words, ‘enjoy[ing] all things that make life pleasant’.

In 1876 Morris resigned from the board of Devon Great Consuls and sat on his top hat to punctuate the act. The moral contradictions of his participation, combined with declining returns on investment, clinched his decision. He would soon become an active supporter of striking miners all across England. In 1884, he wrote in a letter to the Manchester Guardian that nothing on earth could justify ‘a few monopolists’ paying mere ‘starvation wages’ to South Staffordshire miners engaged in ‘hard and stupefying toil’. But the social and economic antagonisms that had stimulated these expressions of a radical class consciousness were more proximate even than those conjured by regular meetings of the board of directors of Devon Great Consols, or by consideration of texts by ancient and modern naturalists. Actually to see class antagonism, and to recognise his own exalted position, the younger Morris had only had to walk out the door of any of the succession of homes owned by his family in Essex.

Class Conflict in Essex

Speaking later in his life, Morris suggested that the year of his birth was coincident with significant changes in the predominant English means of production. In 1884, he stated in a lecture that ‘before the last great revolution in labour, England was still in the main a quiet agricultural country; 50 years passed, and she became what she is now, or at least has been until quite lately, the workshop of the world’. 1834 was indeed a significant year for England, and Morris’s home county of Essex. It marked the passage of the New Poor Law which mandated the establishment of workhouses and the end of in-house relief. The law was greeted across Essex with fear and anger, and led to protests and some working-class incendiaryism. Indeed, the county was soon provisioned with a greater number of workhouses than any other in England, although the expense of actually interning paupers delayed implementation for decades as it turned out to be more expensive to feed the poor gruel in institutions than mutton in their own homes. Thus Walthamstow’s Workhouse, or ‘Union’ as it was called, was
merged in 1836 with the one in West Ham, and the number of paupers on in-door relief in these communities remained small. Agitation in Essex against the Poor Law was nevertheless intense, and was soon linked to widespread demonstrations in support of parliamentary acceptance of universal suffrage, the chief demand in The People's Charter. In 1839 Chartist agitation was particularly strong (judging from reports in the local newspapers) in Walthamstow, Epping, Waltham Abbey and Woodford, and would remain so for a decade.37 There quickly appeared in these towns a correspondingly sizable contingent of county police, paid for by the local gentry. The ugliness of modernisation, and the gulf between rich and poor, would have been immediately visible to the young Morris. The first train to London chugged sootily through the Lea Valley in 1840 when Morris was 6, and the population of Walthamstow soon doubled, from about 5,000 in 1850 to about 11,000 in 1870.38 'More houses have been built in the parish in the last ten years', wrote a town historian in 1861, 'than were erected since the time of Julius Caesar to the year 1801'.39 Row-houses rapidly replaced the plowman's furrows, and smokestacks displaced Hornbeams. The town was increasingly divided between those who lived 'on the Forest' – that is, Forest Street where the wealthy Morris family lived – and those 'on Wood Street', or in 'Jeffrey's Square', a slum area populated by day labourers, the unemployed and criminals.40 At mid-century, according to a contemporary, the two Walthamstows were separated by only a few hundred yards.

Development, modernisation and the exacerbation of class contradictions were equally dramatic and visible on the rural lands adjacent to Walthamstow and Woodford. Common rights to the forests, fields and pastures – rights which could be traced to the time of Ethelbald – were largely ended by acts of parliament in 1843, 1846 and 1848.41 The Morris family's own 50-acre lawns and gardens at Woodford, and adjacent 100-acre field, may in fact have been partly carved from newly enclosed land. In 1851 a bill was passed in Parliament calling for the 'disafforesting' of the Hinault Woods and an end to all previous 'customary rights or claims of poor widows' to firewood.42 In just six weeks 2000 acres of oaks were duly felled. Even Morris's beloved Fairlop Oak was toppled and cleared by the steam ploughs.43 Epping Forest too was diminished in extent and its many deer hunted almost until extirpation. The few surviving modes of independent subsistence existence in southwest Essex, such as gleaning and poaching, were now eliminated. The intensity of Morris's lifelong concern – evidenced in his design, literature and politics – for the conservation of forests, streams and meadows may thus be due to his early recognition of rural proletarianisation and his observation of the actual destruction of woodlands.44

Class conflict was therefore as concrete and visible to the young William Morris, I have been arguing, as the Hornbeams and Oaks of Epping Forest, or the weeds and sedges in 'the wide green sea of Essex marshlands'. It was also the implicit subject of a considerable part of his design work. The energy and sheer ornamental denseness of his mature wallpapers and printed cottons such as Cray, Wandle, Windrush, Lea and Rose and Thistle (all of which are dated 1883-84), named after beloved rivers and streams of Essex, reveal an anxiety – a kind of horror vacui – that is both personal and historical. Morris had seen the very erasure of the woods at Hinault, and known of similar threats to the verdure at
Epping; he had understood that his own family had destroyed the landscape and polluted the waters on the site of Devon Great Consols, and that the local rivers were equally threatened. In 1809, the British Copper Company established a factory in Walthamstow on the banks of the River Lea and its noxious discharge flowed past Water House, the Morris family home from 1848–56. In addition, navigation on the lower stretches of the river, from Waltham Abbey to the Port of London, had grown substantially after 1810 with the development of industry at West Ham, East Ham and Barking. A Board of Health inspector in 1855 reported that Lea River water at West Ham, just five miles from Walthamstow, was ‘so poisonous as to render its use ... impossible’.45 Morris’s rich and fecund forest and riverine designs could replace – at least in imagination – a part of what was destroyed by industrialisation. He wrote that each design functioned to remind the viewer ‘of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol’.46 Patterns and forms advance and recede, glide up and down, side to side, and on the bias. Flowers, buds, seeds, fruits, nuts, branches, leaves, chevrons, stripes, paisleys and figure eights all pulse, grow, blossom and multiply. Precisely such forest and river vitality had now been sacrificed to industrial development, and Morris’s patterns suggested both the former richness and present destruction.

Contemporary Design Theory, and Morris’s Dialectics of Art and History

The key design reformers of the generation that preceded Morris – Henry Cole, Richard Redgrave and Charles Eastlake – insisted that interior decoration had a socially ameliorative character. It ‘softens rough natures’, they stated in 1849, and must at all costs resist vulgarity.47 A writer in the influential Journal of Design praised a particular paper designed by Redgrave – a red-berried bryony with small and widely separated fruits and flowers – for having ‘the character of a well balanced diaper’.48 He added, ‘Granting the position in room decorating to be right, that pictures should be absolutely predominant, and that the paper hanging should retire into a subordinate, but still harmonious relation to them, then it may be said that Mr. R. Redgrave has perfectly succeeded in this modest, long-wanted paper, which, we say, will shock the eyes accustomed to vulgar tawdriness’. The ideal wall covering, according to the Journal authors, was composed according to a ‘distributive’ as opposed to a ‘contrastive manner’. Whereas the first approach spread pattern evenly across the visual plane, achieving ‘general equality and a suppressed effect’, the second disposed form in uneven clumps, creating visual relief and unnecessary dramatic effect.49 Eastlake summarised the position of the reformers in 1878 by stating:

Common sense points to the fact, that as a wall represents the flat surface of a solid material which forms part of the construction of a house, it should be decorated after a manner which will belie neither its flatness nor solidity. For this reason all shaded patterns, which by their arrangement of color give an appearance of relief, should be strictly avoided...where natural forms are introduced they should be treated in a conventional manner ... without attempt at pictorial gradation.50
The drama and intensity of Morris’s wallpaper and cotton patterns from the late 1870s and 1880s belie these conventions. They combine the ‘distributive’ and the ‘contrastive’ manners, and suggest a narrative drama generally deemed indecorous in two-dimensional design. For example, the printed cottons Lea and Bird and Anemone are comprised of optical effects such as spatial oscillation and mis-en-abîme. The patterns are dense and almost without space, and would seem to expel the very breath from any room whose walls they might cover. The effect is clearly contrary to contemporary design theory and practice as outlined above. It could be argued that some of Morris’s designs actually contradict some of his own statements concerning the function of decoration. Although he never accepted the idea that wall ornament must be flat, he did argue that it should be soothing, even anodyne: ‘It will be enough for us to clothe our daily and domestic walls’, Morris wrote in ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’ (1881), ‘with ornament that reminds us of the outward face of the earth, of the innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest as he does’. All good patterns, Morris further argued, require ‘rational growth’. He added, ‘the noblest are those where one thing grows visibly and necessarily out of another’. And yet it seems to me that neither Lea nor Windrush, Cray nor Wandle possess much rationality or encourage much rest. Instead, they create a surge or tide of vitality—a ‘sundering flood’—that threatens to overturn everything that lies in their domestic path.

The latter two printed cottons, named for Thames tributaries, are based upon the seventeenth-century ‘Flowering Tree Pattern’ seen in Indian chintzes from the Coromandel Coast. Morris had long been fascinated with Indian painted and printed cotton, and in 1883 helped arrange an acquisition of Indian cottons for the South Kensington Museum. The large, robust and clear Indian patterns are relatively static: a single tree form dominates each repeat, and the tree trunk meanders like a lazy serpent from top to bottom. Morris’s Cray and Wandle appear frenzied by comparison. These patterns are also significantly bolder than any of his domestic textile sources, from the exquisitely woven, mid-eighteenth-century dress fabrics by Anna Maria Garthwaite to the many industrially-made floral furnishing fabrics of the 1840s. It is as if the 50-year-old designer—preoccupied as we have seen, with the progress of modernisation—was now engrossed both by the propagation of natural life, and its evident destruction, by the desire to create and the revolutionary will to overturn everything.

This urge to create and destroy was precisely the dialectic of nature and history that animated Morris’s art and thought from the early poems to the late prose romances. In an 1885 letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones he spoke with hope about a cleansing tide of ‘barbarism’ that would sweep clean the corruption of the earth and permit a healthy growth of feeling:

I have no more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of ‘civilisation’, which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! And how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies. With this thought in mind, all the history of the past is lighted up and lives again to me.
This passage has been cited by a number of scholars, including E. P. Thompson, as an instance of Morris allowing his outraged aesthetic feeling to commit him to a dangerous course of emotional arson.\textsuperscript{15} Thompson’s discomfort was undoubtedly just: late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century dreamers of apocalypse were only too prescient, and one cannot help but be disturbed by the possibility that even a small part of their prophesies were self-fulfilling.

However, late in his life Morris repeatedly invoked the metaphor of inundation and destruction – natural and human-made – as a form of artistic creation. It is found in the political tracts and the utopian novels, including \textit{A Dream of John Ball} and \textit{News from Nowhere}. It is the basis for some of his romances, including \textit{The Water of the Wondrous Isles} and especially \textit{The Sundering Flood}. It is also the foundation of his mature political philosophy, expressed in the jointly written ‘Manifesto of the Socialist League’ of 1885:

Finally, we look forward to the time when any definite exchange will have entirely ceased to exist; just as it never existed in that primitive Communism which preceded Civilization. The enemy will say, ‘this is retrogression not progress’; to which we answer, All progress, every distinctive stage of progress, involves a backward as well as a forward movement; the new development returns to a point which represents the older principle elevated to a higher plane; the old principle reappears transformed, purified, made stronger, and ready to advance on the fuller life it has gained through its seeming death . . .

The progress of all life must not be on the straight line, but on the spiral.\textsuperscript{16}

Morris’s model of progress – partly inspired, as Jack Lindsay has noted, from Engels’s \textit{Ludwig Feuerbach}, as well as from Lewis Henry Morgan’s \textit{Ancient Society} – is an image of the conjunction of past, present and future. It is an announcement that destruction and defeat are necessary antecedents to progress and emancipation, and that the image of revolution is not the arrow or the wedge, but the spiral and the figure eight, not unlike the forms and patterns that comprise \textit{Wandle, Kennet} and \textit{Cray}.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The art and political thought of William Morris represent an unusual unity. Morris’s definition of art – ‘joy in labour’ – was at the same time his definition of revolution. The latter would be achieved, he thought, when the alienation of labour was ended and all production was socialised, that is, when work and its result were at one and the same time a pleasure for the maker and the user, instead of a burden to each. Morris’s literary works echo the themes and concerns of his historical and political preoccupations: his interest in Icelandic history, politics and literature for example, resulted in \textit{Sigurd the Volsung} and his translations of the sagas; his research into primitive communism led him to write his Germanic epics, \textit{The Roots of the Mountains} and \textit{The House of the Wolfings}. My argument here has been that a similar unity underlies the mature decorative art and the politics. Like the rest of Morris’s work, these arose gradually from an
intense and sustained experience and examination of modernisation. Morris’s feeling of being ‘ashamed’, as he wrote to Maurice in 1883, at the ‘contrasts of rich and poor’, and his ‘religious’ opposition to an economic system of ‘robbery and injustice’, had its origins in his youth. When William Morris cast his gaze upon his community and surrounding countryside, he saw everywhere antagonisms of rich and poor, nature and industry, and old and new. When he considered his own wealth, he could not help but see its oppressive, industrial origins. His mature decorative art and socialist principles arose from clear-eyed observation, lived experiences and a consequent and ever-deepening consciousness of class.

NOTES
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F. Reaper (2001). 5' x 5'. Oil on Indian fabric mounted on linen. Photo: Susan Ormerod

10 The Collected Letters, IV, p. 268.
14 The Collected Works, I, p. 245.
15 The Collected Works, XXI, p. 5.
16 The Historie of the World, p. 293.
21 Morris employed mining as a metaphor in a short poem at the end of his early story ‘A Dream’ in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine in 1856:

No memory labours longer from the deep
Gold mines of thought to lift the hidden ore
That glimpses, moving up, than I from sleep
To gather and tell o’er
Each little sound and sight.

23 The Collected Works, XXII, p. xviii.
24 Katharine A. Lochnan has made a similar observation concerning the derivation of the wallpaper design Lily (1874) from the osier in Gerard’s Herball. See The Earthly Paradise, p. 137.
25 The Herball, p. 634.
26 A copy of the Pliny text was sent by Morris to Thomas Wardle in 1875 in order to assist him in developing vegetable based dyes. A little later he sent another copy to Buxton Forman. See The Collected Letters, I, pp. 265, 270.
28 Latham concludes, ‘... it may be supposed that he was not attracted to the ethos of a mining company; he may even have felt that if he drew his wealth from that source it was better not to know too much about the conditions of
work or the men, women and children who drew the copper and arsenic from the earth' (p. 45).

29 Morris’s first explicit reference is found in letters of 1883, and it is clear from them that he was familiar with Cobbett’s life as well as with the literary style and substance of his writings. See *The Collected Letters*, II, nos. 900, 902 and 908, pp. 215, 217 and 223.


32 Profits from DGC had been diminishing for some time, but still remained robust. See Morris’s letter to Emma Morris reporting on mining sales, 25 May 1874; *The Collected Letters*, I, p. 223.


36 See Thomas Sokoll, *Household and Family among the Poor: The Case of Two Essex Communities* (Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1993).


45 A. L. Dickens, *Report to the General Board of Health on a Preliminary
Enquiry into the Sewerage, Drainage and Supply of Water...of West Ham (1855), p. 17; cited in Essex and the Industrial Revolution, p. 200.

46 The Collected Works, XXII, p. 179.
48 Ibid, p. 50.
52 The Collected Works, XXII, p. 177.
53 Ibid, p. 199.