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“BOUND TOGETHER BY A WEB”: VICTORIAN LITERARY AND CULTURAL
CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN-NATURE ENTANGLEMENT

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the Victorians, in a world in which anthropogenic climate changes were becoming visible and much about the human-nature divide was shifting, understood not only how humans shaped and altered the environment, but how they were shaped and altered by non-human nature themselves. What follows is intended to develop a clearer understanding of how a variety of Victorian writers and thinkers conceptualized and represented the materiality of the human body within the increasingly complex biological framework of life—in what Darwin described as a state of being “bound together by a web of complex relations” (73). Focusing on a variety of genres, but in particular the novel, this project examines selections from *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) from William Wordsworth’s early career, George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–1865), Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Woodlanders* (1886–1887), and *The Return of the Native* (1878), as well as William Morris’s socialist lectures of the 1880s and his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890). By examining these texts in conversation with each other, it is possible to better understand how Victorian culture more widely conceived of the rapidly changing relationship and shifting boundaries between human and nature. I argue that these literary and cultural outputs reflect a larger cultural shift from the early nineteenth century towards a more nuanced, more troubled, and more material understanding of humanity’s place in the wider web of life.

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INTRODUCTION

“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!”

– William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890)

“In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”

– Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016)

“It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. [...] There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

– Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859)

Our own contemporary messy entanglement with nature—with other living beings, both animal and vegetable, has never been more vivid. An abundance of recent writings upon this messy mix of the human and non-human proliferates, as we seemingly hurtle towards an ever-increasing climate catastrophe for ourselves and for all other living creatures. This contemporary discourse mirrors and describes the troubled ways in which various authors grappled with their own human-nature entanglements in nineteenth-century Britain. Although there is a lack of scholarly consensus as to when the epoch of the Anthropocene commences, it is clear that the large-scale environmental shifts occurring in the nineteenth century (due in large part to

industrialization) mark a significant pivot in our human relationship to nature.¹ The climate crisis that is daily unveiling itself to us is one of Western-industrial making. That story's beginning, of course, lies in Britain, the first country to introduce widescale factory-system production of goods and eventually, the common usage of carbon-based fuels that powered the rise of industry throughout the century (Lindsey).²

The period between 1830 and 1900 was an era of rapid scientific developments and substantial changes in the human-altered landscape, all of which forced Victorians to reconceptualize their place within an ecological framework. The most significant of these developments for the Victorian psyche was the seismic shift predicated on the theory of natural selection in 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and simultaneously, Alfred Russel Wallace's independent arrival at the theory of evolution through natural selection, as well as Darwin's later publication of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), which focused specifically on human descent and human sexual selection (Cameron 42).³ Darwin's work was only possible having been built upon the foundation of another highly impactful work on the Victorian understanding of the material world—that of Charles Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* (1830-1833),⁴ which challenged a literal understanding of the Biblical age of earth through gathered geological evidence, demonstrating

¹ Atmospheric changes in Britain during this period were human generated. According to I.G. Simmons's *An Environmental History of Great Britain*, "The atmosphere of Great Britain in the nineteenth century was, however, more notable for its human inputs than its natural change. The burning of coal in homes, workplaces and railways, together with the by-products of the chemical industry, were led off into the air in a more or less uncontrolled fashion until enforceable legislation began to take effect after mid-century" (150).

² It is common to denote 1750 as the start of the Industrial Revolution.

³ Alfred Russel Wallace is an intriguing figure, a progressive who was inspired by the social reformer Robert Owen and his son (also an industrialist and utopian thinker), Robert Dale Owen, founder of New Harmony community collective (1824) in Indiana. Wallace, a proponent of land reform, published *Land Nationalisation: Its Necessity and Its Aims* in 1882 and was "among the first to perceive how sustainability represented an unwritten compact between generations: between the living and those in the 'spirit world' as well as between the living and their immediate descendants on earth" (Conlin 212)

⁴ Lyell's *The Principles of Geology* was published in three volumes during the period of 1830-1833 (Rudwick).

that our planet was older than the few thousand years. These works disrupted the religious and cultural certainty in the human-centered earth, the sacred “set apartness” of humans.⁵ Darwin’s ideas concerning mind-body dualism further disrupted the ways in which readers conceived of the human body. Although he was certainly not the first to suggest it, Darwin “postulated that the mind was a function of the body and its various organic processes” threatening Cartesian certainty (Hillman and Maude 7). For thoughtful, receptive readers of the period, such revelations could not help but transform humanity into more materially-based creatures—creatures, who like all other plants, animals, and fungi are a result of a natural, biological phenomenon—that of evolution. Suddenly, the world must have seemed messier and the lines between human and non-human blurrier, something akin to what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls “patchiness, that is, a mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life” (4).

As previously articulated by many historians of science, Darwin did not develop the idea of natural selection alone nor simply at the same time as only Wallace, but in fact, there had been a bounty of publications that espoused similar selection theories in the years leading up to Darwin’s 1859 publication. In particular, the anonymous work, entitled, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) was widely in circulation and thus, present in the public’s consciousness. According to Philip Sloan, “the pre-existing popularity of the anonymous *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* of 1844, which had reached 11 editions and sold 23,350 copies by December of 1860 [...] with more editions to appear by the end of the century, certainly prepared the groundwork for the general notion of the evolutionary origins of species.” While similar theories had been circulating for some time throughout the British reading public,

⁵ This is echoed in and then modernized by Anna Tsing’s argument that it is not just interspecies entanglement that has disturbed our neat categories of the human and nature, but also that the demand of many human individuals previously left out of the category of “Man” fundamentally undermines “the moral intentionality of Man’s Christian masculinity, which separated Man from Nature” (vii).

these prior works did not have the heft that Darwin's name and elite scientific reputation carried with it. Thus, Darwin's *On the Origin* marks a key turning point not because he was the first to publish, but because of the seriousness of his academic reputation and his influence among elites (van Wyhe).⁶ Some scholars utilize this publication history to argue *against* the prevailing notion that *On the Origin* and Darwin's subsequent publications elicited "a profound psychological threat" (Fleming and Goodall 259). In contrast, I maintain that while clearly Darwin's work marks a cultural culmination of many scientific publications around the mid-century marker, this does not negate the widespread psychological, religious, and cultural impact of his publications nor the impact of the general notions of natural selection and human evolution.⁷

As the perception of humanity's place in the world became increasingly nebulous in light of these explosive scientific breakthroughs, so too did the everyday lived connection between a majority of Britons and rural spaces continue to erode. As the economist and economic historian of labor mobility, Jason Long, describes, between "1841 to 1901 the rural areas of England and Wales lost more than 4 million people from internal migration, 3 million of whom moved to towns, at a rate of more than half a million per decade. The 1851 population census revealed a watershed demographic event: for the first time in the history of any large nation, more people

⁶ For a reception history of *On the Origin* based on the contemporaneous British periodical press, see Alvar Ellegård's mid-twentieth century history, republished by the University of Chicago Press, *Darwin and the General Reader: The Reception of Darwin's Theory of Evolution in the British Periodical Press, 1859-1872* (1990).

⁷ *Descent* was likely more world-shattering than *Origin*, given that not only did it deal directly with human descent, but with "issues concerning the status and origin of human mental properties, faculties presumed traditionally to be possessed uniquely by human beings. These properties Darwin now places on an evolutionary continuum with those features of animal behavior long regarded as instinctual. In this he placed himself in opposition to the long tradition of discourse that had distinguished humans from animals due to the possession of a 'rational principle' related to their possession of a rational soul"—a divide in Western traditions which René Descartes had significantly deepened with his theorized separation of the mind from the body (Sloan). Descartes, regarding the natural world of animals and plants to be entirely material, with humans alone possessing rational faculties. *Descent's* theory of human origins disintegrates Descartes's theorized duality between thinking substance and material substance (Ibid).

lived in towns than in the countryside” (2).⁸ Rural spaces were not just transformed by the growth of expanding cities, but small, rural communities throughout England and Wales were vacated, altering the connection between both the individuals who lives became centered in urban areas and the communities they left behind, which were inevitably deeply altered by this significant population shift.⁹ According to Simmons, during this internal rural to urban migration in the nineteenth century:

Most city people were moved away from the close interaction with nature that farmers experience but they were not immune to weather, nor to a particle-laden atmosphere nor to contaminated groundwater. More and more sought contact with ‘nature’ via the acquisition of scientific knowledge, for example, or by railway excursions to spa towns (Matlock and Buxton in Derbyshire come to mind) or to coastal resorts. ‘Nature’ might have been built over in a great many places but we can be skeptical about claims that it was bricked out of people’s minds (Simmons 149-150)

So, while the depth and intensity of experience and relation to nature altered for a large portion of the population, this does not signify that nature was inaccessible nor irrelevant from urban dwellers’ lives and imaginations. Nature, albeit in less Romantic, non “wild” natural spaces still persisted in urban life, as did more planned, recreational forms of access to non-urban locations in which rural nature became a mediated experience as opposed to a constant, lived experience.

In light of the fact that a majority of the population of England and Wales lived in urban spaces by 1851 and given that Victorian-conceived nature is arguably messier than Romantic

⁸ Interestingly, Long found that “urban migrants of nineteenth-century Britain had not been the most destitute rural residents. They in fact had better rural prospects than did those who remained behind” (3). One might argue that it is the Adam Bede-sorts of the country that were more likely to move to an urban center.

⁹ The first nation-wide census took place in England and Wales in 1801 after the Census Act was enacted on 31 December 1800. (Simmons 149 and Office for National Statistics, UK).

envisionings, in this dissertation, I define nature as not exclusively rural nor sublime, but existing within all biological life—whether in coppiced trees or in the polluted Thames. While the Romantic ideal of untouched nature, set apart from urban life, inevitably persisted throughout the nineteenth century, industrialization and urbanization, seeping into the lives of more and more Britons, in itself demands a wider redefining of what is “nature.”

This dissertation examines how the Victorians, in a world in which anthropogenic climate changes were becoming visible and so much about the human-nature divide was shifting, understood not only how humans shaped and altered the environment, but how they were shaped and altered by non-human nature themselves. What follows is intended to develop a clearer understanding of how a variety of Victorian writers and thinkers conceptualized and represented the materiality of the human body within the increasingly complex biological framework of life—in what Darwin described as a state of being “bound together by a web of complex relations” (73). What is the relationship between human and nature in an increasingly industrialized and urbanized world, a world in which nature in its rural forms was becoming more distant and disconnected from many Britons’ everyday lives?

This dissertation finds evidence regarding how the Victorian imagination conceived of the human body and its connection to its natural surroundings (including urban, suburban, and rural settings) and its place within the ecological community in a time and space in which this relationship was becoming increasingly disconnected (through both rapid industrialization and scientific advancements). Inheriting Enlightenment and Christian ideals, nineteenth-century Western European culture popularly thought of the human as exceptional, apart from nature, not subject to natural laws. But, as I argue, throughout the century, a series of scientific and medical insights—again, most significantly the work of Charles Darwin—challenged such an ideology

built on the separation of the human from the natural world. In other words, the dividing line between human and nature becomes increasingly contested and uncertain. While at first glance, it might be assumed that rapid industrialization and urbanization would force a greater break between the Victorian conceptualization of the human and nature, this is not reflected in a varied array of literary outputs of the period. Instead, my dissertation project examines how a variety of Victorian texts reflect a deepening understanding and representation of the embedded nature of the human body in its environment. Despite the endurance of Romantic notions (particularly Wordsworthian notions) of nature, these quiet material entanglements between the human and non-human become increasingly perceptible in various literary outputs.

Much has been made in recent years of our own ecological and interspecies so-called “entanglements,” particularly in the works of Stacy Alaimo, Haraway, and Tsing. I find Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) useful for its emphasis on the fungal world (fungi becomes significant in chapter two). Similarly, Alaimo’s concept of “transcorporeality” and Haraway’s discussion of interspecies intertwinings both illuminate ways in which Victorians, like ourselves, tried to grapple with depictions of the human and its relationship to the rest of biological life. Although these concepts play some role, this dissertation essentially takes a historicist perspective, drawing connections from close readings and conclusions based on evidence in the form of cultural outputs in a variety of written genres and through historical context. That being said, these materialist theoretical terms, likely in part because of their surge in popularity in academic discourse, have been critiqued for their fundamental vagueness. A central attack on these forms of materialist perspectives comes from Caroline Levine’s *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (2023). Levine argues that “the most influential thinking in the environmental humanities [...] has put its most powerful emphasis on

open endedness” and that such opacity and open endedness threatens the possibility of any real concrete change, postulating: “What if open-endedness justifies an avoidance of planning and building, and reinforces the notion that it is not our job to find practical strategies to work against anthropogenic climate change and its calamitous and uneven consequences?” (Levine 8 and 10). Levine’s critique is an explicit response to the works of Alaimo, Tsing, and Haraway. In particular, she critiques their works when she writes of those who wish for readers “to recognize the intricate enmeshment of human bodies in ecologies composed of all kinds of non-human objects and forces, from rocks and birds to bacteria and fungi” (x). Levine concludes that “As long as the aesthetic humanities stress humility, wild imaginings, the unmaking of prevailing values, and dense entanglements, we push off the work of organized collective action to another moment” (10).¹⁰ Arguably, this controversy around “embeddedness” and “enmeshment” among the human and non-human reflects how crucial this vocabulary has become to contemporary theorization and even activism in the environmental humanities.

I find the terminology utilized by Alaimo, Tsing, and Haraway, which I apply in this project, to be useful in thinking about reactions, including disparate reactions—discomfort and acceptance—to increasingly blurred, albeit subtly blurred lines between human and nature, between the human body and the world outside of the body. Whether or not this vocabulary of entanglement is useful to contemporary politics, it still helps illuminate the Victorians’ responses to their new troubling understanding of the natural world. Additionally, this dissertation is not particularly concerned with the implications that materialist theory which embraces “opacity and ambiguity” might lead to a turning away from the public sphere of active engagement with

¹⁰ Levine goes as far as to argue that because planting seeds of doubt and ambiguity are essential for climate change denial narratives, “climate denialism is itself oddly consonant with the humanistic values of opacity and open-endedness” (7).

climate activism and policy, as Levine argues it does (x and xi). Instead, these terms, critiqued for their murkiness, help bring forth a visualization of otherwise troublesome to describe relationships between humans and nature in literary texts. These are the relationships that I am interested in illuminating and exploring. Descriptive work is often seen as a lesser form of intellectual labor in contrast with theoretical work and writing. Tsing herself emphasizes the importance of description in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, a perspective which she further illuminates in an interview with *ArtReview* magazine:

A false dichotomy between description and theory has really gotten in our way. It reduces description to merely mechanical work and makes theory transcendent, as if it were a religious commitment. Description is important because it gives traction to a theoretical perspective. [...] If we can't describe the patches through which our environmentally troubled earth is emerging, then we can't have any clue what it is we're studying.

Although Tsing and like-minded theorists might lay themselves open to critiques of opacity, the descriptive and theoretical work they are attempting deals with simultaneously urgent but intrinsically difficult to describe phenomena. Climate change with its gradual “slow violence” as Rob Nixon describes in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) is in itself difficult to describe and convey to audiences.¹¹ Likewise, “The body is notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition” (Hillman and Maude 1). And so, in other words, the obliqueness and imprecision, which Levine takes issue with, make their work all the more useful for this project. Given the nuance and subtlety of the descriptions of the body and the body in

¹¹ Nixon argues that given this difficult to perceive slow violence, literature then must make the “unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses” (15).

nature and the relationship shifts between them, these materialist terms' very obliqueness proves beneficial. In other words, I find that the descriptive language utilized by Alaimo, Tsing, and Haraway to be abundantly constructive.

Although each chapter is bound together by a particular theme or themes, the organization of the chapters generally follows a chronological pathway. How writers thought of the human relationship to nature as the nineteenth century progressed remains a source of inquiry throughout the project. Much of how the Victorians conceived of nature and its relationship to literature and the human individual are part of and a reaction to a distinctively Romantic legacy. In particular, Wordsworthian notions of nature continued to shape Victorian narratives about nature. British writers and thinkers throughout the century were influenced by and responded to the legacy of William Wordsworth's lofty nostalgia and deeply individualist engagements with nature—engagements, as Raymond Williams asserts, that were marked by a particular confidence in nature's workings. In his now classic work of Marxist literary critique, *The Country and the City* (1973), Williams argues that in contrast to other late-eighteenth century writers, "with Wordsworth, an alternative principle was to be powerfully asserted: a confidence in nature, in its own workings, which at least at the beginning was also a broader, a more humane confidence in men" (184). I argue that this confidence in nature and in nature's workings was significantly diminished by the mid-nineteenth century. Romantic, Wordsworthian confidence in nature was replaced by Victorian anxieties and fears about the boundaries between the human and the non-human and the permeability of the human body. Leila S. May notes the

seemingly boundless Victorian anxieties, nearly all of which revolve around the bourgeois obsession with the maintaining of clear and distinct boundaries: boundaries despite all efforts to preserve them, are incessantly in danger of collapsing and worse, in

danger of being corroded from some internal disease. The Victorian body, social and individual, felt itself under perpetual assault from within and without.¹² (16)

Although many of these anxieties are beyond the scope of this project, this anxiety over the maintenance of the body's boundaries both physically and in a societal sense reaches a crescendo in the late-Victorian period with concerns surrounding cultural and bodily decadence and decay—in part fueled by the ways in which some people understood evolutionary theory.

Even in the mid-nineteenth century, decades before concerns about cultural and societal decadence reached a crescendo, how writers and thinkers conceived of the body as it moved through its environment had begun to shift. Conceptions of the body and disease contagion evolved from early modern understandings in which disease was based on an imbalance contained within the self to the danger of disease from outside (what should be) the self-contained body. As Pamela Gilbert articulates in *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (2004), the Victorian “leaky body” reflected an evolving medical and cultural understanding of the human body as open to exchange with the outside world, while contrastingly, Victorian culture valued independence and the stand-alone, upright self within the liberal state (117). Charles Dickens, who echoed larger cultural fears of the uncontained, incontinent body, uses the openness, the porous nature of the body to emphasize “social responsibility and interdependence” when it comes to epidemic disease and miasmatic contagion in *Bleak House* (1852-1853) (Gilbert 112). While the focus in this dissertation centers on the infiltrating contagion of the Thames and bodily dismemberment that haunts his last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) in which

¹² May, Leila S. “‘Foul Things of the Night’: Dread in the Victorian Body.” *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 93, no. 1, 1998, pp. 16-22.

the nonconsensual infiltration of pollution and of human and animal parts threatens the self-contained liberal subject.

Dickens and Thomas Hardy express these concerns about the boundary between the human body and its environment through distinctively different affective responses. Dickens consistently envisions absurd, comic, and abject scenes of bodily violation in commercial shops and within the polluted waterways and corrupt air of London. But the body's porousness and its openness to harm from the outside environment is not limited to urban sprawl, industrial smoke, and dirty city streets in Dickens's work. Hardy illuminates bodily anxieties and nature-based fears outside of the city, demonstrating that it is not just urban spaces that can consume and corrupt, but otherwise seemingly idyllic rural environments can also be consuming and corrupting. Nature's forms can appear akin to human forms, imitating human hands and lungs, but this is not a pastoral romp, but a sinister and consuming vision of rural life. It is nature that threatens to wring the life out of human forms. This is demonstrated in one of Hardy's many discursive scenes, so popular in his fiction, this time in *The Woodlanders* (1886-1887). Early in the novel, when the protagonist Giles Winterborne begins to doubt his intended bride, Grace Melbury's continued favor towards him, Giles follows Grace and her father on foot through the autumn woods. His own romantic and relational unease is reflected in the bodies of the plants that populate the woods. The anthropomorphized bodies of elms, ashes, ivy, lichen, and fungi foretell a coming doom for Winterborne and the darkness and disappointment of Grace's future:

They went noiselessly over mats of starry moss, rustled through interspersed tracts of leaves, skirted trunks with spreading roots, whose mossed rinds made them like hands wearing green gloves; elbowed old elms and ashes with great forks, in which stood pools of water that overflowed on rainy days, and ran down their stems in green cascades. On

older trees still than these, huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen eat the vigor of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling. (Hardy, *The Woodlanders* 48)

Rural woodlands can embody “Unfulfilled Intention” just as unhappy masses of people in urban squalor can. Just as human promise can be destroyed within an urban landscape, the violence of decay exists as a natural phenomenon, inherent to rural spaces. Not only are older trees destroyed by fungal parasites, but young stalks are eaten away by lichen, while a sapling is destroyed by the violence and vigor of the ivy’s growth. Lichen, ivy, and fungi are favorites of Hardy because they consume, cover, overtake, and destroy other material bodies. These forms of transgressive boundary crossing are essential to Hardy’s fiction. Indeed, more than any other single author, Hardy reappears again and again throughout this dissertation. I examine three different Hardy novels across the project: *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Woodlanders*, and *The Return of the Native*. Within their pages, I found striking, bizarre illustrations of Hardy’s ambivalent attempts to reconcile his own pessimistic worldview, Darwinian theory, and his Romantic attachment to his native rural landscape. Hardy’s descriptions of the interactions between humans and nature are often deeply threatening and disturbing. And yet, as Williams points to “The general structure of feeling in Hardy would be much less convincing if there were only the alienation, the frustration, the separation and isolation, the final catastrophes” (307). Building off Williams’s assertion, I argue that while Hardy’s view of nature remains dark and consuming, a subtle sense of delight in nature through descriptive nature passages still persists.

Genre and Chapter Outlines

This dissertation examines depictions of human relationships with nature within both urban and rural settings, spanning a variety of genres and subgenres. Significantly, the Romantic lyric poetry of Wordsworth acts as a centerpiece to much of chapter one alongside the realist fiction of George Eliot, whose fiction reflects an intense Wordsworthian influence, which remains strikingly apparent despite the significant differences in literary forms. The focus throughout the entire project rests upon the most popular of nineteenth-century genres—the novel. But given the scope of Wordsworth’s influence—in particular when it comes to how the individual is depicted in relation to nature—some discussion of his poetry and legacy throughout the century proved essential. Examining nature within the Wordsworthian tradition demonstrates how the Victorians not only inherited, but subsequently reshaped Romantic narratives, which depicted the human as set apart from, individualized, and distinct from a gendered and inherently wild or sublime nature.

Even though much of the project centers on the Victorian genre of choice, the novel, variant modes appear of the form throughout—realist, sentimental, sensational, and naturalistic novels. George Eliot’s work epitomizes the nineteenth-century realist novel while Dickens’s absurd and comic mockery of contemporary society is infused with sentimentalism. This project examines three of Hardy’s novels in various capacities: *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Woodlanders*, and *The Return of the Native* (1878) each of which fluctuate between realism and sensationalism to varying degrees. Finally, I look at William Morris’s Romantic-influenced socialist utopian novel, *News from Nowhere* (1890) in conversation with his socialist lectures and essays from the second half of his career. The form of the novel reflects the very theme of entanglement; multi-layered description and depictions of moral ambiguity are well-suited to

providing the attentiveness required in examining subtle networks of connection between individuals both human and non-human.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines the vision of nature that Victorians inherited from the Romantic, particularly the Wordsworthian, tradition of nature poetry. All of the writers discussed in this project are to a certain extent engaged with Romanticism and are affected by the ways in which Romantic thought shaped their vision of what nature is and what experiencing nature should look and feel like. The overarching narrative throughout all chapters lies in how each writer embraces and/or rejects this Romantic legacy differently through their written portrayals of nature-human relationships. Wordsworth has been praised for his holistic, ecological thinking, but as I argue and as other critics have argued, the kinship that Wordsworth expresses with the natural world has an individualist, classist, imperial, patriarchal core.¹³ I examine two closely linked poems from his early publication, *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), “To a Highland Girl, at Inversneyde, Upon Loch Lomond” and “The Solitary Reaper,” concluding that both pieces illustrate working class female figures experiencing unconscious enmeshment with so-called “wild” nature set in contrast to the educated, middle class male speaker’s conscious striving for sublime oneness with nature. As previously mentioned in this introduction, George Eliot, deeply influenced by Wordsworth’s work, is arguably the most Wordsworthian of the Victorian novelists. She is undoubtedly the inheritor of his high moral seriousness. And yet, in her first novel, (and in some ways her own love letter to Wordsworth’s oeuvre), *Adam Bede*, Eliot departs from the Wordsworthian tradition of depicting laboring, rural

¹³ This project is focused upon Victorian receptions of Wordsworth and his own particular conception of nature. Wordsworth’s idealist legacy, including his vision of comforting nature, is utilized as somewhat representative of Romantic ideas concerning nature, but this is not intended to diminish the complexity and diversity of approaches to nature that existed during the Romantic period. But given Wordsworth’s enormous influence, particularly upon the generations coming directly after him, made centering his depictions of nature the clear choice, given the scope of the project.

women as romanticized figures of the male imagination. Instead of existing in an enmeshed, blissful state with nature, her beauty an embodied reflection of her closeness to the earth, the vacuous, even sociopathic character of Hetty Sorrel demonstrates that beauty and rural laboring do not make for readable indications of moral goodness.

Fueled in part by post-*On the Origin of Species* anxieties, concerns over imperfect boundaries between the human and the non-human are central themes within Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* and comprise the substance of chapter two of this dissertation. These novels, although written and published nearly twenty years apart, both articulate fears of bodily contamination and the porous openness of the human body to outside biological phenomena. In his initial full draft of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy correlates menacing soft fungal bodies in a damp, miasmic forest with a deceased infant, remarking that the face and hands of dead child were reminiscent of "the soft convexity of mushrooms on a dewy morning" (259). Both of these disturbing scenes of fungal menace were written out of the published versions of *Far From the Madding Crowd* under pressure from Hardy's editor. Hardy's use of eldritch and threatening fungi also reflects the uneasy boundaries of fungal bodies during a period of scientific incertitude concerning its classification. Fungi as a categorization remained dubiously wavering between the plant and animal kingdoms—the only two kingdoms of categorization at the time. Sharing qualities of both plants and animals, fungi's lack of definition imbued it with a sense of ambiguity and boundary crossing within the Victorian imagination. While Hardy is perhaps the most significant single author in this project, it is only in conversation with others that a wider array of responses and a more complete picture of the variety of affective responses to human-nature enmeshment and entanglement becomes visible. Given that, the second half of chapter two sets Hardy's garden of foreboding mushrooms into

conversation with Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. As Gillian Beer has previously articulated, materiality in the Dickensian universe is utilized for two central purposes—to create unease or a sense of menace, or secondly, for humorous functions. Both of these functions play a role in Dickens's depiction of Mr. Venus's body articulation shop, a journey through a wonderland of abjection. While Hardy's emphasizes the damp soil and poisonous air in his woodland fungi scene, a so-called "meaty air" of tallow candles pervades Venus's greasy shop in which hard human bones and soft body parts are placed among and mixed with non-human animal bones and parts. The creation of haunting scenes that call into question the strict separation of the human and the non-human demonstrates that both novels are engaged in larger cultural conversations about human-nature boundaries in rural and urban spaces, respectively.

Chapter three responds to recent scholarship on John Ruskin and like-minded individuals who travelled to the Lake District in search of Wordsworthian-imbued nature, fulfilling forms of traditional labor in handcrafting endeavors, and a life of "rural virtue" (Hanley and Walton 180). In particular, I engage with Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in John Ruskin's Lake District* (2016), which examines the network of individuals who for the most part were outsiders to the Lake District but shared a connection to and were inspired by Ruskinian ideology. For Ruskin and those closely in his orbit, the idea of a rural return—a shifting back to smaller rural communities in contrast to the contemporary population trend towards urban centers—served as a tantalizing prospect of anti-industrial, historicist praxis based on Ruskin's writings. I argue that these forms of Ruskin's embodied ideology were ultimately extremely limited in reach and longevity. More significantly, a simple return, as enacted by Ruskin and some of his followers, to rural spaces in hopes of returning to the past functions as regressive and reactionary.

In contrast to the Ruskinian desire for a simple return to rural spaces and customary ways of life, Hardy's fiction, in particular *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native*, dramatizes the Romantic yearning for rural return but complicates these desires and exposes the oftentimes tragic reality of such returns. Both Grace Melbury of *The Woodlanders* and Clym Yeobright of *The Return of the Native* are promising young people who return to their rural homes in the West Country after education and work elsewhere. Both of their returns are blighted not just by natural forces in and around their rural homes, which threaten to consume and destroy the protagonists and those around them, but ill-fated poor choices and repressive, conservative social structures. I compare Ruskin's idealized Romantic rural return in the Lake District with the West Country rural returns depicted by Hardy. I argue that Hardy indicates not only an inherent Darwinian unfeelingness in nature, but that neither positive enmeshment with nature nor fulfilling rural returns are possible within existing social and political structures. In chapter four, I then turn to an equally aestheticized and politicized response to the human-nature relationship in the late works of William Morris, in particular, *News from Nowhere*, which depicts a positive, healthy human enmeshment with nature, but suggests that this might only be possible after the downfall of both capitalism and patriarchy. Despite their many differences, Morris's socialist utopia responds to a similar rural yearning that occupies Hardy's more fraught narratives. On the spectrum of affective responses, Morris rejects the disgust that often populates Hardy's fiction in favor of transcendent delight in the human entanglement with nature. Given that the only integrative, positive vision of the human-nature relationship represented is a utopian vision, I end on an examination of the purpose of utopian fiction for the troubled entanglement of the human in a vast ecological web. While the novel allows the Victorians and ourselves to visualize not only the intertwined intricacy of inter-species relationships, utopian fiction, through what Miguel

Abensour terms the “education of desire,” makes the visualization of undreamed worlds with healthy human-nature enmeshments possible for the first time.

CHAPTER ONE:
Hetty Sorrel and the Highland Girl: William Wordsworth and George Eliot, the Most
Wordsworthian of Victorians

While Romantic theories of nature as sublime, allegorical, and spiritual continued into the Victorian period, I will argue in this chapter that this Romantic ideology takes on a new form and shifts to more nuanced, complicated, and ultimately more troubled ways of thinking of nature and the nonhuman. New Victorian scientific understandings of the human body's biological interwovenness with the non-human creates a new openness to understanding the human self as a more material entity embedded in an increasingly less idealized nature. Recent scholarship over the last ten years has pointed to Victorian culture and intellectual thought as more materialist, less dualistic than previously conceived. As Ariane de Waal and Ursula Kluwick argue in "Victorian Materialisms: Approaching Nineteenth-Century Matter,"¹⁴ the view has long been that "Victorians are hardly considered trailblazers for new materialist concerns" (2). But as de Waal and Kluwick also assert, "While the Enlightenment is often associated with the consolidation of 'nature-culture, human-nonhuman, animate-inanimate binaries' (Barad 2007, 171), dualist thinking became increasingly tenuous in the course of nineteenth century philosophical enquiries into the inextricability of organic and inorganic matter, or bodies and minds" (2). I argue that even the most Wordsworthian Victorian novelist, George Eliot, in one of her most Wordsworthian of novels, *Adam Bede*, reflects this increasingly inextricably linked understanding of the human and non-human—a more materialist and enmeshed vision of nature and the human than Romantic Wordsworthian concepts of nature and humans. Furthermore, I

¹⁴ A 2022 special edition of the *European Journal of English Studies*.

argue that Wordsworthian nature remains an anthropocentric ecology, not an enmeshed, deep ecology, as some critics have claimed.

In this chapter, I will analyze and put into conversation a few select poems of Wordsworth's, in particular, "To a Highland Girl, at Inversneyde, Upon Loch Lomond" (1807) and "The Solitary Reaper" (1807) with George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859). Eliot, considered to be perhaps the most Wordsworthian of the canonical Victorian novelists, I will argue, represents a much more entangled, less ego-centric and dominating understanding of the human (particularly the laboring human) with their non-human, natural surroundings. Although Wordsworth and other first-generation Romantics rejected the Enlightenment's sharp division between humans and their non-human environments, as Matthew Taylor argues, "these claims to cosmic kinship are premised on an idealist subsumption of the external world to the individual ego, a metaphysical reduction that parallels not only the physical exploitation of the earth but also the subjugation of 'naturally' passive women and racial others" (354). As these two poems demonstrate, Wordsworthian ideology still heavily privileged a particularly male-, middle- and upper-class observation of the human (female, impoverished, linguistically-othered) interacting with the natural world. Wordsworth idealizes the working-class, laboring female body as being at one with her natural surroundings, illustrating a female unconscious enmeshment with nature in opposition to the educated male's conscious striving for sublime oneness with nature. In contrast, Eliot's examination of the nobility of rural labor demonstrates a web of human and non-human connections, while avoiding an egoistic and ultimately anthropocentric demand for absolute oneness with nature. *Adam Bede* acknowledges that nature is sometimes in conflict with the darkness and tragedy of human life. Nature cannot possibly reflect individuals' emotions. There is, instead, always dissonance between the human experience and non-human nature— "what

wonder that Nature's mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives?" reflects the omniscient narrator of *Adam Bede* (Eliot 264). In contrast to Wordsworth's sentiment that "Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her;" Eliot's more nuanced understanding realizes that nature is often unfeeling despite our own Romantic human longing to feel oneness with the trees, flowers, and skies around us (Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" 125-126). Unlike the nature of Wordsworth, Eliot's nature cannot respond to the individual's yearning, and in fact, we "must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of—to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more" (Ibid.). Eliot (here in her most-Eliot fashion) emphasizes that in place of the nurturing nature that we long for, humanity must instead take comfort in and help each other against the backdrop of detached, unfeeling nature. Eliot, too, has a more ambiguous, complex understanding of nature and gender, embodied in the figure of Hetty Sorrel. Just like Wordsworth's Highland girl and solitary reaper, Hetty is a working-class rural young woman whose beauty is interpreted by the men around her as indicating a soft, unaffected nature. This misinterpretation interweaves through the central tragedy at the heart of Eliot's novel. *Adam Bede*, while reflecting many Wordsworthian qualities, simultaneously inverts the figure of the Highland girl—the unworldly, sweet, and beautiful rural girl, inherently enmeshed in nature—and sets in her place the much more complex, troubled character of Hetty Sorrel, unfeeling and coquettish, convicted of killing her baby and sentenced to death.

Wordsworth as the Romantic Ecologist

The widely held understanding of William Wordsworth as an ecological thinker and environmentally embedded writer came to prominence in part through Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) which marked a new moment in

both ecocriticism in general and understanding Wordsworth as a holistic green thinker in particular. Bate argues against Marxist and New Historicist critics, including Jerome McGann, who had throughout the 1980s attempted to read against the grain, purporting that “Wordsworth was not a nature poet” or as Bate sardonically describes “that there is no such thing as nature, or that if there is such a thing and Wordsworth was interested in it then that interest was very suspect on political grounds” (*Romantic Ecology* 4). Bate’s argues that there is more truth to the way many average readers perceive Wordsworth, as a “nature poet,” than that of many twentieth-century Marxist and New Historicist critics. Additionally, Bate connects commonplace perceptions of Wordsworth with a longer history of Wordsworth critique and reception history, noting that “The common reader’s view of Wordsworth derives from the Victorian way of reading him, John Stuart Mill’s way, John Ruskin’s, Leslie Stephen’s” and “unfashionable as that way now is in literary circles, it might just be the most useful way of approaching Wordsworth” (Ibid.). Ultimately, the central thrust of Bate’s text is that “the way in which William Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to enjoy or to endure life was by teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world” (Ibid.). His thesis, albeit a reiterative one, based on nineteenth-century reception of Wordsworth, contains a more contemporary twist. Bate identifies Wordsworth as a distinctively ecological thinker and writer. The modern usage of the term ecology itself reflects the “web of complex relations” between plants and animals apparent in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) (Ibid. 37).¹⁵ Bate identifies Wordsworth’s “Romantic ecology” as the poet’s call to his readers to see themselves within a “single vast ecosystem” in which “there is ‘one life’ within us and abroad” (Ibid. 40).

¹⁵ *On the Origin of Species* (1859) was published nine years after the death of Wordsworth in 1850 (Gill “Wordsworth, William (1770–1850)”).

While Bate's perspective reilluminates Wordsworth as a nature poet and as a holistic ecological writer, *Romantic Ecology* fails to acknowledge how Wordsworth understands both nature and the non-human through a particularly individualistic, often egocentric, lens. The "nature" of Wordsworth's poetry and travel writing is one inevitably shaped by his own positionality in the world—educated, socially connected, male, white, and at the heart of the British Empire. As Scott Hess argues, "'nature', far from an immediate or transparent given, is always socially constructed in an ongoing dialectic, at once material and ideological, between the human and more-than-human world" (208). And while, as Hess argues, "Wordsworth celebrated deep feelings of harmony with nature, yet he tended to express that harmony [...] in terms of a detached visual consciousness rather than physical embeddedness and participation in the environment" (211). This "visual consciousness" in contrast to a "physical embeddedness and participation in the environment" reflects what I argue are the key differences between Wordsworth's understanding and depiction of nature and the representations of nature by Victorian writers, in particular, George Eliot, who considered herself to have a deep affinity with Wordsworth from adolescence until her dying days, believing throughout her life that she "had a relationship with Wordsworth based on sympathetic identification" (Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* 147).

Wordsworth's Victorian Legacy

The prolific influence of Wordsworth's work on not just Victorian writers and thinkers, but on the general reading public, has been well-documented and analyzed in works such as Stephen Gill's *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (1998). Wordsworth's writing influenced Victorian ideas on a great number of issues: the concept of Englishness in the nineteenth century; the characteristics and character of ruralness and rural people; the nature of childhood; and treatment

of the impoverished. Turns of phrases from Wordsworth's work became commonplace sayings during the period (Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* 5).¹⁶ Perhaps most significantly, the Victorians were highly influenced by Wordsworthian ideas of nature and the relationship between the human and the natural world. This correlation between nature and Wordsworth's depiction of nature in his poetry becomes so ingrained in the cultural memory that, as Hess notes, "Many Victorians conflated nature and William Wordsworth's poetry so strongly that the two began to seem consubstantial. Hence Matthew Arnold in the 'Introduction' to his 1879 *Poems of Wordsworth* wrote that 'Nature herself seems, I say, to take the pen out of his hand, and to write for him with her own bare, sheer, penetrating power'" (207). In Arnold's imagination, Wordsworth is not just simply an oracle for nature, interpreting her as a medium, but he acts as a conduit through which nature, herself, speaks. Wordsworth's words are nature's very own words.

Poems, in Two Volumes (1807)

Two poems that demonstrate illuminating angles to understanding Wordsworth's interpretation of nature and integration within a landscape are from his publication, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, published in 1807. The volume itself, which "ought to have been a triumph," was a critical failure (Gill, "Wordsworth, William (1770–1850)"). The original collection was considered much too earnest, too forward, too experimental and without "taste" for the reviewer and co-founder of the *Edinburgh Review*, Francis Jeffrey, who conducted "the most thoroughgoing of the many onslaughts which, while generally conceding merit to the sonnets, castigated the bulk of the lyrics as puerile trash" in the October 1807 edition of the *Edinburgh*

¹⁶ The line, "The light that never was on sea or land" taken from Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont" (1807), was utilized by both Edward Burne-Jones and Thomas Hardy "without feeling required to identify the source" given the ubiquity of the phrase during the period (Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* 5). Such examples indicate that Wordsworth's poetry evolved into turns of phrases which in turn built a shared Romantic language around aesthetic experience and visual art.

Review (Ibid.). Jeffrey, who would remain a longtime nemesis of Wordsworth, conceded that, “Even in the worst of these productions, there are, no doubt, occasional little traits of delicate feeling and original fancy” (*William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*). Yet Jeffrey insisted that these occasional positives “are quite lost and obscured in the mass of childishness and insipidity with which they are incorporated” (Ibid.). Likewise in an unsigned review from *Le Beau Monde or Literary and Fashionable Magazine*, also in October 1807, the anonymous critic concludes that: “Upon the whole we have a most unfavourable opinion of the volumes before us; a few beauties indeed are scattered abroad through their pages; but, like violets, they lie very low, and are difficult of discovery. Mr. Wordsworth has ruined himself by his affectation of simplicity” (Ibid.). This brief overview of the collection’s critical reception is intended to illuminate the context of the publication in which “To a Highland Girl, at Inversneyde, Upon Loch Lomond” and “The Solitary Reaper” first appeared and how they were perceived by their first readers. Many of the poems in this early career collection are now considered some of the poet’s most emblematic pieces that remain most closely associated with Wordsworthian Romanticism in the public consciousness. *Poems, in Two Volumes* includes “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” also known as “Daffodils,” “Yarrow Unvisited” (also a part of the Scotland poems) and “The World Is Too Much with Us.” The poems in this collection are deeply nature-based and lift up common, laboring people into elevated positions worthy of the reading public’s attention, all the while proclaiming their humanity and beauty with such an earnestness and innocence of manner, that the poems were bound to leave many reviewers discomforted and even hostile. But, as I argue in this chapter, Wordsworth as the speaker and as the poet, remains centered in the poems, but aloof—observant but unintegrated with laboring people and the landscape in which they labor and in which Wordsworth wanders.

The Wordsworths in Scotland

Both “To a Highland Girl, at Inversneyde, Upon Loch Lomond” and “The Solitary Reaper” in addition to “Yarrow Unvisited” and others published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* were derived from the travel experiences of Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy in the late summer and early autumn of 1803. Accompanying them on their journey northward was Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In her recollections of the three’s travels, posthumously published as *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland, A.D. 1803*,¹⁷ Dorothy Wordsworth describes an interaction with two girls, a pair of sisters, near Loch Lomond in the Highlands, “One of the girls was exceedingly beautiful; and the figures of both of them, in grey plaids falling to their feet, their faces only being uncovered, excited our attention before we spoke to them; but they answered us so sweetly that we were quite delighted, at the same time that they stared at us with an innocent look of wonder” (107-108). It is not only the two Highland girls’ beauty that draws the attention of the English travelers, but also the girls’ distance from urban spaces, so often associated with corruption by the Romantics. With “their innocent look of wonder,” (implied to be derived from their ruralness and presumed lack of education) and covered in plaid with only their faces revealed, it is the girls’ lack of pretense and cosmopolitanism that Dorothy and her brother admire. Dorothy elaborates further on the same two girls, declaring that the memory of the two sisters have become so intertwined with their memories of Loch Lomond that,¹⁸ “the beautiful figure and face of the elder, come to my mind whenever I think of the ferry-house and waterfall of Loch Lomond, and I never think of the two girls but the whole image of that romantic spot is before me, a living image, as it will be to my dying day” (112-113). In the very next line,

¹⁷ Sadly, Dorothy Wordsworth’s travel writings of this 1803 Scottish journey remained unpublished during her lifetime despite a publisher having been sought at one point (Kappes 66).

¹⁸ Interestingly, Loch Lomond marks the Highland Boundary Fault, the point of division between the Lowlands and the Highlands of Scotland (Nicolson et al.).

Dorothy records that, “The following poem was written by William not long after our return from Scotland” (113). The poem that she includes is “To a Highland Girl, at Inversneyde, Upon Loch Lomond” in which her brother William transforms the interactions recorded by Dorothy into four stanzas of lyric poetry. The poem maintains remarkable similarities to Dorothy’s depiction of the interaction with the two girls near Loch Lomond. Wordsworth reworks the memory into a piece which focuses entirely on the physically striking eldest sister, whom the speaker refers to as the “Sweet Highland girl” (1). Just as Dorothy notes the sisters’ “innocent look of wonder,” her brother William similarly describes that he “could trace / Benignity and home-bred sense / Ripening in perfect innocence” in the Highland girl (25-27).

Wordsworth emphasizes in both the first and last stanzas how the sisters’ home (in this rendition, just the eldest Highland sister’s home) is situated, all the while emphasizing the home’s integration: “This little bay; a quiet road / That holds in shelter thy Abode—” (9-10). Not only is the girl’s home sheltered within the bay and “quiet road” near Loch Lomond, but the teenage girl’s embeddedness with her native landscape is a part of that home’s integration with the land and sea: “the cabin small, / The lake, the bay, the waterfall; / And Thee, the Spirit of them all!” (76-78). Unlike the speaker who stands outside of the scene, the Highland girl is one with the landscape—she has grown up and dwells in a modest home integrated with nature, nestled near “the lake, the bay, the waterfall;” (Ibid. 77). More than just her home being integrated, the young girl herself embodies these physical spaces in her human form, as Wordsworth addresses the Highland girl, proclaiming that “And Thee, the Spirit of them all!” as the final line of the poem (78).

While Dorothy interacts with the Scottish landscape in community with other figures, including that of the two Highland sisters, their family, and with her brother and Coleridge, on

the other hand, William reshapes the same tale into a purely observational and removed experience. The narrative speaker acts as the unseen male voyeur, observing the Highland girl from a distance, wishing for a closer relationship with her, “I would have / Some claim upon thee, if I could,” (56-57). A closer relationship, some tie between himself and the girl, the speaker proclaims would be “What joy to hear thee, and to see! / Thy elder Brother I would be, / Thy Father—anything to thee!” (59-61). Here the speaker only further reemphasizes his distance and his outsider-status from the scene and the landscape by expressing his desire for belonging within the scene and the life of the figure of the Highland girl. Much is projected onto the figure of the girl of the lyric poem, and her embeddedness in the landscape, I would argue is based in large part on her linguistic and cultural alterity as well as her gender, class, and education. Wordsworth’s narrator, closely aligned with his own identity, remains outside of the landscape, but this is not due to genre conventions alone. Of course, he represents the observational narrative voice that is essential to the lyric poetic form, but he isn’t integrated within the nature being observed nor into the wider landscape. Arguably this is because Wordsworth’s poetic narrator is not the kind of individual to be enmeshed in his own individual Wordsworthian conception of nature. The Highland girl, lacking education and polish, is admired for these qualities, “For never saw I mien, or face, / In which more plainly I could trace / Benignity and home-bred sense / Ripening in perfect innocence” (24-27). Her goodness and good sense are born out of and dependent upon her ruralness, her distance from cosmopolitan centers of both education and fashion, in particular, her growth and development being entirely within and shaped by her remote homeland—again, her “Ripening in perfect innocence” (27). She is one with her landscape; throughout her life she has been nurtured and protected by the wilderness of her Loch Lomond home. As Wordsworth proclaims, “Here scattered, like a random seed, /

Remote from men,” she has remained sheltered by her home’s isolation—tucked away from the human corruption and false sophistication of more peopled, less “wild” spaces. Far away from Edinburgh or the horrors of London, far from fashion fades, the Highland girl “...dost not need / The embarrassed look of shy distress, / And maidenly shamefacedness:” (29-31). There is no need for airs of feigned innocence, but instead the Highland girl simply “wear'st upon thy forehead clear / The freedom of a Mountaineer:” (32-33). Free from artifice, free from fashion and corruption, Wordsworth’s Highland girl belongs to the mountains and lakes. She is native to her land, untouched by human corruption, and what is more, in Wordsworth’s worldview, she possesses an otherness that makes her more removed from his own Anglo-centrism, and closer to nature. The young woman at the center of the poem knows little English, a fact that is also recorded in Dorothy’s travel memoir. Wordsworth describes the native Scots Gaelic speaker’s struggle to express herself in English, her searching for words to express “thoughts that lie beyond the reach / Of thy few words of English speech: / A bondage sweetly brooked, a strife / That gives thy gestures grace and life!” (40-43). Her struggle to express herself is deemed charming by her English visitors. Interestingly, this linguistic difficulty brings forth a comparison between the girl and a bird, the “strife” to make her message clear reminds the speaker of when he has “Seen birds of tempest-loving kind— / Thus beating up against the wind” (45-46). In other words, her linguistic differences, her cultural alterity makes the Highland Girl reminiscent of a wild animal.¹⁹ The culminating factors of the Highland girl’s cultural and linguistic identities, as well as her class, education, ruralness, and her gender make for an observed figure

¹⁹ For more on the creation of Highland identity for English tourists, see Kenneth McNeil’s monograph, *Scotland, Britain, Empire: Writing the Highlands, 1760-1860* (2007) and his dissertation, *Inside and Outside a Nation: Highland Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1998). Additionally, see Katherine Haldane Grenier’s *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770–1914: Creating Caledonia* (2005).

that, in the speaker's mind, is fully enmeshed with the nature around her. This is contrasted with the more worldly status of the lyric speaker.

"The Solitary Reaper" exhibits closely related characteristics and subject matter to the poem to "To a Highland Girl." It is as if the two are sister poems, representing the actual two original Highland sisters as recorded in Dorothy Wordsworth's travel accounts. Also first appearing in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807), "The Solitary Reaper" possesses a similar arrangement of figures in the case of subject and speaker and their relation to one another. Within the first two lines — "Behold her, single in the field, / Yon solitary Highland Lass"— it is immediately apparent to the reader that as in "To a Highland Girl," once more there is a young woman alone and visible to the speaker who observes her from the distance. She exists entirely unaware of his presence and observation of her (1-2). The young woman performs the intensive manual labor of harvesting grain by hand with a sickle and binding the wheat or barley alone, as the speaker records, "Alone she cuts and binds the grain" (5). It is the intensiveness of the work she performs that interests the speaker, but it is also the fact that her reaping combines the work of harvesting via sickle—explicitly Biblical in its imagery and evocative of the nobility of rural labor—with the creative labor of song. This, of course, ignores the very backbreaking nature of the work. Although the speaker describes the reaper's song as possessing "melancholy," her song is described as a welcome relief to those who hear her notes, "No Nightingale did ever chaunt / More welcome notes to weary bands / Of travellers in some shady haunt, / Among Arabian sands" (9-12). Here, her song exists not only as solace as if for those seeking relief in the desert, but there is an association between her song and Orientalized alterity with the reference to "Arabian sands." Arguably, this reference indicates that, the Highland young woman occupies a closer but still distant positionality to the center of the British Empire and to the speaker as an

Otherized individual. As with “To a Highland Girl,” the linguistic alterity of the subject and object of observation is emphasized by the speaker. “The Solitary Reaper” is composed of only four stanzas, the third of which is devoted entirely to discussing the unknowability of the content of the young reaper’s song. The Gaelic lyrics of the chant remain a mystery to the English-speaking observer, who implores of no one (as no one is present besides the speaker and the observed reaper), “Will no one tell me what she sings? —” (17). The speaker here finds the use of Gaelic to be frustrating rather than charming.²⁰ The difference between the frustration of not knowing here and the use of Gaelic in “To a Highland Girl” is that in “The Solitary Reaper” the “bondage” of language ignorance belongs entirely to the English observer and not to the Gaelic-speaking young woman. The speaker has no way of ever knowing whether the harvesting woman’s song concerns “...old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago:” or is it instead “some more humble lay, / Familiar matter of to-day? / Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,” (19-23). Her inner life remains veiled to the speaker, as does the contents of the song that are so striking to him—lyrics that fill the landscape so profusely that “...the Vale profound / Is overflowing with the sound” of her song (7-8). While the speaker can stop and watch her from his vantage point, presumably unseen, he cannot access the meaning or history of her song, nor garner any details about her own state from her chosen song.

The personal characteristics and virtues of the “solitary Highland Lass” of “The Solitary Reaper” are not directly correlated with the woman’s enmeshment with and belonging to landscape in which she labors and lives, as it is explicitly discussed in regard to the young woman of “To a Highland Girl.” And yet the reaper, too, exists as an integrated figure within the landscape. Wordsworth depicts the reaper’s harvesting labor as noble and ancient peasants’ work.

²⁰ Such linguistic troubles do not give the speaker’s “gestures grace and life” (“To a Highland Girl” 43).

Her song makes her labor all the more idealized, but it also makes her closer to nature in the eyes of her observer, the speaker of the poem, who says of the young woman with the scythe that “No Nightingale did ever chaunt / More welcome notes to weary bands / Of travellers...” (9-11). The comparison between a vocalist and a songbird is not in itself striking, but it is particularly intriguing given that the companion poem also makes the comparison between an observed working-class, Highland, Gaelic-speaking young woman and a bird. As mentioned previously, “To a Highland Girl” likens the observed and admired woman’s struggle to speak English with the struggle of “...birds of tempest-loving kind— / Thus beating up against the wind” (45-46) while in “The Solitary Reaper” the observed young woman is compared to a nightingale in the desert.

Wordsworth’s strong association between women and nature stems, of course, from centuries of continued correlation between women and the so-called natural world—an association that eco-feminists have long argued is weaponized in order to denigrate both nature and women (Davion 233).²¹ Within Wordsworth’s own period, according to Hess,

In Romantic-period understandings, male reason and imagination demonstrated its power through the ability to abstract and to generalize, composing the various parts of the landscape into aesthetic unity, while women, like children, the poor, and the uneducated, were associated instead with the particular and the concrete—the former defined as observers of, the latter as figures in, the landscape. Yet these two roles, seemingly separate, actually depended on one another, as the female “beautiful” of embodied

²¹ Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) are the most prominent initial examples of this argument. Merchant’s thesis centers on the Western shift from an organic to a mechanistic worldview during the Scientific Revolution and how this shift resulted in the devaluation and denigration of both nature and women.

presence complemented and helped to define the masculine “sublime” of intellect and imagination. (Hess, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* 189)

Here, Hess argues that—just as demonstrated above in regard to “To a Highland Girl” and “The Solitary Reaper,” Romantic era culture designated (beautiful) women to be the observed by the male poet’s gaze, the “embodied presence” that in contrast to, assisted in the defining of the observer and his sublime male imagination.

It is interesting to note that while Wordsworth continually embraces the gendered correlation between women and nature, Dorothy Wordsworth actively resisted such associations in her own writing. William Synder notes how distinctly Dorothy and William Wordsworth viewed gendered nature, and that for Dorothy, “Nature is more visual experience than anything else; she constantly attends to lighting and texture and, *deliberately*,” Synder argues, “overlooks possibilities for maternal symbolism or personification, usually referring to Nature with the impersonal pronoun ‘it,’ and not with ‘she’ or ‘her,’ as did her brother” (147).²² Wordsworth’s representation of nature and the gendered idealization of nature is resisted in his sister’s works (again, unpublished during her lifetime), and as I will argue, this Wordsworthian gendered idealization of nature was complicated in the second half of the nineteenth century by the most Wordsworthian of the Victorian novelists in a particularly Wordsworthian novel, *Adam Bede*.

²² Italicization added for emphasis.

George Eliot's Reply: Hetty Sorrel and Romanticized Laboring, Rural Women

George Eliot's first novel in many ways remains an ode to her love for Wordsworth's oeuvre.²³ She begins her novel with a quotation from *The Excursion*: "Book Sixth the Churchyard Among the Mountains" (1814) in which the speaker is a figure known as The Pastor:

...so that ye may have
Clear images before your gladdened eyes
Of nature's unambitious underwood,
And flowers that prosper in the shade. And when
I speak of such among my flock as swerved
Or fell, those only shall be singled out
Upon whose lapse, or error, something more
Than brotherly forgiveness may attend;²⁴ (651-658)

Eliot utilizes intertextuality throughout *Adam Bede* and all of her subsequent novels, showing a particular preference for quotations from Wordsworth's decades of work. These quotations serve as useful reminders to the reader of the sentimental power of Wordsworth and his vision of nature, which Eliot in turn undermines and complicates in the novel. According to Gill, it is Wordsworth who "provides more epigraphs for her novels than anyone except Shakespeare" (*Wordsworth and the Victorians* 147). Not only does Eliot share the "high seriousness" of Wordsworth, but her engagement with his work as both a reader and as a novelist can be seen through her reworking of Wordsworthian themes and situations, often concerning

²³ *Adam Bede*, a historical novel for Eliot, is set in the year 1799—just one year after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. Notably, Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's revolutionary publication is mentioned by the character of Arthur Donnithorne within the novel. Arthur's reaction to the collection is largely critical, he claims that "Most of them seem to be twaddling stuff" with the exception of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Eliot 59-60).

²⁴ My version, the Oxford Scholarly edition of *The Excursion*, differs from George Eliot's quotation by a single word on line 651: "so that ye *shall* have" as opposed to Eliot's "so that ye *may* have."

social issues in rural communities, including poverty, labor, and interpersonal conflict and grief. *The Excursion* “published in 1814 as an elegant and costly quarto [...] announced to the world for the first time its author’s larger ambitions. The titlepage declared the poem to be only a ‘portion’ of *The Recluse*, and a preface explained what that work was ultimately to consist of, namely three poems ‘containing views of Man, Nature, and Society’” (Gill “Wordsworth, William (1770–1850)”). *The Excursion*, although negatively received by Coleridge, Byron, and of course, Wordsworth’s indefatigable enemies at the *Edinburgh Review*, ultimately contributed to Wordsworth’s enlarging his literary reputation outside of a small group of admirers. Keats even described *The Excursion* as “one of the ‘three things to rejoice at in this Age’ (letter from 10 Jan 1818; *The Letters of John Keats*, 1814–1821, ed. H. E. Rollins, 2 vols., 1958, 1.203) (qtd. in Gill “Wordsworth, William (1770–1850)”). Eliot’s choice of *The Excursion* quotation provided above appears to have much to do with its correlation to the central narrative surrounding Hetty Sorrel and her fall from respectability and her crime—the killing of her newborn child. Eliot clearly correlates “such among my flock as swerved” to both Hetty and to Arthur Donnithorne, who violates the respected code of conduct and takes advantage of a vulnerable younger woman beneath his station in life. The character of the Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris, embodies the Christian concept of forgiveness, visiting Hetty in prison and urging the young woman to repent and seek God’s forgiveness at the conclusion of the narrative. Given Dinah’s position as a lay Methodist preacher and spiritual guide and as an elder relative of Hetty’s, it is both God’s flock and Dinah’s own flock that the lines, “I speak of such among my flock as swerved / Or fell,” refers to. Throughout the novel, Hetty had represented a focal point for Dinah’s evangelizing efforts and spiritual caretaking, but despite this, the lamb, Hetty, has fallen and her “error” being

so grave requires “something more / Than brotherly forgiveness” (Wordsworth, *The Excursion* 657-658).

The first-time reader of *Adam Bede*, then, cannot help but have Wordsworth in mind as they begin the story—although such a reader would not yet have the knowledge of what this Wordsworthian epigraph refers to. The rural setting and the hero of the eponymous novel, Adam Bede, are all thematically in line with Wordsworth’s own corpus. Adam, a noble figure of the rural laboring class, physically striking, described “as fine a young fellow as ever I saw in my life [...] a carpenter, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow with black hair and black eyes, marching along like a soldier” (Eliot 15). His laboring body is dignified by the manual labor, and the omniscient narrative voice clearly delights in Adam’s physical embodiment. Adam is introduced in his carpenter’s shop in the opening scene of the novel, and in an interesting gender reversal from “To a Highland Girl,” Adam’s laboring body in motion is approvingly noted, “a broad chest, belonged to a large-boned muscular man nearly six feet high, with a back so flat and a head so well poised that when he drew himself up to take a more distant survey of his work, he had the air of a soldier standing at ease” (Ibid. 6). Likewise, just as in “The Solitary Reaper,” Adam’s physical labor is elevated by the accompaniment of his singing. His voice, like his physical appearance, possesses vigor and strength, the narrator noting that “Such a voice could only come from a broad chest” (Ibid.). Adam, like the harvesting young woman of Wordsworth’s poem, elevates the manual work of the rural working class (already respected by both Wordsworth and Eliot) to something more creative and artistic. In doing so, Adam in this scene not only recalls the pastoral tradition, but gazes forward to William Morris’s socialist utopian ideal of meaningful manual labor infused with artistic handcrafting as seen in his science fiction-esque, *News from Nowhere*.

Where Eliot's novel does depart from the Wordsworthian tradition rests in its depiction of women, those women's relationship to nature, and the hero's romanticized delusions concerning the characters of the women around him. Eliot refuses to idealize women in *Adam Bede*, so much so that some critics have accused her of misogyny, particularly in her depiction of Hetty Sorrel, a vacuous young woman, who becomes romantically entangled with the local squire and subsequently commits infanticide, leading to a death sentence (later shortened to transportation). While George Eliot might very well have been striving against her own internalized misogyny in her fiction, I would argue that Hetty is not a repeated female character within Eliot's oeuvre nor is she emblematic of what Eliot saw as female qualities. The uniqueness and eeriness of Hetty's character marks the novel as both a realist novel and a novel that rejects romanticized pastoral women as described in "To a Highland Girl" and "The Solitary Reaper." Hetty is seemingly the perfect candidate to be the rural hero's pastoral love interest—a dairymaid to Adam's carpenter; and a young woman whose beauty the narrator describes as "a spring-tide beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling" (Eliot 77). But immediately this explicitly pastoral imagery is inverted, as the narrator concludes that Hetty's beauty belongs to a creature who acts by "circumventing you by a false air of innocence—the innocence of a young star-browed calf, for example, that, being inclined for a promenade out of bounds, leads you a severe steeplechase over hedge and ditch, and only comes to a stand in the middle of a bog" (Ibid.). Clearly foreshadowing her fate as a murderess in addition to illusions to her running away from home, this description of Hetty's appearance and character displays a more forgiving tone than some of the darker and more menacing illusions to Hetty's lack of inner life.

Hetty's name first appears in the narrative when she is referred to by Dinah Morris, the other central female character of the novel. Speaking with concern to Adam's brother, Seth Bede,

Dinah worries about “that poor wandering lamb Hetty Sorrel” (31), having taken notice of her younger cousin’s deep vanity.²⁵ Vanity being the centerpiece of her existence, Hetty wields her beauty knowingly, with “a self-possessed, coquettish air, slyly conscious that no turn of her head was lost” (Eliot 76).²⁶ Readers are told that “Hetty was quite used to the thought that people liked to look at her” (Ibid.). While she desires the admiration of those around her, Hetty has little emotional depth and feels a sort of emptiness in response to the interests and cares of others.

While Hetty’s character is predicated on immense vanity, Eliot makes clear that there is something darker than simply that. As Rae Greiner indicates, Hetty is defined by “A kind of infantile deadness [...] an elemental heartlessness that, next to sociopaths—and kittens—only babies possess” (107). There is a hollowness to Hetty that her aunt, Rachel Poyser, recognizes, as Eliot’s narrator makes clear: “it is not surprising that Mrs. Poyser, with her keenness and abundant opportunity for observation, should have formed a tolerably fair estimate of what might be expected from Hetty in the way of feeling” (Eliot 141). Mrs. Poyser notes how with Hetty “there’s nothing seems to give her a turn i’ th’ inside, not even when we thought Totty had tumbled into the pit” (Totty being Mrs. Poyser’s young child and Hetty’s little cousin whom Hetty has had a large part in caring for) (Ibid.). Not much besides shiny objects of beauty appeal to Hetty and her “pleasure-craving nature” (Eliot 301). Even her doomed love for Arthur Donnithorne is predicated on the feelings of luxury that she associates with him and his station; all the while she associates Adam—whom readers are told is the more handsome of the two men—with a lack thereof. Arthur’s “white hands, a gold chain, occasional regimentals, and wealth and grandeur immeasurable—those were the warm rays that set poor Hetty’s heart

²⁵ This is the first in-text reference (after the introductory Wordsworth epigraph) of a recurring pastoral (and Biblical) allusion to Hetty as a wandering, lost sheep or a sheep without its flock.

²⁶ This is a far cry from Wordsworth’s Highland girl who exists “Remote from men, Thou dost not need / The embarrassed look of shy distress, / And maidenly shamefacedness:” (“To a Highland Girl” 29-31).

vibrating and playing its little foolish tunes” (88). The narrator makes clear that Hetty’s “was a luxurious and vain nature—not a passionate one,” and that “if Adam had been rich and could have given her these things, she loved him well enough to marry him” (91).²⁷ While it is true that, as Greiner asserts, the novel treats Hetty’s inability to reciprocate Adam’s love “as grave moral and emotional shortcomings rather than the ordinary unfeeling of adolescence or unreciprocated desire,” I would argue that Eliot demonstrates Hetty’s lack of capacity to experience *any* warmth of feeling that does not involve the implication of wealth and ease for herself (108).²⁸

Despite the Wordsworthian perception that a rural young woman, raised on a farm in 1799, would somehow be shielded from the emotional shallowness and feigned shyness that was associated with women of cosmopolitan backgrounds, Eliot’s Hetty herself “laid her small plots and imagined her little scenes of cunning blandishment [...] quite as well as if she had been an elegantly clad coquette alone in her boudoir” (Eliot 288). The figure of Wordsworth’s anonymous Highland girl stands in direct contrast to Hetty Sorrel as a mirrored ideal to Eliot’s realist portrayal. Hetty, just like Wordsworth’s figure, looks like an angelic, strikingly beautiful rural young woman, laboring on a farm and breathing the fresh air of the countryside. But despite her environment, sheltered upbringing, and milk and roses beauty, she is innately a sensual and selfish individual. The character of Hetty demonstrates that despite a rural upbringing making butter in a beautiful landscape a young woman does not necessarily possess a “forehead clear” (Wordsworth, “To a Highland Girl” 32). In fact, Hetty only finds joy making butter as the

²⁷ Greiner points to how in regard to Hetty, “As Dinah sees it, she has a ‘blank in [her] nature,’ an ‘absence of any warm, self-devoting love’ whose most vivid proof is an infant buried alive (143; ch. 15)” (108).

²⁸ Hetty appears unable to access empathy. Upon learning that Adam’s father has just drowned, the omniscient narrator makes clear how surface level Hetty’s response is: “‘Oh, how dreadful!’ said Hetty, looking serious, but not deeply affected” (Eliot 87).

movements allow her the chance to show off her beauty. The readers are told that while she labors, she “tossed and patted the butter her pound of butter with quite a self-possessed, coquettish air” (Eliot 76). Eliot directly responds to such romanticized visions of rural working, country women, when she writes of Hetty’s scheming: “For if a country beauty in clumsy shoes be only shallow-hearted enough, it is astonishing how closely her mental processes may resemble those of a lady in society and crinoline, who applies her refined intellect to the problem of committing indiscretions without compromising herself” (288). This stands in stark contrast to the young woman viewed by Wordsworth’s narrator in “To a Highland Girl,” who lacks all airs and possesses “Benignity and home-bred sense / Ripening in perfect innocence” (26-27). Of course, Wordsworth’s narrator, the viewer from afar, does not know the young Highland woman nor her character; he but reads into her countenance—a moment of physiognomic projection.

Eliot’s Adam, much like Wordsworth’s narrator, projects an enormous amount onto Hetty’s inner life based on her outer appearance. Although in Eliot’s novel, Adam’s mistaken judgement could not be clearer. As Greiner notes, “The rock solidness of Hetty’s insides, invisible to Adam, is relentlessly pointed out to readers” (107). Eliot intends for even the shallowest of readers to imbue the fact that Adam’s constant, albeit generous, misreading of Hetty is at the very least an emotionally fatal misreading if not something more deadly. The hero of her novel does not read women’s inner lives through their actions, but through what he feels that their appearance should indicate.²⁹ Adam, his name choice alluding to the Biblical creation story, places himself as the author, the creator in his repeated and imaginative projections upon

²⁹ Again and again, Hetty’s actions and responses are ignored by Adam, who instead creates imaginative positive motivations for her actions—actions that would otherwise be perceived as uninterested and/or vain and shallow.

his canvas—Hetty. Functioning as a failed physiognomist, his blindness acts as an indictment of male projection, including projection by the male author.

Adam's fatal blindness to Hetty's rotten core is addressed early on by Eliot's narrator—long before the consequences of Hetty's lack of sharpness and empathy as well as Adam's gross misreading of her character are fully revealed to the reader. The narrator's tone is on the surface exculpatory,³⁰ but I would argue that this tone is more mocking than truly excusing ill-judged male perceptions of women. Speaking of Adam (and men similarly charmed by a beauty such as Hetty's), the narrator slyly notes that, "Every man under such circumstances [that of being taken with a woman's innocent-like beauty] is conscious of being a great physiognomist. Nature, he knows, has a language of her own, which she uses with strict veracity, and he considers himself an adept in the language" (Eliot 138).³¹ In such lines, the narrative voice reveals a sarcastic disdain for the confidence of men in reading the appearance of women. Bordering on the scornful, the narrator continues, "Nature has written out his bride's character for him in those exquisite lines of cheek and lip and chin, [...] How she will dote on her children! She is almost a child herself" (Ibid.). But of course, Hetty possesses the selfishness of a small child, but without the docility and lack of self-awareness. The much darker irony though is that by the end of the novel Hetty will have killed her baby, making the latter line all the more viscerally impactful. Eliot's omniscient narrator makes much of not just Adam's, but all men's presumption of being

³⁰ The narrator makes a seemingly obligatory excuse for the novel's hero in this discussion of male overconfidence and misreading, "Before you despise Adam as deficient in penetration, pray ask yourself if you were ever predisposed to believe evil of any pretty woman—if you ever *could*, without hard head breaking demonstration, believe evil of the *one* supremely pretty woman who has bewitched you" (Eliot 139).

³¹ The issue of physiognomy, still an influential theory throughout much of the nineteenth century, and the problem of incongruity between an individual's outer appearance and inner character remains contentious and examined throughout *Adam Bede* and Eliot's novels. As Mrs. Irwine—apparently a confident physiognomist—proclaims, "Nature never makes a ferret in the shape of a mastiff. You'll never persuade me that I can't tell what men are by their outsides" (Eliot 59). Interestingly, this a moment of gendered physiognomic arrogance reversal. It is Mrs. Irwine who is convinced she can best read the inner lives of men from "their outsides" (Ibid.).

able to read nature's language, such men who consider "himself an adept in the language" (Ibid. 138). It remains a remarkably cutting assertion in light of the novel's ending and the brutal clarity of Adam's lack of perception. According to the narrator, men as observers see women not for who they are, not by their actions or words, but by their features and their bodies. These embodied signs are all written out by a feminized "nature." But it is men, such as Adam, and such as Wordsworth, who feel confident that they are the best readers of nature (in both its human and non-human expressions) and that women's appearance must inevitably contain markers that they can best discern women's inner lives from.

While Jonathan Bate and like-minded critics have characterized Wordsworth as an ecologically-centered poet with all of the integrative embeddedness that "ecology" carries with it, Hess argues that the "the perceptual structures" of Wordsworth's poems indicate something quite different. Examining one of Wordsworth's most beloved and well-read pieces, "I wandered lonely as a Cloud" (also simply known as "Daffodils"), Hess critiques the idea that "Wordsworth rejected the separation of nature and observer typical of picturesque landscape vision" (Hess, "Nature and the environment" 209-10). And that, in fact, "the structure of experience in the poem [Daffodils], stopping to compose an aesthetic view from a specific stationed viewpoint, then capturing that view to carry it away for future imaginative engagements, is classically picturesque" as opposed to an integrative ecological position, as Bate would argue (Ibid.). Hess asserts that while some critics argue that Wordsworth's nature-based poetry represents "the harmonious integration of human mind and nature, in which a Cartesian desire for separation and mastery is replaced by a deep identification with and participation in the holistic processes of nature," Wordsworth's nature remains set apart from the human speaker who distances himself from the actual scene, projecting ideas upon the landscape without being actually integrated with

or interacting with the landscape. Similarly, in both “To a Highland Girl” and “The Solitary Reaper,” I would argue that Wordsworth’s idea of nature continues the picturesque tradition of observational landscape viewing and does not resist Cartesian ways of understanding the body and its relation to the so-called “natural world.” While rural and impoverished individuals are often integrated into those scenes and those individuals might be enmeshed (as the two female figures in the two respective poems are) with the landscape, Wordsworth’s narrator remains above the fray, the high aesthetic expert, set apart and able to project a variety of values onto both the landscape and the rural people who inhabit such scenes. This is more than just the issue of genre norms of narrative observation in poetry, but a solidly individualized, non-relational (albeit spiritualized) experience with nature. It is a vision of nature that belongs to the male individual, the educated and the middle-class individual—individuals that look and think like Wordsworth. In his monograph, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* (2012), Hess argues that the legacy of Wordsworthian nature, derived from the Wordsworth’s poetry, privileges “individual consciousness and identity, as opposed to social or communal life” (3). Wordsworth’s vision of nature remains associated “with aesthetic leisure and spirituality, separated from everyday work, subsistence, and economic activity; and with ‘disinterested’ aesthetic contemplation and the forms of high culture, as opposed to more social, participative,” ways of experiencing nature (Ibid.). Both Dorothy Wordsworth and Eliot demonstrate how the same (or in the case of Eliot, similar) scenes of rural life and the lives of people laboring in nature could be relational, and that the depiction of such could be deeply invested and embedded in the lives of rural working people.

As I have examined in two of his Scottish poems, Wordsworth’s gendered projection—his assumption that working class, rural women are somehow a part of a landscape stands as just

one example of the less nuanced, more set-apart ways in which Wordsworth's poetry understands the human relationship to nature. While deeply indebted to Wordsworth's high moral seriousness, Eliot's interest in the rural working class and her examination of the legacy of the pastoral tradition in England are significantly more nuanced, as exemplified in her depiction of Hetty Sorrel and the problem of male projection. *Adam Bede* contains distinctively Wordsworthian values: the dignity of laboring rural people, and to some extent, the romanticization of nature. Yet Eliot's first full novel reveals that the realities of rural life are much more complex and less individualized than what Wordsworth represents. While Wordsworth's vision of nature and the human relationship to nature continues to have long reaching cultural and social implications,³² I would argue that Eliot represents a Victorian realist acknowledgement that recognizes a limit to the projections of the Romantic, singular, male idealization of nature (and of rural working people). This is demonstrated in the gendered elements that are overly simplified in Wordsworth's two poems but are complicated in Eliot's rendition.

³² This influence is what Hess refers to as "the historical emergence of the ecology of authorship" (*William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* 3).

CHAPTER TWO:

“A Nursery of Pestilences”: Bleak Nature and The Permeable Human Body in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Our Mutual Friend*

This chapter examines two very different Victorian novels, Thomas Hardy’s first early career success *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), and Charles Dickens’s last completed novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865). Despite their disparate styles and settings, both works are deeply invested in exploring corporeal boundaries to the point of staging dramatic dissolutions of the body. Ultimately, *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Our Mutual Friend* express Victorian anxieties around the permeability of the body and the possibility of losing a definable boundary between individual material contained self and the increasingly chaotic and changing environment (urban or rural) outside of the body. Both authors do so through shock and sensation, but also through a range of material forms—examining grease in its solid to liquid forms, including the breathing in of such grease in the *Our Mutual Friend* or through the seeping ooze of forest mushrooms, which eerily evaded the categorization of either animal or plant for the Victorians, who had yet to create a third kingdom for fungi. Throughout both novels, soft bodies, whether fungi, human or grease, equate to soft boundaries, and the adjacent fear of contamination and bodily pollution. Both works dramatize the unsettling nature of decay—either as soft fungi or as residual bone remnants from humans and animals. Additionally, within both works exists an affective ambivalence towards nature. This ambivalence towards nature exists in both the (at first glance) idyllic rural spaces inhabited by Hardy’s fiction and the urban decay and squalor for which Dickens is well known. Both novels express disgust and fear towards the dangers of nature—corpse-filled filthy rivers and diseased, damp forests. Against this backdrop

of nature's unpredictable menace and the unease this instills, there remains a glimmer of Romantic delight in nature in Hardy's oeuvre.

Far From the Madding Crowd

On the surface, *Far From the Madding Crowd* lulls its readers into believing that it functions as a pastoral romance. It has many of the hallmarks of the tradition besides its West Country setting—farming protagonists, harvest celebrations, and rural characters from a variety of stations in life. And perhaps most significantly, as Stephen Regan notes in his chapter,³³ “The Darkening Pastoral: *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far From the Madding Crowd*,”³⁴ “Hardy’s novel invokes the pastoral tradition by taking as one of its central characters a shepherd who is also a lover” (247). Despite these pastoral components, the signs of something more menacing become apparent early in the novel. Chapter five of the novel, entitled “Departure of Bathsheba: A pastoral tragedy” brings about the financial destruction of the shepherd Oak with the wholesale death of his flock of pregnant ewes by his inexperienced herding dog. Uncontrollable natural forces beset the novel’s protagonists with both near and total losses throughout—from a life savings investment in a flock to the near loss of the harvest to a rainstorm—natural forces consume without warning or mercy. Familiar, comforting conventions of the pastoral tradition are cast aside in significant ways.

As noted by many scholars, the title, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, itself appears to intentionally twist and distort the pastoral tradition. With his title, Hardy recalls Thomas Gray’s poem, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) with the initial line of stanza 19, “Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife” and continues with:

³³ This is a chapter from *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, edited by Keith Wilson, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, pp. 241-253.

³⁴ The capitalization of “From” in *Far From the Madding Crowd* is done so in line with Hardy’s original capitalization—although in later editions, it was not capitalized (Morgan xli).

Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;

Along the cool sequestered vale of life

They kept the noiseless tenor of their way. (73-76)

And yet, in Hardy's novel, there is no country escape from "the madding crowd"—the frenzy of the world—in fact, it is distinctly the opposite. Within the novel, rural entrapment prevails over pastoral retreat. While still peaceful moments exist within the novel, such moments never last long. There are continued acts of violence, loss, and destruction at every narrative bend. The "natural," non-human world is unlikely to provide solace. Instead, it is more likely to provide a destructive storm just as the harvest has been collected or the unexpected death of a whole flock of sheep—the entirety of Oak's worldly wealth. Human forces too bring about desperation and violence—the tragic death of Fanny; the murder of Troy; or even Bathsheba's missteps and disappointments in love and marriage. As Regan argues, given "the novel's tendency to provoke and disturb its readers rather than gently lull them, the title's invocation of a pastoral idyll seems heavily ironic" (246). This "tendency to provoke and disturb" his reader is all the more evident from Hardy's original manuscript, and in particular, the original version of chapter forty-two, "Fanny's Revenge" and chapter forty-three, "Under a tree: a reaction."

In his first completed draft, Hardy had intended to include a particularly unsettling description involving the most tragic of the novel's characters—that of the young servant girl, Fanny, who dies giving birth in the Casterbridge workhouse. Her death itself is a central turning point in the novel's plot, marking the simultaneous death of Bathsheba's already troubled marriage to the reckless Sergeant Troy.³⁵ In what could have easily been a sentimentalized scene of the young servant's death in the hands of another novelist, Hardy's original manuscript

³⁵ Although Bathsheba's first marriage is not officially over until Troy is murdered later in the novel.

version intentionally provokes discomfort in his readers by pointing to the similarities between the soft bodies of the dead and the soft bodies of fungi. Unfortunately, these unsettling connections were not allowed to survive past the original manuscript.

Much of the chapter involving the aftermath of Fanny's death, chapter forty-two, entitled "Fanny's Revenge," was cut and heavily revised by Hardy's editor at the *Cornhill Magazine*, Leslie Stephen, in order to make the novel more palatable to Victorian audiences. Hardy's original manuscript version of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, now held at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, was never returned to him by his publishers at Cornhill—a common practice at the time for manuscripts of obscure authors (Morgan xli). Subsequently, when Hardy, no longer obscure, heavily revised his novels in the 1890s, he could not refer back to his initial uncensored manuscript (Morgan xvii). But through those later revisions, Hardy did manage to reanimate the novel with some of its original honesty and rawness of the pre-Stephen draft. Rosemarie Morgan was the first to publish the first edition of *Far From the Madding Crowd* as an academic edition through Penguin in 2000. My discussion here will refer solely (unless otherwise mentioned) to Hardy's original pre-Stephen draft as published under Penguin Books under the editorship of Rosemarie Morgan.

Thomas Hardy's rural spaces, including those of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, not only deny its characters and readers a traditional pastoral retreat, but they reflect wider Victorian anxieties concerning the breakdown of the stratification between the human and the non-human. This is most readily apparent in the original manuscript version of Hardy's heavily cut chapters of the 1874 novel. I argue that *Far From the Madding Crowd* portrays a particular horror at the recognition of imperfect boundaries between humans and non-human living creatures—in

particular through the novel's description of woodland fungi, which themselves break the stratification between the terranean and subterranean worlds.

In the manuscript version of the chapters, "Fanny's revenge" and "Under a tree: reaction," Hardy simultaneously describes fungi as diseased human-like bodies with skin appearing as "red as arterial blood" and "scabbed" while comparing the corpse of a human child to "the soft convexity of mushrooms" (*Far From the Madding Crowd* 265, 259). Hardy's soft plant and animal bodies can be linked, I argue, to Stacey Alaimo's theory of "trans-corporeality" in which nature is deeply enmeshed with the human body and is, in fact, "the very substance of ourselves"—marking a profound change in our sense of selfhood (4, 20).³⁶ Hardy's soft plant and animal bodies reflect nature's reach into the permeable human body, obscuring previously definitive categorizations that neatly separated human from nature—the human body from its environment. Hardy's fungi function as symbols of expanding cultural and scientific understandings of the organic body as porous and open to exchange with the outside world, which increasingly haunted the Victorian cultural psyche. As I will argue in this section, the uneasy status of fungi in Hardy's initial draft reflects a darkening conception of nature, a shift away from the more Romantic, positive belief in which there was an implicit trust and faith in the positivity of nature's workings as derived from the work and legacy of Wordsworth.

The chapters leading up to "Fanny's revenge" describe the young Fanny Robin's death at the Casterbridge workhouse and the subsequent removal and return of her body back to the parish. Bathsheba insists that she take on the responsibility of housing the young woman's body until the burial, given that Fanny was one of her uncle's servants. Liddy, Bathsheba's maid, discloses the rumor that perhaps "—that—that there's two of 'em in there!" while gesturing

³⁶ Alaimo and others have utilized both of the following spellings: "trans-corporeality" and "transcorporeality."

towards where Fanny's coffin lay in the hall (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 256).

Bathsheba, overcome with painful suspicions—already knowing of her husband Troy's unfaithfulness—lifts the lid of the coffin after Liddy has gone to bed. There she beholds the dead Fanny with hair that matches the lock of fair hair that Troy keeps and an infant by her side. At this dramatic moment in the narrative, as Bathsheba lays eyes on Fanny and the dead child in her arms, readers are confronted with an excerpt from Charles Lamb's "On an Infant Dying as Soon as Born" (1827) with the following lines:

A curious frame of Nature's work,

A flow'ret crushed in the bud,

A nameless piece of Babyhood, (lines 2-4)

The last excerpted line of Lamb's poem is then completed by Hardy with a meandering sentence that evolves in tone from "neatly apparelled in its first and last outfit for earth—a miniature wrapping of white linen—" and becomes increasingly odd—"with a face so delicately small in contour and substance that its cheeks and the plump back of its little fists irresistibly reminded her [Bathsheba], excited as she was, of *the soft convexity of mushrooms on a dewy morning*" (*Far From the Madding Crowd* 259).³⁷ Hardy has chosen a moment of great crisis in the novel and in Bathsheba's life to introduce the mushroom as the image of death at birth. This section only appears in Hardy's original manuscript. And it is easy to see why Leslie Stephen cut these parts extensively (Morgan xx). The shift from the sentimental lines of Lamb's poem, comparing a baby to a bud, to the bizarre and unexpected description of the dead infant as akin to a mushroom is arguably intended to unsettle the reader. Both Lamb and Hardy compare the figure of the dead newborn infant to non-human creatures. Lamb's child is described as a flower bud

³⁷ Italics here have been added for emphasis.

that is crushed before it ever reaches its blossoming. The image, although somewhat violent, remains more gentle and sweet than distressing—as well as being a somewhat more predictable piece of imagery. But Bathsheba’s perception of her own husband and Fanny’s child as a fungus is shocking in its unexpectedness. The face and hands of the dead child have “the soft convexity,” or the curves of a mushroom covered in dew. This particular visual derives its shock-value from the very cultural inappropriateness of the connection between a dead human child and a non-human organism—in particular an organism that functions as a decomposer. There is a lack of reverence in the description that is usually due to the human dead—particularly a dead child. This inappropriateness was not the only element to have disturbed Leslie Stephen. His extensive cuts have more to do with the scandalous nature of the sexual liaison between very young, unmarried, poor Fanny and Troy, and yet the unsettling imagery and strange asides of this section must have also been perceived as potentially offensive to contemporary readers.³⁸

Situated in the very next chapter, a whole army of woodland fungi emphasize the unsettling possibility of human enmeshment, disintegration, and nature’s inherent menace in “Under a tree: reaction”—thus, connecting the two chronological chapters even more closely through fungal imagery. This chapter follows up on “Fanny’s revenge” which concludes with a heart-wrenching confrontation between Bathsheba and Troy, the latter of whom announces to Bathsheba that, morally, she was never his true wife. Troy lashes out, insisting that he is instead wedded “in the sight of heaven” to the dead girl who lies in the coffin in front of them. The very last lines of “Fanny’s revenge” describe Bathsheba’s storming out of her home after this emotional climax. She retreats at the height of her sorrow to the natural world, entering “a thicket

³⁸ According to Rosemary Morgan, “it was that in a final exasperated editorial swoop Stephen excised *Far From the Madding Crowd*’s most flagrant of all transgressions: Hardy’s poignantly tender delineation in the manuscript of Fanny’s last sleep with her stillborn babe in her arms” (xx). I would argue against using the words “poignantly tender” in reference to Hardy’s description of the dead Fanny and child.

overhung by some large oak and beech trees” (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 264).

Presumably, such a scene would appear to indicate a moment of solace or even a moment of transcendent Wordsworthian communion with nature. She automatically rests against a “reclining trunk” and sinks into “a tangled couch of fronds and stems” (Ibid.). Bathsheba subsequently covers herself with the ferns, simultaneously melting into both the woodland landscape and into an unconscious state, “mechanically [...] [pulling] some armfuls round her to keep off the breezes, and closed her eyes” (Ibid.). In this moment of great pain, it is a thicket of “large oak and beech trees” which provides her with shelter and seemingly a retreat from the tumult and humiliation within her own home.³⁹

But as Bathsheba awakens just as dawn breaks forth, and while a forest setting would presumably appear more ominous under the cover of night, it is the light of day that reveals a hollow with “a species of swamp, dotted with fungi” and that “the general aspect of the swamp was malignant” (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 265). The action of the narrative is put on hold as the narrator dives into an extensive description of this woodland setting. Michael Irwin argues in his book, *Reading Hardy’s Landscapes*, that Hardy’s descriptive landscape passages function as vital elements to his fiction, often taking precedent over the plot itself, noting that, “The human drama seems virtually to lose itself in the background, or rather dissolve into it, and yet to take on the more significance for doing so” (ix). And so too in this passage does the human fade away as the foreground centers upon the non-human creatures of the swamp. But that centering on the landscape and setting and the tension between the characters and their setting is

³⁹ There is a rather heavy-handed allusion here between the oak trees which provide the kind of emotional and physically sheltering that Gabriel Oak wishes to provide for Bathsheba.

an essential tension in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and as Irwin argues, essential to understanding the heart of most of Hardy's novels (Ibid.).⁴⁰

The narrative voice paints a stark picture, describing the land as possessing a “moist and poisonous coat” from which “seemed to be exhaled the essences of evil things in the earth, and in the waters under the earth” (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 265). The vehicle for these “evil” exhalations appears to be various fungi, as the subsequent sentence describes how, “The fungi grew in all manner of positions from rotting leaves and tree stumps, some exhibiting to her [Bathsheba's] listless gaze their clammy tops, others their oozing gills” (Ibid.). Fungi here are expellers of evil—of disease and poison. Not only do they expel the poison of the earth, but this poison explicitly endangers any human interloper—in this case, Bathsheba, who “arose with a tremor at the thought of having passed the night on the brink of so dismal a place” (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 266). Having sought peace and distance from her troubled marriage in the forest, Bathsheba awakes only to find an uncanny parallel (quite literally the aesthetic representation of anxiety and fear) between the horrors that await her at home and what she had supposed would be a Wordsworthian solace in the glen.

The fungi of the hollow exude various anthropomorphized symptoms of human disease. Not only are they “oozing” as if they possess an infected wound, but others exhibit the signs of various human skin diseases: “Some were marked with great splotches, red as arterial blood—other were scabbed...” (Ibid. 265). Signs of human skin infection and affliction transform the woodland scene into a deeply disturbing landscape in which fungi appear as if covered in

⁴⁰ Irwin argues that the titles of Hardy's novels indicate the focus of either individual or environment: “The titles of Hardy's novels suggest the potential fluctuation of focus. *Tess*, *Jude*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: all these point to the primacy of some particular individual. *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *The Woodlanders* are titles which might seem to locate the essential interest in a community or an environment rather than in the doings of a human protagonist” (5).

splotches of human or animal blood, recalling the skin of Fanny's dead baby, which in contrast to the blood-infused mushrooms was described in the previous chapter as a soft and dewy mushroom. This striking parallel between the "oozing," infected mushrooms and the dead baby only exists in Hardy's initial draft. As a repeated image, it works to not only disturb the reader but to point to the decay and death at the heart of Bathsheba's marriage.

As if the diseased and dangerous imagery were not already explicit enough, the narrator proclaims that, "The hollow seemed a nursery of pestilences small and great" (Ibid.). Several aspects to this last line are intriguing. In particular, the word "pestilences" indicates that the disease of the damp earth and the fungi is one of contagion—transmittable from non-human life to human life forms. It indicates that this damp hollow is fluid, open to exchange with the previously sleeping Bathsheba, who had thought she had found "comfort and health" "in the immediate neighborhood" of this very "nursery of pestilences" (Ibid.).⁴¹ The danger of the woodland fungi is due in part to the fluidness—akin to Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality—the porousness between the fungal material existence and the material existence of Bathsheba. While she may have found momentary comfort and mental refreshment in nature,⁴² she was situated much too close to the ever-present malignancy present in Hardy's natural world. Additionally, Hardy's framing of "a *nursery* of pestilences" irresistibly recalls and connects his previous chapter's description of the dead newborn's mushroom-like appearance to Bathsheba's attempted escape from the scene.⁴³

⁴¹ The term "pestilence," of course, also carries a great deal of Biblical connotations. Additionally, the term is often utilized specifically in reference to the bubonic plague, particularly The Black Death of the fourteenth century.

⁴² As for her sleeping under the trees with a blanket of ferns—"Bathsheba was not clearly aware" whether she truly slept or not, "But it was with a freshened existence and a cooler brain" that she regained consciousness (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 264).

⁴³ Italics here have been added for emphasis.

This “nursery of pestilences small and great” reflects the persistent belief into the early 1870s in the miasma theory of disease transmission—a theory that in itself highlights the porous boundary between the human and inhuman; between health and illness; and between life and death. Miasma, which identified “foul” air as the carrier of disease, had been theorized since ancient times. The spread of disease in increasingly overcrowded urban centers such as Victorian London did much to seemingly affirm this theory of contagion in the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. Proponents of the theory, including Florence Nightingale, asserted that “disease was created and carried by foul air emanating from sewage, polluted waters, and putrefying organic matter” (Smeele 17). Although Dr. John Snow famously theorized that cholera was spread not through the air but through the water itself, “Snow’s conclusions were dismissed by the members of the committee of enquiry appointed by parliament to enquire into the 1854 cholera epidemic,” and the miasmatic theory of contagion continued to hold sway through much of the second half of the nineteenth century (Halliday 1470). This lasted until the rise in popularity of germ theory in the late 1870s and the 1880s (Tomes 509).⁴⁴ In “Under a tree: reaction,” the influence of miasma theory of contagion is still apparent in Hardy’s descriptive language around the menacing woods. This influence might in part reflect the continued cultural acceptance of miasma theory, but it is equally likely that as a theory of contagion and transmission miasma functions for Hardy as a particularly poetic and intuitive source of imagery. Bathsheba chooses her sleeping location based on the fact that it is “a spot sheltered from the damp fog by a reclining trunk,” a damp fog being an air that for miasmatists would be considered

⁴⁴According to Wietske Smeele, “In the 1880s the microscope neared the limits of its perfection for use in a medical setting, with improved lenses permitting for crystal-clear images and microscopic techniques, such as sectioning and staining, allowing for the observation of organisms smaller than the cellular building blocks of life” (23). The improvement of the microscope, and with it the birth of the germ theory of disease, provided the final blow to the previously dominant miasma theory (Coleman 22).

unhealthy (Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* 264). The swamp possesses a “moist and poisonous coat” which “exhaled the essences of evil things in the earth, and in the waters under the earth” (Ibid. 265). So not only do fungi have animal-like respiration in which they exhale, but the air they expel spreads “evil things,” including pestilences from the soil and from the water, as mirrored in the statement of the Scottish physician Neil Arnott (1788-1874), who declared in the inquiry published in the *First Report of the Royal Commission on the State of Large Towns and Populous District* in 1844 that ““The immediate and chief cause of many of the diseases which impair the bodily and mental health of the people, and bring a considerable proportion prematurely to the grave is the poison of *atmospheric impurity* [his italics]” (qtd. in Halliday 1469). In other words, Hardy’s poisonous vapors from the earth are aligned with the fading, but still persistent belief in miasma. Most discussion around disease and air-contagion dealt with the “dangers” of urban air and contained air in urban homes and factories (the focus of the 1844 *First Report of the Royal Commission on the State of Large Towns and Populous District*)—thus, making Hardy’s focus on a rural, open-air woodland scene of miasma and disease particularly intriguing. This context of miasmatic airborne contagion highlights the fear of an increasingly “soft” boundary between the contained human body and the outside world—both physical and theoretical.⁴⁵

As Pamela Gilbert argues in her work *Mapping the Victorian Social Body*, the understanding of disease shifted during the Victorian period from lingering early modern conceptions of disease as an imbalance within the self to the danger of contagious disease from without the self-contained body (110-111). According to Gilbert, “By the mid-Victorian period, this model of a body made vulnerable to outside filth, with most Victorian medics falling

⁴⁵ Pamela Gilbert’s description of the “leaky body” in *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* is applicable here and is further discussed in the *Our Mutual Friend* section of chapter two.

somewhere in the middle, claiming that illness result from a precondition of instability within the body which might be exacerbated by such proximate causes as sanitary nuisances and an ‘epidemic constitution’ of the environment” (111). In other words, the boundaries of the body became all the more important and challenges to these boundaries (including any porousness or softening) between the body and its environment became a cause for concern.

Hardy exploits already existing cultural and scientific fears of soft boundaries in order to discomfort his readers. The unsettling nature of these descriptions in Hardy’s manuscript version of chapter forty-two, “Fanny’s Revenge” and chapter forty-three, “Under a tree: a reaction” have much to do with the similarities between human bodies and the bodies of fungi. This porous boundary between human bodies and the bodies of fungi shares distinctive similarities with Alaimo’s conception of transcorporeality, which “as a descendant of Darwinism [...]” insists “that the human is always the very stuff of the messy, contingent, emergent mix of the material world” (11). According to Alaimo, “Transcorporeality does the opposite of distancing or dividing the human from external nature. It implies that we’re literally enmeshed in the physical material world” (Kuznetski and Alaimo 139). Hardy both emphasizes the similarities and the interchange between human and non-human bodies. Hardy’s omniscient narrator simultaneously describes fungi as diseased human-like bodies with skin appearing as “red as arterial blood” and “scabbed” while comparing the corpse of a human child to “the soft convexity of mushrooms” (265, 259). The boundary between human bodies and the bodies of other living creatures (in this case, fungi) are blurred. The disturbing nature of this blurred boundary is compounded by the longstanding cultural association between fungi and poison, death, and decomposition.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The opening line of M.J. Berkeley’s first chapter of *Outlines of British Fungology* (1860) describes fungi as “objects of disgust or admiration, from their real or supposed poisonous or nutritious qualities” (1).

This boundary crossing is both a function of Hardy's sensationalist style and his desire to violate respectable, comfortable Victorian norms and shared values. But it is also grounded in scientific-based fears. During the first half of the nineteenth century, it was not yet clear how fungi should be classified—did they belong in the plant or animal kingdoms? According to Ella Mershon, “No other organism better represented the nebulous boundary between botany and zoology in the Victorian imagination than fungus” (272).⁴⁷ This confusion was due to the fact that while appearing in many ways to be plant-like, fungi do not contain chlorophyll, and like animals, they are either parasitic, feeding on living matter, or are saprophytic, feeding on dead matter (Ibid.).

This lack of categorical clarity helped to infuse the very idea of fungi with a transgressive aura of boundary crossing. For the Victorians, as well as for ourselves, fungi challenge neat and clean human categorizations of the world. They defy conceptual and physical boundaries. They straddle between the surface of the earth and the subterranean. Fungi are both seen and unseen—visibly small and mysterious to the human eye above ground, while simultaneously existing in vast, prolific networks below the earth's surface—largely invisible to humans.⁴⁸ Fungi embody contradictions. They can be food, and yet can easily be poisonous.⁴⁹ While by the end of the nineteenth century “the taxonomic confusion was resolved by creating a new third kingdom,” according to Mershon, “fungi were still figured as ‘quasi-animals,’ consuming rather than storing the sun's energy” (273) And indeed, today fungi, although in their own kingdom, are understood to be closer to animals than to plants (Tsing 137). Mershon argues that “Hunger for flesh—as well as a resemblance to flesh as the pileus was often called ‘fleshy’—continued to

⁴⁷ Mershon, Ella. “Pulpy Fiction.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2020, pp. 267–298.

⁴⁸ This includes hyphal networks created by mycorrhizal fungi.

⁴⁹ “The poisonous nature of some [fungi] was early recognised” by early humans and “fungi have since classical times been notorious for their poisonous properties” (Ainsworth 1, 183).

animate fungus in the Victorian imagination” (273).⁵⁰ Hardy emphasizes this very “fleshiness” in both fungal and human bodies in his mushroom imagery. Of course, this matter of categorical ambiguity was not relevant to all of Hardy’s Victorian readership nor is the knowledge of it necessary to create discomfort and or a sense of the uncanny for Hardy’s readers.

Hardy’s initial manuscript edition of *Far From the Madding Crowd* demonstrates through the vehicle of fungal imagery an unsettling confusion—a porous stratification—between what is human and what is living and non-human. As Hardy implies throughout most of his novels, no escape or return to the country will bring peace and clarity. Not only does the novel resist pastoral simplicity and ease despite possessing pastoral elements, but it also refuses to “suggest that the life of the country is necessarily preferable to that of the town” (Regan 247). Hardy’s pastoral is a dark one filled with intense Victorian anxieties sourced in post-*On the Origin of Species* (1859) reconceptions of the human position within the larger biological world.⁵¹

Our Mutual Friend

Among his many grotesque novels, Dickens’s last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend* contains some of the most dramatic imagery of decay and dismemberment. From the mudlarks (human scavengers along the Thames) to Venus’s horrific shop of body parts, the novel not only expresses Victorian anxieties surrounding human degradation in consumerist Victorian London, but of the boundary between the human and the non-human—particularly when examined from a

⁵⁰ On the other hand, G.C. Ainsworth’s 1976 *Introduction to the History of Mycology* states that the status of fungi regarding “whether they were animal, vegetable, or even mineral in nature” was not entirely resolved until twenty-five years before the publication of the aforementioned text (in other words, around 1950) (5). Ainsworth asserts that “although it became traditional to classify fungi as plants, this convention, as a result of ideas tentatively advanced a century ago, has, during the last twenty-five years, been rejected by the increasing number of workers who would treat fungi as a kingdom distinct from both animals and plants” (Ibid.).

⁵¹ By the 1870s (*Far From the Madding Crowd* being published in 1873) Darwinism, or at the very least some form of evolutionism, became widely accepted among scientists (Bowler 185, 196).

combination of posthuman, materialist, and ecocritical perspectives. The novel paints a grim, uneasy picture of the commodification and commercialization of humans and the river Thames. As previously noted, an increasingly “soft” boundary between the contained (or hopefully contained) human body and the outside world—that boundary being both physical and theoretical—was a cause for concern for the Victorians and is reflected in various cultural outputs of the period, including *Far From the Madding Crowd* and Dickens’s novel written in the previous decade, *Our Mutual Friend*.

Far From the Madding Crowd, with its human violence and threatening nature, disrupts notions of a traditional pastoral while simultaneously possessing many of the marks of a rural idyll. And by doing so, the novel significantly challenges (as does all of Hardy’s fiction) the notion that harmony with nature is possible within a rural setting, and that the dreamy trope of the “return to the countryside” will bring neither peace nor contentment. Less than a decade before the publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Dickens’s intricate novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, similarly blurs the lines between the human and non-human in intentionally distressing ways for its readers. While Hardy’s novel utilizes the soft bodies of fungi (and dead babies) to unsettle his readers, Dickens’s 1865 novel also includes dead babies and soft tallow meaty candles (the latter is also a feature of *Bleak House*) that vaporize from their solid form and pollute the air. But primarily, *Our Mutual Friend* specializes in hard skeletons to disturb its audience. In all of these cases, organic bodies dissolve into hard bones and greasy sludge. The novel also explores the human relationship to non-human nature within the city through the relationship between numerous key characters and the river Thames. The Thames serves as a point of convergence for the action of the novel. From the very beginning of the novel, Dickens makes clear the significance and the transformative—even baptismal—religious function that the

Thames plays throughout the narrative. But the river is more than just a place where the living emerge into a new life and the dead sink only to be found again. As Valerie Kennedy describes “The first chapter establishes the river as a place where the living and the dead merge, where inanimate things may be transformed into other things like words or commodities, or become human, where human beings are transformed into animals, and where parts of the human anatomy seem to have a life of their own” (230-231).⁵² The Thames in the first chapter, in other words, acts as a harbinger of the issues at stake in the rest of the novel.

Like much of Dickens’s work, *Our Mutual Friend*, has a great multitude of characters and plots lines that converge together in the end—much like smaller streams merging with rivers, converging to meet the sea. The novel’s source of action rests on the inheritance of great wealth from the recycled left overs of London’s well-to-do. The “dust heaps”—perhaps best described as a large nineteenth-century waste and recycling business—brought a fortune to John Harmon’s father, who, now dead, has left his fortune to his son on condition that John marry the woman of his estranged father’s choosing. On a larger scale, the novel revolves centrally around the concepts of waste, consumption, reuse, and recycling. Set in the 1860s in London while the city dealt with “spiraling financial speculation while thousands of homeless scratched a living” from the leftovers of the wealthy, the novel describes both the indecent speculation of the unscrupulous upper classes and the dehumanizing fight over the bits and bobs leftover by those left out of the city’s consumerist comforts (Cotsell). At the bottom rungs of the social ladder, “Gaffer” Hexam and Riderhood pull objects and bodies from the river Thames. While Hexam pulls dead bodies from the Thames in order to pick their pockets, he is critical of Riderhood for

⁵² Kennedy, Valerie. “Human, Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral? Crossovers between Organic and Inorganic Matter in *Our Mutual Friend*.” *Charles Dickens, Modernism, and Modernity*, vol. 2, edited by Christine Huguet and Nathalie Vanfasse, Editions du Sagittaire (Collection Histoire Littéraire), 2014, pp. 229-247.

stealing from a live sailor (in other words, stealing from the dead is acceptable, but not from the living). Strikingly, there is a subplot that involves the character of Mr. Venus, a “bone articulator,” who makes his living by using spare bones and body parts from different people and reusing them to make skeletons that are then sold to consumers. His skeletons, then, are conglomerations of many different living and formerly living humans. Bodies—human and animal alike—are recycled and reused in the novel—just as the consumerist waste is recycled and reused.

Urban consumerism provides the centerpiece of the Harmon dust heaps—the inevitable outcome of infinite growth capitalism. Mr. Venus, a “bone articulator” makes his living by using spare bones and body parts from various people and animals and reusing them to make skeletons that are in turn sold for a profit. His skeletons then are conglomerations of many different living and formerly living humans and animals. Depictions of bodily violence and gore in the novel are striking and prolific. The attempted murder of Eugene Wrayburn by the obsessive and violently jealous schoolteacher, Bradley Headstone—although not fully detailed—is still clearly gory and gruesome—it is a direct, violent physical assault—not an indirect murder (as by poison, etc.). Human bodies, alive and dead, broken and disabled have a strong presence throughout the novel, as they do in much of Dickens’s work.⁵³

At the heart of this grotesque obsession with the bodily, Dickens attempts to dissolve the boundaries between humans and non-humans (Shah 275). The conflation between the human and non-human, particularly between humans and objects, is central to Dickens’s body of work. As

⁵³ See Clare Walker Gore’s book, *Plotting Disability in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, chapter one, “A Possible Person?: Marking the Minor Character in Dickens” for a detailed discussion of disability in *Our Mutual Friend* through the characters of Silas Wegg and Jenny Wren. Gore ultimately argues that “Jenny and Silas demonstrate both how disabled characters enlarge the possibilities of Dickensian characterisation, and how their claim to personhood is always conditional upon their acceptance of minor status, and is subordinated where necessary to the wider demands of the novelistic plot” (67).

Gillian Beer argues, “The preoccupation with materiality in Dickens takes comic and menacing forms.” (40). Individual human characters are dehumanized—made horrific and/or comedic by their resemblance to inanimate objects; while objects are imbued with human characteristics that unsettle and disturb readers, further blurring the boundaries of the human. In the Dickensian universe, “People are seen formulaically, like objects, and objects are endowed with the energy traditionally reserved for organic life” (Ibid.). This career-long violation of the line between human and object has been the focus of a great deal of Dickensian scholarship, significantly in Dorothy Van Ghent’s article, “The Dickens World: A View from Todger’s” (1950). Van Ghent opens her argument by pointing out that demonically possessed objects are demonic by virtue of the fact that they imitate human characteristics, while human demonic possessions require individuals to “imitate the inhuman” (419). For Van Ghent, Dickens’s human/object diffusion in part functions as a punishment for particularly egregious characters. Using as an example *Bleak House*’s miserly Grandfather Smallweed, who must be “shaken up” by others as if he is a sofa cushion in need of fluffing, Van Ghent argues that those “who have engaged [...] in the manipulation of their fellows as if they were things, themselves develop thing-attributes...” (420). Grandfather Smallweed’s greed has debased and dehumanized himself and his victims and thus, he is forced to exist as if a household object—“beaten up periodically like a cushion [...] suggesting unspeakable deterioration” both inwardly and outwardly (Ibid.).

Dickens’s work, in particular *Our Mutual Friend*, presents “critical and creative representations of the ways the unity and coherence of the Victorian body and identity were threatened and damaged” (Shah 276).⁵⁴ As Shah notes, Dickensian novels presented Victorian

⁵⁴ See also Adrienne Elizabeth Gavin’s 1994 PhD dissertation, *The Anatomy of Charles Dickens: A Study of Bodily Vulnerability in His Novels* for an exploration of the power of Dickens’s focus on and descriptions of the Victorian human body’s vulnerability.

readers with a “discourse of mass poverty, physical degradation and degeneration, *dissolving the boundaries* between the normal and the deviant, purity and impurity, child and adult, animal and human in the streets, in the river and slums throughout the city” (Ibid.).⁵⁵ As I argue here, just as Hardy’s soft decomposing fungi and human bodies unsettle the Victorian reader through the disruption of the stratification of the human and non-human, Dickens too plays upon post *On the Origin of Species* anxieties in *Our Mutual Friend*’s commodified mixing of hardened human and animal fragments and remains.

A recurring and ultimately (in the novel’s conclusion) essential character for one of the novel’s subplots, Mr. Venus, describes his grotesque professional work as a ““Preserver of Animals and Birds,”” and ““Articulator of human bones.”” A man of thirty-three years of age with a “sallow face with weak eyes surmounted by a tangle of reddish-dusty hair,” he makes his living taking (among other things) hospital amputations and pairing them with other human bones to create complete human skeletons, which he presumably then sells back to medical students (Dickens 78). But it is not just human skeletons that Mr. Venus “articulates” but animals as well. His shop is a mix of human and animal remains—of stuffed parrots and sparrows alongside human fetuses in jars above the fireplace (Ibid. 78-79). The villainous but absurd Silas Wegg, in search of his amputated leg bones, seeks out Mr. Venus’s shop, finding it on a narrow and dirty street in an area of London filled with derelict shops. Mr. Venus’s emporium is on first glance “a muddle of objects vaguely resembling pieces of leather and dry stick, but among which nothing is resolvable into anything distinct, save the candle itself in its old tin candlestick, and two preserved frogs fighting a small-sword duel” (Ibid. 77). “Stumping with fresh vigour,” Silas Wegg “goes in at the dark greasy entry, pushes a little greasy dark reluctant side-door, and

⁵⁵ Italics have been added for emphasis.

follows the door into the little dark greasy shop. It is so dark that nothing can be made out in it, over a little counter, but another tallow candle in another old tin candlestick, close to the face of a man stooping low in a chair” (Ibid. 78). The repetition of the words “little” “greasy” and “dark” (in various orders) is of course intentional and meant to draw attention to itself. Given the intentionality of this repetition, one cannot help but stumble upon the detail of the tallow candle. Doing little to light the “dark” and “little” shop, it does much to fill the reader’s mind with grease and a vague sense of unease. Tallow, a product rendered from either beef or mutton fat, was one of three commonly used candle materials at the start of the Victorian period. It was cheaper than spermaceti or beeswax (the other two most popular candle materials), but this affordability came with a price as “they burnt with a smoky flame which produced progressively less and less light” and perhaps even worse—tallow candles were known for their reeking smell (The Courtauld Institute of Art). In other words, the scent of Mr. Venus’s shop, which Wegg describes as “musty, leathery, feathery, cellary, gluey, gummy,” is due in part to the smell of burning animal fat (78). It is not only the use of chemicals that comprise the stench of the bone articulation shop—it is the taking apart of bodies—both human and animals that accounts for its odor. The tallow candles are a further reiteration, an olfactory echo of the layered animal decomposition scent.⁵⁶ In addition to their smell, the tallow candles account for both the darkness and the greasiness of the shop. Dickens highlights the use of tallow candles in not just *Our Mutual Friend*. As Anna Henchman explores in her article, “Tallow Candles and Meaty Air in *Bleak House*,” “there is a strange — and disgusting — pattern of characters feeling that they can ‘taste’ the air, and that air tastes either greasy or meaty” through the description of tallow candles (1). Henchman argues that in the case of the smell and “taste” of tallow candles in *Bleak House*,

⁵⁶ As Anna Henchman notes, “Rather than reassuringly remaining in the category of inanimate things, Dickens’s tallow candles are unnervingly close to being alive. They remain too embodied” (4).

“The suffocating disgust Dickens elicits in these scenes uncovers anxieties about modern modes of production and the waste that they create. By representing animal fat in its liquid and gaseous states, Dickens creates an eerie sense that inhabiting the modern urban world means ingesting undesirable matter” (Ibid). Likewise, the possibility of ingesting “undesirable matter” in the chapter “Mr. Wegg looks after himself,” in which Mr. Venus’s shop is first described, is similarly implied. The danger of such infiltration of matter into the living human body is emphasized through the tallow candles, the noxious air, and the consuming of tea in an environment surrounded by dead animals and humans.



Figure 1: “Mr. Venus surrounded by the Trophies of his Art” by Marcus Stone. Wood engraving by Dalziel. Illustration for *Our Mutual Friend*, Chapter Seven, “Mr. Wegg looks after himself.” Source: <https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/mstone/15.html>

This fear of bodily infiltration of “undesirable matter” plays out as Mr. Venus inquires as to whether Mr. Wegg is interested in partaking in tea. Wegg, always keen to take from others, replies in the affirmative, but soon comes to question his choice as Venus’s darkened shop becomes increasingly visible. Wegg watches as Venus prepares the tea, toasting a muffin by taking a spear out of a dead sparrow and jamming it directly into the muffin in order to toast it over a fire (Dickens 79). Full of dark corners and unseen spaces, the dead only reveal themselves

in stages of adjustment to the low light. Tea at Mr. Venus's shop clearly involves the danger of unintentional consumption of unwanted and undesirable matter. Readers are meant to feel disturbed at the prospect of such contamination, perhaps less out of sympathy for the unlikeable Mr. Wegg, but more so for the abjection it creates within the readers themselves. The boundary of the human body itself is being infiltrated by food contamination—contaminated with material of dead creatures, hidden by the darkness, sporadically lit by greasy animal tallow that seemingly contaminates the lungs. While disgusting, it is a deeper sense of unease and disgust that this scene brings about, it is a violation of both physical and theoretical boundaries. According to Kristeva, "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). Mr. Venus's shop is itself a shop of abjection. The boundaries between what the human body contains and what goes into the human body are transversed, violated whether through the consumption of food and drink or the breathing in of the tallow-filled, greasy air.

While "food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection," reactions to the human corpse represent the most fundamental, deep-seated examples of Kristevan abjection (Kristeva 2). In Mr. Venus's storefront, animal bodies, such as the burning tallow, are used for commercial purposes, but equally so are human ones. As Mr. Wegg begins to take his contaminated tea, his eyes adjust to the dark, and more items on the shadowy, greasy shelves begin to make themselves apparent. He "gradually acquires an imperfect notion that over against him on the chimney piece is a Hindoo baby in a bottle, curved up with his big head tucked under him" (Dickens 79). Food abjection turns to the ultimate form of abjection. For Kristeva, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which

one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4). Mr. Wegg himself appears not to experience this abjection at the sight of the dead human babies in jars, but the reader is likely to feel that the consumption of tea in such an environment is “death infecting life” (Ibid).⁵⁷ Even the existence of the burning animal fat candles becomes more menacing in this moment. The thought seeps in through broken boundaries that the tallow candles could possibly be comprised of more than just the fat of sheep or cows, but instead, candles made of the fat of humans seems suddenly possible in Venus’s shop.

As tea comes to a close, Mr. Venus catches Wegg glancing about the shop, “You’re casting your eye round the shop, Mr. Wegg. Let me show you a light” (Dickens 81). The metonymic use of “eye” for the act of looking acts as a vaguely menacing usage given the number of isolated, dismembered human and animal body parts present. Venus begins to point out items around his macabre place of business, all the while using his greasy tallow candle, “Bones, various. Skulls, various. Preserved Indian baby. African ditto. Bottled preparations, various [...] human various. Cats. Articulated English baby, Dogs, Ducks. Glass eyes, warous. Mummied bird. Dried cuticle, various” (Ibid.) Venus ends his tour by declaring, “Oh dear me! That’s the general panoramic view” (Ibid.). What is interesting about this tour, conducted by the bone articulator, is the emphasis on the mixing of the remains of both humans and animals. Dogs and ducks are articulated next to the remains of an English baby.⁵⁸ This listing of items with its

⁵⁷ Of course, Mr. Wegg’s lack of abjection and disgust denotes something about his character and lack of genteel qualms.

⁵⁸ Likely, the identifying of a specifically English baby would have had a different impact on the initial British audience of the novel in the 1860s. The appearance of a “specimen” as an “English baby” would alter the impact of Venus’s shop. The articulation shop does not only contain those who might be from edges of the Empire—people who were Otherized—cultures and bodies that were dehumanized and devalued. But in Mr. Venus’s shop, the colonized and the colonizer are equally articulated and displayed in a disordered array along the shelves, mixed in with mummified birds and cats.

free mixing of human parts and animal remains, creates a visceral reaction, a growing discomfort at the conflation between the human and non-human, a conflation that, as mentioned previously, is so central to Dickens's body of work. In order to continue this growing disgust, these mixed "listings" of human and non-human dismembered body parts are repeated throughout the chapter. Even as Wegg leaves the establishment, pulling the door open in order to exit, he "notices that the movement so shakes the crazy shop, and so shakes a momentary flare out of the candle, as that the babies—Hindoo, African, and British—the 'human various', the French gentleman, the green glass-eyed cats, the dogs, the ducks, and all the rest of the collection, show for an instant as if paralytically animated" (Ibid. 85). Here, the listing of "items" is repeated once more, and for an added horror, the dead appear to cross the boundary into life.⁵⁹

The owner of this greasy shop, Mr. Venus, although portrayed as rather disgusting with a dead sparrow's head "drooping on one side against the rim" of his in-use tea saucer, is depicted as more of a lovelorn, depressed man than a creature of horror (Dickens 78-79). Venus is not a Victor Frankenstein figure, cursed for violating the sanctity of the human body. His shop is a place of abjection, but Venus is both a comedically absurd figure while simultaneously being "a haggard melancholy man" who finds little joy in his profession now that his love interest scorns him for its very gruesomeness (Ibid. 79). Additionally, he is slated to turn semi-heroic by the end of the novel, catching the villainous Wegg in a trap. Like many of Dickens's unappealing, even grotesque, characters, Mr. Venus receives his moment of dignity and respect by the end of the novel.

⁵⁹ Disembodied, separate body parts are explicitly uncanny and even more so if they move on their own, according to Freud. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Freud asserts that "Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves—all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove able to move of themselves in addition" (14).

Our Mutual Friend, structurally, acts as an assemblage, a mix of seemingly unrelated parts, just as Mr. Venus articulates one body from the parts of various individuals. It is a mix of different, improbably placed together “body” parts—characters that seem unlikely to cross paths situated within a highly improbable plot with doubles and drownings galore. These at-first-glance unrelated parts make up a messy unlikely whole in a novel in some ways more related to early twentieth century absurdism than the high Victorian realist novel. Several scholars have compared elements of *Our Mutual Friend* to the work of Samuel Beckett, including Robert Kiely, who points to the novel’s “Beckett-like glimpses of a meaningless universe are arresting even though they are momentary and do not prevail” (282).⁶⁰ Kiely also compares Dickens’s self-consciously aware design and structure of *Our Mutual Friend* to the articulation work of Mr. Venus, who according to Kiely, “seems an author after Dickens’s own heart. He deals in illusions, gives animation to that which seems inert, but, most importantly, he strings together odd pieces in order to make a whole of them” (Ibid.). I would argue that Dickens replicates Venus’s practice of remaking disjointed separate pieces of bodies in his own at times absurdly implausible narrative structure. Given this, in a novel filled with doubles and disguises, Dickens, too, acts as a double for the boundary-crossing creator, Mr. Venus.

As mentioned previously in this section, Dickens plays upon post-*On the Origin of Species* anxieties in *Our Mutual Friend*—whether through the commercialized mixing of hardened human and animal fragments, blurring the line between human and animal; or emphasizing the animal-like vulnerability of the body to its environment—to outside disease, pollution, and filth as seen in the multiple forms of contamination present in Mr. Venus’s shop (and a constant presence in infinite forms throughout all of his work). This relationship between

⁶⁰ This Beckett connection gestures toward the idea that *Our Mutual Friend*, too, could arguably be—in its glimpses of a chaotic and meaningless universe—the most Hardy-like of Dickens’s work.

Our Mutual Friend and *On the Origin of Species* is an intentional and even acknowledged relationship—given that the title emphasizes “the mutual—though hidden—relations between its characters” reflecting the mutuality and networks of biological life in Darwin’s 1859 publication.⁶¹ The very centerpiece of *Our Mutual Friend* is an inheritance, albeit the Harmon financial inheritance that is morally and psychologically cursed, as opposed to a biological inheritance. But as Howard Fulweiler concludes in his article, “A Dismal Swamp”: Darwin, Design, and Evolution in *Our Mutual Friend*,” although Dickens was sympathetic to science, engaged with Darwinian theory, and interested in utilizing the text’s imagery of networked relationships and inheritance, he rejected the darkness of its Malthusian and predatory implications. Given Dickens’s worldview—his opposition to laissez-faire ideology and his belief in the ultimate redeemability of humanity—it was impossible for him to fully embrace a theory too closely “joined in marriage to the mechanical economic theories of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century capitalism” (Fulweiler 74).⁶² In other words, although *Our Mutual Friend* converses in a variety of ways with the ideas and imagery of *On the Origin of Species* (in particular its web of connectivity and mutuality), it does not function as an endorsement of Darwin’s text.

Our Mutual Friend and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, both fueled by post-*On the Origin* anxieties, are deeply anxious about imperfect boundaries between the physical human body and the outside environment in which the human body moves, as well as boundaries between the human and the non-human. These anxieties are reflected in their depictions of grotesque fungi,

⁶¹ According to Howard Fulweiler, “The connection between Dickens and Darwin was not simply one of analogy, however, or “something in the air,” but was in fact quite direct. Not only was there a general climate of interest in natural philosophy at mid-century, but this general interest was specifically reflected in Dickens’s own periodical, *All the Year Round*” (53). Although a literary magazine, Dickens’s *All the Year Round* published a review of *On the Origin of Species* in July 1860, reflecting Dickens’s deep interest in the topic (Ibid.).

⁶² Or at least the redeemability of much of humanity. Dickens did not attempt to redeem the irredeemable.

bones, and other quasi-animate objects. Given their shared anxiety around body boundaries, both novels express concern around the infection and/or pollution of the body, whether through the air, through touch, or through the consumption of food. Whether it is fungal spores through the air, fungal infection through damp earth, or the breathing in of tallow grease, both novels concern themselves with the mixing of biological life—whether the transfer between bodies or the transfer between liquid and solid forms.

This purposeful confusion between what is human, what is animal, and what is plant life plays different roles and is enacted for different purposes for Hardy and Dickens, respectively. For Hardy, long considered a great realist writer, it is part of both his dark realism and his noted sensationalist streak.⁶³ This bio-based confusion contributes to his world-building in which hope is ultimately futile and in which humanity is bound to fall into its own traps—a fate not even the bright, young, and educated can escape. Hardy’s “natural world” cannot bring relief nor solace, as it does for the Romantics, but instead acts as a more ancient, sinister, and threatening form of nature, one that is not only unfeeling to the concerns of the individual human (as it is for George Eliot) but threatens to consume and destroy his heroine.

On the other hand, Dickens utilizes this boundary crossing for both critical and comedic purposes. As mentioned previously, confusion and amalgamations between the human and non-human, particularly between humans and objects, sit at the center of Dickens’s work, as long ago demonstrated by Dorothy Van Ghent and later by Gillian Beer. It is an engaging vehicle for harsh critiques of individuals and systems that Dickens wished to tackle. But the scenes in Mr. Venus’s shop are more than just intentional, critical confusion between the human and object,

⁶³ See Richard Nemesvari’s *Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode* (2011). Nemesvari’s work is a key text describing Hardy’s position as both a realist novelist (associated in the nineteenth century with “high art”) and his use of melodrama and sensationalist modes, which were associated with mass culture and consumerism during Hardy’s lifetime.

but a journey into Victorian anxieties surrounding the porousness and vulnerability of the human body in polluted English urban spaces of the 1860s. Hardy is more intent on critiquing romanticized nature and rural spaces, demonstrating the possible pollution and violation of the boundaries of the human body by soft, damp fungi.

CHAPTER THREE:

Yearning for Return: John Ruskin's Lake District Fantasies and Thomas Hardy's West Country Rural Returns

Thomas Hardy's rural landscapes depict a yearning for return in many of his protagonists, including those such as Grace Melbury in *The Woodlanders* (1887) and Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native* (1878). But in Hardy's fiction, the movement back to a more traditional community, one more enmeshed with nature, inevitably brings neither joy nor comfort to his protagonists. Whereas George Eliot claims in *Adam Bede* that nature cannot reflect individual human emotions, Hardy's non-human world is not just darker and unsympathetic but threatening to the point of consuming the human. Hardy's nature, inspired by a Darwinian understanding of the biological world, threatens to consume and destroy his protagonists in multiple novels,⁶⁴ but ultimately it is the rural societal structures that prove more deadly—culminating in the destruction of his characters.

This chapter examines the Victorian yearning for return to rural life and the explicit, menacing rejection by nature and of the human in Hardy's novels, including *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*. By exploring rural poverty, lack of opportunity and growth for the individual, and constrictive rural social structures, these texts call into question Ruskinian anti-consumerist, traditionalist rural retreats, such as those described in Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson's *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in John Ruskin's Lake District* (2016), which I will be using as a counterpoint. I argue that these Hardy novels gesture towards the

⁶⁴ Notably, there are several nature-related deaths in *The Return of the Native*, Eustacia Vye, drowns in the Shadwater Weir along with Damon Wildeve. Mrs. Yeobright, Clym Yeobright's mother, dies from a combination of heat exhaustion and a venomous snake bite.

failure of simply returning to older, more traditional rural ways of life (including the return to handcrafting, which Ruskin advocated) without the reconceptualizing of social hierarchical structures. Ruskin represents a Romantic yearning for a neo-feudal, anti-industrial return to the land with clear hierarchical structures and distinctions, while Hardy represents a much more nuanced, darker conceptualization of nature and a clear critique of the ways in which traditional social structures bind and destroy lives.

The choice of juxtaposing John Ruskin and Thomas Hardy is intended to represent distinctive and differing perspectives on the subject of rural English communities and the nostalgic fantasy of return to such communities throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Although surely an oversimplification, it can be illuminating to place each thinker as a point on a spectrum. John Ruskin exists not only as a figure of great presentist interest in the realm of ecocriticism and our current climate crisis, but as a writer and intellectual difficult to place on any spectrum of ideas—given his often fantastical and highly individual perspectives. For the sake of contrast, Ruskin’s Wordsworthian-influenced High Toryism, one could say, sits at one end of a spectrum. This spectrum ranges from Romantic idealism to pessimistic views of nature’s ability to nurture or provide solace. Thomas Hardy, a naturalistic writer who utilizes both nineteenth-century realist conventions while simultaneously also relying on sensationalist modes, sits at the other end of the spectrum. Although not examined further in this chapter, as a point of extra contrast, I would place George Eliot, the great realist, as a more moderate, middle point between Ruskin and Hardy. Eliot validates the desire to seek redemption in nature and recognizes the human desire to see one’s emotions reflected in the non-human, “natural” world,⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Eliot says so explicitly in *Adam Bede*, whose narrative voice muses that: “For if it be true that Nature at certain moments seems charged with a presentiment of one individual lot must it not also be true that she seems unmindful, unconscious of another? For there is no hour that has not its births of gladness and despair, no morning brightness that does not bring new sickness to desolation as well as new forces to genius and love. There are so many of us, and

but as a realist, deeply enmeshed in evolutionary theory and natural history, she recognizes the impossibility of such romanticized notions. Likewise, much of Eliot's fiction concludes that rural communities even collude with natural forces themselves to punish bright women who stray outside of prescribed feminine conduct, such as the tragedy of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860).

My reasoning for contrasting these giants of Victorian thought originates in the very nature of their highly disparate personas in addition to their divergent political, social, and religious beliefs. Ruskin and Eliot happen to share a particular generational tie. Both belong to the significant cohort of 1819—Britons of the post-Napoleonic period—all of whom were born in the same year as Queen Victoria herself. These “Victoria's Victorians” were greatly remarked upon during the bicentennial of 1819 and have been examined extensively in two issues of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* (volumes 24.3 and 24.4). While they might share a birth year, there is much to differentiate the two from each other in their worldviews and cultural, societal orientations. Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, Ruskin ultimately rejects Darwinism and materialist science, as Mark Frost notes in his essay, “Reading Nature: John Ruskin, Environment, and the Ecological Impulse” (13). While Ruskin views nature through a Romantic and religious lens, Eliot's work is steeped in contemporary biological science and Darwinian networks of relation. Hardy's work too is deeply touched by his reading of Darwin. Eliot, having come through her own period of adolescent Evangelical fervor, evolves into an agnostic, while

our lots are so different, *what wonder that Nature's mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives?* We are children of a large family, and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of—to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more” (Eliot 263-264). Italicization has been added for emphasis.

Ruskin himself maintains some of his Revivalist upbringing and the profound influence of his pious mother throughout his life.

Although Thomas Hardy's life overlaps significantly with both that of Eliot and Ruskin, he is of the late-Victorian generation, born during the mid-Victorian period in June of 1840 (Thomas Hardy Society, "Life of Thomas Hardy"). And as might generationally be expected, Hardy's poetry and fiction question many dearly held Victorian assumptions about gender, sexuality, morality, and the duality between the city and the country. It is notable that Hardy, born in the small hamlet of Higher Bockhampton three miles east of Dorchester, has the most rural roots of the three figures (Ibid.). Eliot was born outside of the market town of Nuneaton in Warwickshire, where her father was the estate land agent at Arbury Hall (Ashton). The only figure of the three to have spent their formative years in a large city, Ruskin grew up the son of a wealthy merchant in London, although his paternal-family roots were in Scotland (Albritton and Albritton Jonsson 25). We can see how in particular, Ruskin and Hardy's lived experiences shaped their politics and positionality towards rural landscapes and developed their sense of the values that exist or should exist in such communities.

Ruskin's Rural Idyll

Given that Ruskin had the most urban—not to mention most privileged—upbringing of the three figures, one could argue that his embrace of rural spaces and landscapes reflects the zeal of the convert or an idealistic fantasy unmixed with the weight of personal memory and associations. Additionally, Ruskin's embrace of rural Britain, particularly that of Wordsworth's very own Lake District, was deeply enmeshed with Ruskin's own political and social views as a paternalistic, self-described "'violent Tory of the old school'" (qtd. in Shrimpton 1). As an

idealistic High Tory, Ruskin's true dream was the adoption of the political economy of the Christian Middle Ages with a "pious absolute monarch or a chivalrous clan chief from the pages of Sir Walter Scott" as his ideal leader (Shrimpton 1). Given his unique set of beliefs that were not only imaginative but also anti-capitalist and simultaneously deeply conservative, Ruskin occupies an unusual ideological space both now and during his own lifetime.⁶⁶ He was and still is often admired by those on the left who found inspiration in his anti-capitalist, anti-industrialist perspectives. As Francis O'Gorman reluctantly points out in his piece, "John Ruskin, via Elizabeth Gaskell, and the Working Classes," "Ruskin could, on occasions, align himself with the radicals, or at least sound as if he is so aligning himself, not primarily because he was inconsistent but because he shared, though for very different reasons, their hatred of laissez-faire economics" (45). This hatred of laissez-faire economics, mass production, and rampant homogenized consumerism is a central link between Ruskin and some of his most prominent leftist admirers, most notably William Morris. Aesthetics, anti-capitalism, and an awakened environmental consciousness are the ideological ties that bind Ruskin and Morris together. These are powerful shared values, but Ruskin's anti-democratic desire for a return to a rigid neo-medieval hierarchy and Morris's desire, as expressed in *News from Nowhere*, for an anarchistic socialist utopia (including gender equality) are so antithetical, so irreconcilable as to make Morris's lifelong admiration for Ruskin surprising.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ruskin writes in his great three-volume treatise, *The Stones of Venice*, that the current state of the industrial worker of England is a much worse fate than has ever existed before for the poor and working class: "there might be more freedom in England, though her feudal lords' lightest words were worth men's lives, and though the blood of the vexed husbandman dropped in the furrows of her fields, than there is while the animation of her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the exactness of a line" (836 in PDF/"VI. The Nature of Gothic" 193).

⁶⁷ The uneasy relation between Ruskin and his contemporary progressivists, in fact, angers some current Ruskin scholars. One such Ruskin scholar, Francis O'Gorman has some rather furious accusations towards Morris and other leftists for what he refers to as the "ruthless" extraction of some of Ruskin's ideas in his rather deceptively entitled article, "John Ruskin, via Elizabeth Gaskell, and the Working Classes," (47). O'Gorman directs his anger at Morris's Kelmscott Press edition of *The Stones of Venice*, describing Morris as a deceiver intent on hiding Ruskin's

Ruskin's utopian ideal is "a world of content labour, reverence, and shared traditions, and one free from the political economists' certainty that 'getting on', and breaking out of classes, was the rightful ambition of all under capitalism" (O'Gorman 55). This particular kind of nineteenth-century conservatism—referred to in the period as "Ultra Toryism"—seems intuitively linked to an ideological orientation towards rural landscapes and communities and a desire to "return" to nature.⁶⁸ This form of traditionalist conservatism, including some other forms of nineteenth-century conservation, including movements in the United States, links itself easily to nature conservation that maintains already existing or recently existing hierarchies.

As Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City* (1973), such anti-industrialists who pined for the British countryside of the past were inevitably elites, apathetic to or unable to see the reality and needs of the vast majority of rural people. Such rural romanticists allowed their judgement to be clouded by virtue of their own privileged positions. Williams, although he later became a scholar and Cambridge professor, knew rural poverty growing up on the Welsh borderlands, the son of a railroad worker. Seeing the world from his unique position as a successful Marxist scholar with working-class roots, Williams argues that for people like him, "At home we were glad of the Industrial Revolution and of its consequent social and political changes" (qtd. in Hunt xvi). Williams relies on not only Marxist analysis but cultural

religious conservatism, filled with ill intent, "All that Morris has to do is make sure the reader does not know how Ruskin envisaged the return of pleasurable labour. His principal strategy for this is ruthless. First, Ruskin's Christianity and Ultra Toryism is unmentioned in Morris's Introduction, and second, far more effectively, the reader does not know of either because Morris, *ruthlessly*, reproduces nothing else from *The Stones* except that one chapter. We are asked to judge an apparently political ideal wholly outside its context" (Ibid.).

⁶⁸ "Ultra Tories (act. 1827–1834), [...] rejected the changes in British life loosely associated with the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, and urbanization. [...] As opponents of economic liberalism they shared with some of their counterparts in French, Iberian, or German politics a willingness to challenge the nostrums of classical political economists, and to support measures that would tend to mitigate the hardships of the poor during the early industrial age" (Sack) As these aforementioned active dates from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* above illustrate, Ultra Toryism belonged to Ruskin's adolescence, and yet it is the political position he identified himself with as an adult—long past the time frame of the Ultra Tories.

materialism to critique centuries of recycled and reborn nostalgia for the British landscape—whether “the vistas of Capability Brown” or “the architecture of Robert Adam,”⁶⁹ the writings of Evelyn Waugh,” each piece of rural imagery, Williams argues, exacted “a human cost” in order to maintain its stability (Hunt xvii). Williams’s analysis, rooted in British literary history, of the country/city divide functions as a useful framework for examining Ruskin’s conservative drive for rural return and Hardy’s pessimistic, naturalist response to such romanticized ideologies.

Although neither Ruskin himself nor Ruskinian theory are discussed in *The Country and the City*, the theoretical framework of Williams’s work is applicable and relevant to Ruskin’s ideology. And intriguingly, Williams discusses Ruskin elsewhere notably in a 1985 *London Review of Books* review of a biography of Ruskin’s early life.⁷⁰ The goal of *The Country and the City* is to “disinter the historically binary demarcation [...] between the urban and rural” (Hunt xiv). I would argue that Williams seeks to do more than just “disinter” but means to break this country/city binary—in order to see the urban and rural as linked instead of as villainized/idealized oppositional forces with competing values that exist as two counterpoints of human life.

Arguing that it is a habit of writers and thinkers of any period to recall an earlier idyllic time to be “now” corrupted (“now” being a variety of times and historical moments), Williams in turn complicates this idea by arguing that “what seemed a single escalator, a perpetual recession

⁶⁹ Robert Adam (1728–1792), eighteenth-century Scottish architect of the Neoclassical school who built vast Neoclassical country homes across Scotland and England for the aristocracy. Many of these stately homes are now in the care of the National Trust and are thus, open to the public (Tait).

⁷⁰ In a 1985 *London Review of Books* review of a biography of Ruskin’s early life, Williams describes Ruskin as being a part of a “romantic anti-capitalism” movement. Here we only have a glance at Williams’s perspective on Ruskin, who he paints as a difficult figure to grapple with. Ruskin, as a romantic anti-capitalist, is part of “A whole succession or even tradition of writers” who “were influential opponents of industrial capitalism and, in a rather different way, of bourgeois society, and one common factor in their opposition was their conviction that the art they valued was incompatible with any such social order.”

into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement: Old England, settlement, the rural virtues—all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question” (16-17). Ruskin, too, belongs to this long tradition of aesthetic-minded thinkers, recalling the past with rose-colored glasses, and feeling driven to return to an ideal rural state of life. But each age, according to Williams, does have some distinctive understanding about rural virtues and the quality and values of rural Britain and how these have altered from the past (Ibid.). This does not negate the fact that Williams believes that rural nostalgia is an impulse that most often reinforces hierarchies and does little to serve everyday working people of the country.

John Ruskin’s Lake District

Nostalgic and idealistic impulses guide the individuals explored in Albritton and Albritton Jonsson’s *Green Victorians*. In their intellectual and cultural history, Albritton and Albritton Jonsson deftly describe the community of locals, conservationists, and Ruskin-disciples that come to populate the area surrounding Ruskin’s Lake District home of Brantwood starting in the 1880s, where they hoped to create sustainable handcrafting ventures. As Ruskin moved his life to the Lake District, so too did he draw like-minded, often middle-class to upper-class, educated people to join him.⁷¹ Just as Williams argues that our assessment of both the city and the country are more about our own cultural constructs—our human associations of the land with historic and cultural memories and associations—Albritton and Albritton Jonsson argue that Ruskin, the great advocate of the rural, had an “aversion to an unpeopled natural world” (15). In

⁷¹ Ruskin, although expressing concern towards an influx of tourism, unintentionally promoted the concept of the Lake District as a desirable tourist destination in his portrayal of it “as a haven of peace, simplicity and rural virtue that deserved to be protected” from the scourge of industrialization (Hanley and Walton 180).

other words, Ruskin, unlike figures such as the American preservationist John Muir (1838-1914), was disinclined towards what might be called “wilderness,” wild spaces, or nature that is far removed from human touch.⁷² Ideally then for Ruskin, the life he created in the Lake District was embedded within a human context (including most significantly the legacy of Wordsworth). While Ruskin significantly departs from his contemporary Muir when it comes to his own philosophy on the beauty of nature, his love for the human reflected landscape is echoed in Williams’s framework. For Williams, when individuals or society mourn/s a change in landscape, this is less often the loss of a truly “unspoiled country” untouched by the human, but it is more often “the loss of a specifically human and historical landscape, in which the source of feeling is not really that is ‘natural’ but that it is ‘native’” (200). Thus, the loss has more to do with the shifting human and historic landscape. This desire for a human-history imbued landscape might be part of a wider reactionary Victorian “structure of feeling” as Williams would call it— “the way meanings and values were lived” by a particular community in a particular time and place (Hunt xv). This was surely the case as Ruskin and his like-minded community, including Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, rallied against the damming of Lake Thirlmere (Albritton and Albritton Jonsson 13).

Rawnsley and Ruskin sought to maintain or recreate a less ecologically destructive source of historical living (in Ruskin’s case, the English medieval period) and livelihood-making through anti-industrialism and forming and/or supporting small handicraft operations. So, while anti-industrial, they were still maintaining human-centered spaces that intended to be less radically destructive to an already highly human-altered landscape (as Albritton and Albritton

⁷² The very idea of wilderness or nature untouched by humans or perhaps more likely, untouched by Western colonialism, is a cultural construction, deeply connected to European and American Romanticism, but beyond the scope of the discussion here.

Jonsson point out, the Lake District has been occupied by humans since at least the end of the last Ice Age, and Bronze Age people cleared the woods around the district) (98). Most of the significant figures in Ruskin's Lake District community, as illustrated in *Green Victorians*, were transplants from outside of the region. Rawnsley, from the south of England, was one of these outsiders who made up what became known as the Lakeland Arts and Crafts movement.⁷³ After becoming vicar of Crosthwaite at Keswick in Cumbria, Rawnsley, who would later found the National Trust alongside Octavia Hill and Robert Hunter, established with his wife, Edith Fletcher, a school to train locals in handcrafting home goods such as candlesticks and silver tea services to spinning stools (Ibid. 105, 108). For over a century, the school, the Keswick School of Industrial Art, promoted not only a localized economy, but a historical and local traditional aesthetic, selling objects that spoke to "the people's ancient connection to land through the wool and flax that been historically produced there" (Ibid.). Similarly, Albert Fleming, a devout follower of Ruskin, began a handcrafted linen production venture, known as the Langdale Linen Industry. A barrister by trade who had inherited his father's practice, Fleming, an eccentric and religious man, uprooted his upper middle class London life to move to the Lake District in "an attempt to be close to Ruskin, whom he considered his mentor" (Ibid. 56.). Recruiting poor elderly local women, Fleming himself had to first learn the art of spinning, and then in turn, he and Marian Twelves taught local women the same, who then subsequently began to produce hand-spun material for the business venture (Ibid. 57).

⁷³ Also known as the Lakeland Arts Revival or the Lakeland group. According to Sara E. Haslam, the group was once thought to have been an offshoot of the British Arts and Crafts movement. Through her own research on the group (see: *John Ruskin and the Lakeland Arts Revival, 1880-1920*), Haslam discovered by carefully examining the group's own writings and specimens of work and design that the "Lakeland group ran independently and was unique in its founding and approaches towards art and design" to the larger Arts and Crafts movement (x xi). According to Haslam, "Indeed, if any comparisons are to be made, they should be with the earlier and similarly Ruskin-inspired Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" (Ibid.).

While they were ultimately successful in smaller ventures, Ruskin and his community of idealists, as Albritton and Albritton Jonsson concede, “failed in the larger task of creating a long-lasting alternative to industrial society” (20). And while Ruskin and his allies managed in many ways to protect the area around Brantwood from overdevelopment, they fell short of leaving any deep-rooted mark on British social and economic systems (Ibid.). Albritton and Albritton Jonsson emphasize that this failure has much to do with the very nature of Ruskin’s paternalism—much of the burden of creating his ideal society was left upon the shoulders of the poor. It also in many ways reflected the fact that Ruskin had no lived experience as either a person experiencing poverty or as someone growing up in a rural space. Ruskin felt he knew the answers to solve industrial society’s ills, but his answers required others, particularly the impoverished and the working class, to follow his prescriptions, which included eschewing everything from “cheap penny prints” and other enjoyable but facile mass-produced items to the “luxury” of spacious rooms (Albritton and Albritton Jonsson 175).

Hardy: The West Country’s Native Son

While there were many reasons for this failure, as Albritton and Albritton Jonsson discuss, if there is one prominent contemporaneous figure whose oeuvre most reflects the failure of educated individuals returning from the city to integrate or reintegrate into rural society—that is, of course, Thomas Hardy. Hardy’s youth, in the biography ostensibly written by second wife, Florence, is described as “a life twisted of three strands—the professional life, the scholar’s life, and the rustic life, combined in the twenty-four hours of one day” (F. Hardy 41). Before his novelist career and before his move to London as a young professional, Hardy was already experiencing the fracture between the new ways and the old ways, between city and the country (the latter of which Williams would argue is more of an artificial binary than a reality):

Owing to the accident of his being an architect's pupil in a county-town of assizes and alderman, which had advanced to railways and telegraphs and daily London papers; yet not living there but walking in every day from a world of shepherds and ploughmen in a hamlet three miles off, where modern improvements were still regarded as wonders, he saw rustic and borough doings in a juxtaposition peculiarly close. (Ibid.)

Whether this biography (or perhaps somewhat ghost-written autobiography) is intentionally meant to be an echo of the key themes of Hardy's novels lies beyond the scope of this particular examination.⁷⁴ But here the reader is led to believe that the duality of technological innovation versus the old ways of the ploughman and the shepherd were very much front of mind, shaping the young Hardy before he had ever moved from his West Country birthplace.

Hardy's Rural Tragedies: Doomed to Return, Doomed to Remain

Throughout his long career, Hardy's novels replay in a number of very different ways the story of a young man or woman who leaves their rural home—usually in the West Country—and become more educated, more worldly.⁷⁵ But the desire or need for returning home eventually brings this young person back to their rural native landscape. While Hardy clearly delights in many of the characters that populate his rural communities, his novels after *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872) and starting with *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) depict “returns” that grow increasingly dark, violent, all-consuming, and destructive. While the unique Yuletide traditions of the West Country are seen in both *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Return of the*

⁷⁴ Although nominally written by Thomas Hardy's second wife, Florence Hardy, née Dugdale, and published only after his death, there remains much speculation as to how much Hardy had to do with its composition (“Frontmatter” to the Cambridge Library Collection edition of *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840–1891*.)

⁷⁵ Raymond Williams was fascinated by “Hardy country.” This makes a great deal of intuitive sense given that biographically, Williams lived the life of something of a Hardy character himself – the young person tied to a rural landscape and community but who finds outside success through an education outside of that community.

Native, these plots range from an unconvincingly happy return to nightmarish tragedy with “a moderately happy ending” tacked on under pressure (Benvenuto 83).

The heath of *The Return of the Native*, known as Egdon Heath, once a beloved place for the novel’s “native son” and the centerpiece of the drama, ultimately becomes a consuming, destructive force. Influenced by his reading of Darwinian theory, Hardy is led to “reject the Wordsworthian ideal of a Beneficent Nature, and thus the heath becomes a metaphor for nature’s indifference to human suffering and despair” (Thomas Hardy Society, “Egdon Heath, Dorset”). Describing a significant figure in the novel, Diggory Venn, the “reddleman,” Hardy paints the young man as “one of a class rapidly becoming extinct in Wessex, filling at present in the rural world the place which, during the last century, the dodo occupied in the world of animals. He is a curious, interesting, and nearly perished link between obsolete forms of life and those which generally prevail” (*Return of the Native* 13). Here the influence of Darwinian thought upon Hardy and upon Hardy’s vision of vanishing rural customs and ways of being becomes explicit. Some life forms, or some occupations/ways of life/cultures will not survive biological evolution or in this case, economic, cultural, and societal shifts. Hardy essentially superimposes a biological theory onto cultural shift.⁷⁶ Life on the heath, life in rural England is closer to nature and thus, life there is more punishing, less forgiving, and more brutal. Such a landscape has no qualms about consuming its own, whether native or not.

The titular “native” in *The Return of the Native*, Clym Yeobright, fails to be protected by his native status, nor shielded by his love for the landscape of his birth. The call of his native heath, Hardy’s fictional Egdon Heath, draws him home from Paris, where he has experienced

⁷⁶ This is not intended to imply that Hardy was a proponent of social Darwinism.

some career success. Clym turns what appears to be a simple Christmas visit into a permanent residence at home—much to his mother’s great disappointment. What follows upon the heels of his return are tidal waves of disappointment, mistakes, misunderstandings, culminating in tragedy and several deaths, including that of his mother, Mrs. Yeobright. Clym’s desire to return and remain in his provincial home is met with confusion among not just his mother, but by other residents of the heath. As the narrator proclaims with great simplicity, “Yeobright loved his kind” (*Return of the Native* 170). Not only is he inspired by his love for the place and its people, but Clym is informed by progressive educational ideologies that are beyond the purview of his rural home community. Clym is described as “a John the Baptist who took ennoblement rather than repentance for his text. Mentally he was in a provincial future, that is, he was in many points abreast with the central town thinkers of his date” (Ibid.). And while Egdon Heath’s native son might be “permeated with its scenes, with its substance, and with its odours,” when it comes to his philosophy surrounding his home and its people, Clym has been largely shaped from his time abroad. He owes much of his viewpoint “to his studious life in Paris, where he had become acquainted with ethical systems popular at the time” (Ibid. 171). Furthermore, the reader is told that “In consequence of this relatively advanced position, Yeobright might have been called unfortunate. The rural world was not ripe for him. A man should be only partially before his time—to be completely to the vanward in aspirations is fatal to fame” (Ibid. 170). Here, early on in the narrative, the reader is allowed to foresee the dangers of both Yeobright’s idealist return to his native landscape and how the hero’s forward-thinking outside education will become—at the very least—a danger to his success and reputation.

Although Yeobright survives his return to his heath, his new wife, who yearns to escape Egdon, which she despises, and his mother, who is a native of the heath, do not survive. For in

Hardy's Wessex universe, being a native who remains does not guarantee safety nor prosperity, just as being a native who returns does not protect the individual from tragedy and profound loss. A character's embeddedness in their rural landscape is not a marker of safety from tragedy. This pattern in Hardy mirrors the seeming randomness of Darwinian theory of evolution to the human mind in search of design, progression, and purpose. There is no hand of justice nor discernable pattern to tragedy and suffering, just as the process of evolution has no moral purpose or motivation towards improvement. Of course, as natural phenomena, natural selection and evolution have no motivations at all.

Her native knowledge of the heath does not save Mrs. Yeobright from heat stroke and the bite of a venomous adder, which in combination, suddenly and shockingly, take her life. While happenstance and coincidence gather to form a noose around many of Hardy's characters, nature, if not an active player or catalyst in their demise, acts as an unfeeling and dangerous force. It may have been the simple mistake of Eustacia refusing to answer the door to Mrs. Yeobright that forces her mother-in-law to turn back out (into the blistering heat without refreshment) that subsequently brings about the older woman's death. But it is the punishing elements of the landscape and the non-human that deal the blow directly. In other words, it is human action and misadventure that bring forth the forces of death, but the elements of nature are oftentimes the most direct cause of death. Likewise, Eustacia herself, Clym's new bride, dies by the forces of the heath—her drowning becomes the final tragedy for the native son at the center of the novel.

Hardy depicts the forests of *The Woodlanders* as even more invasive and threateningly fertile than Egdon Heath. Nature, arboreal and otherwise, in *The Woodlanders* reclaims humans and human structures. Trees and lichen threaten to consume humans—paralleling the fungi in *Far from the Madding Crowd*'s woodland scene (Hardy, *Madding Crowd* 265). In *The*

Woodlanders, moss and ivy claim and reclaim the Elizabethan Hintock House, the manor house of the wealthy widow, Felice Charmond. The lichens live on an entirely different time scale than that of human activity, “The ashlar of the walls,” of the house, according to the narrator, “where not overgrown with ivy and other creepers, was coated with lichen of every shade,” so much so that “below the plinth, it merged in moss” destroying the boundary between the manor and the biological community it is situated in (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 53). The very setting and position of Hintock House Hardy is described as “a stimulus to vegetation” (Ibid.). Despite the valiant human efforts, which include continual cutting away of the moss and ivy, “It was vegetable nature’s own home” and no human effort could defeat its reclamation of the structure (Ibid.).

Not only does nature reclaim human structures in *The Woodlanders*, but it also reclaims human lives back to the earth, including human lives that have been linked and merged with non-human life. The life-holds of other tenants hang on the woodsman John South’s life—when he dies, their holdings will return to the lord (or in this case, the lady) of the manor. Although South is not a major character in the novel, his life is inextricably linked to the lives of both his neighbors and the life of a tall elm tree, a tree that has lived its life alongside South, and “which stood at a distance of two-thirds its own height from the front of South’s dwelling” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 83). The sight of the elm swaying and creaking in the wind, including the anthropomorphic “sound of its sighs” conjures in South “the terrifying illusion [...] that it would descend and kill him.” South’s obsession with the elm becomes all-consuming: “he would sit all day, in spite of persuasion, watching its every sway” (Ibid. 83-84) Not only does the tree sigh as if it possesses lungs (a recurring image throughout the novel), but it replicates human culture producing “the melancholy Gregorian melodies which the air wrung out of it” (Ibid. 84). The life of John South and the life of the elm tree have run parallel to each other. The reader learns

from South's recollection that "when it was quite a small tree [...] and I was a little boy, I thought one day of chopping it off with my hook [...] But I put off doing it, and didn't. And at last it got too big; and now 'tis my enemy, and will be the death of me" (Ibid.) South bemoans his failure to cut down the young elm when he could have, remarking bitterly that "Little did I think, when I let the sapling stay, that a time would come when it would torment me, and dash me into my grave" (Ibid.) It is this terror of the elm tree that has grown in tandem with the woodsman "rather than any organic disease which was eating away the health of John South" (Ibid.). Indeed, the actual biological cause of John South's death remains unclear. The woodsman's daughter, Marty South, explains to Dr. Fitzpiers that her father is haunted by the elm, whom he claims, "has got human sense" (Ibid. 93). What is more, Marty's father insists that the tree "sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him his slave" (Ibid.). Marty's statement to the doctor concludes with the assertion that the violent elm is not the first of its kind in their village, that, in fact, "Others have been like it afore in Hintock" (Ibid.).⁷⁷ It is not entirely clear here whether Marty herself believes this statement or if it is simply a conveyance of her father's own supernatural beliefs in tree-human lore. But it does indicate a wider folk belief that ties human life—bodies and their physical and psychological well-being—to the lives of the trees that surround them.

What is clear is that the fatal decision by the doctor to cut down the elm tree leads directly to the death of John South. In the early hours of the morning, the looming tree comes down and by nightfall, South has drawn his last breath. Significantly, the doctor who makes that fatal decision, Edred Fitzpiers, exists as an outsider—a newcomer to the central village of the

⁷⁷ John South's supernatural life-long intertwining with the trees foretells similarly fatal, mystic tree-human relations in Algernon Blackwood's Edwardian works of early horror and weird fiction, particularly his novella, *The Willows* (1907) in which willows along the banks of the Danube form a human-consuming alternate dimension of willow spirits, and his short story, "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912).

novel, *Little Hintock*.⁷⁸ The doctor's decision ends the life of South, one of Hardy's most nature-entwined characters; a man so local, his spirit is tied to an elm. Simultaneously, Fitzpiers also destroys the prospects of Giles Winterborne, another native-born woodsman. Hardy hints at Fitzpiers's invader-like status through his naming conventions. Throughout the character's introduction, his surname is deliberately emphasized. On inquiring as to the name of the new doctor, Mrs. Charmond is told that he is called "Fitzpiers. He represents a very old family, I believe, the Fitzpierses of Buckbury-Fitzpiers—not a great many miles from here" (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 56). While his family origin is not far removed from the area, Edred himself is an outsider; and likewise, his family, albeit ancient, were once outsiders and invaders themselves—the Fitzpiers name itself indicates a likely Anglo-Norman background (Nicolaisen 66). Later in the novel, Fitzpiers's ancestors are more clearly associated with the Anglo-Normans when Grace visits the remnants of what she thinks are the stones of the family's decayed castle. Examining the remains, "Grace had no doubt that it represented the ancient stronghold of the Fitzpiers family" which is described as possessing a "quaint Norman carving" (Hardy, *Woodlanders*, Macmillan first ed. 112).⁷⁹ Thus, while the narratorial framing (in the first edition) begs the reader to question the legitimacy of the castle remnants as the Fitzpiers ancestral home, the fact that Hardy intended Fitzpiers's family origin to at least appear to be associated with the Normans and Anglo-Norman culture remains clear. Such a naming choice leaves a clue, subtly reiterating to readers the doctor's non-native status. It brings forth an association with the Norman invaders,

⁷⁸ Little Hintock, while a fictional village created by Hardy, is located within the real Blackmore Vale (also spelled Blackmoor) of north Dorset (Lowry 6). Many of Hardy's placenames are "only semi-fictitious, in so far as they have been coined in imitation of, or with only slight alterations of, existing place-names" in the counties of Berkshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Hampshire, Dorset, and Devon (Nicolaisen 69).

⁷⁹ The line "Grace had no doubt that it represented the ancient stronghold of the Fitzpiers family" is included in the original Macmillan edition of the novel in 1887. This line is removed in later editions and replaced by a more definite and detailed description: "On another day she drove to the ruins of Sherton Castle, the original stronghold of the Lords Baxby, Fitzpiers maternal ancestors" (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 145). Thus, this later alteration complicates the narrative—the Norman carving and ruins would not have been from the Fitzpiers themselves.

contrasting Fitzpiers and his lack of woodland, local knowledge, to his natives of Wessex— Wessex being a quintessentially Saxon place name as “one of the ancient Saxon kingdoms of England” (Thomas Hardy Society, “Hardy's Wessex”).

It is through the viewpoint of Marty South, oftentimes the ignored and unseen observer,⁸⁰ that Grace Melbury makes her first foray into the reader's mind as “a flexible young creature in whom she [Marty South] perceived the features of her she had known as Miss Grace Melbury, but now looking glorified and refined to much above her former level” (Hardy, *Woodlanders* 34). Marty observes Grace just as Grace is returning to their village after years of education outside the bounds of Little Hintock. Giles Winterbourne, Grace's childhood sweetheart and presumably her intended husband, is assigned to fetch the returning Grace. The narrative voice emphasizes the contrast between Giles and the educated Grace, informing the reader that “though well-attired and well-mannered for a yeoman, [he] looked rough beside her” (Ibid.). Education outside and beyond one's home village leaves a legible trace upon Hardy's characters that is recognizable and readable to them through visualized, oftentimes material clues. Winterbourne possesses the self-awareness to read Grace's appearance as indicating a worldliness and gentility beyond his own. He realizes that “external phenomena—such as the lowness or height or colour of a hat, the fold of a coat, the make of a boot, or the chance attitude of a limb at the instant of view—may have a great influence upon feminine opinion of a man's worth” and recognizes that Grace now has the outside education to know not just how to present herself to the world but also possesses the knowledge to read his visualized lack of education (Ibid 35). While Grace's polished education outside of Little Hintock makes her doubt her possible connection with Giles, readers are told that despite this, there “pulsed an old simple indigenous feeling favourable to Giles,

⁸⁰ Multilayered observation by various characters is a consistent feature of *The Woodlanders*.

though it had become overlaid with implanted tastes” (Ibid. 74). Preferences that would have existed without the outside education—that “simple indigenous feeling”—draw Grace to Giles upon her initial return. However, in *The Woodlanders*, it is the “implanted tastes” that win out over simple indigenous feeling—ultimately leading to heartbreak, an ill-fated marriage, and Winterbourne’s tragic death.

The choice of the term “implanted tastes” echoes the woodland community’s deeply rooted dependence on native trees. Here the implication is that outside, more modern and urban tastes and preferences have wrongly been implanted through education in the mind of Grace. Grace’s implanted, outsider tastes alienate her from her woodland community and ultimately encourage her rejection of Winterbourne, leading to a series of unhappy decisions—a situation repeated throughout Hardy’s novels. For both the men and women of Hardy’s novels alike, the “view of education offered [...] is consistently dark” (Mattisson 188). As Jane Mattisson argues, starting with Hardy’s early novels, including *Under the Greenwood Tree* and the figure of Fancy Day, and continuing throughout his career, “Any attempt to improve one’s social standing through education results in failure or a painful dislocation from one’s environment, values, and traditions,” reflecting Hardy’s own skeptical understanding of progress, his nuanced perception of education, and suspicion towards middle class values around education (Ibid.).

The killer trees and reclaiming lichen and ivy of *The Woodlanders* share similarities to the consuming, threatening fungi of Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd* (as discussed in chapter two). While *The Woodlanders* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* both depict threatening plant life and tragic disappointments for modern alienated characters, the heath of *The Return of the Native* has less menacing plant life but likewise consumes and destroys its human inhabitants, educated or otherwise. Rural retreats and returns in Hardy’s universe underline the

deadliness of nature for both those who remain and those who leave and return. Within his Wessex world, nature and ruralness are deadly whether an individual remains within their native landscape throughout their life or not. Neither rootedness nor integration into a particular landscape can save Hardy's protagonists nor their loved ones from the fickleness of fate or from the forces of nature. Even characters that are well-integrated parts of their native-born ecosystem, such as John South or Mrs. Yeobright, are subject to capricious consumption and destruction by the natural world which had previously nourished them and to which they were deeply embedded.⁸¹ Although this destruction is wrought directly or indirectly by nature itself, as is the case for both of the aforementioned characters, there is no doubting Hardy's delight in the natural world. Through his attentiveness to the natural world as demonstrated through extensive landscape and natural descriptive prose (and as described in Michael Irwin's *Reading Hardy's Landscapes*), Hardy makes clear his love and belief in nature for nature's own sake. Hardy's Romantic delight in nature, particularly in his native landscape, is difficult at times to reconcile with his deeply ingrained pessimism around human choice, fate, and the volatility and darkness inherent in nature. As Penny Boumelha argues, Hardy's understanding of human embeddedness and integration with nature is influenced in part by nineteenth-century French naturalism (xx).

French naturalism exists as only one part of the story of influence though. As Gillian Beer noted decades ago, Darwin was always an acknowledged source of major intellectual influence upon Hardy, and "much has been written on the connection" between the two thinkers (222).⁸² While the influence of Darwin on Hardy has been explored throughout the twentieth century, our

⁸¹ Whereas for Ruskin, a sense of rootedness to a place and a landscape always possesses a positive connotation.

⁸² Beer argues that while much of the writing on Darwin's influence upon Hardy has to do with his pessimism, it is significant to note that Hardy bases his novels on the single lifespan of an individual. Through this focus on the "human scale" of a single life, Hardy "opposes evolutionary meliorism or pessimism by making the single generation carry the freight of signification" (223).

current accelerating climate crisis imparts a renewed relevancy to reexamining figures as diverse as Hardy and Ruskin. Ruskin serves as a uniquely nineteenth-century thinker—a romantic conservative anti-capitalist—and an interesting counterpoint to Hardy. For Ruskin, a simple return to pre-industrial life and the hierarchies that accompanied it can solve the ills of the endless monotony of urban industrial labor. Rural communities, old ways, returning to nature (albeit a still very human-altered nature) are balms for the evils of the nineteenth century—solutions to laissez-faire capitalism. Hardy, the native son of rural England and of a younger generation, sees such landscapes and communities through more realistic, at times even pessimistic eyes. His view of rural spaces is deeply influenced by Darwinian thought, but there is more to his conception of ruralness than this. In Hardy’s universe, nature consumes and destroys all. It threatens destruction upon the heads of both those that stay all their lives on the heath and those that leave and return. It reclaims human endeavors—great manor homes are broken down and consumed through its reaching grasp in the form of moss and ivy. But the forces of destruction in Hardy’s novels are much more than that – it is also the social structures, including the repressive sexual and gender standards, that are also destructive, consuming, and punishing. Thus, Hardy’s nature intertwines with and is inseparable from the socio-political and cultural structures that also bring forth the destruction of his protagonists. Such intertwining emphasizes how socio-political structures are inseparable from the rural landscapes in which they exist, and the environmentally and aesthetically-motivated “returns” to such communities cannot be successful without the reconceiving of the inequities and hierarchies inherent in such spaces. An environmentally sustainable return to nature—complete with radically reimagined rural communities—becomes possible through the utopian envisionings of William Morris at the end

of the century. These utopian dreams of happy, fulfilling enmeshment with nature are explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR:
“How We Live and How We Might Live”: William Morris’s Utopian Answer to the Human-
Nature Divide

As discussed in the previous chapter, Thomas Hardy’s novels call into question the Ruskinian fantasy of anti-consumerist, traditionalist rural retreats by exploring rural poverty, lack of opportunity and growth for the individual, and suppressive rural social structures. As I have argued, these works gesture towards the failure of simply returning to older, more traditional rural ways of life (including the return to handcrafting) while maintaining existing and traditional social hierarchical structures. Tracing this stream of thought leads to the late writings of William Morris, whose work represents a very different kind of post-Darwinian imagining of human society—in this case, harmoniously embedded in the natural world. Although inspired by John Ruskin’s focus on nature and anti-industrial labor practices, Morris imagined not just a restructuring of labor that was much more enmeshed in nature and traditional craftsmanship but recognized the fundamental importance of reconceptualizing traditional social and economic structures.

The late works of William Morris emblemize the multi-faceted complexity of Victorian cultural conceptions of the body and its relationship to nature and urban and non-urban spaces. His writings, particularly *News from Nowhere* (1890), serve as a nexus for various connecting elements, including early environmentalism and economic structure and the relationship of these to the health of the human body and the need for fulfilling labor.⁸³ I see Morris’s ethos and

⁸³ As Benjamin Morgan argues in his essay, “How We Might Live: Utopian Ecology in William Morris and Samuel Butler,” the very genre of utopian fiction lends itself to the complexity and intersecting nature of the industry-fueled ecological and class violence of the nineteenth century: “the turn to nature in utopian literature around 1870 is better understood as an attempt to use structural features of utopian form to navigate the complexity of ecological and economic systems as they intersect at multiple scales” (140).

writings in a similar fashion to how John Parham describes the Victorian novel—as a productive vehicle to “tease out the intersections and ramifications of complex ecological relationships that encompass political economy, society, nature and the human body” (23). In describing humans as part of a larger ecosystem in *News from Nowhere*, Morris makes clear the delusionary nature of the nineteenth century’s division between the human and natural realms by calling into question the presumption that the human resides outside the boundaries of so-called “nature.” In light of Morris’s eco-conscious commentary throughout *News from Nowhere*, I argue that elements throughout the novel gesture towards an early understanding of ecosystems, a term not coined until 1935 by the British ecologist Arthur Tansley (Bocking 12).⁸⁴

Any discussion of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* must grapple with a multitude intertwining elements surrounding labor, environmental well-being, health, aesthetics, and gender. A fictional portrayal of utopian socialism, Morris’s novel describes a future anarchist society in which the government, currency, and industrialization have been violently overthrown, leading to the end of capitalism and factory labor. By creating a socialist utopia, Morris shapes his own vision of Marxism—a vision which is naturally married to issues of labor. In turn, labor is tied to the health and well-being of the environment. Correspondingly, how humans labor and how their labor alters the environment, in turn, shapes human health and physical appearance.

The aesthetics of the human form within this new socialist non-state reflect and are due in part to the restoration of the natural landscape. It is only when society moves away from the

⁸⁴ According to Stephen Bocking’s “Visions of Nature and Society: A History of the Ecosystem Concept,” Arthur “Tansley’s concept reflected ecological traditions around him. Ecologists in Britain, more so than elsewhere, had considered the interaction between plants and soil, and the influence of grazing and other activities of animals on plants” (12). *The Oxford English Dictionary* also identifies the origin of the term “ecosystem” as being first printed by the plant ecologist Arthur Tansley in 1935 as “The fundamental concept appropriate to the biome considered together with all the effective inorganic factors of its environment is the ecosystem, which is a particular category among the physical systems that make up the universe. A. G. Tansley in *Ecology* vol. 16, p. 306.”

mechanization of work and the pollution of the skies and waterways do the people themselves show visible signs of health. While Morris presents a vision that weaves together aestheticism and political radicalism, I argue that he forces his readers to confront the intertwining challenges which perpetuate human inequality and injustice. Morris asks his readers to recognize humans as embedded in and inseparable from the rest of the natural world. In *News from Nowhere*, the problems facing human society are inseparable from environmental degradation. In other words, the toxic, damaging relationship of industry upon human health is intimately related to the degradation of the natural world. In Morris's imagining humans are not masters of nature, but more akin to members of an ecosystem. Humans in his socialist utopia embody both the labor they perform and the environmental improvements of Morris's visionary post-industrial future. Although the influence of Darwinian concepts of nature would have been inescapable in the late nineteenth century, Morris's vision of humanity as thoroughly in harmony with nature surprisingly resists the Darwinian narratives of decline and competition that were so compelling to other thinkers at the time. I will argue that Morris is able to envision such integrative understandings of the human body and environmental policies given his emphasis on the inextricable connection between the aesthetic appreciation of nature and his own particular amalgamation of Marxist and anarchist thought.

What Morris shares with some of the other figures discussed throughout this dissertation—in particular Thomas Hardy and George Eliot—is a deeply engrained love for the landscape of rural Britain, a yearning for what might be considered a pastoral idyll at first glance. But like Hardy and Eliot, Morris is a counter-pastoral thinker. As Benjamin O'Dell argues in his essay, "The Victorian Counter-Pastoral: *Adam Bede* as Historical Novel" and in his dissertation, *Victorian Literature and Historical Time: Genre and Historicity After Walter Scott*, Raymond

Williams's concept of the "counter-pastoral" "demonstrates how some writers use the same conventions [of the pastoral] to subvert an idealized or nostalgic view of agrarian life" ("The Victorian Counter-Pastoral" 27). And while "Williams is reluctant to describe Eliot's fiction in these terms," O'Dell argues that Eliot's work, in particular, *Adam Bede* should be considered a counter-pastoral given that the historical novel "fosters a dialectic of past and present through which readers are called on to confront the ongoing course of history. Historical time is thus differentiated from either an accessible 'reality' prior to and outside the fictional text, [...] it is instead offered as a basis for shared consciousness of and reflection on the reality of change" (Ibid. 27-28). Likewise, despite the fact that Williams characterizes Morris's writing, in particular *News from Nowhere*, as "often backward-looking," I would argue that *News from Nowhere* and Morris's later works, although aesthetically idyllic, are ultimately counter-pastoral (*The Country and the City* 393). While Williams describes Morris's vision "gentler and more idyllic" than that of H.G. Wells, I argue that Morris's vision is clearly oppositional to the essential nature of the pastoral—idealized nostalgia.

Morris's Romantic Radicalism

The first biography to truly reassess and confront Morris's Marxism and political radicalism was E.P. Thompson's 1955 biography of Morris (with a significantly revised edition appearing in 1977).⁸⁵ According to this significant political reassessment by Thompson (who like Morris could also be described as a Marxist humanist), it was early nineteenth century romantic radicalism, particularly a sort of Keatsian stunted radicalism, and its complex relationship with revolutionary politics that are the forebearers of Morris's unique romantic radical ways of seeing

⁸⁵ I will be referring to the 1977 edition of Thompson's biography, unless otherwise stated.

and thinking.⁸⁶ Identifying Keats as the most significant Romantic literary influence on the adolescent Morris, E.P. Thompson understands John Keats as a political radical at heart.⁸⁷ He argues that Keats at the start of the century, stood unprotected by the class and economic privilege of someone like P.B. Shelley, and was left to throw himself into beauty and art for its own sake. And yet, as Thompson understands him, “At every turn Keats was racked by the conflict between the ideal and the real. Rather than hand over poetry to the utilitarians he was proud to write it for ‘its own sake’, and to nourish his aspirations for beauty and a nobler humanity in the loneliness of his own heart” (18). Keats exemplifies the “inward-turning of the great romantic impulse” when faced with the enormous weariness felt by once-hopeful radicals in the aftermath of the failure of the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. The Peterloo Massacre in 1819 served as the nail in the coffin for British radical movements at the start of the nineteenth century. Keats’s own world-weariness was not solely based on the crushing of radical movements on the continent and at home, but also the industrial nineteenth-century capitalist bourgeois turn. As Thompson argues “in Keats’s time the way was being prepared for the triumph in the mid-century of Victorian utilitarianism” (16). The focus on money and the lack of middle-class interest in poetry (in favor of a focus on industry) left Keats rushing into an artistic dream world; poetry became “a refuge from a social reality which he felt to be unbearably hostile” (Ibid. 11). Unlike Wordsworth, Keats doesn’t turn to conservatism; although in all fairness, he had no extended chance to do so given his very short lifespan.⁸⁸ In some ways, Keats

⁸⁶ In his essay, “William Morris and the Division of Labor” Christopher Shaw argues that the Romantic radicalism of Keats that E. P. Thompson deftly connects to Morris finds its initial source in Friedrich Schiller’s Romantic German Idealism (from the collection from the William Morris Society, *William Morris and John Ruskin: A New Road on Which the World Should Travel*).

⁸⁷ Keats’s “private letters show that he was Radical himself in his sympathies, admired Orator Hunt, the chief speaker at Peterloo, and Richard Carlile, the courageous free-thinker, and shared Shelley’s revulsion at the oppressive corruption of his times. And yet [...] there is little evidence of direct political interest in his poetry” (Thompson 10).

⁸⁸ Keats dies in 1821 at just twenty-five years old (Everest).

is the Morris without hope in Thompson's depiction. As he articulates, young Morris and Edward Burne-Jones at Oxford and their young Pre-Raphaelite circle of friends early on echo the life of Keats, "unorthodox and advanced in their opinions—freethinkers, or Republicans, or simply 'Bohemians'; and like Keats, their opinions found like expression in their art or their actions, they were without 'hope' of their effective realization, they were 'suffocated' and oppressed on all sides by 'bourgeoisdom and philistinism'" (Thompson 20). But the turning point for Thompson was "When Morris became an active Socialist, it was this re-birth of 'hope' to which he recurred, again and again, in lectures and poems" (Ibid.). An adolescent romantic, Keatsian allegiance in Morris found renewed purpose—something to strive for in the radical reawakening during the second half of his life.

It is the uneasiness between the Romantic and the revolutionary that Thompson (although he is surely in good company with all those who study Morris) grapples with throughout his almost a thousand-page biography of Morris. His battle is with both himself and other writers on Morris to find the nexus between Romantic and Marxist; the point where dream world and practical action meet. It is a central point that he returns to in his revised 1977 edition and extensive postscript (dated 1976)—in some ways his final word on Morris—given that Thompson vows never to revise his biography ever again (a vow which he sticks to). In some ways, Thompson's subtitle, "Romantic to Revolutionary" misleads readers into thinking that Thompson is indicating an abandonment of Romantic ideals, whereas his argument is more nuanced and complimentary to Romanticism than it might first appear from both this subtitle and Thompson's own Marxist background.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Thompson had been a member of the British Communist Party but broke away from the Party after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, "Socialist humanism would, Thompson hoped, provide the liberating approach around which a new left movement

Thompson grapples with other twentieth-century critics who have entered into the fray of Morris studies—particularly when it comes to defining Morris’s political ideology. Thompson argues that other critics often either underplay Morris’s Marxism or make it seem as if Morris was suddenly converted to orthodox Marxism *and* that this must necessarily initiate Morris’s shaking off of his Romantic heritage. This is all undergirded by the assumption that Romanticism and Marxism are intrinsically at odds, that they represent not just divergent but oppositional paths. But as Thompson argues, “the Romantic tradition is not to be defined only in terms of its traditional, conservative, ‘regressive’, ‘escapist’, and ‘utopian’ characteristics—and hence to be seen as a continual undertow threatening to draw Morris back to ‘subjectivism’ and ‘idealism’ – but contained within it resources of a quite different nature, capable of undergoing this transformation independently of the precipitate of Marx and Engel’s writings” (Thompson 779). Although transformed from his schoolboy and Oxford days, Morris’s Romanticism is still key to understanding his mature works and his socialist writings. Morris’s later work continues to luxuriate in the natural world, but this does not make it pastoral (in Raymond Williams’s use of the term), nor does it preclude its inherent Marxism. As Thompson argues “...it is more important to understand [Morris] as a (transformed) Romantic than as a (conforming) Marxist” in order to truly understand the man and his oeuvre (786).

could emerge. In simple terms it would restore to the Marxist tradition (after 1956 Thompson tended to describe himself as a historian working in the Marxist tradition), the dimension which had been partly lost by Marx himself as he moved on from the writings of his youth to the economic certainties of Capital. It had certainly been lost from the Soviet version of communism” (Rule). Thompson reveals in his 1976 postscript to the second edition of his Morris biography “that he was he had been much sustained by what he had learnt ‘in those years of close company with Morris’” (qtd. in Rule).

Political Radicalism

Morris's Romantic heritage infuses his writings and lectures with the understanding of the relationship between human dominion over nature and the mechanization of human labor. On November 13, 1887, Morris spoke of his visions for the future: "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" ("The Society of the Future"). This lecture, entitled "The Society of the Future," was delivered on the very same day as the clash between the public and the metropolitan police—"Bloody Sunday" in Trafalgar Square in which tens of thousands of demonstrators, including William Morris, were met by thousands of police bent on quelling the protestation of coercion in Ireland and unemployment (Delveaux 131). Following George Bernard Shaw's assertion that Trafalgar Square "cured" Morris of his belief in a great revolutionary political change, subsequent biographers (before Thompson) identify Bloody Sunday as the moment in which "Morris passed out of the revolutionary phase of his political convictions and into one of reformism or Utopian idealism" (Thompson 498).⁹⁰ Thompson disputes any assertions that Morris left behind revolutionary politics for utopian idealism that day. In fact, he compellingly demonstrates that Morris was more moved towards revolutionary action after Bloody Sunday. And indeed, Morris's lecture earlier that Sunday appears to demonstrate that Morris was primed to react in such a way. Based on his visionary "The Society of the Future" lecture and its timing, Morris demonstrated that he already possessed many of the shaping factors for the vision he presents in his 1890 *News from Nowhere*—including an emphasis on simplicity, handcrafting over a reliance

⁹⁰ Bradley Macdonald argues that instead of abandoning his revolutionary phase and political convictions, Morris uses "his literary and theoretical tools to the task of intense propaganda work for revolutionary socialism" during his late utopian phase (288).

on mechanical labor, and the ability to achieve such a society based on an integration with ecological systems instead of a dominance over them. The seeds of Morris's utopian environmentalism and desire for radical revolution had already been expressed before the violence at Trafalgar Square. Morris's interest in utopianism and Romanticism did not negate his revolutionary politics. Instead, Morris, still believing in radical revolutionary change, began to see the revolution as being farther in the future than other radicals understood it to be. As Thompson asserts: "...by the summer of 1888 Morris knew that somehow he and the pioneers had failed in their aim of building a revolutionary party. And from that time onward he looked increasingly across the intervening years to a future in which he never lost confidence" (511). *News from Nowhere* is that vision in literary form. Thompson later reasserts in his second edition postscript that to understand Morris is to understand that true political radicalism and utopian thought are not incompatible. Referring to the French philosopher, Miguel Abensour's work,⁹¹ *Utopiques et dialectique du socialisme* in which Morris's utopian vision is examined (and with which Thompson agrees), Thompson reiterates the significance and coexistence of these two elements, "We may say, and should say, that Morris was a Marxist *and* a Utopian, but we must not allow either a hyphen or a sense of contradiction to enter between the two terms" (791).

Interestingly, the other most significant Morris biographer besides Thompson, Fiona MacCarthy, claims in her acclaimed 1994 biography of Morris, that Thompson did not go far enough in describing the radicalization of Morris in the second half of the 1880s: "The Anarchist element in Morris has been consistently, and deliberately, written off in accounts of Morris's politics from the 1950s onwards [...] Even E.P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to*

⁹¹ Thompson actually cites Abensour's 1973 doctoral thesis which at the time was in the process of being published as *Utopiques et dialectique du socialisme*.

Revolutionary [...] [Thompson] misses his qualities of waywardness and danger” (543).

According to MacCarthy, Thompson’s work “underestimates the extent to which Morris, from the middle 1880s, was not just in sympathy with but was on terms of warm personal friendship with the leading London Anarchists” (Ibid.).⁹² Morris’s dreaminess and the “imaginative, creative continent in Morris’s thinking and writing” that is so evident in *News from Nowhere* (and fundamental to its effectiveness), are what drives Morris away from the more regulated “Fabians and parliamentarians in late Victorian Socialist politics” and moves him into an alliance with the intellectual Anarchists (Ibid.).

Morris’s first-hand experience of the November 13, 1887, massacre of protestors in Trafalgar Square plays a central role in his fictional history of revolution (ultimately leading to his utopian future) set out in the chapter, “How the Change Came” in *News from Nowhere*. The change from capitalism to the world of the future filled with equality was realistically a very violent one, Morris’s historian in the future, the elderly Hammond, shares that “It was war from beginning to end: bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 133). As Hammond summarizes the history of this great change, it becomes clear that the turning point he centers is the very event that so shaped Morris—protestors in Trafalgar Square being met with bludgeons from “the civic *bourgeois* guard (called the police)” (Ibid. 140). In *News from Nowhere*, as in Morris’s own political evolution, this moment of violence in Trafalgar Square is a central, radicalizing turning point.

This extensive discussion of Morris’s turn towards radicalism is necessary in order to understand Morris’s unique position representing traditions that are often viewed as antithetical

⁹² Morris became close friends with one of the most significant Anarchist theorists of the time, Prince Peter Alexeyevich Kropotkin, who arrived in London in 1886 (MacCarthy 544).

(i.e. utopian vs. Marxist). He stands within the radical Romantic tradition, but also as a socialist, a utopian thinker, and an anti-state anarchist. All of this is essential in understanding Morris's responses to human/nature questions at the end of the nineteenth century.

In his defense and discussion of Morris's legacy in his 1976 postscript, Thompson argues that it must be decided if Morris qualifies as a major intellectual figure: "We have to make up our minds about William Morris. Either he was an eccentric, isolated figure, personally admirable, but whose major thought was wrong or irrelevant and long left behind by events" or Morris was "our greatest diagnostician of alienation" (801).⁹³ Thompson mentions, rather in passing, that there are some minor elements of interest about Morris—for example, his place in the history of decorative arts or in the ways in which Morris is an environmental figure, "a pioneer of responsible 'ecological' consciousness" (Ibid.). But these Thompson indicates are rather minor pathways to intellectual significance. Either he might be important in such "subsidiary interests" or "On the other hand, it may be that Morris was a major intellectual figure" (Ibid.). From Thompson's positionality as a twentieth-century Marxist, this opinion of course isn't shocking, but it does reflect Thompson's own limitations in truly seeing Morris's integrative critique of capitalism—a critique that held the beauty of the earth as essential to making labor a pleasurable and healthy activity. It also demonstrates Thompson's own inability at times to look beyond Morris as simply "our greatest diagnostician of alienation" (Ibid.).⁹⁴ Thompson's dismissive statement regarding Morris's place as an ecological thinker reflects Thompson's own positionality both politically and within time and space. While modern environmentalism is actively emerging as Thompson writes his postscript in 1976, it is Morris

⁹³ Thompson of course does not think that Morris is an eccentric or isolated figure and sees Morris's significance in the area that Thompson valued—the Marxist theory of alienation.

⁹⁴ This is a much bigger compliment in Thompson's mind.

sitting within the nineteenth century who astutely sees environmental protection and regeneration for the fundamental, core issue that it so clearly appears to us from the perspective of the twenty-first century. It is astounding to see Thompson figure ecological consciousness as a rather minor, perhaps even eccentric issue for Morris, who couldn't have imagined a just laboring world without the beauty of deindustrialized nature, shared amongst all. As Morris tells an art school audience, the Wedgewood Institute, on the 13th of October 1881: "For surely there is no square mile of earth's inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way, if we men will only abstain from willfully destroying that beauty; and it is this reasonable share in the beauty of the earth that I claim as the right of every man who will earn it by due labour" (Morris, "Art and the Beauty of the Earth").

Morris and Imperial Ecology

Morris's conceptualization of an ecology that integrates the human with the natural world stands in marked contrast to previous understandings not just earlier in the nineteenth century but far beyond. In *Nature's Economy, A History of Ecological Ideals*, Donald Worster identifies how Western understandings of nature and ecology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were dominated by the ideas of Sir Francis Bacon's "imperial ecology"—in contrast to the more integrated "arcadian" conception of ecology. This anti-arcadian or imperial ecology "ancient in its origin and still highly influential in eighteenth-century ecological writing [...] stripped from nature all spiritual qualities and rigidly distanced it from human feelings—promoting a view of creation as a mechanical contrivance" for human usage (Worster 29). Under imperial ecology, the domination of the earth becomes "one of modern man's most important ends" (Ibid.). Bacon saw science and the domination of nature as the way forward towards a human utopia on earth.

While in *News from Nowhere*, Morris creates his own ecological utopia in contrast to the precepts of Bacon's imperial ecology, rejecting the industrial developments that arose in the intervening time between himself and Bacon.

There are moments in Morris's oeuvre in which he appears to fall into the realm of imperial ecology. Before composing *News from Nowhere*, his lecture "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil" (1884) demonstrates that even Morris was capable of veering into seeing humans as intrinsically embattled against nature. His argument is a straightforward one—that early humans fought to survive in the natural world and struggled to survive; civilization indicates a "conquering" of the natural world and should mean an end to poverty and hunger. Morris particularly emphasizes in a related and contemporaneous lecture, "How We Live and How We Might Live" (1885) that this struggle to survive and to conquer nature has much to do with a lingering "terrible phantom fear of starvation" even in places of plenty ("How We Live and How We Might Live"). Morris premises that this is a lingering delusion since there is enough food to go around without "desire for domination" now that "the conquest of Nature is complete" (Ibid.). The language of "conquering Nature" exists in "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil" as well; and although the appearance of the language is troubling, the nuance of Morris's argument is much less imperial in context. While it appears that Morris is influenced by both imperial ecology and the determinism of Marxist historiography when he argues that "the fruits of our victory over Nature [have] been stolen from us," he follows this statement with "thus has compulsion by Nature to labour in hope of rest, gain, and pleasure been turned into compulsion by man to labour in hope—of living to labour!" ("Useful Work Versus Useless Toil"). For Morris and anyone familiar with Morris's ideology, it is the former—"labour in hope of rest, gain, and pleasure" that is the clearly superior state over that of "living to labour" by compulsion of one's

fellow man. In other words, the “conquering” of nature has left contemporary humankind in a much less desirable and fulfilling situation. Nature has been defeated, but to what end? As Morris argues “we moderns ought to be in all ways vastly better off than any who have gone before us” (Ibid.). And yet there still exists the artificial creation of starvation for many impoverished people in the Victorian industrialized world (as is still very much the case) in which nature has supposedly been vanquished.

Perhaps the most troubling sentiment that Morris evokes is that “Nature will not be finally conquered till our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives” (“Useful Work Versus Useless Toil”). Here Morris separates the human from non-human and again, as above, sees human history progressively and involving the domination of one categorization over the other. Yet, in stark contrast to this statement, within the very same lecture, Morris states that for both the rich and poor “how rare a holiday it is for any of us to feel ourselves a part of Nature” and that the most ideal life would be finding pleasure in our work and that will in turn make us feel as if we are truly a part of Nature—“such a holiday our whole lives might be, if we were resolute to make all our labour reasonable and pleasant”(Ibid.). The language of conquest is negated by the greater substance of Morris’s essay, including his deep interest in ecological integration. Morris waxes on about the pleasure of feeling oneself a part of nature to “unhurriedly, thoughtfully, and happily [...] note the course of our lives amidst all the little links of events which connect” oneself to the “lives of others” and to other sentient creatures (Ibid.).

Icelandic Visions: Morris’s 1871 Journey to Iceland

According to MacCarthy, the inspiration for Morris’s distinctive synthesis of human society and the natural world derives from Morris’s travels across Iceland in 1871 during which

he trekked through the otherworldly landscape on pony (278). On this first journey to Iceland, Morris immersed himself in Icelandic culture, which embraced both ecological integration and communal living. Compelled by his intense interest in and study of old Icelandic sagas and the Icelandic language—in addition to his unhappy marital circumstances at Kelmscott Manor—Morris set off along with three male companions. The first and foremost of these companions was Eiríkur Magnússon, Icelandic scholar and Morris’s tutor in the language and companion in saga translation; Charles Faulkner, Morris’s friend since their days together at Oxford, and W.H. Evans, “an unlikely companion for Morris” a military officer from Dorset who shared the expense of the trip and was used to “wild travel” (MacCarthy 279-280 and 290).⁹⁵ While he was definitively not the first Englishman to travel to Iceland, MacCarthy claims that Morris was the first Englishman to arrive in Iceland “with such a knowledge of its language and literature and was so instinctively attuned to the sagas [of Iceland]” (290). This journey to Iceland, precipitated upon his intense interest in the literary history of the island and its language and culture, came at a crucial time in Morris’s intellectual life. His trip was a decade before his political radicalism fully deepened in the late 1880s, but it built the foundation for Morris’s unique vision of a more just, equitable society embedded in nature and legend. And by building this foundation, Morris’s Icelandic journey was essential for his creation of *News from Nowhere*, almost two decades after his first trip to Iceland.

Morris finds a society living a life of relative poverty, against the backdrop of what might be described as a sublime but simultaneously bleak landscape. Although eking out a living in an

⁹⁵ Late into their Icelandic journey, it became apparent how ill-suited Morris and Evans were as travelling companions. Morris grew to despise Evans’s gun-slinging attitude and for his lack of interest in the sagas. According to MacCarthy, “he reproved Evans for wanting to shoot the swans in Iceland by calling him a British officer. This, as Mackail [an early Morris biographer] reminds us, was Morris’s most severe term of contempt” (298).

unforgiving environment, the Icelandic peoples of the nineteenth century possessed one of the highest levels of literacy within a largely equitable social and economic system in which none were particularly wealthy. A love for storytelling infused contemporary nineteenth-century Icelandic society, just as it had during the medieval period in which Morris was so very fascinated. Commercial luxuries were not part of the lives of the majority of Icelanders in what Kristin Ross would describe instead as “a form of communal luxury” (70).⁹⁶ Iceland’s non-growth driven culture appealed deeply to Morris’s distaste for the self-indulgence and commercial excess of middle-class English Victorian life. As Clive Wilmer illustrates, Morris “admired the natural egalitarianism of the social arrangements he found there, the sense of continuity with an ancient past, the easy intimacy with nature and, above all, ‘the religion of the Northman...the worship of Courage’” (xvi). This simplistic hardiness, integrated within the landscape of fire and ice—an environment infused with ancient sagas—was irresistible for Morris.

⁹⁶ Kristin Ross compares Kropotkin’s time in Finland with Morris’s experiences in Iceland. Comparing these two anarchist thinkers and their experiences in two different Scandinavian cultures, Ross asserts that “The lesson Finland imparts Kropotkin is a great deal like the lesson Morris learned in Iceland: in spite of great poverty, Finns practiced a simplicity of life premised, in the words of Kropotkin’s biographers, on the ‘absence of unhealthy habits of luxury [that] were universal in all ranks of society’” (70).



Figure 2: Caricature of William Morris riding a pony (what would be “Mouse”) on his first expedition in Iceland drawn by Edward Burne-Jones, dated 1870. Pen and ink on paper. (The journey did not take place until 1871). Source: William Morris Gallery.

The Ruskinian Legacy in Morris’s Later Work

Morris’s interest in Icelandic sagas, which in turn led him to make two separate journeys to the island, was distinctive to Morris—his own eccentric area of interest—pursued with the kind of intensity and passion that only he was capable of achieving. But this interest in medieval and contemporary Icelandic culture was also a part of a larger nineteenth-century nostalgia and interest in the medieval and the tribal, brought about by advances in historical study during Morris’s lifetime, which also generated interest in communal life. In his rejection of both

centralized state communism and capitalism, Morris was joined by many writers of the period who sought out a dream of communal, decentralized utopian living. Morris's predecessors in—among other things—communal thinking, John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, were “some of the most famous theorists of the disenchantment of modern society and some of the fiercest advocates of the idea of community” (Vaninskaya, *Morris and the Idea of Community* 2).⁹⁷ Yet these thinkers were inherently deeply conservative and even regressive in their social outlooks, led by a desire to simply to return to the past, including various hierarchical forms of community. Although deeply influenced by Ruskin in this way and in a multitude of other ways, Morris sought out a very different kind of solution to that of Ruskin and his High Toryism.

Morris ultimately reshapes the Ruskinian narrative of rural returns to nature that include retreats into an imagined, medieval, or feudal past. As he asserts in one of his socialist lectures of the 1880s, “Do not misunderstand me; I am not a mere praiser of past times. I know that in those days of which I speak life was often rough and evil enough, beset by violence, superstition, ignorance, slavery; yet I cannot help thinking that sorely as poor folk needed a solace, they did not altogether lack one, and that solace was pleasure in their work” (Morris, “Art and the Beauty of the Earth”). Here Morris incorporates the key Ruskinian thread of valuing rewarding, handcrafted work, but he does so while acknowledging the amount of daily violence, ignorance, and superstition that beset past ages. As discussed previously, Morris incorporates the Romanticism of those who came before him, including that of Ruskin, but his romanticization of

⁹⁷ Writing at the close of the century, “Morris believed that in the future ‘the society of so called free-contract’ ‘enforced by the State’ would yield ‘to that of communal organisation’ [...] and it was hardly a coincidence that the famous utopian romance that portrayed this future, *News from Nowhere*, was written during the height of the romance and socialist ‘revivals’ of the 1880s and 90s” (Vaninskaya, *Morris and the Idea of Community* 3). Vaninskaya refers to the late-Victorian revival of romance literature as “New Romance,” brought about by newly emerging “economics of publishing, the material methods of book production and distribution” (“The Late-Victorian Romance Revival” 58).

fulfilling labor and renewed landscapes always comes with a measure of practicality about the dirtiness and inequalities of so-called traditional life. Despite Raymond Williams's assertion that Morris's work was "often backward-looking," Morris's writings and speeches demonstrate again and again that he rejected the idealized nostalgia that permeates pastoralism (*The Country and the City* 393). Morris's Marxist interest in economic and social inequality never allowed Morris to fall into the easy trap of paternalistic neo-medievalism. While Ruskin attempted to create a rural retreat from the evils of industrialization and unfettered capitalism, remaking society into older forms once more in the Lake District, Morris made his own occasional personal rural retreat at Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire (his very own "Earthly Paradise"), but he never retreated from the reality of nineteenth-century capitalism. There continues to be debate as to the connectiveness (or lack thereof) between the two men with some critics arguing that Morris was thoroughly a Ruskinian with others arguing that they were not united in shared values or ideologies.⁹⁸ It seems the truth lies somewhere in the middle. The influence of Ruskin upon Morris is undeniable as Morris himself articulates in his 1894 essay "How I Became a Socialist." Referring to Ruskin as his "master" in "open rebellion against" Whiggery, Morris claims that Ruskin,

before my days of practical Socialism, was my master towards the ideal aforesaid, and, looking backward, I cannot help saying, by the way, how deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin! It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent, which I must say was not by any means vague. Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern

⁹⁸ For further discussion, see the essay by Peter Faulkner, "Ruskin and Morris" from *William Morris & John Ruskin: A New Road on Which the World Should Travel* (2019).

civilization. What shall I say of it now, when the words are put into my mouth, my hope of its destruction—what shall I say of its supplanting by Socialism? (“How I Became a Socialist”)

And yet in this same passage, Morris makes clear that he has moved beyond the simple hatred of modern civilization as inspired by Ruskin (and to a lesser extent Carlyle). According to Morris, it was “*before* my days of practical Socialism” that Ruskin was his “master.” In other words, Ruskin is no longer Morris’s one, central guiding intellectual light. Socialism has come to be “the leading passion” of his life. This does not mean that Morris no longer wishes for the destruction of the commercial ugliness as Ruskin likewise so desired, but additionally, now Morris has a greater hope—socialism replacing modern civilization and its “contempt of simple pleasures,” “eyeless vulgarity,” and “dull squalor” (“How I Became a Socialist”). In other words, Morris fundamentally moves beyond Ruskin’s ideology. And yet he takes significant pieces that suit his more just, equitable and progressive outlook, keeping core elements that were so significant to both men. It is useful to think of some of Ruskin’s core ideas functioning as fundamental building blocks for Morris’s mature political and social worldview of the last two decades of his life. For example, Morris clearly continues to embrace Ruskin’s concept that landscapes, architecture, and art are reflective of the society in which they appear—a concept which is “fundamentally Ruskinian” (Laurent 58).⁹⁹ According to Béatrice Laurent, “Morris may have discovered it when reading, as a young man, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in which Ruskin wrote that the practical laws of architecture should be exponents of moral ones” (Ibid.). For both Ruskin and Morris, no piece of decorative art or architecture could possibly be beautiful

⁹⁹ Morris wrote that “The essence of what Ruskin taught us was really nothing more recondite than this, that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life” (“The Revival of Architecture”).

if produced through alienated labor (Hatherley). The concept that beauty could only come about through fulfilling and fair labor remains essential in Morris's late works, including *News from Nowhere*.

Not just theoretically, but also in the practice art of handcrafting, Morris was more effective than Ruskin, as demonstrated not only in his prolific output, but in his own personal self-taught skilled practice of physical handcrafting. Morris, as argued by MacCarthy, was a "much more effective practical design reformer than John Ruskin" given that "he was involved in the techniques of the workshop" in ways that Ruskin never was even during his time in the Lake District (as discussed in chapter three).

Despite their deep differences, Morris continued to admire Ruskin's work throughout his life, including *The Stones of Venice*, which had deeply influenced him as an undergraduate at Oxford (MacCarthy 617). In the last decade of his life, Morris, through his Kelmscott Press (founded in 1891) published in its second year of printing a gilded edition of the chapter "On the Nature of Gothic" from Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (Ibid.). Ruskin, for his part, continued to speak well of, protect, and praise Morris as the years went by. Despite their vastly different political ideologies—one deeply conservative, the other radically progressive—Ruskin in his seventies referred to Morris as "the ablest man of his time," which thrilled Morris upon learning of this compliment (qtd. in MacCarthy 649).

News from Now...where?

Initially appearing in serial form in *Commonweal* (the Socialist League's official party publication, bankrolled by Morris) between 11 January to 4 October 1890, *News from Nowhere* was revised by Morris for a collected publication in March 1891. As the Socialist League was

fracturing, Morris's serial publication of the novel was his own goodbye to the party, an articulation of Morris's own characteristically unique vision for socialism. The piece was part of a larger trend of futuristic utopian and dystopian publications of the 1880s, including Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885) and the American Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). In fact, a significant motivating factor in the creation of *News from Nowhere* is Morris's need to respond to Bellamy's technocratic futuristic vision of society based on a massive bureaucratic centralized state. Morris found Bellamy's vision abhorrent. Given *Looking Backward*'s popularity, Morris agreed to read it and was disgusted by what he found within its pages. Writing to Bruce Glasier, a political devotee of Morris's, Morris groans, "I suppose you have seen or read, or at least tried to read 'Looking Backward.' I *had* to on Saturday, having promised to lecture on it. Thank you, I wouldn't care to live in such a cockney paradise as he imagines'" (qtd. in MacCarthy 584). Later, Morris would review *Looking Backward* in the 22 June 1889 edition of *Commonweal*. The centering on urban life in Bellamy's utopian future, and little to no mention of ruralness, strikes Morris as deeply troubling. He writes in his *Commonweal* review that "Mr. Bellamy's ideas of life are curiously limited; he has no idea beyond existence in a great city [...] he mentions villages, but with unconscious simplicity shows that they do not come into his scheme of economical equality, but are mere servants of the great centres of civilization. This seems strange to some of us, who cannot help thinking that our experience ought to have taught us that such aggregations of population afford the worst possible form of dwelling-place" ("Looking Backward" Review). In answer to this, Morris set out to write a utopian vision in which urban centers were deindustrialized, their waters cleared and renewed, and the true heart of life and joy in this new society would be centered in the countryside.

The novel opens in London as one William Guest, the protagonist and a Victorian socialist, awakens to find himself in a vastly different city—London in the year 2102. The narrative follows Guest, who functions as a sort of stand-in figure for Morris himself, as he meets the inhabitants of this place, referred to as “Nowhere”—a place that epitomizes a distinctively English landscape but is now devoid of industrial blights. The reader travels with Morris from London and through the Thames valley, discovering how this futuristic socialist society functions through Guest’s interactions with various inhabitants along the way. Aesthetic joy and appreciation play a significant role throughout the work. Beauty in the living spaces, in the human form, and in the landscapes of Nowhere establishes an intimate connection between aesthetic appreciation and a deep reverence for the earth. These sentiments are expressed by the character of Ellen, the embodiment of strength and health, with her “shapely sun browned hand and arm” embracing “the lichen wall as if to embrace it, and cried out ‘Oh me! Oh 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!’” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 220).¹⁰⁰ She exults at the vibrant abundance of the summer garden and the suitability of the timeless house in its midst. Ellen’s euphoria overwhelms time traveler Guest all the more given Ellen’s “beauty, so delicate, yet so infused with energy” (Ibid.) Her words, her passion for the natural world, and her healthy sun-infused beauty, Guest tells the reader, all combine to cast a spell upon him. Laurent describes Ellen’s declaration as a “...semi-panteistic, semi-orgasmic outcry” which “makes Ellen more than a character of fiction, an allegory of Life” (57). Ellen attempts to articulate to her companion the inexpressibility of her passion for nature: ““The earth and the growth of it and the

¹⁰⁰ Here the lichen walls increase the beauty of the historical buildings, treasured by the inhabitants of Nowhere. This is in contrast to the lichen and ivy that menacingly consume buildings in Hardy’s work, particularly in *The Woodlanders*.

life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!’” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 221). Although her outburst is spontaneous in the context of the narrative, it is received enthusiastically by her utopian visitor, Guest. While Ellen is considered sexually attractive to her male counterparts, she embodies a reversal of many of the standards for feminine Victorian beauty. Not only is she browned by the sun, but Ellen “with a beauty quite different from that of ‘a young lady,’” is muscular and strong (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 203).



Figure 3: Kelmscott Press edition of *News from Nowhere: Or, an Epoch of Rest, Being some Chapters from a Utopian Romance* by William Morris, London: Kelmscott Press, 1892. Source: Dominic Winter Auctioneers.

Morris presents Ellen as symbolic of the new kind of human society that thrives in Nowhere. One might go as far to argue that Ellen, among other things, represents the female earth in the human form, a Gaia of the future. Florence Boos identifies Ellen as both a renewed, future world Helen of Troy and even as a Christ-like figure that leads Guest to the new Jerusalem (Oxfordshire and Kelmscott Manor) (204 and 206). Once she is introduced, Ellen’s sunburnt complexion emphasizes her attunement with nature, a symbol of her outdoor life and the bodily manifestation of rewarding outdoor physical labor. The sun itself has affected Ellen’s skin, just

as it brings forth the greening of the surface of the planet. It is no wonder then that she “in all ways so strangely interesting” becomes the central object of interest for Guest (*News from Nowhere* 203).

The developing relationship between Guest and Ellen hints at the potential for a new gender dynamic within the framework of a socialist anarchist utopia. Guest’s attraction to Ellen is physical but also clearly based upon shared intellectual and philosophical grounds. Ellen’s drive to understand Guest is based on her curiosity for the past, and she, like Guest, has been instructed by her grandfather, “old Hammond” (as he is referred to in the text), at the British Museum. Not only does she participate in the work in the fields, but she also labors intellectually. Her knowledge of the past leads her to defend the current society against the grumblings of her grandfather and to find contentment in their life: “they have taught me things: and this is the upshot of it. We live in a little house now, not because we have nothing grander to do than working in the fields, but because we please; for if we liked, we could go and live in a big house amongst pleasant companions” (*News from Nowhere* 181). Guest and Ellen’s growing attachment is based on their shared understandings of the “present” and of the nineteenth century. Ellen’s understanding of Guest’s own time binds them together. As she tells her grandfather in front of their visitor:

But in those past days you, grandfather, would have had to work hard after you were old; and would have been always afraid of having to be shut up in a kind of prison along with other old men, half-starved and without amusement. And as for me, I am twenty years old. In those days my middle age would be beginning now, and in a few years I should be pinched, thin, and haggard, beset with troubles and miseries, so that no one could have guessed that I was once a beautiful girl.

Ellen's impassioned defense of her own time and society and her revulsion at the injustice of the capitalist system make for shared values between herself and Guest. Ellen's interest in Guest and the attraction Guest feels towards Ellen combine with their shared intellectual and political values—ultimately suggesting the potential of an idealized romantic partnership—which Guest clearly wishes to pursue. Although the narrative appears to be moving in the direction of a coming together between the two, such a fate turns out to be illusionary and unavailable to Guest, who is still tied to his own century. A romance with Ellen literally fades away before Guest's eyes as he becomes invisible at the conclusion of the novel. The implication is that the romantic relationship envisioned by Guest—one based on equality, heavily altered gender relations and laboring practices among both men and women—remains out of reach in the fiercely divided separate spheres of capitalist life in late nineteenth-century Britain.¹⁰¹

Morris, Gender, and Masculinity

Morris was steadfast in his engagement with the topic of women's right of sexual choice (Boos 192). Male friendships and masculine comradery were highly important in Morris's social life, but his concept of masculinity also included a radical acceptance of women's autonomy, including their right to choose sexual partners freely and without male possessiveness. Morris, of course, radically (at least, for the nineteenth century) lived this out in his own personal affairs, protecting and facilitating his wife, Jane Morris, née Burden (known as Janey), to choose other lovers—despite the heartache he experienced as a consequence of her sexual affairs.

Additionally, Florence Boos notes that “Morris remained notable [...] for the complete absence

¹⁰¹ Morris's own marriage to Jane (Janey) Burden left much to be desired for both parties. Janey yearned for the attentions and lavish expressions of suave but unscrupulous suitors, in particular, Morris's so-called “friend,” Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

of casual sexism from his speeches, essays, and private writings” (193). Despite his fascination with heroic masculinity (as demonstrated in his love for ultra-masculine, violent Icelandic sagas), there was “something stoically irenic and basically equable in him, something related to his refusal to blame or stereotype entire classes of people” (Boos 193). Given this, “none of his published statements ever ascribed inferiority to female nature, or relegated women to any of the social roles he condemned” (Ibid.). On the other hand, Morris has often—and rightly—been criticized for his less-than progressive imagining of women’s labor in *News from Nowhere*. Although women, such as Ellen, are seen doing both physical and intellectual labor, the domestic burdens of cooking, house care, and childcare are still carried out by women in Morris’s utopia. This is arguably the most troubling gender issue within the novel.

The Utopian Body

Given their harmonious relationship with nature and their contentment and freedom in their laboring, the population of Nowhere is considerably more physically beautiful than their ancestors, who lived amidst the smog and congested cities of industrial Britain or in the countryside, which was likewise scarred by the effects of industrialization. Old Hammond describes how not only are the people of Nowhere more physically beautiful, but their beauty lasts longer than that of their Victorian ancestors. Speaking to Guest, the elderly wise man points out to his visitor that he “must remember, also, that we are long-lived, and that therefore beauty both in man and woman is not so fleeting as it was in the days when we were burdened so heavily by self-inflicted diseases” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 92).¹⁰² Cleanliness, including

¹⁰² In this particular moment in *News from Nowhere*, it appears that Morris is using “self-inflicted” diseases to refer to love-sickness—that commercial marriages led to heartache but also to a cult of sentimentalism surrounding romantic love. The implication of this passage is also that nineteenth-century society inflicted disease on itself as a whole through unhealthy laboring practices, industrial pollution, and an unnatural disconnect from the beauty of

clean skies and bodies, means longer-lasting beauty in the human form. The same point emphasized by Hammond is pointed out in a subtler manner earlier in the text, when Guest chats with a beautiful woman at the guest house in Hammersmith. She asks Guest: “‘How old am I, do you think?’” He replies that: “‘I have always been told that a woman is as old as she looks, so without offence or flattery, I should say that you were twenty.’” To which the woman “laughed merrily, and said, ‘I am well served for fishing for compliments, since I have to tell you the truth, to wit, that I am forty-two.’” Guest, astounded, notes to the reader—in an attempt to defend his vastly off the mark assumption—that “there was not a careful line on her face; her skin was as smooth as ivory, her cheeks full and round, her lips as red as the roses...” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 57). This forty-two-year-old woman appears so youthful to Guest in part because of the labor she has been performing throughout her life. Not only does she find her work fulfilling and is not exposed to pollution and toxins, but unlike Ellen she works mainly indoors—thus her ivory skin—and has time for amusements such as reading in the morning (Ibid.).

It is not just the youthfulness and beauty of the people that startle William Guest. The renewal and cleanliness of the natural spaces in and around London shock him as well. At the start of Guest’s foray into a utopian future, he is both intrigued and confused by the laboring handsome young waterman “dark-haired and berry-brown of skin, well-knit and strong, and obviously used to exercising his muscles, but with nothing rough or coarse about him, and clean as might be” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 47). Guest remarks that “If I was astonished with my sight of the river banks, I was no less astonished at my waterman, now that I had time to look at him and see him with my head and eyes clear” (Ibid.). Morris’s narrator expresses the shock at

nature and the beauty of well-designed living and working spaces. Balance both in love and labor here are key to Morris’s criticism of the nineteenth century.

the improved beauty of both the landscape and the human laborer. Notably, Morris's descriptions embody a truly socialist vision of the physical manifestations of health. Human beauty exists in *News from Nowhere* without reference to class. This young waterman, as Morris's readers come to know as Dick, by virtue of his classless society, is as "clean as might be"—a privilege that once belonged to the middling sort, the gentry, and the aristocracy—not to men rowing boats on the Thames. Guest's initial surprise at the appearance of the waterman is the disconnect between the clean and physically attractive man doing a manual job and Guest's preconceived notions of how manual workers, in this case scullers, should appear.

Guest is equally taken aback by the salmon fishing in the Thames, which is now clean and thriving, filled with fish that provide sustenance to the populace, who in turn have been physically enhanced through not just their fulfilling work (the socialist improvement) but through the improvements to the skies, waterways, and fields (the environmental improvements). Happy with their work and in the beauty of their surroundings, improved in their well-being and health through the end of factory pollution and the restoration of nature, Guest muses that "the people in the fields looked strong and handsome, both men and women, and that so far from their being any appearance of sordidness about their attire, they seemed to be dressed specially for the occasion—lightly, of course, but gaily and with plenty of adornment" (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 185). The significance of the salmon fishing in the Thames meant more to Morris's original audience than it likely would to readers today: "To Victorians, perhaps one of the most dramatic changes described in *News from Nowhere* would have been that in Central London, where there is now a thriving salmon fishery. The clarity of the water in the Thames tells us that upstream there are not only fewer polluting factories, but that also, somewhere there are forests" (O'Sullivan 179). For Morris's original readers, such visions of the Thames would have been

astonishing in contrast to their knowledge of the contemporary state of the river. Morris's reimagined vision of the river stands in stark contrast to the Thames represented as a vector of disease, brimming with dead bodies in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*.¹⁰³ According to Martin Delveaux, "At the time when Morris moved to London in 1856, the Thames" was both "London's chief sewer and main source of drinking water," lending the city a stench that reeked of inevitable death and disease (134). The popular satirical *Punch* magazine is filled with dark satirical images representing the filth and disease of the Thames. During the summer of 1858's "Great Stink," during which Morris was twenty-four years old, *Punch* magazine published a graphic in July of a waterman on the Thames (Cook and Werner). But instead of being a healthy young man, such as the waterman Dick in *News from Nowhere*—here, the highwayman is depicted as Death himself, rowing along the river, collecting lives along his route. Morris's vision of the Thames restored and cleansed is thus highly symbolic given how the river was represented throughout the second half of the century as a central vector of disease. As a Marxist, Morris understood the diseased Thames as in turn breaking down the health of the human bodies of the city—all of which are in consequence of capitalism's destruction of both kinds of bodies.

¹⁰³ An intriguing connection between *Our Mutual Friend* and *News from Nowhere* exists beyond the centrality of the health of the river Thames. Morris explicitly references *Our Mutual Friend* in *News from Nowhere*. In Morris's future society, Mr. Boffin, Dickens's dustman is still well-known and referenced by the denizens of Nowhere.



Figure 4: “The ‘Silent Highway’ Man. Your Money or Your Life” from *Punch* magazine, July 1858. Source: Museum of London.

While the Thames in Nowhere has cleared so too have the skies. Factories that once made London and industrial towns of the north unbreathable no longer exist—leading to much confusion between Guest and his guide, Dick. As they are travelling, Guest asks his host about a former factory building they are passing by:

‘What building is that?’ said I, eagerly; for it was a pleasure amidst all these strange things to see something a little like what I was used to: ‘it seems to be a factory.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think I know what you mean, and that’s what it is; but we don’t call them factories now, but Banded-workshops: that is, places where people collect who want to work together.’ ‘I suppose,’ said I, ‘power of some sort is used there?’ (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 81)

Confusion between the two men ensues: “‘No, no,’ said he. ‘Why should people collect together to use power, when they can have it at the places where they live, or hard by, any two or three of them; or any one, for the matter of that?’” Still, Guest cannot process the alteration: “‘I see no smoke coming from the furnaces,’ said I. ‘Smoke?’ said Dick; ‘why should you see smoke?’”

(Ibid. 81-2). Only then does Guest realize his mistake and finally decides to hold back any further inquiries.

It is unclear what actual forms of energy are utilized in *Nowhere*. The closest answer provided appears to be: ““whatever coal or mineral we need is brought to grass and sent whither it is needed with as little as possible of dirt, confusion, and the distressing of quiet people’s lives”” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 102). But practical answers as to the detailed mechanizations or functioning systems of this society are not the point of Morris’s vision.¹⁰⁴ It is, after all, a utopian fantasy; it is both in England and yet not in England; it exists *Nowhere*. It is of the Romantic and utopian traditions.¹⁰⁵ While Morris has been accused of woolly-mindedness by critics, he balanced being a Romantic and a practical thinker simultaneously. But a practical road map is not the intention of the vision set out in *News from Nowhere*. Literary utopias are set out to expand the possibilities of what the reader imagines of what the world could or should be. As Abensour—by way of E. P. Thompson—theorized “Morris’s Utopianism, when it succeeds, liberates desire to an uninterrupted interrogation of our values” (Wegner 169). Abensour, whose early-career theorization of the utopian tradition relied heavily upon Morris’s utopian writings, conceives of utopias as what he terms, “education of desire” (qtd. in Thompson 791). This education of desire is intrinsic to the utopian socialist genre. It pushes readers “toward the recognition that the object that we have lost is, in fact, one we have not yet possessed but one that it is still in our power to bring into being,” as Phillip E. Wegner asserts in his review of the

¹⁰⁴ MacCarthy notes that “the laborious attacks on *Nowhere*’s economics, its technology, its race relations, are absurd in a book that was never intended as a blueprint from which people could plan a working social system.” She argues that the more accurate description of the novel is more like “Morris’s *jeu d’esprit*” (MacCarthy 587).

¹⁰⁵ As E.P. Thompson concludes in his 1976 postscript, “it stares one in the face: Morris was a Communist Utopian, with the full force of the transformed Romantic tradition behind him” (792).

recent English translation of the late Abensour's *Utopia from Thomas More to Walter Benjamin*.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion: Morris & Friends

Morris, born into wealth and privilege which allowed him the space and time to explore his interests and to develop ways of seeing how the world might be, was always intrinsically compromised in his values.¹⁰⁷ With finances leveraged from extractive mining practices in Devon, Morris, ironically, provides the most complete and satisfactory response to nineteenth-century anxieties about the relationship between humans and their environment. Aware of, yet defensive of his own ethical compromises, Morris, part of the bourgeois and yet dreaming of its downfall, is able to marry the practicality of socialism with the Romantic anti-utilitarianism of Keats—equity and economic justice married to beauty and pleasure—objectives that make life worth living. What does it say about the troubled place of the human in a larger ecological world that the only satisfactory Victorian response lies within a utopian vision? It is only through a utopian romance, through a dream vision alone that Morris can fully imagine an integrative answer to the troubles of the nineteenth century—the troubled labor, the disconnect to the land

¹⁰⁶ Wegner argues that the utopian “education of desire” by pointing to a world that could be ours but never has been “is in direct contrast to the fantasy that underlies contemporary right-wing populism—make America great again—that we did once possess such an object but that it has been stolen from us by nefarious forces” (170).

¹⁰⁷ It is of some interest to note one biographical detail from Morris's life that reflects this compromised state. Some of the items that Morris designed for the home—his famous wallpaper—produced by Jeffreys and Co. had potentially fatal side-effects. The green pigment of a particular shade of green contained arsenic, a deadly poison that could be released through fumes from the wallpaper under certain damp conditions. According to a 2003 article in the journal, *Nature*, “Morris was not ignorant of the health hazard. He was a shareholder and sometime director of his father's mining company, Devon Great Consols (DGC), the largest arsenic producer of the age. DGC workers were plagued by arsenic-related illnesses, and many died from lung disease. The company's activities caused immense environmental damage. Nonetheless he dismissed public concerns about arsenic-based pigments in wallpapers, writing in a letter in 1885: ‘a greater folly is hardly possible to imagine: the doctors were bitten by witch fever.’” Although Morris avoided the use of synthetic dyes in his textiles, it is clear that some of the compounds he used for his wallpapers could have had serious side effects (Ball). For further discussion of Morris's poisonous wallpapers, see: Hawksley, Lucinda. *Bitten by Witch Fever: Wallpaper and Arsenic in the Nineteenth-Century Home*. Thames & Hudson, 2016. It is worth noting that the title of this work is taken from William Morris's letter.

and the destruction of nature, the troubled health and broken bodies of industrial workers, and the sorrow and violence that comes of commodified romantic and sexual relationships between men and women. In his best moments, Morris reveals to his readers a world beyond capitalism. As capitalism insists (both then and now) upon being the only “practical” or even imaginable possibility or in the words of Margaret Thatcher’s unfettered capitalism campaign slogan: “There is no alternative.”¹⁰⁸ To strive for an ideal vision of what might be is only possible through the utopian education of desire. Only through the utopian can the reader visualize a lost object that we have never possessed, but suddenly becomes possible: “complete equality which we now recognise as the bond of all happy human society” (Morris, *News from Nowhere* 200).

In some ways, Morris’s later writings, especially *News from Nowhere* can be conceived of as response, an answer to Thomas Hardy’s troubled visions of the relationships between humans and between humans and the rest of nature—nature that is often menacing and consuming. Although Hardy was six years Morris’s junior and Hardy outlived Morris by three decades, Morris answers the despair and rural isolation in Hardy’s novels. As Raymond Williams articulates so beautifully about the despair and hope in Hardy’s novels:

The general structure of feeling in Hardy would be much less convincing if there were only the alienation, the frustration, the separation and isolation, the final catastrophes. What is defeated but not destroyed at the end of *The Woodlanders* or the end of *Tess* or the end of *Jude* is a warmth, a seriousness, an endurance in love and work that are the

¹⁰⁸ See also: Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009) theorizes the idea of “capital realism” the commonplace sentiment that capitalism is the only practical or even imaginable economic or social system. (2 and 16-17). The phrase “capital realism” existed before Fisher’s book further theorized it. There is a common phrase of dubious origin that Fisher cites in his first chapter, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (2).

necessary definition of what Hardy knows and mourns as loss” (Williams, *The Country and the City* 307).

While Williams might be correct in identifying a state of defeat but not full destruction in Hardy’s work, there is still a deep sense of mourning, an elegiac tone throughout his novels for promising rural young people and their unmet promise—lost hopes and aspirations. Williams acknowledges this permeating darkness but cautions readers to see Hardy for more than unmixed tragedy: “The losses are real and heartbreaking because the desires were real, the shared work was real,” and there is beauty and some measure of hope in that (Ibid.). In Hardy, nature consumes, destructs, and haunts: mushrooms threaten and resemble dead infants; a father’s life is tied to the fate of a tree growing in tandem with his own; miscommunication, heatstroke, and a deadly snake bite cut short any reconciliation between a mother and son. But the tragedy of Hardy’s work is not just the vicissitudes of the natural world, but the cruelty and mischance of human relationships and existing societal inequities. These are essentially political and social problems that are beyond the scope of being solved within the genre of realist fiction (although the realist novel excels at describing the intricacies of entangled life). Hardy is not in the business of fixing inequities that he observes but in describing the experience of them within a very particular West Country rural context. Morris, on the other hand, was never interested in realism as a genre, but he was deeply interested in pragmatic sociopolitical solutions and political action—the practical Marxist thread of himself. The other half—the Keatsian Romantic half—gets to envision these solutions to the problems that Morris sees so clearly, the same problems, the same inequities that cut down promising young rural people in Hardy’s novels. Such solutions must be imagined within the utopian literary genre; there is no possibility for such envisioning, such evocative rural peace within the realist genre. This is for obvious reasons—

such radical equality, such beauty and pleasure in life and labor does not live side by side in either nineteenth century or contemporary forms of reality.

The dream set forth in *News from Nowhere* and in the socialist lectures and articles that Morris presented throughout the last two decades of his life reflect the essence of Morris's vision of the human body, including its health and its relationship to nature. Fundamentally, the human body is integrated and embedded with nature. While this embeddedness exists harmoniously, this is only made possible through pleasurable, fulfilling, and varied labor—labor outside of the confines and violence of capitalism and patriarchy. Only in *News from Nowhere's* integrative socialist vision does each individual have the opportunity to live out fulfilling labor in harmony with each other and with nature, integrated within the landscape. Such labor, embedded in nature, but not consumed by nature (as in Hardy) encompasses the laboring as practiced by George Eliot's heroic everyman figure of Adam Bede. Adam, beautified, admired, appreciated, and fulfilled by his physical labor, works in tandem with nature much like Wordsworth's Highland girl; his labor, likewise, is exalted by his rural surroundings. Such enmeshed but fulfilling labor exists rarely in the works examined across these four chapters. Adam Bede's experience of purposeful labor is also unusually fulfilling for the works of Eliot, whose characters, such as Tertius Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch* spend their lives stifled, prevented from reaching fulfillment in their work, fettered by their own choices and societal structures. While in Hardy, the experience of labor and the laboring human body exist tightly enmeshed in relation to nature and community. All the while, these characters, working within a shifting framework of rural life and labor, find themselves smothered with bitter regrets or terrible desperation. It is only within an integrative socialist utopian framework in which non-

capitalist, pleasurable labor is embedded harmoniously with the non-human natural world—the trees and the fungi—that a balance can be struck.

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