In his 1882 lecture, ‘Art a Serious Thing’, Morris tells of an incident which, at the time of its occurrence, had provoked his characteristic response to the state of nineteenth-century art, nature and society: during a train journey to Manchester a fellow passenger, much to Morris’s annoyance, pulled down the window blind – but not before the “sunny glimpse” of the Chilterns had reminded Morris of van Eyck’s ‘The Madonna with the Chancellor Rolin’. Van Eyck, suggests Morris, combined keen ocular sight, visionary sight, and skill of hand and eye to open a ‘window’ which, through historical time, allows others (at least, those with sympathy) to ‘see’. Several conclusions may be drawn from this recollection of a recollection: initially, it is the passenger with “his landscape ... bounded by his ledger and his mutton chop,” not Morris, who excludes reality. Morris’s recourse to the memory of van Eyck’s painting is, therefore, not escapism; instead, it is his response to his fellow traveller’s conventional and, to Morris, deficient nineteenth-century perception – an aberrant way of seeing which looks at nature but does not see it other than as either a commodity or an unrelenting antagonist. The premise of Morris’s idea of progress is a change in this perceptual point of view, a change that will, as he argues, give “people back the eyes we have robbed them of.”

Morris’s ‘tale’ of the landscapes he sees, one through the train window and the other through the memory of van Eyck’s painting, reveals his sympathetic participation in the alliance between art and nature. This participation gives Morris a moment of insight which he hopes to transmit to his audience as an example of an appropriate way of perceiving nature and art – that is, as renovating and healing forces. Morris’s insistence that progress, or a change in the way of seeing suggests that he anticipated the blindness which, in the twentieth century, would lead to wholesale and possibly irreparable damage to the environment.

Accordingly, Morris’s priority is what has come to be called ‘consciousness raising’, or the development of the workers’/readers’/listeners’ ability to see through their era. In 1892, for instance, Morris explains that the Socialists’ task is “to make the workers conscious of the disabilities which beset them; to make them conscious of the dormant power in them for the removal of those disabilities...” (AWS 2: 326). Because artists are among those who retain their “eyesight” (AWS 2: 463), they share the Socialists’ responsibility to educate perception: in the December 22, 1888 Commonweal, Morris argues that because artists see through “humbug and hypocrisy,” their “aim, instinctive or conscious, is to make everybody an artist” (404). Change must be effected by, not for, the people and, as the narrator in The Pilgrims of Hope discovers, will evolve from “familiar things made clear/Made strange...” (CW 24: 376).

This capacity to “distanciate,” or to make the familiar “new-seen” (CW 16: 215),
gives art a crucial role in the evolution of the clear seeing of nature’s historical function; in fact, as George Wardle recollected, Morris’s Socialism “had the future of English Art for its justification – if we accept excellence in the fine arts as the test of a nation’s moral elevation and of its general happiness” (AWS 2: 606). Yet, behind art lies nature, the source of essential beauty. As Morris explains in ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877), the laws of nature are the laws of art and, by extension, should be the laws of society. Because beauty originates in the forms underlying the organic wholeness of nature, everything made by man is beautiful if it follows these patterns and ugly if it thwarts (CW 22: 4) them. In addition, if our art is to be sincere and progressive, it should also reflect the dialectic of our kinship and struggle with nature because this reciprocity identifies us as being part of the natural process. According to Morris, competitive commerce breaks this original bond. In News from Nowhere, Clara refers to this alienation: in the nineteenth century, she explains, people looked upon nature “as one thing, and mankind as another” and tried “to make ‘nature’ their slave, since they thought ‘nature’ was something outside them” (CW 16: 179).

Our destruction of nature, together with our blindness to the causes and effects of this destruction, creates a series of bizarre perceptual inversions, each of which Morris relates to our loss of the sense of harmony between man and his natural environment. Mikhail Bakhtin, the twentieth-century literary sociologist, describes inversions of conventional perceptions and social customs as “carnival.” In this view, carnival is revolutionary because it refers to popular celebrations which undermine or transgress official points of view, behaviour, and language. However, Morris’s interpretation of capitalism inverts Bakhtin’s meaning of carnival. Namely, the incongruencies of competitive commerce turn nature’s rules of beauty, wholeness and order upside down; hence, Morris characteristically describes his society as “anarchy,” “disorganization,” “chaos,” and a “mad world” in which not the unusual but the normal is bizarre.

This anomaly leads Morris to conclude that “progress,” as it is generally understood, is in fact the progress of commercial capitalism but the regression of civilization: alienated from our natural world, we forfeit the unity of mind, hand, and nature which gave organic integrity to the work of medieval craftsmen such as van Eyck. The destruction of “the natural beauty of the earth” (CW 22: 136) is also the destruction of art; in turn, art, the measure of civilization’s progress, cannot be dissociated from morality, politics, or religion. Commerce mocks humanity’s traditional reverence for the earth: instead of inspiring the desire for beauty, commerce inspires the desire for profit. Consequently, in ‘The Revival of Handicraft’ (1888), Morris suggests that our attempt to produce beauty for its own sake is now a futile imitation of the originally innate instinct for beauty – futile because, as our abuse of the environment indicates, we lack the ‘eyes’ to see nature comprehensively; instead, we perceive nature reductively as “raw material” or property.

The result is parodic inversion or carnival: we strive to produce a beauty which can only reflect the ugliness we have created in nature. Thus, Morris describes the art of his ‘unartistic’ age as ‘sham’ or ‘galvanized’ art (CW 23: 171). Moreover, because the artist is now separated from the craftsman, ‘intellectual’ art is marginalized in galleries and collections leaving the co-operative or ‘lesser arts’ (that is, the objects of everyday life) without decorative or ornamental beauty. For Morris, true art should be found in these functional domestic objects. Similarly, beauty is in
the ordinary English hedgerow as much as it is in the ‘extraordinary’ sublime mountain scenery sought by “view-hunters,” as Carlyle calls them. Until we can once again see this beauty in ordinary nature, we cannot hope to beautify ordinary everyday objects. Before the ‘progress’ of capitalism, our perception reflected our unconscious “instinct for beauty” (CW 23: 170); true progress, argues Morris, will require the development of “a new art of conscious intelligence” (CW 22: 12; emphasis added). At the same time, the craftsman and the artist will reunite.

For the capitalist, progress is the advance of commerce; for Morris, progress is the advance through commerce to Socialism. Although this progress may appear to be a series of regressions, in the broader historical perspective these will constitute a forward movement: “the progress of all life,” Morris and Belfort Bax explain, “must be not on the straight line, but on the spiral.” In other words, the “dead blank” of nineteenth-century aesthetics contains the “new seed” of rejuvenated perception that will end this apparent “night of the arts” (CW 22: 11–12). Yet Morris does not ask for a retreat into either nature or the past. In fact, as May Morris remembers, her father considered the back-to-nature philosophy of the “simple-lifers” (CW 22: xxiv) untenable because a retreat from modern complexities is both escapist and impossible. As for the past, Morris asserts that he is not “a mere praiser of past times” (CW 22: 163) or “a mere railer against ‘progress’” (CW 23: 281). True progress is not a reconstruction of the past (after all, this is what Anti-Scrape opposes) but an awareness of the contribution of the past to civilization as it could/should be.

In all contexts, then, Morris’s idea of progress involves clarity of actual and imaginative vision: “use your eyes: your own eyes, you understand, in one way or other, and not other people’s.” Hope for this perceptual progress leads Morris to plead for the arts to be the guardian of humanity’s sense of reverence for nature; in turn, this reverence will counteract the contemporary reverence for luxury and ugliness. In time, Morris predicts, an inclusive, egalitarian art will again mediate between nature and civilization: “when art is hopeful and progressive there is plenty of it for every one, and every one is in some sense an artist, and those who produce beauty are not demi-gods but men, and all can understand them...” (AWS 2: 494). In the meantime, society remains in a state of anarchy or, as I suggest, carnival, which inverts the reciprocity between art and nature: according to commerce, progress means the destruction of nature by industrial growth and the degradation of art by the manufacture of shoddy or make-shift goods.

Paradoxically, for us the conquest of nature is no longer a utopian dream but a dystopian reality. As Morris points out, progress, or mastery of nature, threatens to transform the earth into a “hopeless prison” (CW 22: 120) within which the population is condemned to poverty, servitude, and ugliness. Moreover, the commodification of desire and nature destroys the uniqueness of individuality while, at the same time, it champions competitive individualism. Morris writes: “People are beginning to murmur and say: ‘So we have won the battle with nature; where then is the reward of victory?...still we force ourselves to toil for that bare unlovely wage...’” (CW 22: 372). Like Ruskin, Morris interprets this reward as a return to a subsistence level of existence for the mass of the people and, for the upper classes, a life with riches but no wealth – that is, no mystery, no romance, no beauty. Carnival, indeed, as commercial war among rival nations, firms, classes, and citizens replaces the war against nature.
The class hierarchy also violates nature’s rule that “livelihood follows labour” (CW 23: 250). The workers get little reward for this work; therefore, their work is unproductive. The middle class works but produces nothing — it is the system’s parasite. The aristocracy consumes but does not produce; therefore, its members are paupers. Carnival occurs again as the logical laws of nature are turned upside-down: livelihood without labour; labour without livelihood. Science may either facilitate or resist this carnival. Morris’s idea of progressive science, like his idea of progressive art, is a science which is in accord with nature. Freed from its dependence upon capitalist economics, science would contribute to the quality of life: “The poet, the artist, the man of science,” Morris asks, “is it not true that in their fresh and glorious days... are thwarted at every turn by Commercial War, with its sneering question ‘Will it pay?’” (CW 23:206). While serving the interests of political economy, science subverts nature’s design by seeking new methods of consuming the earth’s resources. Horticulture, for instance, errs when it tries to outdo nature by grotesque exaggeration. The over-artificality (CW 22: 89) of hybrid varieties is, in Morris’s opinion, symbolic of the capitalist’s desire for luxury and accumulation, or as he writes in his early tale ‘Svend and His Brethren’ (1856), the desire to extract “more and more” (CW 1:226) from the earth. Nevertheless, Morris does not dismiss science any more than he does the machine; he dismisses the abuse of science. For instance, he praises the original garden rose because it retains its true colour within “a new beauty of abundant form” (CW 22: 88); however, the hybrid multiple rose developed during the nineteenth century is garish, coarse, and has lost the essence of the rose’s beauty. For Morris, science and beauty could and should be synonymous.

Morris’s theory of pattern design concurs with his perception of design in the natural world: “in all patterns which are meant to fill the eye and satisfy the mind, there should be a certain mystery” (CW 22:109). Horticulturalists and landscape gardeners remove both the meaning and the mystery, or romance, from the design of natural forms. Hence, in News from Nowhere, Kensington Gardens (now a wood) and other wilderness areas attract people by an aura of romance more ‘progressive’ than, as Hammond explains, artificial rockeries and “forcing-grounds for fruit out of season” (CW 16:74). Nature’s laws discourage complete knowledge; thus, the dialectical relationship between man and nature, nature being “a friend in the guise of an enemy” (CW 23: 133), involves both resistance and harmony. This progressive dialectic corresponds to Morris’s claim that the artist should accept, and indeed welcome, the limitations of his materials — the resistance of stone to the chisel, of paper to the brush, and of words to meaning. Inventions such as machine-made imitation handicrafts and artificial dyes aim to eliminate these constraints and by so doing destroy the artist’s skill and pleasure.

Instead, if directed to the enhancement of nature and art, science would contribute to beauty, not merely provide ease of effort and rapid production. Science could reduce the smoke and noise from factories, develop the means to dispose of the waste from industry and coal pits, and purify our air and water. In this way, Nature would recover her original beauty. As “visible history,” architecture should be freed from attempts by engineers scientifically to reproduce the designs and ornamental methods of the Middle Ages. Protection, not restoration, was Anti-Scrape’s argument against the modern architects who believed that they had access to the historical consciousness which produced architectural traditions. Furthermore, weathering is nature’s
contribution to history and should remain as part of a building’s structure. The division of labour and the separation of the artist from the craftsperson leaves the nineteenth century with no architectural style of its own and certainly, according to Morris, with no capability to re-create the organic style of Gothic buildings. Hence, the short and esoteric life of the Gothic Revival.

Yet, in matters of business and pragmatics, Morris was no idealist: as he did with mechanization, Morris recognized the beneficial potentiality of science to recover beauty, a recovery which would take into account, not reject, both the past and the present. As Halliday Sparling explains, although Morris invariably returned to history to find his best models, he “neglected to learn nothing that his own day could offer him...that which was old was not necessarily good in his eyes, nor that which was new to be acclaimed on the score of its newness. It...was the work which counted...”

To be more precise, for Morris it was the *honesty* of the work which counted. When modern science and art falsified the inherent qualities and limitations of materials by seeking perfection, by making machine-made objects appear handmade, and by simulations, the products of human labour and labour itself degenerated into incongruous inversions of the meaning of nature, work, and art. Thus, carnival, or the unnatural and artificial, spreads from society’s economic base to all levels of human thought and effort. Morris’s pragmatic and ‘natural’ approach to house-construction reveals his ‘practical’, as he calls it, Socialism: use of the materials supplied by the nature around you will allow the building to ‘grow’ organically out of the landscape – Cotswold stone does not belong in London, but brick, the best smoke-absorber, does. To flout this logical relation between function and beauty is to reduce civilization to carnival; however, before this carnival can be stopped, it must be ‘seen’. If no such perceptual change occurs, warns Morris in ‘The Aims of Art’, science will develop into itself until it grows “more and more one-sided, more incomplete, more wordy and useless, till at last she will pile herself up into such a mass of superstition, that beside it the theologies of old time will seem mere reason and enlightenment” (CW 23: 95). At the same time, “Art will utterly perish” (CW 23: 95).

Most scientists, suggests Morris, consider art to be frivolous and “a nuisance...a hindrance to human progress” (CW 22: 30). However, with a crucial perceptual change ‘progress’ may regain its essential meaning: art, as Paddy O’Sullivan points out, must be understood holistically as “all of human enterprise.” Moreover, as the expression of the ideal, art in its various forms must be involuntary and free; it is as necessary today as it was in Morris’s era to “set the true ideal” (CW 23:281) before us.” During the past ten years, our “perception and creation of beauty” (CW 23: 281) has been more in accord with Morris’s ideal of ‘progress’. Our attempts to repair and protect our environment with natural rather than chemical processes indicate that we have become (or, at least, are becoming) aware of the long-term and irreversible effects of technological ‘progress’. Recycling (Ontario’s ‘blue box’ programme, for instance), the international project to end the pollution of the Great Lakes, the efforts of “Green” groups such as the “save a tree” plan in London, Ontario, the re-introduction of paper bags, and composting – now a familiar sight in Canadian cities and suburbs – indicate that we are beginning the perceptual change that Morris knew was necessary: environmental pollution is becoming socially unacceptable. This change in our way of seeing corresponds to Morris’s vision of the well-being of the earth as a communal responsibility: “When you have accepted the maxim that the
external aspect of the country belongs to the whole public, and that whoever wilfully injures that property is a public enemy, the cause will be on its way to victory" (CW 22: 173-74).

In A Dream of John Ball, the narrator explains “we, looking at these things from afar, can see them as they are indeed; but they who live at the beginning of those times and amidst them, shall not know what is doing around them; they shall indeed feel the plague and yet not know the remedy...” (CW 16: 274). We live “amidst those times”; we “know” the remedy, but do we yet see it clearly? Like Morris’s fellow passenger, do we continue to draw down the blinds on sunlit landscapes? Or are we the age of “those that see” (CW 16: 286) because, like Morris, we understand that progress involves a sifting of wealth from the past as well as a vision of hope for the future?

NOTES


2 Ibid., p. 39.


5 LeMire, p. 43.

6 Morris writes in a September 4, 1882 letter, “As to the machines, the reasonable thing to say of them is that they are like fire, bad masters, good servants.” He continues, “I do believe that the day will come when people will be able to recognize this reasonable view of machinery...” (Kelvin, II, 126).


