

## Sustenance from the past: precedents to sustainability in nineteenth-century literature and culture

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### Introduction: sustainability has no history

In her 1980 book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant argues both that ‘new social concerns generate new intellectual and historical problems’ and that ‘new interpretations of the past provide perspectives on the present and hence the power to change it’ (1980: xvi). While this offers a rationale for the study of ‘Victorian ecology’, the question of whether sustainability even has a history is vexed.

There is little indication, for example, of historical precedents in the book most often credited with enshrining the principles of sustainability in the environmental movement – E. F. Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful* (1973). There’s little or nothing in academic studies of sustainability or, correspondingly, of sustainability in major cultural histories of environmentalism or ecology such as Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Economy* (1994). Indeed, some of those histories (though not Worster’s) are ambivalent about any nineteenth-century tradition of green ideas. David Pepper’s survey, *Modern Environmentalism* (1996), identifies Romanticism and Victorian ecological socialism (e.g. the work of William Morris) as precursors of contemporary environmentalism but neglects sustainability and is guarded about Romanticism in particular. Likewise, Andrew Dobson, in the fourth edition of *Green Political Thought* argues strongly against any correspondence between the long Romanticist tradition and a contemporary ecological thinking whose specific elements, he argues, simply were not there in the nineteenth century, whether anxiety over ‘environmental crisis’ or the organic, systemic paradigms that underlie scientific and philosophical ecology (2007: 22–6). And yet Derek Wall’s *Green History* (1994) has a chapter on ‘Sustainable Development’ that includes three nineteenth-century writers – Percy Shelley, George Perkins Marsh and the French utopian socialist François Fourier; John Stuart Mill, in *Principles of Political Economy* (1920 [1848]), wrote about ‘the stationary state’;

while Morris envisaged something akin to a sustainable society in *News from Nowhere* (1993 [1890]).

Writing in the *Observer* newspaper, the political journalist Andrew Rawnsley (2014) recently compared current divisions amongst the British Conservative Party over Europe to what he regards as the party's last 'fundamental' schism when, in 1846, it was critically divided by the Corn Laws. He writes, 'History does not repeat itself, but it can rhyme.' Resisting (for the most part) a temptation to play with the relationship between the Corn Laws and conceptions of sustainability, I will nevertheless develop my argument via Rawnsley's notion of rhyming. Namely, that while ecological sustainability was not literally there as a concept in the nineteenth century, contemporary patterns of thought did anticipate it.

The introduction to this volume makes clear the impossibility of regarding sustainability as a unified discourse. While arguing that a distinct understanding of sustainability can be seen emerging from nineteenth-century cultural and literary history, nevertheless I will also suggest that this evidences and illuminates the complexities, contingencies and competing priorities the term contains. Sustainability's history was constituted by the pan-European emergence of a set of conditions, responsive philosophical paradigms and literary texts. In a sense this has already been historicised by Ulrich Grober's 2010 book *Sustainability: A Cultural History*. While markedly (though not entirely) Germanic, Grober includes a chapter on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, entitled 'The Birth of Ecology', from which a three-part framework for the cultural development of sustainability can be gleaned. Working from Grober's account, my opening section will consider where and in what form sustainability emerged in the nineteenth century. Retaining a focus on that century, the middle section will explore, more generally, how literature can articulate principles of sustainability. Lastly, the essay closes with an analysis of two novels – *News from Nowhere* (1890) and Emile Zola's *La Terre* (1887). In their different ways, these books can inform our understanding of how sustainability might be conceptualised, narrated, even practised.

### Sustainability's history

The first of three elements emphasised in Grober's history is that sustainability was founded upon a philosophical paradigm that, contrary to the 'death of nature', emphasised the energy, complexity and autonomy (from humans) of nature. He refers, essentially, to the Romantic paradigm of Vitalism, which stresses that phenomena in nature have 'independent powers' of self-generation, animation, self-direction and the ability to act (Packham 2012: 1). From there Grober develops a trajectory that

encompasses, as it does for environmental historians like Wall and Worster, Linnaeus' *The Oeconomy of Nature* (1749). Here the classification of plants and the sense of a (God-given) balance of species is driven, Grober argues, by 'sheer delight' in multitude, diversity, fertility (2012: 90). Grober's trajectory extends to Johann Gottfried Herder's *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1800), which formulates the Earth and its biosphere as bound to the physical forces of the atmosphere and sun (Grober 2012: 96). And from there it reaches towards the physicist Alexander von Humboldt, whose works, such as *Cosmos* (1845), more firmly established the web of connections between flora, fauna, environment and geography as 'an integral whole given animation and direction by inner forces' (cited in Grober 2012: 104).

One can append a parallel English context that Eric Wilson characterises as 'romantic turbulence': Wordsworth's 'sense sublime' of a world 'deeply interfused' in 'Tintern Abbey'; or Coleridge's view, developed in *Hints Toward the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* (1816; published 1848), that life discloses itself through a 'principle of individuation' which, nevertheless, reveals 'unity in the many' (see Wilson 2000: 23, 100). Likewise, as in Germany, one might trace this trajectory onto Victorian literature and culture: Carlyle's receptivity, even anticipation, of energy physics in *Sartor Resartus* (see Myers 1989); Ruskin's realisation that 'life' is characterised by a radical interconnectedness that encompasses perpetual nascence and decay (see Bardini 2014: 10); or Hopkins's poetic embodiment, via the deployment of a stress-based 'sprung rhythm', of ecological relations structured by energy exchange (Parham 2010: 53).

Yet, for Wilson, 'Goethe is the exemplar' of this epistemology (2000: xviii); for Grober too he is the 'fulcrum' of the 'convoluted story' (2012: 108) of the origins of sustainability. Influenced by Linnaeus, and encapsulating the Weimar Classicism that surrounded himself and Herder, Goethe crystallised this emergence of an understanding of nature as possessed of ceaseless vitality, autopoiesis, power, and beauty. He is also fundamental to the second aspect of Grober's analysis, namely that the idea of sustainability derives, specifically, from a consequent deliberation as to how human activity – land use, industry, development, social structures – answers to a nature unceasingly dynamic and turbulent. Heather I. Sullivan has written that Goethe's philosophy and writings precede, or anticipate, a contemporary 'open-systems' model which posits that organisms co-exist in a state of dialectical 'affinity' whereby each being is simultaneously made and remade by an environment (2011: 244–5) on which it, itself, nevertheless acts. Consequently, for Sullivan *Faust* articulates the blindness of human 'consciousness' when it 'sees its own agency but not its inevitable affinities' (2011: 246) but also the realisation that if we recognise our dual existence and affinity with other nature, then we can, ourselves, effect

alterations that serve a mutually-supportive, sustainable environment (see Sullivan 2011: 248).

Central, of course, to Romanticism's own emergence was a reaction to science, industry and, more generally, modernity. This leads to the third point Grober makes in documenting the history of sustainability: in the context of the origins of ecology, sustainability developed both as a discourse which articulated an anxiety about whether we, humans, could sustain ourselves while the project of civilisation or modernity continued on its way and as an attempt to find practical solutions by which we might sustain human being. One of the particularly interesting aspects of Grober's analysis is the revelation that, invariably, the philosophical speculations described above were underpinned by practical considerations. The cultural context underlying Linnaeus' *The Oeconomy of Nature* was the defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War in 1721. Rampant Swedish militarism in central Europe removed the peasants from the land and left the 'corn ... rotting in the fields'; defeat consigned the Swedes back to their own territory and 'restricted to their own resources.' So, 'In order to adapt to the new situation they imported the doctrine of cameralism from the German princely states complete with its ideological structure of self-sufficiency and self-government, careful use of one's own resources, and sustainability' (Grober 2012: 92). When Sweden experienced famine in 1756 Linnaeus offered up a list of edible native flora as alternative food sources.

Likewise, active in civic duties, in later life Goethe wrote that 'it was only the desire to be able to offer ... practical advice', on the use of the woods, parks and gardens around the ducal palace at Weimar which 'drove me to study nature.' Goethe's preoccupation, as Grober puts it, was primarily with how a 'tiny, resource-poor, famine stricken ... territory in the middle of Germany' might develop 'on the basis of its own resources' (2012: 94). Correspondingly, it is noted that early in his career Humboldt worked for the Prussian mining authorities in the mountains in Bavaria, that one of his first tasks was to address a wood shortage, and that later he was angered that deforestation in the tropical rainforests of Venezuela had led to shortages of wood and water (Grober 2012: 104). The Vitalist conception of nature was founded, in other words, in the context of a wider examination of human capabilities, human labour, and the kinds of society one should work towards (Grober 2012: 107). Sustainability developed, if you like, as the social or political wing of human ecology.

Questioning why the word 'ecology', coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, remained in the cultural background until the late twentieth century, Grober suggests that the practical connotations raised by the Romantic conception of a living, powerful nature were buried under a competing, increasingly dominant free-market liberalism. For example, the briefly

fashionable doctrine of cameralism had advocated State-administered strategies for achieving sustainable self-sufficiency in the supply of food and raw materials via measures like environmental improvement, reclamation or the indigenous cultivation of hitherto imported crops (see Jonsson 2013: 55–6). Yet liberalism dismissed such early philosophies of sustainability as the ‘outdated doctrine[s] of petty central European states’ (Grober 2012: 103; and see 106). While this might explain why sustainability (and its rhyming philosophies) remains invisible even in most environmental histories, as Goethe wrote, ‘Where there is much light, there will also be strong shadow’ (1799 [1773]: 17). The purpose of this historical analysis is, then, to examine the role that literature can and did play, within these counter-histories, both in drawing a philosophy of sustainability out of the shadows and in modelling and articulating its implications for human society and culture. As will now be considered, Grober’s analysis suggests that both the concept of sustainability and its literary articulation emanated from an emerging idea of ‘environment’.

### Sustainability and the concept of environment

Goethe and Herder studied nature together in the 1780s. Grober suggests that, for each of them, related concepts of ‘evolution,’ ‘development’ and ‘environment’ became increasingly important (2012: 107). ‘Environment,’ in particular, was the concept which engendered an understanding that human life is dictated by our surroundings even as we, in turn, act upon them. Occurring across Europe, and across disciplinary boundaries – science, philosophy, social science, culture – this growing consciousness of ‘environment’ was facilitated by literature. That fact – and ultimately literature’s capacity to represent sustainability – can be traced via the emergence and definition of interlocking terms: *environment* (Britain), *milieu* (France), *Umwelt* (Germany), and *ambiente* (Italy). Returning to *milieu* later, I will, for now, focus upon the interrelationship of the English and German terms.

In English, *environment* was first used as a noun by Carlyle in his translation of a passage in Goethe’s autobiography where Goethe discusses the influence of surroundings on his personality. This, writes Grober, ‘is, so to speak, the birth certificate of a word’ (2012: 110). *Umwelt* emanates from Goethe’s *Italian Journey* (1816–17), though Goethe appears to have picked it up from the Danish poet and travel writer Jens Baggesen (Spitzer 1942: 207; Grober 2012: 108). Foregrounding the ecological importance of the concept, Grober touches upon the inflection of *Umwelt* as it was developed by the Estonian German naturalist Jakob von Uexküll in his 1909 book *Environment and Inner World of Animals*. Recently, von Uexküll has had a great influence on the fields of biosemiotics and ecocriticism.

His definition best captures the significance of the developing concept of environment to that of sustainability.

*Umwelt* was promulgated by von Uexküll to express a subjective sense of environment. It refers, on the one hand, to the totality of everything the organism perceives and internalises from its environment and, on the other, via the supporting concept of *Innenwelt*, to the influence of the mind and, subsequently, human practice on that environment (see Grober 2012: 110; Wheeler 2011: 124). Wendy Wheeler writes:

All organisms, von Uexküll argued, live in *Umwelten* which are signifying environments characterised by semiotic loops flowing ceaselessly between the *Umwelten* (semiotic environments) and *Innenwelten* (semiotic 'inner worlds') of creatures: each making each in a ceaseless living ecological process ... What a creature (as instance of a species) recognizes, or knows (and compares), are the signs in its environment which are necessary to its survival (and, thus, to its species' survival). And, of course, this applies to humans too. (Wheeler 2011: 272)

The concept of *Umwelt*/environment captures, then, a dynamic model, one that prefigures the contemporary ecological paradigm of *emergence*. Emergence posits that organisms and species evolve within an environment that shapes them but that that environment is, in turn, reshaped as each constituent organism evolves. Species and environments emerge and (re) emerge in tandem. In terms of a cultural understanding of sustainability, this means two things: as organisms partially shaped by our environment, we are (or ought to be) compelled both ecologically and existentially towards assessing how far the particular nature of human activities, social organisation and prevailing ideologies, discourses and cultural constructions (not least, sustainability) will, in their actual or likely environmental impacts, contribute towards sustaining human being; second, the fundamental role played by *Innenwelt* highlights that a significant part of that assessment will be carried out culturally.

Leo Spitzer's classic 1942 essay, 'Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics', sheds light on where and how the latter occurred. Focusing predominantly on the French variant of these terms, Spitzer traces the development of the phrase *milieu ambient*. *Milieu ambient* is generally defined, Spitzer writes, as 'the element immediately surrounding a given body' (1942: 173). He demonstrates how this concept evolved across biology, social science and poetics. The first, the biological definition, immediately signals the relevance of this discussion to our purposes: the 'surrounding element', he writes, 'is that which environs, not an inert substance, as in physics, but a living being; and so *milieu ambient* represents the element in which an organism *lives* and upon which it depends for sustenance' (1942: 175). Spitzer then describes how 'an ever-growing feeling of the solidarity existing between man and nature' (1942: 175–6)

resulted in a convergence of the natural and social sciences. Consequently, *milieu ambient* gained a sociological dimension which extended the biological definition to incorporate the sum of 'exterior circumstances' shaping human lives, including society, politics and economics.

A fundamental issue posed, however, by the all-encompassing aspect of (natural *and* social) 'exterior circumstances' was the seemingly deterministic subjugation of all life to a rigid *milieu*. Such determinism undermines, as we shall see, a crucial component of sustainability. A qualification arose, Spitzer suggests, with a further revision of *milieu ambient* that began when the largely spatial sense of 'environing' was supplemented, in a development he attributes to the French physiologist Claude Bernard, with an interior dimension (Spitzer 1942: 182) not unlike the *Innenwelt*. That itself could be deterministic, as suggested in more pessimistic accounts of ideology such as Marcuse's 'One Dimensional Man'. Yet here, Spitzer asserts, what was inculcated was a sense (implicitly, and semantically, ecological) that humans belong to their *milieu* 'not as a captive to his jailor, but as a man to his home' (1942: 186).

Spitzer outlines how this steady, semantic conceptualisation of 'environment' in the nineteenth century gradually engendered an awareness that, while environmental conditions were partly attendant on how we ourselves modified the environment, this in turn was shaped by the ways in which, philosophically or culturally, humans modelled environments. The crucial development occurred when the word *ambient* evolved from being, in effect, a somewhat static noun (*milieu ambient*) to encapsulate more dynamically the qualities that animate an environment. This happened when, semantically, the word took on a new form – *ambiance* (see Spitzer 1942: 199). Embedding a sense of environments as mutable, *ambiance* foregrounded that our surroundings are (in part) constituted by how we imagine them. While this would gradually help foster an anticipation of sustainability as a fundamental prerequisite for human existence, more immediately it liberated the emergent paradigm of 'environment'. Spitzer writes: 'ambiance entered upon a brilliant career ... in the literary language, a word evocative of a spiritual climate or atmosphere, emanating from, hovering over, a milieu' (1942: 188). In the beautifully apt 'hovering,' he extols *ambiance* as 'the antithesis of the deterministic milieu' (Spitzer 1942: 191). This would lead, in places, to a 'conception of Western man as triumphant (at least in comparison with his brother of the East) over his environment' (Spitzer 1942: 186). That in turn would have ramifications in Nazism or, more recently, in free-market liberalism. Yet this remained qualified because, Spitzer states, *ambiance* was in actuality never entirely free of *milieu* (1942: 199). Rather, what the newly created semantic eminence of *ambiance* constituted was precisely the equipoise between environmental determinism and human agency that Grober sees as integral to the dialectic of sustainability that emerged in the nineteenth century. And such dialectical

complexity rendered the concept of ‘environment’ ripe for literary treatment.

In damaging environmental systems, we endanger the very thing that determines human existence. Conversely, by reconceptualising environments, through creative representations that alter our sense of a given environment’s ambience, we have the agency to mitigate those dangers. Literature, in the nineteenth century, was seen to have this capacity for altering conceptions and offering possibilities because its modes – whether non-discursive (e.g. poetic) or discursive (e.g. narrative) – could carry this complex interweaving of *milieu* and *ambience*, determination and agency. Working in the intellectual currents described above, John Stuart Mill, for example, suggested that the representation of such complex interrelations requires the ability, which he attributed to Carlyle, both to intuit ‘many things ... not visible’ and to offer, in turn, a ‘poetry to animate’ (Mill 1920: 132–3). The relevance of this to contemporary discourses of sustainability – heavily implied, given that Mill posited the concept of ‘The Stationary State’ – is indicated by the fact that this nineteenth-century interplay between *milieu*/environment and ambience has echoes in recent debates in ecocriticism.

### **Environment, literature, sustainability**

In his landmark ecocritical study, Lawrence Buell (1995) established a much-cited, four-point definition of what constitutes an ‘environmental text’. Most relevant here are his first and fourth points: that ‘The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history’; and that environmental texts are characterised by ‘some sense of the environment as a process’ (Buell 1995: 7–8). In response to the accusation, however, that Buell’s criteria run the risk of coming too close to literary mimesis (see Phillips 2003: 6–9), one might summon Timothy Morton’s ‘ecomimesis’, founded, Morton writes, on an ‘ambient poetics’ (2007).

For Morton, we are enmeshed in nature as ecological beings and can only hope to make sense of that condition through social or cultural constructions. Accordingly, we should seek not mimetic depictions of environments but, rather, ones that represent ‘a circumambient, or surrounding, *world* ... something material and physical’ but nevertheless ‘intangible’ (Morton 2007: 33; author’s italics). Such an aesthetic, were it to be developed with reference to Spitzer, might encapsulate what Morton regards as the ‘strangeness’ of one’s environment (2007: 34). Seeing the ‘openness’, fluidity and lack of certainty of non-representational art (from Coleridge to *The Cure*) as well-placed to articulate this ‘strange’ ecomimetic ambience, Morton argues that we need a ‘dark ecological’ aesthetics (rather

than idealisations of nature) to confront an estrangement from nature that has always been part of the human condition but which has now been heightened by environmental crisis. Morton suggests that the distancing achieved, by shattering our illusions, would be a necessary step towards politicising ecological sentiment. It would compel us to attempt to work out how, in practical terms, we might co-exist with nature (see Morton 2007: 113).

Commentators such as Kate Soper (2011) have accused Morton of evading what those forms of relationship might be and of lacking any tangible solutions or strategic political vision. Consideration of how an eco-mimetic ambient aesthetics might be developed in more practical (social or political) directions, such as sustainability, turns us towards the novel, a connection Spitzer made in relating the interplay of *milieu* and ambience to Balzac, the Goncourt brothers and Zola. In his 1998 article 'Problems in Ecocriticism and the Novel', Dominic Head suggests that 'If biological science can definitively break down the separation between the human individual and his or her environment ... then the implications for our modes of perception appear to be enormous' (1998: 69). In that context, he argues, an ecological aesthetics would require 'The apparent paradox of a representation which is stylized yet referential' (Head 1998: 67). Such an aesthetic is available within the textuality of the novel. For structural and narrative discontinuities, the ambiguities of diction or focalisation are well suited, Head suggests, to articulating the discordant, dialectical continuity between the human and her or his environment (1998: 67, 69). As Serpil Oppermann puts it, the novel has a unique potential to 'disclose how the discursive constructions of nature shape and condition the human valuation and understanding of the environment' (2008: 243).

In this light, ecocritics have made claims for contemporary, deconstructive forms such as the modernist or postmodern novel (see Heise 2002; Oppermann 2008; Rozelle 2002). As Head and others have pointed out, the same arguments might be applied, however, to the intricate textuality of the classic realist and naturalist novels of the nineteenth century (Head 1998: 66; Parham 2011: 25–7). Martin Ryle, for instance, has suggested that the temporal basis of these novels might allow for a sustained analysis of the emergence, evolution and impact of both natural and ecologically destructive processes (2000: 12). Such novels could hold the capacity to map both environmental diminution and/or the emergence of future, eco-utopian and (perhaps) sustainable societies. With these points in mind, I will, in the remainder of this essay, consider *News from Nowhere* and *La Terre*, two virtually contemporaneous novels, embedded in the same trans-European developments that Grober and Spitzer describe. The two novels indicate not only that discursive constructions akin to sustainability had a presence in nineteenth-century literature, but also how these constructions could now inform discourses of sustainability.

**Morris and the sustainable novel**

In many ways the most evident nineteenth-century novel about sustainability, *News from Nowhere* emerged out of the shadow history that Grober describes. As Peter Gould argues, as a prominent member of the Social Democratic Federation, Morris represented an ‘early green politics’ which sought to modify a prevailing Marxist emphasis on industrial production with the values of decentralised, land-based economies (see 1988: 31, 62–3). While the origins for this lay in Morris’s British Romanticism (notably the influence of Keats – see Thompson 1977), such a perspective also appears to have had roots in what Anna Vaninskaya has called ‘Germania’. This extolled Northern European models of rural, democratic, communal and subsistence living, an influence that Morris apparently shared with Marx and Engels, and seemingly derived from the social and intellectual context (not least the doctrine of cameralism) described by Grober (see Vaninskaya 2010: 185–7).

*News from Nowhere* both critiques Victorian society and imagines and formulates a more ecologically viable alternative. Yet the force of Morris’s depiction of the social and ecological demise of Victorian industrial society is not met by an equivalently rich description of a future utopian society. His utopia seems sterile and is imagined through clichéd reference points: clean, clear water, and salmon swimming in an unpolluted Thames; urban London rebuilt on Italian architectural lines; the countryside as a garden cultivated by all; entertainment afforded by Welsh folk songs. Morris’s utopia lacks, that is, any animating ambience. This is particularly evident in comparison to both the pungent metaphor by which he describes Victorian England – ‘the beetle gets used to living in dung; and these people, whether they found the dung sweet or not, certainly lived in it’ (Morris 1993: 125) – and the vivid narrative as ‘Old Hammond’ recounts a Victorian insurrection. Reminiscent of an adventure novel, Morris’s novel describes how ‘a glittering officer on horseback came prancing out from the ranks’ and announced an order to disperse that was ignored by the crowd:

I saw three little machines being wheeled out in front of the ranks, which I knew for mechanical guns. I cried out, ‘Throw yourselves down! They are going to fire!’ But no one scarcely could throw himself down, so tight as the crowd were packed. I heard a sharp order given, and wondered where I should be the next minute; and then – It was as if the earth had opened, and hell had come up bodily amidst us. It was no use trying to describe the scene that followed. Deep lanes were mowed amidst the thick crowd; the dead and dying covered the ground, and the shrieks and wails and cries of horror filled all the air, till it seemed as if there was nothing else in the world but murder and death ... How I got out of the Square I scarcely know: I went, not feeling the ground under me, what with rage and terror and despair. (Morris 1993: 144)

The relative failure of the utopian vision is not because of any limitations as a writer! Rather, *News from Nowhere*, initially serialised in 1890 in the Socialist League's journal *Commonweal* (of which Morris was editor), arguably should not be regarded as a novel at all (Pinkney 2010: 99). It was a political narrative – a blueprint for utopia – with as much a pragmatic as literary purpose. While it probably does highlight why we need a 'poetry to animate' our visions of sustainability, its limitations also reveal something fundamental about sustainability itself. Grober complains that, preoccupied with pollution and environmental degradation, the word 'environment' has lost its complexity and vitality, as described by Spitzer. As a consequence, we invariably downgrade nature 'to a threatened "setting" or "surrounding" for human life' (2012: 110–11), precisely what Buell suggests an 'environmental text' should not do. Conversely, what *News from Nowhere* demonstrates, in evidencing the difficulty of an ambient eco-aesthetics of sustainability, is that the ideal sustainable society does not, and cannot, exist; it is, indeed, 'nowhere'.

Morris knew this. Highlighting a contrast between 'Old Hammond' who, though functioning as the conscience and keeper of the utopian society's 'customs, values and memories,' is, in fact, 'disappointed' with life (Morris 1993: 99) and the (anti-entropic) vitality brought about by the appearance, late on in the novel, of twenty-year-old Ellen, Tony Pinkney reads these narrative developments as suggestive of the fact that revolutions, socio-ecological or otherwise, are 'never definitively won' (2010: 101). The utopian, sustainable society has to be continuously renegotiated, reconstituted and evolved, a precise analogy to the concepts of dialectical systems of affinity and perpetual environmental emergence that constitute scientific ecology. This leaves us – and Pinkney credibly argues that Morris perceived this – with a more radical and realistic conception of sustainability as a permanent, ongoing project, working with a nature that we cannot ever definitively manage. A utopian sustainable society, crudely understood, is then just as much a management of nature as those lamented by environmental critics of modernity. This was also Zola's understanding. His representation of an existing society articulates both the anxiety that arises from the dialectical struggle to live within nature, an anxiety strained further by modernity, and the fundamental terms and conditions on which human life can be sustained.

### Novels of sustainability

Zola was expressly preoccupied with issues akin to contemporary discourses on sustainability. One could cite the portent in his mining novel *Germinal*, 'Hasten to be just, or the earth will open up beneath our feet' (quoted in Nelson 2007: 14). Conversely, his later work was marked, Julia Przybos has argued, by social utopianism, notably a belief that Malthusian

predictions of exponential population growth could be solved by scientific discovery and technological innovation (2007: 169; 178–9). Przybos finds this in *Fécondité* (1899), where Mathieu Froment practises irrigation and utilises technology to bring fallow land and marshland into productivity (Przybos 2007: 181). Having suggested in *Fécondité* that there need be no poverty, Zola's next novel, *Travail* (1901), addresses the forms of social organisation that might bring this about. Influenced by Fourier, Zola depicts the creation of *phalanstères*, small-scale socialist communities of roughly 5,000 acres cultivated by about 1,600 people. While Przybos suggests that such an idea 'still resonates within the rising culture of alternative solutions' (2007: 185), Brian Nelson has described *Travail* as 'highly didactic' (2007: 17). Certainly, the novel, like *News from Nowhere*, is at times schematic and lacking in vitality. Having addressed, through Morris, the utopian novel, I want here then to turn my attention to *La Terre*, part of the Rougon-Macquart cycle. For this novel connects the idea of human sustenance as an ongoing project more closely to a recognisable, contemporary everyday life.

Arch-representative of a literary naturalism defined by its preoccupation with historical, social and environmental determinism (White 2011: 524), Zola's interest in these ideas was influenced by three figures, all cited by Spitzer – Balzac, Claude Bernard and the critic and historian Hippolyte Taine. Taine exerted a particular influence on Zola's literary ideas via his paradigm of *race*, *milieu* and *moment* (national and family heredity; social and biological environment; historical point in time). The third of Taine's categories, *moment*, is of particular interest. Its emphasis on temporality potentially introduces historical change into the paradigm, and, therefore, a suggestion that attributes such as subjectivity, agency and intervention might temper social or environmental determinism. Noting, however, that Taine had little feel for nature beyond a mechanistic sense of 'forces conditioning human life' (Spitzer 1942: 178), Spitzer nevertheless concludes that the paradigm still tended towards the overly deterministic:

*Le moment* is not superfluous in Taine's system, but represents a recognition of the necessity to take into account the imponderable. It was, however, only a partial recognition, and neither the introduction of this term, nor his salutary 'hesitations' were adequate to off-set his still too rigid adherence to naturalistic parallels. (Spitzer 1942: 178)

This did not apply to Zola. The preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* famously documents Zola's preoccupation with social and environmental determinism. Yet Douglas Parmée, in an introduction to *La Terre*, has argued that these social scientific enthusiasms had waned by the time Zola wrote this particular novel (in Zola 1980: 5). Likewise, Susan Harrow suggests that while Taine's model did influence the Rougon-Macquart cycle, *moment* became an increasingly prominent component

(2007: 106–7). Accordingly, for all the social philosophy etched into the structure of *La Terre*, the resultant combination of environmental determination and human agency, alongside the animating force of Zola's desire to create 'the living poem of the Earth, but in human terms, not symbolically' (Parmée, in Zola 1980: 11), engendered the perfect *terrain* on which to explore the three key elements found in Grober's outline of the historical development of sustainability. For in *La Terre*, Zola acknowledges and explores nature and the environment as an agential living force; translates this into a corresponding examination of how humans could exist and sustain themselves within ceaselessly shifting, emergent environments; and encapsulates anxieties contained within discourses around sustainability.

### *La Terre*

An understanding of the Earth as a living force is animated via a metaphor that compares the land, the Plain of Beauce, where the novel is set, with the sea, the archetype of living, autonomous nature:

At first there was nothing to see on the broad brown fields but barely perceptible touches of green along the ground. Then this tender green grew bolder, more velvety, and became almost uniform in colour. Then the wisps of corn grew and thickened out until each plant took on its special hue; he could pick out from afar the yellowy green of wheat, the blue-green of oats, the grey-green of the rye, in fields stretching out in all directions as far as the horizon, amid the red patches of clover. This is the time when Beauce is lovely, dressed in youthful spring attire, uniform and refreshing to the eye in its monotony: the stalks grow longer and turned into a sea, a sea of grain, heaving and deep and limitless ... a gentle wind would blow in steady gusts, hollowing the fields out into waves which started on the skyline and swept along until they died away on the further horizon. The fields quivered and grew paler, the wheat was shot through with tints of old gold, the oats were tinged with blue whilst the rye trembled with glints of purple. And as one undulation followed the next the heavens heaved ceaselessly under the ocean breath. (Zola 1980: 200–1)

The ambient, oceanic metaphor vitalises the flat landscape. Correspondingly, focalised through the farmer Buteau's newly enchanted eye (having just acquired the land), the colours, though 'barely perceptible', make this life force visible to both mind and soul. Nevertheless, having expressly desired to render this 'living poem of the Earth ... in human terms', Zola is clear that the plain of Beauce, otherwise a 'bare plateau', emerges in this vitality and beauty only through the integral human activity of farming. Hence the vision at the very end of the novel of 'the infinite expanse of the rich

plain of Beauce swarming with sowers, swinging their arms in the same monotonous gesture' (Zola 1980: 500). For Zola, human sustenance is dependent upon productive action within a given environment that we are 'forced to cultivate ... in order not to starve' (1980; 499). Humans and environment (e)merge together: affinitive, co-existent.

Even prior to the long description above, Zola had, though, introduced a cluster of anxieties as to the continuation of the sustenance provided by the earth. Framed by a concern that the land around Beauce was becoming 'exhausted' and 'infertile' (1980: 153), three particular anxieties emerge. These concern: the capaciousness of nature; the capaciousness of human nature; and the specific impact of modernity. Immediately following the passage above, Buteau recalls the prevalence of storms and the possibility, reversing his analogy, that a 'raging sea' might leave his crops 'razed to the ground' (Zola 1980: 201). (Conversely, it is a drought that, soon after, almost wipes out his crops). Correspondingly, while Zola continues to invoke the mutuality of humans and earth, an earlier chapter, which has further wave-like images of reapers 'lunging forward without a pause, all in the same rhythm, their bodies swaying from the hips and their scythes swinging steadily to and fro' (Zola 1980: 141), nevertheless highlights the regularity with which reaping and haymaking are interrupted. For throughout the novel, indolence, lack of interest, greed, jealousy, alcohol, or lust interfere with the necessary work of cultivating the earth.

Addressing the extent to which this perceived exhaustion of the land has been exacerbated by human indolence, the novel contains ongoing discussions about how to increase yield. Generally articulated by the progressive farmer Hourdequin, possible solutions include chemical fertilisers, methods of crop rotation, soil analysis, accounting and mechanisation (see Zola 1980: 153–4, 156). A further discussion (echoing Mill) occurs around the respective merits of small-scale and industrial farming. This remains unresolved, the potential benefits of the labourer having (like Buteau, at this stage) a personal investment in the land offset by the increased hard labour, decreased economies of scale and impossibility of deploying machinery on small plots. Subsequently, while Hourdequin's potential remedies represent much the same faith in modernity that Zola endorses in *Fécondité*, the impression here is of a perplexed, despairing search for solutions. What that implies is modernity's essential impotence in terms of conserving sustainability, partly as a result of human imperfection but also because of the problems that modernity itself has created. Equivalent to what Rawnsley invokes, Corn Law type battles between free trade and protectionism (Zola 1980: 152–3) raise the spectre of globalisation extinguishing local farming and commerce. And other modern factors compound the fears haunting this novel. Throughout, people are drifting from the land and from an understanding of how it sustains us – whether from lack of interest, the vivid temptations of the city, or the

relative ease (it would appear) of making money by trading in foreign commodities. *La Terre* demonstrates an anxiety about the land continuing to sustain its human inhabitants that resonates through contemporary discourses of sustainability.

## Conclusion

*News from Nowhere* and *La Terre* both suggest a literature that can nourish, envision and enrich sustainability, not didactically, but in the complex 'environmental' sense that informed the writing of Grober, Goethe, Mill or Taine. The question of how literary texts might nourish contemporary articulations, even practices, of ecologically sustainable living is currently under discussion. Most notably, Hubert Zapf has pressed the claims for literature exploring issues such as sustainability when he asserts that, while 'culturally embedded', literary writing also offers 'distinct form[s] of textuality and knowledge' engendered by its unique 'codes and autopoietic rules of production' (2016: ch. 2). For Zapf, literature's distinctiveness and complexity – forged, for example, from narrative, imagery, characterisation – offers an appropriate fit with the 'complex processes of interaction in the living world of material nature'. It is of value, specifically, to sustainability because of an ability to invoke 'longer-term perspectives of evolution and survival beyond short-term economic interests', as in *La Terre* (see Zapf 2016: ch. 3). However, while positing literary texts as 'a living force field of transformative energies', potentially able to revitalise our understanding of ideas such as sustainability, Zapf also insists that realising that transformative potential will 'depend on the active participation' of readers bringing their own meanings to the text. Interestingly, this idea of transformation arising ultimately from the 'creative activity' of readers leads him to speculate that the 'creative energies of texts can travel across periods and cultures' (Zapf 2016: ch. 2).

The question of whether the novels discussed above realise Zapf's contention that literary texts might open up a recognition of the environmental consequences of our actions and/or new perspectives and possibilities would require further analysis, possibly even reader-reception studies. Nonetheless, the presence of both Morris and Zola in recent ecologically oriented discussions of utopianism (see Pinkney 2010; Przybos 2007) – and of Morris, and Zola's inspiration (Fourier), in Wall's *Green History* – suggests that these writers can be or are already regarded as important precursors. Furthermore, the analysis above indicates that these books' distinctively literary modes do help untangle the radically dialectical sense of human–environment relations that emerged across Europe in the nineteenth century. The novels afford an 'aesthetic transformation' of the cultural discourses that Grober charts and offer, in Zapf's

terms, a ‘metadiscursive space’ (2016: ch. 2) out of which a contemporary reader might discern important lessons about sustainability.

The lessons might be summarised as follows: that the discourse of sustainability which has arisen since the 1960s is not a historically specific response to a particular crisis (e.g. anthropogenic climate change or the growing excesses of consumer society) but one component within an ongoing response to the pressures exerted by modernity; that there exists a long cultural tradition which understands that ecological imperatives form an enduring basis to human life; that those imperatives render sustainability a political issue and raise questions about the structure of society; that, however, a sustainable society will ‘never definitively [be] won’ and constitutes, instead, something to aspire to; lastly, that the project of sustainability is ongoing precisely because it involves working with the forces of a ‘nature’ that we will never definitively manage.

In this final sense *La Terre*, in particular, delivers a deeper, more profound understanding of the complexities that surround sustainability but also the indisputable reality that governs human being – we need to sustain ourselves within ‘nature’. Writing in this volume, Hannes Bergthaller suggests that the paradox of a sustainability which insists on limits and constraints while simultaneously seeking to transform human lifestyles and behaviours need not be seen as a weakness. On the contrary, this dialectic of two competing priorities undergoing constant renegotiation is precisely why sustainability constitutes ‘genuinely political matter’. Goethe and Herder’s dual sense of nature’s perpetual transformation and permanence is strikingly similar. I hope, therefore, to have demonstrated both that sustainability can be historicised and that something approaching contemporary ecological notions of sustainability emerged as identifiable (if unnamed) concepts from the intellectual, social and literary currents of nineteenth-century (post)Romanticism.

The nineteenth-century history of sustainability mapped in this chapter also corroborates that sustainability, as a concept, never stands still. It is, as several essays in this book testify, endlessly discursive. Even when colonised by ideology, ‘sustainability’ remains a flexible, agile paradigm, perpetually political, and so perpetually historical. And yet; though offering an ongoing responsiveness and vigilance to the conditions by which, at any given moment, we live within ‘nature’, sustainability also issues an ongoing reminder that we live under constraints dictated by the nonhuman. In that sense, a more useful concept might, arguably, be *sustenance*: making choices (e.g. between technological and organic food production) and creating conditions for sustaining ourselves and the nonhuman nature with which we co-exist and on which we rely. Zola’s remedy, for example, to his society’s anxiety about sustenance, was to understand the importance of working with the land, even though aided by the judicious (sustainable) application of new technologies and methods. This, he believed, would

offset Malthusian concerns about 'exhaustion' and about the conservation of humanity.

Referring to the fire which destroyed what had been Hourdequin's farm, Zola writes: 'The walls might be burnt down but you couldn't burn down the earth. Mother earth would always be there to feed those who sowed her. She had space enough and time, until people learned how to make her produce more' (1980: 499). Yet in keeping with the counterbalance, in sustainability, of constraint, the final key point to arise from the novel is that an autonomous, self-organising, ever-emergent earth (and 'Earth') will, in the end, continue on its own path. Regardless of human intervention, we are reminded, there is every chance that nature, as an independent force, will carry on regardless:

It was said that the land would pass into other people's hands and harvest from other countries would overwhelm ours and all our fields would be overgrown with brambles. So what? Can you harm the earth .... The earth doesn't take part in our petty, spiteful, antlike squabbles, she pays no more attention to us than to any other insects, she merely goes on working and working, eternally. (Zola 1980: 499)

In *La Terre* Zola returns us to a world in which sustainability, or sustenance, is an ongoing, dialectical, and contingent project. In this light, when we talk about sustainability, we are also talking about human sustainability, a point we'd do well to remember.

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