

**THE IDEAL OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN WILLIAM MORRIS’  
*NEWS FROM NOWHERE***

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*News from Nowhere* (1891) has remained the most original and enduring utopian fiction of nineteenth-century Britain. Its author William Morris (1834-96) was a poet, designer, social activist, translator of Icelandic sagas, writer of prose romances, founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, a pioneer in book and furniture design, as well as tapestry-weaving and other decorative arts. Morris saw many of these undertakings as efforts to realize collegial and communitarian ideals, early manifestations of which included the “Oxford Brotherhood”, his design-work for the “Firm”, his active role in “Antiscrape” (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings), and his pioneering collaboration with Emery Walker at the Kelmscott Press. However, the deepest and most enduring expression of Morris’ communal ideals, by common consent, was his work on behalf of the Socialist League, an anarchist-Socialist organization which he helped to found and in whose periodical *Commonweal* his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* first appeared in 1890. In this work, Morris alluded to his friends’ and comrades’ gathering places and a police riot they had endured together in Trafalgar Square. Close ties with them and strong desires to see an ideal of communal fellowship guided his hand as he wrote.

The feasibility or infeasibility of Morris’ hopes for popular art and artisanal practices as well as the details of Nowhere’s marriage, governance, child-raising, voluntary labour and informal penal codes have been examined and re-examined many times. In this essay, I will not dwell so much on the specific features of the work’s semi-agrarian anarchist-Communism but on the elusive yet evocative ideals that underlie it, and his holistic convictions that human fellowship is an intrinsic part of a larger flux of natural interrelations. As an example of this, consider the passage in which Guest, Nowhere’s twenty-first-

century revenant, asks his guide why Nowhereans take a keenly naïve interest (“like children”) in such a “recurring and consequently commonplace matter as the sequence of the seasons”. His guide intently replies that:

‘I can’t look upon it as if I were sitting in a theatre seeing the play going on before me, myself taking no part of it .... I mean that I am part of it all, and feel the pain as well as the pleasure in my own person. It is not done for me by somebody else, merely that I may eat and drink and sleep; but I myself do my share of it.’<sup>1</sup>

In what follows I will first canvass some of the deeper personal, aesthetic, communal and egalitarian convictions Morris expressed in *News from Nowhere* and essays such as “Monopoly” (1887), “The Beauty of Life” (1880), “The Socialist Ideal” (1891) and “The Society of the Future” (1887). Afterwards I will consider some traces and variants of Morris’ ideals for the transformation of everyday consciousness in the writings of twentieth-century Socialists and Marxists such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Ernst Bloch.

### **Desire and displacement in *News from Nowhere***

In “The Society of the Future”, Morris remarked that:

There are ... two groups of mind with whom Social Revolutionists like other people, have to deal, the analytical and the constructive .... And one thing I must confess from the beginning, which is that the visions of us visionaries or practical people differ largely from each other ... ; whereas the theories of the analysts differ little from each other, and they are hugely interested in each others’ theories – in the way that a butcher is interested in an ox – to wit, for cutting up ... I want to tell you what it is I *desire* of the Society of the Future, just as if I were going to be reborn into it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction and notes by Clive Wilmer, Penguin, 1998, 225. All subsequent references are given in the text.

<sup>2</sup> William Morris, “The Society of the Future” (1887), in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton, London, 1984, 190 (emphasis mine).

Yet when Guest encounters the social order he has so ardently desired, he initially experiences it through a screen of disorientation and even muted estrangement. Certain patterns in Nowhere seem to him mildly outlandish as well as counterfactual. Nowhereans in turn find the values of ancient capitalism not only unjust but "barbaric" ("foreign" in ancient Greek), and sense in him a kind of spectral displacement before he fades away altogether in the work's final scene.<sup>3</sup>

Similar nuances of desire and unsettling distance appear in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) and others writings by Morris, as do his unexpected and slightly paradoxical identification of "visionaries" with "practical people" – for instance, the "idle singer" in *The Earthly Paradise*.<sup>4</sup> But they have an unusual resonance in *News from Nowhere*, for Guest's time-travel returns him to what social geographers would call his own "life-space". Nowhere is here.

Awakening with puzzlement in what appears at first to be his own bed in Kelmscott House, now a guesthouse, the work's narrator introduces himself cautiously to others as "William Guest".<sup>5</sup> Trying to fit in, he accompanies one of them through Hammersmith, Kensington, Hyde Park, central London and Piccadilly to Bloomsbury (where Morris and Company maintained offices at 26 Oxford Street); then joins others in a collective journey from Hammersmith upriver to Kelmscott, the tiny village in Oxfordshire where the historical Morris is now buried. When the party arrives, they are greeted in what had once been Morris' beloved Kelmscott Manor by a handsome grey-eyed woman who resembles Morris' wife Jane.

Certain things have changed, however. The Thames in Hammersmith has become clear and sparkling, and "The soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering came down the west wind from Thorneycroft's" (a shipbuilding site and munitions factory). Guest's virtual journeys also traverse a "green belt" (Epping Forest, fondly remembered from Morris' childhood), and later pass tile-roofed buildings which nestle in luxuriant gardens

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<sup>3</sup> For Morris' views on modern civilization, see "How I Became a Socialist", in *Political Writings of William Morris*, 244.

<sup>4</sup> William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise*, London, 1890, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Gestur* was a *spámaður* or village-prophet in the *Laxdaela Saga*, which Morris recast in *The Earthly Paradise* as "The Lovers of Gudrun".

at the water's edge, described as "above all, comfortable, and [looking] as if they were ... alive and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them" (48). In harmony with the ideas of contemporary anarchists and town planners,<sup>6</sup> houses upstream along the Thames are also "designed so as not to hurt the character of the country" (193), and a mill over the stream seemed to him "as beautiful in its way as a Gothic cathedral" (215).

As Old Hammond, an elderly amateur historian Guest encounters in the British Museum, puts it:

'England [had become in the nineteenth century] a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens [the stock exchanges], surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country ....' (105)

On the second day of the collective journey up river, Guest also observes that "the banks of the forest that we passed through ... were ... wild and beautiful as need be" (183). This does not surprise him at this point, for after "the Change", Old Hammond observed:

'The town invaded the country; but the invaders, like the warlike invaders of early days, yielded to the influence of their surroundings, and became country people ... and it was indeed this world of the country vivified by the thought and briskness of town-bred folk which has produced that happy and leisurely but eager life of which you have had a first taste.' (104)

'... as to the forests, we need a great deal of timber, and suppose that our sons and sons' sons will do the like .... Go north this summer and look at the Cumberland and Westmoreland ones, – where by the way, you will see some sheep feeding .... Go and have a look at the sheep-

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<sup>6</sup> For discussions of Morris' relationship to ideas of urban planning see Martin Delveaux, "From Pastoral Arcadia to Stable-State Mini-Cities: Morris' *News from Nowhere* and Callenbach's *Ecotopia*", *Journal of the William Morris Society* XIV/1 (Autumn 2000), 75-81; Stephen Coleman and Patrick O'Sullivan, *William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, Dartington, 1990; and Florence S. Boos, "News from Nowhere and 'Garden Cities': Morris' Utopia and Nineteenth-Century Town Design", *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, VII/2 (Fall 1998), 5-27.

walks high up the slopes between Ingeborough and Pen-y-gwent, and tell me if you think we waste the land there by not covering it with factories for making things that nobody wants, which was the chief business of the nineteenth century.' (106-107)

The inhabitants of this green and pleasant land also weave, print books, mend roads, harvest hay, ply complex handicrafts and write quasi-Morrisian historical novels about nineteenth-century England. When Guest encounters harvesters, they are not exactly bookish, but they are very quick and "eager to discuss all the little details of life: the weather, the hay-crop, the last new house, the plenty or lack of such and such birds, and so on; and they talked of these things ... as taking real interest in them" (193).

Henry Morsom, another quasi-double whom Guest encounters near his journey's end (variants of *morsom* in modern Scandinavian languages mean "funny" or "entertaining") finds absurdity in the nineteenth-century arguments that the toil of many will release a few for higher pursuits: "It was strange, was it not, that they should thus ignore that aspiration after complete equality which we now recognize as the bond of all happy human society?" (200).

It is Ellen, however, a clear-eyed woman appearing as the granddaughter of a dweller on the Thames, who understands exactly who and what "Guest" is, and who becomes the principal guide and wisdom-figure in *News from Nowhere* – "Guest's" *Beatrice*, so to speak. The old man and young woman engage in a series of probing dialogues which sometimes converge toward a kind of thought-transference: "Yes, you are answering me, teaching me, in some way or another, although you have not spoken the words aloud" (212). When she and Guest admire the beauty of the once-polluted Thames' headwaters, for example, she remarks bluntly that "the whole business [in the nineteenth century] was founded on lies and false pretensions. I don't mean only these river-guardians, but all these master-people I have read of" (216).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Emphasis is placed on the need to keep the river clear and unpolluted; Guest attacks those who oversaw maintenance of the Thames in the nineteenth century, who "as to this lovely river, destroyed its beauty morally, and had almost destroyed it physically, when they were thrown out of it" (180).

Earlier in their acquaintance, she described her likely fate and that of her grandfather in Guest's day as follows:

'... you, grandfather, would have had to work hard after you were old, and would have been always afraid of having to be shut in a kind of prison [i.e., the workhouse] 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.' (182)

When she and Guest enter the "Old House Amongst New Folk" at journey's end, she considers another hypothesis:

'I should have been one of the poor, for my father when he was working was a mere tiller of the soil. Well, I could not have borne that; therefore my beauty and cleverness and brightness ... would have been sold to rich men, and my life would have been wasted indeed .... I should have been wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or by luxury. Is it not so?' (223)

By contrast, each of the three days of the river journey seems to Guest more beautiful than its predecessor. When he observes the Kelmscott village harvest-celebration, he is overwhelmed for a moment by the difference in the lives of ordinary people "the change" has made:

There I stood in a dreamy mood, and rubbed my eyes as if I were not wholly awake, and half expected to see the gay-clad company of beautiful men and women change to two or three spindle-legged back-bowed men and haggard, hollow-eyed, ill-favoured women, who once wore down the soil of this land with their heavy hopeless feet, from day to day, and season to season, and year to year. But no change came as yet, and my heart swelled with joy as I thought of all the beautiful grey villages ... peopled now with ... happy and lovely folk, who had cast away riches and attained to wealth. (219)

As the Thames narrows to a small brook in Oxfordshire, Ellen and Guest come upon Morris' Kelmscott House a hundred and sixty years on. Now surrounded by gardens, covered with moss, and graced by the blend of natural age and human construction Morris loved, it is an

emblem of Old Hammond's "spirit of the new days" and "delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells" (158). Ellen, for her part, "[leads him] up close to the house and la[ys] her shapely sun browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it and crie[s] 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!'"(220).

Soon afterwards, however, the impossibly beautiful dream dissolves. Guest becomes aware that he has become a kind of spectral presence: his new friends at the harvest-festival no longer recognize him, and Ellen turns sadly towards him before he returns "home", "lonely and sick at heart past the power of words to describe", and sees a black cloud of pollution roll toward him as he makes his way to Hammersmith.

Before his departure, he had told Ellen that "even now, when all is won and has been for a long time, my heart is sickened with thinking of all the waste of life that has gone on for so many years!", and she had responded "So many centuries ... so many ages!" (222). Now he encounters "a figure strangely contrasting with the joyous, beautiful people I had left behind in the church":

It was a man who looked old, but who I knew from habit, now half-forgotten, was really not much more than fifty. His face was rugged, and grimed rather than dirty; his eyes dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping. His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real goodwill and courtesy, and much servility.

Inexpressibly shocked, I hurried past him ... (227-28)

Morris' utopia expressed a devout hope that in a more natural as well as socially just world which had cast off the riches of capitalism to attain to the wealth of humanity human desires would change. These were not passing thoughts, but grew from his reflections on art over an eighteen-year period. He expressed similar hopes, for example, in a number of roughly contemporary essays published in

volumes such as *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882) and a more political volume he entitled *Signs of Change* (1888).<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I will dwell on four ideals which animated these hopes: the importance of pleasure in labour, the transcendent beauty of nature, the role of craft and architecture as a repository of memory and history, and the intrinsic role of simplicity in a well-lived life. All of these ideals and imperatives anticipated in some measure significant aspects of twentieth-century utopian Marxist thought.

### **Pleasure in labour**

Morris inherited this sustaining ideal from John Ruskin, and integrated it in new ways into his own view of authentically humane activity. In “The Nature of Gothic”, described by Morris as “the truest and the most eloquent words that could possibly be said on the subject”,<sup>9</sup> Ruskin had argued that “It is not [solely] that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread”.<sup>10</sup> Morris, like Kant, Hegel, Marx and others before him, saw original human work – creation – as a measure of human well-being.

In “The Origins of Ornamental Art” (1886), for example, he argued that “labour found out a solace and a glory for the handicraftsman from the earliest times”,<sup>11</sup> and that fulfilling work was

not merely an attempt to escape from the wearisomeness of labour, but ... an expression of pleasure in the hope and sense of power and usefulness which men felt in the making of things in the childhood of the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Collections of Morris’ essays include *Hopes and Fears for Art*, London, 1882; *Signs of Change*, London, 1888; *Lectures on Art and Industry*, vol. XXII of *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols, London, 1914; *Lectures on Socialism*, vol. XXXII of *The Collected Works of William Morris*. Other lectures were included in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris, Oxford, 1936; and *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene LeMire, Detroit, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> William Morris, “The Lesser Arts”, in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> John Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic”, in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, ed. John Rosenberg, London, 1964, 179.

<sup>11</sup> “The Origins of Ornamental Art”, in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, ed. Norman Kelvin, New York, 1999, 161. This idea is repeated many times, for example: “Such then it seems to me was the first origin of ornament on wares: ... an expression of pleasure in the hope and sense of power and usefulness which men felt in the making of things in the childhood of the world” (162).



All people not dishonest must work, and ... their working hours must be the most important part of their lives: if therefore they have due hope, pleasure, and honour in their daily work their lives will on the whole be happy, if they lack that hope, pleasure, and honour their lives will be unhappy.<sup>12</sup>

In "The Arts and Crafts of Today" (1889), he added that "it is our business, as artists, to show the world that the pleasurable exercise of our energies is the end of life and the cause of happiness, and thus to show it which road the discontent of modern life must take in order to reach a fruitful home."<sup>13</sup>

The true mark of the "Great Change" for Old Hammond in *News from Nowhere* was that "At last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we had our fill of it; and then all was gained, and we were happy. So may it be for ages and ages!" (160).<sup>14</sup> By contrast, capitalism degraded useful work, "mass-produced" it and instrumentalized it, with the result that "many thousands of men and women mak[e] Nothing with terrible and inhuman toil which deadens the soul and shortens mere animal life itself". Correlative with this degradation of genuinely useful work was the creation of new forms of "slavery", and new forms of addiction:

[The vast number of slaves of competitive Commerce are] the slaves of what is called luxury, which in the modern sense of the word comprises a mass of sham wealth, the invention of competitive

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 162 and 171.

<sup>13</sup> William Morris, "The Arts and Crafts of Today", in *Lectures on Art and Industry*, 356: compare this with "Nor can I conceive of anything more likely to raise the standard of life than the convincing some thousands of those who live by labour of the necessity of their supporting the second part of the claim I have made for Labour: namely, *That their work should be of itself pleasant to do*" ("Art and Socialism", in *Political Writings of William Morris*, 118).

<sup>14</sup> See also Hammond's remarks in Chapter 15 of *News from Nowhere*, "On the Lack of Incentive to Labour in a Communistic Society": "*all* work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable habit, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists" (122-23).

Commerce, [which] enslaves not only the poor people who are compelled to work at its production, but also the foolish and not over happy people who buy it to harass themselves with its encumbrance.<sup>15</sup>

What brings about luxury but a sickly discontent with the simple joys of the lovely earth? ... What is it but a warping of the natural beauty of things into a perverse ugliness to satisfy the jaded appetite of a man who is ceasing to be a man – a man who will not work, and cannot rest?<sup>16</sup>

Over time, Morris' loathing of such wretched excesses evolved into an intensely personal critique of commodity fetishism as a form of cultural as well as profit-driven alienation: "The grossly unequal distribution of wealth forces the rich to get rid of their surplus money by means of various forms of folly and luxury, which means further waste of labour."<sup>17</sup> Morris often used the words "art" and "labour" almost interchangeably, an assimilation some critics have found implausible. Morris spoke from personal experience, of course, but he had thought long and deeply about the effects of contemporary economic forces on the decorative arts of his time, and it is clear that any sort of human design or creation in interaction with the natural environment could be Morrisian art or craft. But the nature of that interaction was essential: beauty was specious if it came at the cost of high mortality from polluted air and dangerous machines.

Morris was also no Luddite. Nowhereans make use of a "force" which seems to be electrical power (81), and he used current machinery in the Kelmscott Press and Merton Abbey works. "All work [in Nowhere] which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without", according to Old Hammond (127),<sup>18</sup> and Morris conjectured in "The Society of the Future" that a "few more important machines [might someday] be very much improved, and the host of unimportant ones fall into

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<sup>15</sup> William Morris, "Art and Socialism", in *Political Writings of William Morris*, 113.

<sup>16</sup> William Morris, "The Society of the Future", in *ibid.*, 193.

<sup>17</sup> William Morris, "True and False Society", in *On Art and Socialism, Essays and Lectures by William Morris*, ed. George Holbrook Jackson, London, 1947, 308.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, "The Origins of Ornamental Art", in *Art and Socialism*: "Machines should never be used for doing work in which men can take pleasure" (172).

disuse; and as to many or most of them people will be able to use them or not as they feel inclined" (196).

The test, in short, was not whether the work was mechanically aided, but what human faculties were exercised or improved in performing it, and whether it served a social purpose, rather than recurrent human avidities for profit, manipulation and snobbery. For Morris may have enjoined us in "The Beauty of Life" to "have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful nor believe to be beautiful",<sup>19</sup> but he did not have in mind a penthouse filled with ornate *objets d'art*. In "Makeshift", one of his last lectures, delivered in Manchester in 1894, he denounced the production of superfluous wares for the rich and shoddy goods for the poor ("Slave-wares for wage-slaves") by the Capitalist "World-Market". His rationale for this denunciation was not only that the former were not attractive, but that the ultimate purpose in both cases was "the production [not] of goods but of profits, for those who are privileged to live on other people's labour".<sup>20</sup> Like Old Hammond, he also believed that "It was a jest of the time that such wares were made to sell and not to use" (124).

Working with broader social-anthropological definitions of "human creation", it would not be hard to extrapolate Morris' ideals to other sorts of "craftwork" – "service occupations", for example, such as teaching or social work – and even the design of certain sorts of software. Childrearing and other forms of "cultural" and "social reproduction" can also be brought into this tent; but there is no space in it for "mission statements" or other bureaucratic forms of "useless [bureaucratic] toil".

#### **Nature as a regulative ideal**

Karl Marx essentially viewed nature as a kind of static repository of physical resources at the disposal of human labour, an illusion Clara characterized in Morris' *News from Nowhere* as:

'... their mistake ... bred of the life of slavery that they had been living ... – a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animal and inanimate – "nature", as people used to call it –

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<sup>19</sup> Morris, "The Beauty of Life", in *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Morris, "Makeshift", in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Oxford, 1936, 479-80.

as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make “nature” their slave, since they thought “nature” was something outside them.’ (200)

Morris saw beauty and human welfare as kindred forms of symbiosis between people, their dwellings, and a cultivated landscape in a larger setting of natural wilderness.<sup>21</sup> Within the boundaries of that symbiosis, no one can own natural beauty, which retains its own rights, as he argued again and again in the 1880s:

’tis we ourselves, each one of us, who must keep watch and ward over the fairness of the earth .... all we can do in this way we must look on not as palliatives of an unendurable state of things, but as tokens of what we desire; which is in short the giving back to our country of the natural beauty of the earth, which we are ashamed of having taken away from it ....

Until our streets are decent and orderly, and our town gardens break the bricks and mortar every here and there, and are open to all people; until our meadows even near our towns become fair and sweet, and are unsoiled by patches of hideousness; until we have clear sky above our heads and green grass beneath our feet; until the great drama of the seasons can touch our workmen with other feelings than the misery of winter and the weariness of summer – till all this happens our museums and art schools will be but amusements of the rich; and they will soon cease to be of any use to them also unless they make up their minds that they will do their best to give us back the fairness of the Earth.<sup>22</sup>

Some day, by contrast, he hoped “the huge manufacturing towns will be broken up, and nature heal the horrible scars that man’s heedless greed and stupid terror have made”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. “there indeed if anywhere, in the English country, in the days when people cared about such things, was there a full sympathy between the works of man and the land they were made for ...” (“The Lesser Arts”, in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, 17). In “The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization”, he describes the beauty of a Cotswold cottage built by an ordinary labourer in the past: “this simple harmless beauty that ... added to the beauty of the earth instead of marring it” (*William Morris on Art and Socialism*, 62).

<sup>22</sup> Morris, “The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization”, 56, 68-69.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, “The Society of the Future”, 196.

Shall I tell you what luxury has done for you in modern Europe? It has covered the merry green fields with the hovels of slaves, and blighted the flowers and trees with poisonous gases, and turned the rivers to sewers; till over many parts of Britain the common people have forgotten what a field or a flower is like.<sup>24</sup>

And as he argued in "Art under Plutocracy": "all that external degradation of the face of the country of which I have spoken is hateful to me not only because it is a cause of unhappiness to some few of us who still love art, but also and chiefly because it is a token of the unhappy life forced on the great mass of the population by the system of competitive commerce."<sup>25</sup>

Morris himself had been active in several local "preservation societies", but understood that the whole of nature, its wilderness and its social modifications, needed broader forms of sustenance and preservation. *News from Nowhere* is replete with allusions to the need for the husbandry of all forms of beauty, and Morris' essays return again and again to the Kantian sublimity experienced by a "herdsman and tiller, [who] ... though he [had] to take his share of rough torment from storm and frost and sun, yet [had] his eyes on beautiful things forever, and his ears often delighted by the multitudinous voice of nature as he [went] to and fro through the changes of the year, nursing his hope of the harvest which is to be".<sup>26</sup>

Many, including myself, have sought to document Morris' environmentalism and explore the extent to which *News from Nowhere* may be read as a pioneering ecotopia.<sup>27</sup> Here I would point out only that Morris believed that nature is its own "means of production", and that "there is no square mile of earth's inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way, if we men will only

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 193. Cf. "The Beauty of Life", in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*: "... for I must now speak of something else, of possessions which should be common to all of us, of the green grass, and the leaves, and the waters, of the very light and air of heaven, which the Century of Commerce has been too busy to pay any heed to" (48).

<sup>25</sup> William Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy", in *Political Writings of William Morris*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, "The Origins of Ornamental Art", 161.

<sup>27</sup> See Florence Boos, "Aesthetic Eco-communism: Morris the Red and Morris the Green", in *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, eds Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston, Exeter, 1998, 10-39.

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 ...”<sup>28</sup> Morris never anticipated global warming or the mass extinction of species, but I suspect he would have viewed such phenomena as natural extrapolations of miniatures he knew well in his own time and place:

Nothing can make me believe that the present condition of your Black Country yonder is an unchangeable necessity of our life and position. ... and a hundredth part of the energy that was spent in creating these [miseries] would get rid of them .... [and] it would soon be something more than an idle dream to hope that your pleasant midland hills and fields might begin to become pleasant again in some way or other, even without depopulating them; or that those once lovely valleys of Yorkshire in the “heavy woollen district”, with their sweeping hillsides and noble rivers, should not need the stroke of ruin to make them once more delightful abodes of men, instead of the dog-holes that the Century of Commerce has made them.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Architecture as a record of memory and human endeavour**

Morris’ art embraced any form of human labour and intellectual beauty that gave innocent pleasure and raised consciousness, but he especially admired the craft of architecture, whose conceptual range encompassed “the whole external surroundings of the life of man”:

The word Architecture has, I suppose, to most of you the meaning of the art of building nobly and ornamentally. But, noble as that art is by itself, ... it neither ever has existed nor ever can exist alive and progressive by itself, but must cherish and be cherished by all the arts whereby men make the things which they intend shall be beautiful, and shall last somewhat beyond the passing day. It is this union of the

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<sup>28</sup> “Art and the Beauty of the Earth”, in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, 91. In the “Prospects of Architecture in Civilization”, Morris envisioned that care of the earth would enable humans for the first time to recognize the power of the stories of the lives of others; that is, to create a true literature: “For we indeed freed from the bondage of foolish habit and dulling luxury might at last have eyes wherewith to see ... the faces of people in the streets bearing the tokens of mirth and sorrow and hope, and all the tale of their lives ... and many a time there would come before us memories of the deeds of past times, and of the aspirations of those mighty peoples whose deaths have made our lives, and their sorrows our joys” (78-79).

<sup>29</sup> Morris, “The Beauty of Life”, 42-43.

arts, mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated one to another, which I have learned to think of as Architecture .... a great subject truly for it embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man; ... it means the moulding and altering to human needs of the very face of the earth itself ...<sup>30</sup>

Morris, who had briefly studied architecture in the firm of G.B. Street, here extended and modified an existing Victorian tradition of architecture-as-social criticism. In *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841), for example, A.W. Pugin had identified medieval gothic with the apex of social development in a Roman Catholic communalist society which ostensibly upheld fairness to all, and John Ruskin had secularized this claim in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1846) and "The Nature of Gothic" (1853). In one of these "Seven Lamps" ("The Lamp of Memory"), Ruskin eulogized – indeed, almost canonized – architecture as follows:

It is as the centralisation and protectress of this sacred influence [of memory] that Architecture is to be regarded by us .... We may live without her and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her. How cold is all history, how lifeless all imagery, compared to that which the living nation writes, and the uncorrupted marble bears! .... there are but two strong conquerors of the forgetfulness of men, Poetry and Architecture; and the latter in some sort includes the former, and is mightier in its reality: it is well to have, not only what men have thought and felt, but what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life.<sup>31</sup>

For indeed the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age .... it is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture ...<sup>32</sup>

Morris gave this historicism a more distinctly egalitarian inflection, and reinterpreted it in ways which accord with the more even-handed views of many left-wing historians and social anthropologists:

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<sup>30</sup> Morris, "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization", 56.

<sup>31</sup> John Ruskin, *The Genius of John Ruskin*, ed. John Rosenberg, London, 1964, 131.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-33.

Indeed they have had a hard time of it those ancient buildings of England raised once in such hope by the “Famous men and the fathers that begat us” ... the pedant of today [is] self-sufficient, the slave of money, ignorant he also of that real history which is no dead thing, but the living bond of the hopes of the past, the present, and the future ....

Now the essence or soul of popular art is the due and worthy delight of each worker in his own handiwork, ... as it has been communicated to him by the thoughts of many generations of men under the name of Tradition.<sup>33</sup>

Morris never saw a cathedral he did not like. He also understood that history was wider than medieval architecture, and his tastes were fairly broad. As the Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, he worked hard in one period of his life to preserve ancient buildings, that is, from the tenth to the seventeenth century, but in “The Arts and Crafts of Today” (1889), he also praised “the refined and careful work of ... educated [Victorian] architects – the Eclectic style, if you will allow me so to call it ... it would be nothing short of a miracle if those refined buildings did not proclaim their eclecticism to all beholders”. He urged contemporaries to “praise their eccentricity and not deride it”, as an antidote to “buildings which are a blot on the beautiful earth, an insult to the common sense of cultivated nineteenth-century humanity”.<sup>34</sup>

Morris’ radical-democratic theory of art was already present in “The Lesser Arts” (1877), one of his earliest published essays, in which he interpreted history as the material culture of ordinary people, against the period’s dominant mode of political history:

Nor must you forget that when men say popes, kings, and emperors built such and such buildings, it is a mere way of speaking. You look in your history-books to see who built Westminster Abbey, who built St. Sophia at Constantinople, and they tell you Henry III, Justinian the Emperor. Did they? or, rather men like you and me, handicraftsmen who have left no names behind them, nothing but their work?<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Morris, “The Origins of Ornamental Art”, 167, 171. See also “The Lesser Arts”: “For your teachers, they must be Nature and History” (15).

<sup>34</sup> “The Arts and Crafts of Today”, 235-36.

<sup>35</sup> Morris, “The Lesser Arts”, 6-7.



In effect, he broadened the definition of architecture in such arguments to embrace a social contract between generations and witness to human continuity.

Similar historicist ideals animate Morris' best-known poetic works, *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858) and his *Earthly Paradise* (1870) – in which fourteenth-century refugees from the plague narrate twelve classical tales and twelve medieval and Scandinavian folktales – as well as three of his prose romances (*The House of the Wolfings*, *The Roots of the Mountains* and *A Dream of John Ball*) and "The Roots of Socialism", a co-authored Marxist history of Europe which appeared in book form as *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (1896).

It is true that Guest's guide Dick tells him that children in Nowhere take more interest in practical matters than in history, and Dick's grandfather, the historian Old Hammond, acknowledges that "it is mostly in periods of turmoil and strife and confusion that people care much about history" (67). But Morris' work was itself deeply historical, as was its persistent sense that he and his "idle singer" had been "born out of [their] due time"<sup>36</sup> – more preoccupied with the past than contemporaries besotted with Victorian notions of industrial progress.

Nowhereans, in any case, commemorate the past in many ways, though they have little interest in "the dull records of the battles and intrigues of kings and scoundrels".<sup>37</sup> But an annual celebration memorializes the "Clearing of Misery", the construction of decent housing, for example. The wall of the Guest House records that "on this site once stood the lecture-room of the Hammersmith Socialists. Drink a Glass to the Memory! May 1962." Henry Morsom, the curator of a museum of old machines and crafts also:

... had a extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the ancient history of the countryside from the time of Alfred to the days of the Parliamentary Wars .... [and] had detailed records of the period of the change to the present state of things, ... especially of that exodus of the period from the town to the country, and the gradual recovery by the

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<sup>36</sup> In the prefatory lyric to *The Earthly Paradise*, London, 1890, the singer expresses an anxiety of belatedness, a "dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time" (1).

<sup>37</sup> Morris, "The Lesser Arts", 8.

town-bred people on one side and the country-bred people on the other, of those arts of life which they had each lost .... (198-99)

But to the active and cogently informative Old Hammond falls the work's most complex and thoughtful historical narrative (in Chapters 15, 17 and 18), passages from which can still be read as a chilling indictment of the early-twenty-first-century present:

When the civilized World-Market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found – the suppression of a slavery different from, and not so cruel as that of commerce; the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters; the “rescue” of some desperado or homicidal madman whose misdeeds had got him into trouble amongst the natives of the “barbarous” country – any stick, in short, which would beat the dog at all.<sup>38</sup>

Ellen – the new society's most eloquent spokesperson – is fascinated by history in less explicitly political but more deeply personal ways. Her desire to learn about the past has motivated her to make the journey upriver with Guest, and it also elicits the work's most introspective defence of historical consciousness:

‘I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past – too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men like Hammond. Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid.’ (214)

Morris' empathic interest in the myriad nameless actors who have created history allied him with dissident contemporary historians such J.R. Green, author of *A History of the English People* (1877-80), and their spiritual heirs A.L. Morton, writer of *A People's History of England* (1979), and Howard Zinn (*A People's History of the United*

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<sup>38</sup> Consider also the following remark in *News from Nowhere*, “The best of [wares made for the World-Market] were of a lowish average, the worst were transparent makeshifts for the things asked for .... It was a current jest of the time that the wares were made to sell and not to use ...” (125-26).

*States*, 2003), as well as the *Annales* school and more recent self-conscious analysts of the everyday such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau.

### **The ideal of simplicity**

Morris believed that genuine equality would render a simpler life necessary, and new forms of consciousness would reveal its greater potential for happiness. This conviction that simplicity was an ideal of the natural life as well as a practical necessity for the achievement of Socialism appeared in essay after essay, for example, in "The Society of the Future": "Being determined to be free, and therefore contented with a life not only simpler but even rougher than the life of [wage-] slave-owners, ... men (and women too, of course) would do their work and take pleasure in their own persons, and not vicariously."<sup>39</sup> This would require the gradual end of degrading occupations he called "mechanical toil", and a shift in social relations and patterns of consumption:

... as to occupations, we shall clearly not be able to have the same division of labour in them as now: vicarious servantry, sewer-emptying, butchering, letter-carrying, boot-blackening, hair-dressing, and the rest of it, will have come to an end: we shall either make all these occupations agreeable to ourselves in some mood or to some minds, who will take to them voluntarily, or we shall have to let them lapse altogether ....<sup>40</sup>

Simplicity of life begetting simplicity of taste, that is, a love for sweet and lofty things, is "of all matters most necessary for the birth of the new and better art we crave for; simplicity everywhere, in the palace as well as in the cottage".<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Morris, "The Society of the Future", 201.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-96. See also "The Art of the People", in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*: "Yes, luxury cannot exist without slavery of some kind or other, and its abolition will be blessed, like the abolition of other slaveries, by the freeing both of the slaves and of their masters" (33). In "The Beauty of Life", Morris writes: "All art starts from this simplicity, and the higher the art rises, the greater the simplicity" (54); and in "The Revival of Handicraft": "Vicarious life is the watchword of our civilization" (*On Art and Socialism, Essays and Lectures by William Morris*, 226).

<sup>41</sup> Morris, "The Lesser Arts", 22.

Simplicity of life, even the barest, is not misery, but the very foundation of refinement: “A sanded floor and whitewashed walls, and the green trees and flowery meads and living waters outside; or a grimy palace amid the smoke with a regiment of housemaids always working to smear the dirt together .... which, think you, is the most refined ... of those two dwellings.”<sup>42</sup> Such a life would alter consciousness for “from simplicity of life would rise up the longing for beauty, which cannot yet be dead in men’s souls”,<sup>43</sup> and banish luxury, for true art “[would] not hinder any work that is necessary to the life of man at the best, but ... destroy all degrading toil [and] enervating luxury”.<sup>44</sup>

When Ellen and Guest discuss such matters in *News from Nowhere*, Guest suggests that “the ugliness and vulgarity of the rich men’s dwellings was a necessary reflection from the sordidness and barrenness of life which they forced upon the poor people” (212), and Ellen agrees that “in times of inequality it was an essential condition of the life of these rich men that they should not themselves make what they wanted for the adornment of their lives, but should force those to make them whom they forced to live pinched and sordid lives ... ” (212).

By simplicity, then, Morris meant something like sustainability, self-sufficiency and abstention from conspicuous consumption – more tolerant versions of what the Amish in North America call “*Schlichtheit*” or “plainness”, tempered by pleasure in innocent display and love of craftwork. Nowhereans smile at the finery of Boffin the dustman, and Dick is proud of his handsome self-crafted damascened steel belt buckle, but they do not respect or envy riches and gratuitous consumption. What they do cherish and respect are useful and pleasurable work, harmony with nature, and kinship with one’s fellows and the past as marks and rewards of a fulfilled everyday life.

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<sup>42</sup> Morris, “The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization”, 77; see also “The Lesser Arts”, where he comments: “To my mind it is only here and there (out of the kitchen) that you can find in a well-to-do house things that are of any use at all: as a rule all the decoration (so called) that has got there is there for the sake of show, not because anybody likes it”.

<sup>43</sup> Morris, “The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization”, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Morris, “Art and the Beauty of the Earth”, 87.

**Is utopia static?**

Critics have sometimes argued that Morris' notions of art, beauty, pleasure and nature were embedded in Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic sensibilities, and that they left little room for change or evolution. Yet in contrast with the technology-driven urban society of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, News from Nowhere* is one of the one least prescriptive and most plurally interpretable of all utopias, for in an idealized society informed by beauty and fairness, as well as justice and meaningful work, he hoped that a hundred beneficial endeavours might bloom:

... in a social condition of things, the gains that would lie before the exercise of one's energies would be various and wide indeed; nor do I in the least in the world believe that the possibility of mere personal use would, or indeed could, limit people's endeavour after them; since men would at last have recognized that it was their business to live, and would at once come to the conclusion that life without endeavour is *dull*.<sup>45</sup>

And when in *News from Nowhere* Guest asks Hammond "how you get people to work when there is no reward of labour, and especially how do you get them to work strenuously", Hammond expresses surprise:

'No reward of labour?' said Hammond, gravely. "The reward of labour is *life*. Is that not enough?' ....  
'... we are so far from thinking that [work is suffering], that, as you may have noticed, whereas we are not short of wealth, there is a kind of fear growing up amongst us that we shall one day be short of work. It is a pleasure which we are afraid of losing, not a pain.' (122)

Nowhereans are also aware that certain aesthetic and social choices cannot be anticipated. New endeavours and forms of art will come into existence, and they will have to be open minded enough to recognize them when they do. When Guest asks Morsom what the art of the future beyond his present new society will be, the latter laughs and answers, "I don't know ... we will meet it when it comes" (201). Most deeply utopian of all, perhaps, was Morris' confidence – expressed in "The Society of the Future" – that humans are inherently

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<sup>45</sup> Morris, "The Society of the Future", 198.

capable of this: “Nor for my part would I prescribe for him [the dweller in the new society] what he should do, being persuaded that the habits which would have given him the capacities of a man would stimulate him to use them . . . .”<sup>46</sup>

In a recent article, Tony Pinkney has argued that the second part of Morris’ utopia “incorporates its critics’ insights, ... asks us to reassess substantially its idyllic London scenes and tries to offer something ... beyond them” – metaphorically in the “the long voyage of discovery up the Thames towards – what?”, and personally in the emblematic figure of Ellen, who represents a “more challenging, more energetic, fully historized and political world”.<sup>47</sup>

Ellen is the new society’s most poignant symbol and embodiment. But the capacities for change and recovery Morris evokes are expressed not only in the metaphor of the journey and the work’s subtitle (“an epoch of rest”), but in the plot’s many returns to familiar settings in oddly transformed guises. For humans have need of recurrence as well as change, in alternations that might be represented in Morrisian designs which flow and renew themselves in self-similar patterns that recur throughout nature. Morris deepened and refined Ruskin’s views of “changefulness” and “rigidity” when he observed that the promise of change alternates with the pleasure of recognition and the solace of memory, and that “happiness [is] the pleasurable exercise of our energies and the enjoyment of ... necessary rest”.<sup>48</sup>

### **Morris and twentieth-century Marxists**

Most of Morris’ spiritual heirs in the twentieth century considered themselves Socialists of some sort, and it is interesting to consider ways in which some of them consciously or unconsciously emulated his views. Such a large topic would have required an entire essay in itself, so I can only suggest some parallels here. Morris was an artist,

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>47</sup> Tony Pinkney, “Kinetic Utopias: H.G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* and William Morris’ *News from Nowhere*”, *Journal of the William Morris Society*, XVI/2-3 (2005), 53-54.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, “The Society of the Future”, 192. See also Morris, “Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil”, in *Signs of Change*: “Rest, when it comes, must be long enough to allow us to enjoy it, and it must not be disturbed by anxiety, else we shall not be able to enjoy it” (99). In “The Nature of Gothic”, Ruskin had included “changefulness” and “rigidity” (7) as paradoxical opposites necessary for the greatest art.

writer and activist, not an academic philosopher – a visionary or practical rather than analytic thinker, in his own words – and his essays were not treatises but secular appeals and calls for action.

Wittingly or unwittingly (the latter, presumably, in the cases of most French and German writers), poststructuralist essayists such as Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari<sup>49</sup> recapitulated certain aspects of Morris' literary views and artistic temperament – in Barthes' observation that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination", for example (an oddly apt characterization of the point of *News from Nowhere*); or in Barthes' assertion that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader".<sup>50</sup>

Other Morrisian leitmotifs, recapitulated in Barthes' and Frederic Jameson's critiques of social manipulation and forced consumption,<sup>51</sup> were his deep loathing of the alienation and commodification he identified with competitive commerce, the savagery of its spoliation of the natural and social environment, and its ruthless denial to workers of rest, leisure, and natural enjoyment of their labour, unless they could be commodified to yield yet more profit. He especially loathed early forms of advertising (or "capitalist realism"), the servile art of capitalism's propaganda ministry, and had nothing but contempt for "the stupidity and emptiness of the London Exhibition of 1851 – the first of the series of advertising shows which have since cursed the world with their pretentious triviality".<sup>52</sup>

Given what people with doctorates in social psychology are paid to manipulate people's sensibilities, there is something poignantly naïve (and unjaded) about his response to nineteenth-century advertising

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<sup>49</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Brian Masumi, "A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia" (1987), in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch, New York, 2001: "Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come"; "the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature .... It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows" (1605).

<sup>50</sup> Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in *Norton Anthology of Theory*, 1469.

<sup>51</sup> See also Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, New York, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> Morris, "The Present Outlook of Socialism in England", in *Art and Socialism*, 186.

posters: “I suppose ’tis early days in the revival of the arts to express one’s disgust at the daily increasing hideousness of the posters with which all our towns are daubed. Still we ought to be disgusted at such horrors.”<sup>53</sup> Morris’ last public talk was an address to the “Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising”, on 31 January 1896,<sup>54</sup> and he was mercifully spared knowledge of the subtly addictive force and rapacity of compulsory over-consumption – part of everyday life – in the early twenty-first century.

Likewise Russian formalists such as Victor Shklovsky and Boris Eichenbaum introduced a cognate analysis of Marxist alienation and Mikhail Bakhtin argued that “carnavalesque” moments in literature had the capacity to subvert class-hierarchies, an aim dear to Morris’ heart and literary aspirations. Gyorgy Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Boris Eichenbaum, Mikail Bakhtin, Louis Althusser and other left-wing critics also debated whether mimetic forms of realist fiction or abstract expressionist representations were more progressive or subversive forces in capitalist and proto-fascist societies.

A Victorian with few complexes about his romantic antecedents, Morris would probably have found some of his left-wing academic successors’ prescriptions rather airless. A reader of the novels of Scott, Dickens, Dumas and Victor Hugo,<sup>55</sup> he fashioned introspective symbolic and allegorical accounts of human desires and frustrations in his poetry – *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), the *Earthly Paradise*, (1870) and *Love Is Enough* (1873) – his prose romances – *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894) and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1895) – and his extended verse-narrative of the Paris Commune in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, which appeared serially in *Commonweal* in 1885.

Moreover, in *News from Nowhere*, Ellen remarked rather astringently of nineteenth-century fiction that:

‘Some [novelists], indeed, do here and there show some feeling for those whom the history-books call “poor”, and of the misery of whose lives we have some inkling; but presently they give it up, and towards the end of the story we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily in an island of bliss on other people’s troubles .... while

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<sup>53</sup> Morris, “The Beauty of Life”, 50.

<sup>54</sup> This address was published in *A Beautiful World*, December 1896, 17.

<sup>55</sup> For a list of favourite books see *The Collected Works of William Morris*, XXII, xvi.



the world must even then have gone on its way, and dug and sewed and baked and built and carpentered round about these useless – animals.’ (175-76)

Morris might therefore have found something to praise in Boris Eichenbaum and Victor Propp’s interest in narrative art, traditional folk tales and repeated narrative motifs in romance, and one might even see in his analyses of the useless toil and degradation of the worker under capitalism – In education, speech, tastes, amusements, family life – an anticipation of Louis Althusser’s contempt for an “ideological state [or corporate] apparatus”.<sup>56</sup>

*News from Nowhere* had no such “apparatus”, capitalist, Socialist, or other – no prisons, no armies, and no centralized government. In keeping with Morris’ anarchist-communist trust in “general cultivation of the powers of the mind, [and] ... the powers of the eye and hand”,<sup>57</sup> its children learn daily crafts and languages from converse with adults, who study or meditate from time to time in communal houses such as the former Eton College.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, in nineteenth-century England “all education [had been] ... directed towards the end of fitting people to take their places in the hierarchy of commerce – these as masters, those as workmen”.<sup>59</sup>

Family life in *Nowhere* is likewise a matter of personal choice. As old Hammond observes, “there is no code of public opinion which takes the place of [law-courts] ... [and] no unvarying ... bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their minds and lives; no hypocritical excommunication which people are *forced* to pronounce” (93; emphasis in the original). The only religion, of course, is “the religion of humanity”. For “we do, both in word and deed, believe in the continuous life of the world of men, and every day of that common life added to the little stock of days which our own mere individual experience wins for us: and consequently we are happy”. Such an everyday confession is made easier by the fact that humankind is no

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<sup>56</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York, 1971, 177-88.

<sup>57</sup> Morris, “The Lesser Arts”, 21.

<sup>58</sup> In Chapter 24, according to Dick, “it is used now as a dwelling for people engaged in learning; and folk from round about come and get taught things that they want to learn; and there is a great library there of the best books” (184).

<sup>59</sup> Morris, “Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil”, in *Political Writings*, 101.

longer “divided into blind tyrants on the one hand and apathetic degraded slaves on the other” (159).

At points such as this, Morris’ utopian vision converges toward a colloquial counterpart of Immanuel Kant’s (explicitly counterfactual) “realm of ends”.<sup>60</sup> In the *Commonweal News from Nowhere*, serialized in 1890, Morris temporally sited the “Great Change” in the early twentieth century, a date he quietly displaced into the mid-twentieth century a year later. In “The Lesser Arts”, his first political essay, he had acknowledged that:

It is a dream, you may say, of what has never been and never will be; true, it has never been, and therefore, since the world is alive and moving yet, my hope is the greater that it one day will be: true it is a dream; but dreams have before now come about of things so good and necessary to us, that we scarcely think of them more than of the daylight, though once people had to live without them, without even the hope of them.<sup>61</sup>

A less lyrical but historically deeper and more poignant acknowledgment that Morris’ “Society of the Future” is a stage in the dialectical evolution of a regulative ideal appeared in *A Dream of John Ball* (1888). Before his capture and execution, John Ball, the rebel “hedge-priest” who led the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, preached a final sermon in which he contemplated the eternal incompleteness of human history: “I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Hope and everyday life**

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<sup>60</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, eds Bernt and Dieter Schönecker, Hamburg, 1999, 59-60 and 66 (Akademie-Ausgabe 433 and 438).

<sup>61</sup> Morris, “The Lesser Arts”, 27.

<sup>62</sup> William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, XVI, 231-32. The narrator in this text is unable to offer the soon-to-die Ball certainty that his death will have heralded the change he sought, only that the coming of the new social order will seem less remote and men will hope for it; and even grief and internecine strife shall “bring about the end, till thy deeming of folly and ours shall be one, and thy hope and our hope” (286).

Among the twentieth-century's Marxist critiques of alienation, consumerism, the state and ideology, some seem to me to resonate more clearly with the ideals that animated *News from Nowhere*. In his study of the "bureaucratic society of controlled [and manipulated] consumption" in *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (1968), Henri Lefebvre mourned the relative absence of art, style and communal events in contemporary French daily life, argued that "referentiality" had dwindled into "the consumption of signs", in which "the act of consuming is an endlessly recurrent diagram", and characterized himself as a "utopian" and "a partisan of possibilities ... since for me what is possible is already partly real".<sup>63</sup> Evoking a cultural revolution whose object is "to create a culture that is not an institution but a style of life", Lefebvre argued that a genuine revolution would seek three kinds of change: "sexual reform", "urban reform", and "freedom of the city" (the reorganization of cities for the social needs of their inhabitants). He also called for a "rediscovery of the Festival", which would overcome "the conflict between everyday life and festivity and enabl[e them] to harmonize in and through urban society", adding that "The very notion of play as a work of art, of the city as play, would strain the imagination of even the most cultured bourgeoisie". Like Morris at the end of *News from Nowhere*, Lefebvre also reminded his readers that "to be aware of being unhappy presupposes that something else is possible", and praised what he called "adaptation", "setting it in its rightful position above the concepts of mastery (of material reality) and of praxis".<sup>64</sup> Such attempts to escape the labyrinth of a "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" – varied and extended by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974) – echoed Morris' defence of the "lesser arts" and meaningful pleasure as a model for the radical democratic transformation of civil society.

Still another academic philosopher who echoed many of Morris' views in the twentieth century was Ernest Bloch, whom Theodor Adorno rather hyperbolically called "the one mainly responsible for restoring honour to the word 'utopia'".<sup>65</sup> Bloch's long life spanned much of the twentieth century (1885-1977), but his earliest statement

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<sup>63</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Edison: NJ, 1984, 109, 192.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 203, 206, 206.

<sup>65</sup> Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, London and New York, 1996, 34.

of his views may be found in his *Geist der Utopie (Spirit of Utopia, 1918)*, and its fullest expression in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung (The Principle of Hope)*, which appeared in German in 1959.<sup>66</sup> Influenced by Schelling (and, more distantly, by the teleological views of Aristotle), Bloch believed that “all that lives must tend towards something or must move and be on its way towards something”.<sup>67</sup> Existence itself, in this view, is an underdetermined and open-ended dynamic process, and world history “an experiment”<sup>68</sup> in the “darkness of the lived moment”.<sup>69</sup> In this valley of the shadow of death, understandably, we seek consolation in our chiliastic hopes, in “great works of art” and “poetic anticipation of what ... is still latent in the world ...”. Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” shines beyond what has been experienced hitherto, because (although – and since – it is only an ode) it already names and summons perfect joy.<sup>70</sup> “In the architectural will of Amiens and Reims, of Strasbourg, Cologne and Regensburg [a very “Morrisian” identification] sprouted ... the utopia of an *aspiration to become and a ... resurrection, of a transformation into the tree of the higher life.*”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ernest Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt am Main, 1959; *The Principle of Hope*, Oxford, 1986.

<sup>67</sup> Ernest Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*, trans. J. Cumming, New York, 1970, 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 112. Compare Ernest Bloch, *Marxism and Art*, ed. Maynard Solomon, New York, 1973, 582, 586: “without the dimension of the future, conceivable for us as an adequate future, no empirical being will endure long .... Consequently not only the specific existent, but all given existence and being itself, has utopian margins which surround actuality with *real and objective possibility*” (582).

<sup>69</sup> Ernest Bloch, *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*, trans. P. Palmer, Cambridge, 1985, xi.

<sup>70</sup> Bloch, *Marxism and Art*, 586-87. He continues: “Utopia in works of art certainly makes fragmentary and negative the offerings of those that are significant, inasmuch as the world really signified in them is itself the least ready and finished of all: it is as often thwarted as it is seldom realized, as often traversed as it is seldom peopled. But an ode to joy is a most valiant effort, for it affords a venturesome even if – unfortunately – only a poetic premium; yet, philosophically too, no mean education is to be obtained from the testing end, and (more permanently) from the experimental beginning (587).

<sup>71</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 720-21. A Morisian willingness to exempt architecture from the vitiating influence of high culture was a recurrent characteristic of European Marxism. Walter Benjamin, for example, argued in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, that “Architecture has never been idle. Its history is more ancient than that of any other art, and its claim to being a living force has significance in every attempt

Guided by these secular epiphanies, Bloch believed, we struggle to sustain what he called a "*docta spes*" (an ironic echo of Nicholas Cusanus' "*docta ignorantia*") – an "informed hope" that our successors will someday attain a truly "upright gait" (*aufrechten Gang*). This gait is not a posture, much less an ultimate state. Rather, it is a graduated process, of inquiry and fulfillment, a journey, like that of the Nowhereans upstream. As Henry Morsom observes in *News from Nowhere*, "We will meet it when it comes" (201). In short, like Morris, Bloch offered meliorist interpretations of progress mediated by human desires rather than historical necessity, for his "educated hope" was not only a reasonable faith: it was, and is, a precondition for such faith. And both the hope and the faith (Kant's "*vernünftiger Glaube*") are sustained and tempered by a common awareness that they are only "*Grenziideen*" – limiting ideals.

Increasingly towards the end of his life, Morris saw the goal of Socialist political activity as a Sisyphean effort to change consciousness through education and persuasion. He also saw – lucidly, but through a glass darkly – that no other path was possible:

Our business, I repeat, is the making of Socialists, i.e., convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible. When we have enough people of that way of thinking, they will find out what action is necessary for putting their principles in practice ... all but a very small minority are not prepared *to do without masters* .... When they are so prepared, then Socialism will be realised; but nothing can push it on a day in advance of that time.<sup>72</sup>

And, as he remarked elsewhere in the *Hammersmith Socialist Society Record* (1892):

There is no royal road to revolution or the change in the basis of society. 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; to give them hope and an aim and organization to carry out their aspirations: here is work enough for the

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to comprehend the relationship of the masses to art. Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight" (1184).

<sup>72</sup>Morris, "Where Are We Now?", in *Political Writings of William Morris*, 226.

most energetic: it is the work of patience, but nothing can take the place of it.<sup>73</sup>

### **The long road to “Nowhere”**

Morris’ intention in *News from Nowhere*, was to provide a matrix of ideas, not a map or blueprint but a series of incomplete criteria new social orders that should satisfy if they are to be genuinely new. For when they are, Hammond suggested, we will know it, and the mark of this transformation will be, as we have seen, a kind of

‘... art or work-pleasure ... sprung up almost spontaneously ... from a kind of instinct amongst people, ... to make it excellent of its kind .... Then at last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we had our fill of it; and then all was gained, and we were happy.’  
(160)

For Morris, then, as well as some of his twentieth-century descendants, this pleasure in work is an art form, created by people who are conscious of their moral debt to past generations, and willing to set aside the false signs of a profit-driven culture in favour of simplicity and mutual respect.

In keeping with this ideal, the conclusion of *News from Nowhere* therefore represents an eternally recurrent tension between fulfilment, frustration, and hope. Recalling Ellen’s suggestion that he must return to his flawed society “to strive to build up the new world of peace and happiness”, Guest pondered the complex modality of change: “If others can see it as I have seen it, then it may become a vision and not a dream.” This conditional meditation was an exordium as well as a conclusion, for it expressed Bloch’s *docta spes*, as well as Nowhereans’ pleasure in the changing faces and surfaces of the earth. Counterfactual as they are, our abilities to honour such visions in our art and labour create recurrent glimpses in our daily lives of Morris’ “earthly paradise” – in the engine-room of capitalism, as it were, “midmost the beating of the steely sea”.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, 326.

<sup>74</sup> Morris, *Earthly Paradise*, 1.