WRITING ON THE IMAGE: READING WILLIAM MORRIS

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To Live in the Present: *News from Nowhere* and the Representation of the Present in Late Victorian Utopian Fiction

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The Here and Now stands too close to us. Raw experience transposes us from the drifting dream into another state: into that of immediate nearness. The moment just lived dims as such, it has too dark a warmth, and its nearness makes things formless. The Here and Now lacks the distance which does indeed alienate us, but makes things distinct and surveyable.

– Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (180)

'"I cannot make these present times," he says once, "present to me."' Walter Pater quoted this statement by Charles Lamb – about the apparent impossibility of configuring the present as a distinct temporal category, in opposition to both the past and the future – during the course of a critical appraisal of the Romantic critic published in 1878 (*Appreciations* 111). Lamb's comment clearly served as a kind of rationale for Pater's aesthetic, which self-consciously revelled in the evanescent quality of the present as a lived moment, as the 'Conclusion' to his *Studies in the Renaissance* (1873) reveals. In the context of this essay, however, it serves to summarize my contention that under the everyday conditions of modernity in the late-Victorian period the present tends to disappear in the instant that it is apprehended. In an industrial capitalist society, the present cannot be made present. The Here and Now stand too close to us.

It is in part this problem that lies behind the reappearance of utopian fiction at the fin de siecle. From the 1880s in particular there was a remarkable resurgence of the genre. 'At the present day,' wrote the secularist G.W. Foote in 1886, 'social dreams are once more rife'

(190). *Looking Backward* (1888), a conventional utopian narrative by the optimistic American 'state-socialist' Edward Bellamy, sold approximately 200,000 copies in the United States during its first year in print. In England, where it proved almost as successful, sales of 100,000 copies had been reported by 1890 (P. Marshall 87–8). On both sides of the Atlantic, and in continental Europe, it inspired numerous popular imitations. As the example of *Looking Backward* implies, utopianism at this time scarcely found expression in experimental literary forms. On the contrary, it was commonly reliant on narrative structures that reflected a view of history as a successive process, and it therefore was almost structurally incapable of capturing the impact of modernity on the experience of social life. But like the radical aesthetics decried by Max Nordau it was nonetheless a literary response to the challenge to conceptualize a present that seemed inaccessible to the habits of rational consciousness. Modernity might be said to mean immersion in the lived moment – in the absence of a reliable historical narrative. Utopian fiction sought to escape this miasmic condition. It purported to be clairvoyant; that is to say, not so much prophetic as simply clear-sighted. It was used to read an unreadable reality that, because of 'the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions' experienced in daily life (Nordau 175), seemed at the same time too abstract and too concrete to be understood. Utopia tried to grasp the fragmentary parts of the present as a singular totality by glimpsing it from an imaginary future.

News from Nowhere (1891), which William Morris conceived as a deliberate critique of *Looking Backward*, has traditionally been regarded as one of the most backward-looking novels of the late-nineteenth century, mainly because it is ostensibly medievalist in form and content. But this assumption was undermined by Patrick Brantlinger in 1975 when he argued that, as 'a conscious anti-novel, hostile to virtually every aspect of the "great tradition" of Victorian fiction,' it is in some vital aspects closer to a modernist aesthetic (35). More recently, James Buzard has claimed in a persuasive account of the 'ethnographic' vocation of narrative in *News from Nowhere* that, though 'not usually considered in connection with Modernism, [indeed] more often seen as quintessentially, quaintly Victorian in its nostalgia for preindustrial civilization,' it is in fact a proto-modernist meditation on 'the role of interruption in fiction' (446–7). My own contribution to the critical reappraisal of Morris's curious book is concerned not with its relation to the classical Victorian novel but to contemporaneous

utopian fiction. By reconsidering it in this context, and in relation to the attempt in utopian fiction to represent an unrepresentable present, I hope to demonstrate, if not its affiliations to Modernist discourse, either literary or ethnographic, then its critical meditation on the conditions of modernity in the late-Victorian period. I interpret *News from Nowhere* as a solution to the problem posed by what Ernst Bloch, the philosopher of Utopia associated with the Frankfurt School, called 'the darkness of the lived moment' (*Principle* 180). Morris's utopian romance historicizes the present in terms of an imaginary trajectory into the future. But in contrast to other utopian novels of the 1880s and 1890s, it also presents an ideal socialist society that repudiates or negates the empty present of capitalism. It is this political treatment of the time of modernity that marks the novel's transformation of the utopian form. Morris's 'epoch of rest,' to cite the novel's subtitle, depicts a utopian temporality that is the positive opposite of capitalism. Rest in this imaginary epoch is characterized not by empty exhaustion, nor by mere leisure, but by a sense of plenitude and self-fulfilment. In Nowhere, the here and now are not alienated but disalienated. The present is not absent, but present to itself. *News from Nowhere* proposes no less than a redemptive ontology for Utopia.

My argument unfolds in two main phases. I first examine the problem of the perception of the present, reviewing the Marxist theory of reification in order to propose a materialist explanation for the almost impenetrable opacity of the present in capitalist society. I then try to codify utopian thought of the late-nineteenth century in terms of its historicizing function, which I read as a response to the darkness of the lived moment. This forms the theoretical and historical basis on which my reading of *News from Nowhere* rests. The third section of this essay explores the way in which Morris's utopian fiction depicts a world wherein the present is finally present to itself. But it also draws attention to the fact that Morris ultimately questions this fantasy of utopian presence. Finally, I conclude with a brief reflection on the possible implications of this interpretation of Morris's Utopia for our understanding of his politics.

The present appears to represent a well-nigh insuperable phenomenological problem. Any attempt to capture the presentness of the present results in something like a short circuit of the logic of cognition. Grasping the present is like trying to stop what William James called 'the wonderful stream of our consciousness' in order to subject it to

'introspective analysis': 'it is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks' (3). And if we cannot conquer its fundamental resistance to signification, we are forced to accept that a concept of the present must be produced, constructed.

'The problem of the present,' as Georg Lukács counselled, must be treated as 'a historical problem' ('Reification' 157). In the Victorian period, the perceptual problem of the present is at some level the result of the reifying effects of commodity culture under capitalism. I want therefore briefly to explore its socio-economic preconditions. A crisis of representation is endemic to the capitalist mode of production, as the career of the term 'ideology' indicates. But this ideological deformation is not simply a species of 'false consciousness,' that is, the purely mental operation whereby capitalism produces its own misapprehension. As Marx reveals in the first volume of *Capital* (1867), the sense of alienation that haunts human beings is not a hallucination but instead a structural property of their social relations under capitalism. The theory of commodity fetishism (so-called) represents an attempt to come to terms with the interior hiatus of these relations. It explains that the exploitation of the proletariat, which establishes the foundation of the capitalist mode of production, is systematically concealed by the fact that commodities, the products of social labour, function as if they are subject solely to their mutual interrelation in the marketplace. In this way, as Marx says, the social relations between producers assume 'the fantastic form of a relation between things' (165). But this fantastic form is not merely the lamination of reality with an illusory relation: it deforms reality itself. For to the producers, commodified as they are, 'the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things' (166). In sum, if the commodity form 'inevitably give[s] rise to an opaque society,' as Henri Lefebvre affirms, then this opaqueness is 'a social, or rather, a socio-economic fact' (63).

In 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,' Lukács reformulated the 'phantom objectivity' of capitalist relations in terms of 'the phenomenon of reification,' the process of alienation whereby the fetishism of the commodity form diffuses into 'capitalist society in all its aspects' (83). According to Lukács's article, the rational mechanization of capitalist production breaks up the labour process and corrodes 'the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker' (88). Under the impact of this atomization, the worker's activity becomes 'more and more *contemplative*.' And this attitude 'transform[s] the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world' (89): in particular, 'time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable "things"' (90). In these desiccated conditions, the worker cannot totalize or intellectually transcend society. But the reification of consciousness is not restricted to the worker, because 'the objective reality of social existence is *in its immediacy* "the same" for both proletariat and bourgeoisie' (150). Thus bourgeois consciousness loses sight of the social totality too. Science 'find[s] that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand, its own concrete underlying reality lies, methodologically and in principle, beyond its grasp' (104). And this obstruction to the totality of knowledge makes it impossible to ascertain the silent movement of reality. The present time, that is to say, becomes impenetrable; it is inapprehensible as an historical moment.

The paradox of reification is that it naturalizes the present even as it alienates it from human understanding. Life is experienced as a plasmic flux beyond the power of human apprehension. Lukács captured this contradictory phenomenon when he proposed in another context that 'when the surface of life is only experienced immediately, it remains opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended'; and, further, that 'what lies on the surface is frozen and any attempt to see it from a higher intellectual vantage-point has to be abandoned' ('Realism' 39). Utopian thought is an attempt to attain this 'higher intellectual vantage-point,' this transcendent perspective: it projects a fictional future from which it defamiliarizes the present state of society and reconceives it as an objective historical totality rather than a subjective way of life. In Utopia, the present is the past of a specific, fictional future. Time-travelling to the future, it turns out, is about the return journey to the present traced by the forward motion of the time machine itself.

It is this problem of grasping the present in an estranged form with which William Morris and some of his contemporaries struggled in the late-Victorian period. In 'The Hopes of Civilization' (1888), Morris tried 'to realize the face of mediaeval England': 'How strange it would be to us if we could be landed in fourteenth-century England!' There was nothing nostalgic about this exclamation. Historicizing the past,

he wanted too to historicize the present, 'the great commercial epoch in whose latter days I would fain hope we are living.' To this end, Morris there posited an imaginary people who in the future 'will wonder how we lived in the nineteenth century' (*CW* 23:61, 62). *News from Nowhere*, like other utopian fictions of the period, is an equivalent exercise in historicity. 'No age can see itself,' as Morris averred: 'we must stand some way off before the confused picture with its rugged surface can resolve itself into its due order, and seem to be something with a definite purpose carried through all its details' ('Dawn of a New Epoch,' *CW* 23:121). Utopia provides Morris and his contemporaries with a kind of metaperspective from which the present appears in its approximate proportions.

Utopian thought is eccentric; or, as Morris's friend and collaborator Ernest Belfort Bax phrased it in his *Outlooks from the New Standpoint* (1891), it is 'a hybrid pseudo-reality ... which is neither past, present, nor future.' Bax complained that contemporary utopian romances represented a pointless attempt to escape the inescapable opacity of the lived present:

> When we ourselves are part and parcel of a social state, when we ourselves are a portion of the reality of a given society, bathed in its categories and inhaling its atmosphere, our imagination cannot transcend it to any appreciable extent, if at all. Our logical faculty can, indeed, pierce through, or, as it were, dissolve the reality for abstract thought, and show the lines on which the new principle growing up within it is going, but our imagination is quite incapable of envisaging the reality in its final and complete shape. We can just as little conceive how the men of the future will envisage our civilisation of to-day – how they will represent to themselves our thoughts and feelings, aspirations and antipathies – for when all this social life has become objective, with all its categories stiff and lifeless, it will be seen in its true proportions and significance. (viii–ix)

Bax's somewhat contemptuous comparison between, on the one hand, utopian thought, and, on the other, the hopeless attempt to conceive how the men of the future will envisage our civilization of today, is instructive. It provokes a suspicion that these imaginative gestures are in fact mutually complicit. To think of a future civilization is to think of the future of civilization – that is, to picture civilization in an historical context. It is an effort to freeze the flow of contemporary

social life in order to identify its posterior significance. But the present is peculiarly resistant to this interpretative discipline. And in spite of his close attention to the darkness of the lived moment, Bax is insensitive to the fact that, as Bloch indicates, 'the lived darkness is so strong that it is not even confined to its most immediate nearness' (*Principle* 296). Not even the passing of time can be relied upon to resolve the present into its proper shape.

Most importantly, Bax fails to appreciate that Utopia may be an important part of the struggle to apprehend reality. The utopian wager is that the imaginative faculty furnishes a more effective means than the logical faculty for penetrating what Morris called 'the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us' ('On Some Practical Socialists' 338). The best utopian fiction is about clairvoyance, seeing clearly. In H.G. Wells's words, Utopias are 'shadows of light thrown by darkness' ('Utopias' 119). They try to detect, to quote Morris, 'the silent movement of real history which is still going on around and underneath our raree [*sic*] show' ('Architecture and History,' *CW* 22: 315). In this sense, they are less about the future (as a distinct category in opposition to the past), than they are about the outer limit or horizon of the present. Utopia creates a caesural space in the present, opening up a distance that is internal to it.

Utopian writers react to the unrepresentable quality of the present with an anamorphic squint. They pull away from its patternless forms and try to reconfigure it from the optic of a hoped-for future. This is the process mapped out by the mathematician Edwin Abott in his fantasy novel, *Flatland* (1884). In Flatland itself, a two-dimensional land inhabited by animate, sentient lines, all figures appear to one another as points. However, from the perspective of Spaceland, the three-dimensional world to which the two-dimensional narrator is taken by a Sphere ('Let us begin by casting back a glance at the region whence you came'), the figures in Flatland manifest their linearity (78). Trying 'to diffuse the Theory of Three Dimensions' to his fellow Flatlanders, the narrator writes 'not of a physical Dimension, but of a Thoughtland whence, in theory, a Figure could look down upon Flatland and see simultaneously the insides of all things' (96).

Wells describes the same interrelationship of utopian and non-utopian perspectives in the concluding pages of *A Modern Utopia* (1905). The narrator notes that his utopian narrative ends, on its return to the present, 'amidst a gross tumult of immediate realities,' surrounded by 'a great multitude of little souls and groups of souls as darkened,

as derivative as my own' (372). This optic corresponds to the perspective of Lineland. But, as he insists, it is unsettled by a flickering anamorphic perception of the total system of which he and his fellow citizens form a part:

> Yet that is not all I see, and I am not altogether bounded by my littleness. Ever and again, contrasting with this immediate vision, come glimpses of a comprehensive scheme, in which these personalities float, the scheme of a synthetic wider being, the great State, mankind, in which we all move and go, like blood corpuscles, like nerve cells, it may be at times like brain cells in the body of a man. (372)

This description corresponds to the perspective of Spaceland. Wells explains that the two viewpoints comprise a bifocal optic – like the vision of someone who is at the same time far- and near-sighted. The utopian capacity for 'looking backwards' from the future is something like this far-sighted perspective.

In 1895 the novelist Grant Allen published *The British Barbarians*, a utopian satire on nineteenth-century social conventions from the vantage point of a visitor from the twenty-fifth century. His subtitle is 'A Hill-top Novel.' Frustrated with the censorious influence of magazine editors after the controversy surrounding his best-seller *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Allen formulated the phrase to identify novels that had not been interfered with before their publication. These novels were to be marked, he claimed, by their independence and 'purity.' It is no accident that he coined the term in conjunction with a fiction set in the future. As Allen explained, he picked his emblematic image because he wrote from a study high up above the city in the pellucid air of a hilltop:

> But away below in the valley, as night draws on, a lurid glare reddens the north-eastern horizon. It marks the spot where the great wen of London heaves and festers. Up here on the free hills, the sharp air blows in upon us, limpid and clear from a thousand leagues of open ocean; down there in the crowded town, it stagnates and ferments, polluted with the diseases and vices of centuries. (xvii–xviii)

The hill top is a Romantic vantage point from which contemporary society can be comprehended in its totality. It therefore functions as the spatial equivalent of the temporality of the future. The same principle

shapes the symbolic landscape of Havelock Ellis's 'Dialogue in Utopia,' *The Nineteenth Century* (1900), a novel that is set on a hill top that, emblematically, is 'crowned by an observatory' (1). The hill top symbolizes the objectivity of perspective realized in the critical gaze of both Allen's alien visitor from the twenty-fifth century and Ellis's twenty-first-century student of nineteenth-century culture. This is the totalizing, historicist perspective of Utopia.

This system of perspective forms the premise upon which Morris had himself founded the narrative practice of *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) in the previous decade. There, the nineteenth-century narrator tells John Ball that he can see the fourteenth century through the lens of future history: 'And we, looking at these things from afar, can see them as they are indeed; but they who live at the beginning of those times and amidst them, shall not know what is doing around them; they shall indeed feel the plague and yet not know the remedy' (*CW* 16:274). Romance, Morris wrote, 'is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present' ('Address,' *AWS* 1:148). But as John Goode once stated, romance for Morris also 'becomes a power for seeing the future in the present' (239). 'Utopian Romance,' to cite another component of the subtitle to *News from Nowhere*, fulfils this capacity for history by making the present part of the future too. Like many contemporary utopians, Morris is in this sense the inheritor of a Romantic tradition central to his mid-Victorian forebears: his foray into a fictional future is equivalent to those 'long, deep plunges into the past' taken by Tennyson and Browning, as well as by Arnold and Carlyle, in the course of their search for what V.G. Kiernan calls 'an observatory from which to survey their own epoch' (147).

The famous account of 'How the Change Came' in *News from Nowhere* is in effect a history of the turn of the twentieth century written in the future perfect tense. In this way, Morris may be said to interpret the present from what Adorno, in one of his melancholic attempts to redeem the hopes of the past, termed 'the standpoint of redemption' (247).

Old Hammond, who is a professional historian, performs the quasi-historiographical function of *News from Nowhere*. He traces the revolutionary process whereby, sometime in the twentieth century, 'a longing for freedom and equality' was translated into a force for social transformation (104–5). In so doing, he penetrates what Morris elsewhere refers to as 'the silent movement of real history' ('Prospects,' *CW* 22:120).

But Hammond is an anachronism in Nowhere. He is an anomalous presence precisely because of his passion for making the past part of the present. For if his narrative serves to historicize the late nineteenth century, then this series of 'tales of the past' cannot interest most of the inhabitants of Nowhere, since they have no sense of what Marx styled 'pre-history.' 'The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place, is history enough for them,' Hammond observes (89). Morris uses this comment to articulate Hammond's criticism of the semi-conscious amnesia characteristic of Nowherean citizens. But, significantly, he also uses it to emphasize the fact that, in this future socialist society, history itself has been redefined. In Nowhere history is made not in the macrological events of an evolving civilization but in the micrological processes of daily life. Utopia, Morris implies, redeems history as the process by which we produce and reproduce ourselves in our everyday lives. So Morris's utopian romance is more than an attempt to grasp the present of capitalist modernity as history. It is also an attempt to imagine a communist society in which it is possible to grasp history as the present, that is to say, in which history is simply being.

The inhabitants of Nowhere, so Hammond says, are 'assured of peace and continuous plenty' (89). As Morris emphasizes in his lecture 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' (1884), 'when revolution has made it "easy to live," when all are working harmoniously together and there is no one to rob the worker of his time, that is to say, his life; in those coming days there will be no compulsion on us to go on producing things we do not want, no compulsion on us to labour for nothing' (*CW* 23:108). Impossible under capitalism, or any competitive system, these material and social circumstances are the foundation of a future socialist society in which all work is useful and every useful activity is a form of work. Work will at last fulfil its fundamental promises – 'hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself,' as Morris itemizes them (*CW* 23:99). For when capitalist relations of production are abolished, and labour is made 'pleasant to everybody,' people will be free 'to take a pleasurable interest in all the details of life' (*CW* 23:108).

Morris associates these 'details of life' with what he subsequently calls 'the ornamental part of life': 'We must begin to build up the ornamental part of life – its pleasures, bodily and mental, scientific and artistic, social and individual – on the basis of work undertaken willingly and cheerfully, with the consciousness of benefiting ourselves

and our neighbours with it' (*CW* 23:111). Morris's celebration of 'social' ornament is based on his assessment of material ornament. He draws a crucial distinction between ornamental objects produced under alienated conditions on the one hand, and those produced under disalienated conditions on the other hand. In capitalist relations of production, 'the workman is compelled to produce ornament, as he is to produce other wares,' and ornament is therefore 'but one of the follies of useless toil' (*CW* 23:114). Ornament signifies the pretence of happiness in work, a forced declaration of satisfaction. It camouflages the exploitation structural to commodity production under capitalism, and consequently reinforces the opacity of social life. In communist society, on the contrary, ornament is an expression of the pleasure of production, and, paradoxically, of the transparency of non-exploitative social relations. And this aesthetic serves as a model for the ethic indicated by Morris's injunction 'to build up the ornamental part of life.' In a future socialist society, even the most trivial aspects of everyday life will serve as an aesthetic pleasure, because they will embroider the basic activity of creative labour.

Morris explores his conception of ornament in the episode from *News from Nowhere* in which William Guest is given a pipe in the little girl's shop. The pipe is free, like all the products of labour in Utopia; but more importantly it is ornamental. It is 'carved out of some hard wood very elaborately, and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems' (73). In Morrissian terms, this implies that it is stamped 'with the impress of pleasure' ('Useful Work,' *CW* 23:114). We are now in a world in which the act of production is rendered transparent to the consumer because, in a celebration of emancipated labour, it is openly inscribed into the commodity. The demise of commodity fetishism means that labour itself is returned from the realm of exchange-value to the realm of use-value. So the split between appearance and reality that is typical of capitalism disappears. Under capitalism, as Marx argues in *Capital*, 'the products of labour become commodities, sensible things which are at the same time supra-sensible ... The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this' (165). In Utopia, the case is the opposite: the products of labour fully realize their physical properties. Appearance disappears into essence. 'In the happy days when society shall be what its name means,' as Morris once put it ('Present Outlook' 216), the signifier is finally conflated with its signified: *Ceci c'est une pipe*.

History, to return to an earlier contention, and to cite the title of another well-known lecture by Morris, is in this sense merely 'How We Live.' In Nowhere, history is rendered ordinary, here and now. Returned to a people participating in pleasurable labour, it is the opposite of those epic spirals and crises typical of prehistory. To filch Hammond's phrase, it is simply 'the present pleasure of ordinary daily life' (105) – a whole way of life, self-consciously felt in all its fibres. In 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil,' Morris represents this utopian culture in terms of a holiday:

> How rare a holiday it is for any of us to feel ourselves a part of Nature, and unhurriedly, thoughtfully, and happily to note the course of our lives amidst all the little links of events which connect them with the lives of others, and build up the great whole of humanity.
> But such a holiday our whole lives might be, if we were resolute to make all our labour reasonable and pleasant. (*CW* 23:108)

In this glimpse of a utopian epoch of rest, the totality of social relations is not absent and unrepresentable, as it is under capitalism, but present and spontaneously apprehended. In his lecture 'The Society of the Future,' Morris reaffirms that, in a socialist community, 'the social bond would be habitually and instinctively felt, so that there would be no need to be always asserting it by set forms' (201). The present, that is to say, is transparent in Morris's Utopia.

News from Nowhere is a fantasy of effortless self-fulfilment. Terry Eagleton has proposed that it is possible to explain Utopia as 'a condition in which Freud's "pleasure principle" and "reality principle" would have merged into one, so that social reality itself be wholly fulfilling' (*Ideology* 185). It is because of something like this lack of conflict that, for a moment, roughly halfway through his stay in Nowhere, Guest enjoys what he refers to as 'a dreamless sleep' (166). Successfully choking down his fears, as he himself phrases it, Guest briefly experiences the pacific harmony of Nowhereans like Ellen. Ellen is in fact the exemplary utopian. If she admits to Guest, as they travel up the Thames by boat together, that she doesn't like 'moving about from one home to another' because 'one gets so used to all the detail of the life about one,' then she also happily contemplates the prospect of 'go[ing] with [him] all through the west country – thinking of nothing' (210). Rest of this sort is not a bestial stasis. As the metaphor of the drifting journey upstream emphasizes, Ellen is the model for a kind of

dynamic immobility, outlined elsewhere by Morris when he rejects the notion that a state of plenitude necessarily results in stagnation: 'to my mind that would be a contradiction in terms, if indeed we agree that happiness is caused by the pleasurable exercise of our faculties' ('Society' 202–3).

Rest is a familiar trope in Utopias of the fin de siècle. 'We long to cast from our midst forever the black nightmare of poverty: we yearn for fellowship, for rest, for happiness,' wrote the American Leonard Abbott in his book of 1898 on *The Society of the Future* (4). Utopian fiction of this period often projected what was in effect a mirror-image reversal of life under capitalism. Consequently, rest most often resembled a state of blissful inertia. Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue probably offers the most programmatic expression of this tendency in *The Right to be Lazy* (1883). Morris, however, upset the convention when he depicted his epoch of rest (the book's subtitle, as Buzard points out, is quite inappropriate, because Nowhere 'is characterized, above all else, by constant work,' 451). Morris had a dialectical, or perhaps processual, understanding of the utopian state of repose, in comparison with many of his contemporaries. A.L. Morton helpfully compares *News from Nowhere* with W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), and maintains that 'this time of rest, which for Morris is no more than a temporary and relative pause between periods of marked change ... is for Hudson unbroken, as far as can be seen, in either direction' (*English Utopia* 159). In other words, where Morris sees the 'epoch of rest' as part of history – or, as I have proposed, as its deepening, or redemption, in opposition to prehistory – Hudson perceives it as a sort of homogeneous space outside history.

In the lecture 'The Society of the Future,' Morris defiantly refers to his own notion of rest and asks, 'Where would be the harm? ... I remember ... after having been ill once, how pleasant it was to lie on my bed without pain or fever, doing nothing but watching the sunbeams and listening to the sounds of life outside; and might not the great world of men, if it once delivered itself from the struggle for life amidst dishonesty, rest for a little after the long fever and be none the worse for it?' (203). Morris here looks forward to his image of Ellen both attending to the details of life and 'thinking of nothing.' This form of rest is quite different from what Morris identifies as 'leisure' in 'The Prospects of Architecture' (1881). Under capitalism, leisure is a refuge from work, and Morris confesses that he himself spends part of it 'as a dog does – in contemplation' (*CW* 22:142). Ellen's rest, by contrast,

is an extension of the creative, quietly purposive activity of pleasurable labour. It is more closely akin to what Morris calls 'Imaginative Work,' because in its peaceful attention to life 'it bears in its bosom the worth and the meaning of life and the counsel to strive to understand everything' (*CW* 22:147). It is, precisely, 'the pleasurable exercise of our faculties' ('Society' 202–3). Life in Nowhere, as Lionel Trilling once wrote, 'is lived for itself alone, for its own delight in itself. In the life of each individual, the past now exercises no tyranny and the future is not exigent. The present is all, and it is all-satisfying' (219). In Utopia, real life is no longer absent, as it is in prehistory; it is present.

But it is nonetheless necessary to recall that, before and after the fleeting self-forgetfulness of his 'dreamless sleep,' Guest is haunted by 'a vague fear' that he will 'wake up in the old miserable world of worn-out pleasures, and hopes that [are] half-fears' (166, 177). In this way, the half-forgotten, the repressed, in the form of his own empty present, the present of prehistory, foreshadows its return. If, in Bloch's vocabulary, Morris's epoch of rest embodies '*the utopian primacy of rest*, as the schema of fulfilment, over motion, as the schema of unfulfilled striving for something' (825), then this state of rest is after all simply epochal and impermanent. Socialism, as Morris stressed, 'does not recognize any finality in the progress and aspirations of humanity; and ... the furthest we can now conceive is only a stage of the great journey of evolution that joins the future and the past to the present' ('Theory' 153). Morris's Utopia is dynamic. (Wells subsequently insisted on something like this quality in *A Modern Utopia*, when he stated at the book's outset that 'the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages,' 5.)

In a perceptive essay on Morris, Miguel Abensour addresses this issue of impermanence by proposing that *News from Nowhere* comprises 'a highly original utopian hypothesis on the "hazy realm of non-history," that moment of forgetfulness that alone clears the way for a new history, an amazing history beyond everything it has heretofore told or produced' (134). But if this interpretation is compelling, it has two problems. First, it fails to grasp the utopian paradox whereby the 'hazy realm of non-history' may in fact be this 'amazing history' to which Abensour refers. Morris is emphatic that our whole life might be a 'holiday' if all our labour is 'reasonable and pleasant,' in this way deconstructing the difference between work and play, history and non-history ('Useful Work,' *CW* 23:108).[1] Second, if it freely acknowledges

that, as Ellen puts it, 'happy as we are, times may alter,' it fails to recognize that this moment of forgetfulness may itself clear the way for a return to some more alienated, fetishized condition of life. 'We may be bitten with some impulse towards change,' muses Ellen, '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). Presumably, this refers to the fact that, as Hammond had earlier hinted, the inhabitants of Nowhere are increasingly fearful 'of a possible scarcity in work.' Competition may yet upset this realm of 'peace and continuous plenty.' Ellen's comment therefore amounts to an implicit criticism of Hammond, who idealizes the past and so opens up the possibility of its return. At the same time, however, it is a guilty admission of her attraction to Guest, who is himself a fragment 'of what has been before,' appealing to her precisely because of his emotional complexity, his 'hopes that [are] half-fears' (177).

Guest is a ghost, and he unsettles the tranquillity of Utopia. His very presence is a disruption of the epoch of rest. He is the mark of non-contemporaneity. In his person, the spectre of prehistory haunts the realm of a redemptive history just as the 'ghost of London' still asserts itself as a centre in Nowhere (70). This is the significance of Dick's conversation with Guest about the cycle of seasons before the feast: '"One thing seems strange to me," said he – "that I must needs trouble myself about the winter and its scantiness, in the midst of the summer abundance. If it hadn't happened to me before, I should have thought it was your doing, Guest; that you had thrown a kind of evil charm over me"' (225). Guest has interrupted the unity of subject and object to which Dick referred a moment earlier when he talked of being 'part of it' all, part of nature itself, in Nowhere (225). Like an anamorphic mark on a canvas, he unsettles the image of the 'best ornament' of the church in which the harvest is to be celebrated, that is to say, 'the crowd of handsome, happy-looking men and women' wearing 'their gay holiday raimant' (226). As 'the guest of guests' (226), Guest is also the ghost at the feast (as the common etymological root of 'ghost' and 'guest,' the word *ghos-ti*, indicates). So the minatory advice that Dick offers Guest in Runnymede, that 'you had better consider that you have got the cap of darkness, and are seeing everything, yourself invisible' (179), is, for a moment, fulfilled quite literally: he watches his physical presence fading quickly from the consciousness of his Nowherean friends, before experiencing his own

painful apparition in fin-de-siècle London (227). An immaterial presence in Nowhere, he now returns to haunt 'old London.' Morris's protagonist is spectral because he unconsciously announces that the present – even the utopian present of happy plenitude – is not as complete or self-sufficient as it appears.

It is noticeable, however, that Dick draws attention to the fact that he has felt this disturbance before. In the past, Old Hammond, representing the link between prehistory and Utopia, has probably allowed a sense of the present's possible incompleteness to leak into Dick's consciousness. Guest is therefore not the cause of this spectral effect; he is merely a symptom of it. We might summarize this by saying that he is a sort of symbolic supplement to Utopia, conforming to Jacques Derrida's logic of supplementarity, explained in 'Speech and Phenomena,' whereby an addition also makes up for a deficiency: 'it comes to compensate for an originary nonself-presence' (28). Guest's very arrival in Nowhere reveals that the 'filled present' of Utopia is not in fact self-sufficient. He has broken through a crack in the outer walls of this world, like the crevice through which Edward Bulwer-Lytton's narrator breaches the hermetic kingdom of the Vril-ya in *The Coming Race* (1871). The appearance of Morris's protagonist in Utopia testifies to the ultimate impossibility of complete utopian plenitude. The opaque spot on the lived present in prehistory stains the apparently transparent present of Utopia too.

'For ultimately the influence of the lived darkness is not confined to the various foregrounds mentioned above,' Bloch remarks; 'but the blind-spot, this not-seeing of the immediately entering Here and Now, also in fact appears in every *realization*' (*Principle* 299). Bloch clarifies this claim that the present is in some existential sense non-identical to itself, in his characteristically clotted, occasionally obfuscatory prose style:

> Everywhere else there is a crack, even an abyss in the realizing itself, in the actuated-topical entrance of what has been so beautifully foreseen, dreamed out; and this abyss is that of the ungrasped existere itself. So the darkness of nearness also gives the *final reason for the melancholy of fulfilment*: no earthly paradise remains on entry without the shadow which the entry still casts over it. (*Principle* 299)

In his utopian fiction, Morris plays with the idea of a utopian present that is fully present to itself. But he is finally too dialectical to accept the possibility of this concept. After all, *News from Nowhere* is a political tract as well as a phenomenological fantasy. It addresses a tight circle of committed readers, at least in its first, serial form of publication. And for these readers, the concept of the utopian present is, crucially, a heuristic possibility. In the words of Robert Musil, 'Utopia is not a goal but an orientation' (qtd in Suvin 131).

In his writings for *Commonweal*, the organ of the Socialist League, Morris repeatedly criticized those whom he called 'practical' or 'one-sided' socialists, because 'they do not see except through the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us' ('On Some Practical Socialists' 338). This notion of what we might call one-dimensional socialism is the basis for his polemical review of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, printed in *Commonweal* in 1889: 'The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious *professional* middle-class men of to-day purified from their crime of complicity with the monopoly class, and become independent, instead of being, as they now are, parasitical' ('Looking Backward' 354). *News from Nowhere* is in a dual sense an attempt to supersede this ideological impasse, and so to render the 'smoked glass of the present' transparent, so to speak. On the one hand, it is an exercise in clairvoyant historicity: the late nineteenth century, despite its opacity, is refocused from the perspective of its future history. On the other hand, it is an exercise in imagining no less than an alternative reality, in the form of a kind of communistic structure of feeling: it recuperates the present by making it present to itself in the utopian future, if only in some incomplete and finally illusory sense.

This dialectical prospect, of a moment of utopian fulfilment that cancels itself out, generates the sense of poignancy that characterizes Morris's socialist romance as well as inspiring its political urgency. As William Guest had feared, his dream of Nowhere fades, and he finds himself at home, inferring the following message from Ellen's 'last mournful look': 'Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness' (228). All too quickly, Ellen's recommendation recalls the reader of *Commonweal* to the mundane activity of building a socialist movement in late-Victorian London. But it is important to register the fact that the terrain of politics has itself been defamiliarized, and transformed, by the protagonist's dream of the future – just as in daily life the people

of whom one has dreamed seem subtly altered the following day. 'Or indeed *was* it a dream?' he wonders. If 'it may be called a vision rather than a dream' (228), if it is symbolic of some inchoate struggle for socialism, then it will have been imperceptibly transfigured by the future.

Socialist politics in the present, according to Morris, are about helping to create those conditions of possibility in which the 'great motive-power of the change,' 'a longing for freedom and equality,' coincides with the objective conditions of capitalist crisis described in the discussion of 'How the Change Came' (*News* 134). What Guest imports from Utopia is a sense of the possibility of that redemptive present, and this in part redeems the present of capitalism from its emptiness. For Morris, ultimately, as for Walter Benjamin almost fifty years later, 'history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now' ('Theses' 262–3). William Guest is an allegorical figure for this 'conception of the present as the "time of the now" which is shot through with chips of Messianic time' (266). For if he represents a spectral rupture of the utopian present while he is in Nowhere, on his return to Hammersmith he represents a spectral rupture in the capitalist present. And this breach marks out what Benjamin termed 'the strait gate' through which the Messiah, in the form of the moment of revolutionary transformation, might enter history (266).

When old Hammond tells his kinswoman Clara to 'go and live in the present' during 'the drive back to Hammersmith' in *News from Nowhere* (162), he is not simply reassuring her that she must rest in Utopia's happy state of plenitude; he is implicitly pressing Guest to return to his present, opening it up to this future.[2]

NOTES

1 For a discussion of Morris's critique of the relation between work and rest, see Latham, 'Reading Aright.'

2 I am grateful to Patrick Brantlinger, Frederick Kirchhoff, Ivan Kreilkamp, and David Latham for their comments on previous drafts of this paper. A version of this essay appeared in *Victorian Studies* 47 (Autumn 2004).

10

'Paradyse Erthly': *John Ball* and the Medieval Dream-Vision

Yuri Cowan

William Morris's understanding of life in the Middle Ages was not restricted to an intimacy with Gothic architecture or a scholar's knowledge of primary texts, although he had both of these. Morris immersed himself in the study of the concrete objects of everyday medieval life, surrounded himself with them, and, indeed, could make many of them himself; as a result, he could write as a modern writer in a relatively unstrained medieval idiom. It is significant that even during the 1880s, when his life was dominated by his agitation for socialist change, his interest in medieval culture never flagged: J. Bruce Glasier fondly recounts how Morris would occasionally at Socialist League functions 'relate one or two of the old Norse legends' (38).

To see Morris's medievalism as forming a sphere of his creative life apart from his socialism, as such early scholars as J.W. Mackail did, is misleading. Morris saw in the Icelandic Althing, for example, a form of mutual aid and democracy that he felt could be a partial model for a communist society. In the fourteenth-century European guilds Morris, like his Russian anarchist contemporary Peter Kropotkin, perceived another nascent model of mutual aid that would be nipped in the bud by the onset of early capitalism. Moreover, Morris's interest in the art of the Middle Ages was not merely aesthetic but was based on his conception of craftsmanship and of the necessity for a popular art, both of which he saw inherent in medieval art and literature.

From the intersection of his socialism, his interest in history, and his love of medieval art and culture springs the first of his two socialist dream-visions, *A Dream of John Ball* (the other is *News from Nowhere*). It