



# Editorial

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In the very first issue of this *Journal*, published during 1961, John Purkis gestured towards some of the pitfalls that might face a publication such as this one:

first, mere *historiography* – the exploration of pleasant nineteenth-century by-ways and the accumulation of trivial information; this easy toil is a self-deceiving way of avoiding the bigger issues which Morris had the courage to face, and which are clearly there on the pages of his well-known writings: second, *fragmentation* – owing to the specialist trainings forced upon us by modern education, we tend to be only too competent (more competent than Morris?) to discuss one small aspect of Morris's work [...] – like certain climbers we scabble about among the foothills, demonstrating our agility on this or that difficult piece of rock-face, and appear not to see the mountain which is staring us in the face.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the unyielding march of time, these issues remain remarkably pertinent to Morris studies during the early decades of the twenty-first century – a conjuncture that is characterised by a period of renewed capitalist crisis, with the attendant consequences of widespread unemployment and precarity, impending climate catastrophe and an intensifying process of inter-imperialist rivalry, conflict and war. In a situation such as the one in which we find ourselves, anyone with a serious interest in Morris's manifold legacies must legitimately question whether his corpus is to be regarded simply as an object of historical curiosity, tending towards the antiquarian and curatorial ('mere *historiography*'), or whether it should be approached as a resource of critique in the present. The question, were it to be posed in such a manner, would almost answer itself in the asking: '[t]he remedy is more activity of a contemporary relevance'.<sup>2</sup> The dichotomy between historical curiosity and present-oriented critique, however, is not quite as stark as my above formulation suggests. The contrapuntal nature of Morris's historical imagination should alert us to this much at least.

Purkis's presentist impulse strikes a chord with some recent interventions into the field of Victorian studies. For example, the opening sentence of the 'Manifesto of the V21 Collective', produced by a group of predominantly US-based academics, reads as follows: 'Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past. Among its symptoms are a fetishization of the archival; an aspiration to definitively map the DNA of the period; an attempt to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* [as it actually happened]; an endless accumulation of mere information'.<sup>3</sup> One target, here, is the nineteenth-century

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German historian Leopold von Ranke's dictum about the source-based approach to historical research, a method which Walter Benjamin once criticised as the 'strongest narcotic of the [nineteenth] century'.<sup>4</sup> The V21 Manifesto, polemical in its purpose, urges a reorientation of critical attention towards theory and the politics of form. This does not imply an amnesiac abandonment of history; rather, it encourages more theoretical self-consciousness on the critic's part about the uses to which history can be put. This might, in turn, help to consolidate 'awareness that our interest in the [Victorian] period is motivated by certain features of our own moment. In finance, resource mining, globalization, imperialism, liberalism, and many other vectors, we *are* Victorian, inhabiting, advancing, and resisting the world they made.'<sup>5</sup>

Benjamin articulated a related critique of historicism in his essay 'On the Concept of History' (also translated as 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'). Benjamin identified his critique, unpublished during his lifetime, with the practice of historical materialism. As Benjamin put it, writing against the background of fascism's rising tide in 1940: '[t]he historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not in transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing. Historicism offers the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.'<sup>6</sup> The present, Benjamin reminds us, must be conceived *as history*, even as we simultaneously *arrest* history in striving to acknowledge the radically contingent, open and unfinished character of that present.

It is with such concerns in mind that the present issue of the *Journal* plays host to a symposium-in-print on Kristin Ross's recent book *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (2015), itself motivated by a Benjaminian attempt to assert the Commune's contemporary political relevance. In a period of resurgent crisis of pan-European identity, it is an apt moment to revisit episodes in the history of the continent during which concerns about social stability and fragmentation have loomed large. The Commune, in particular, represents a moment in which counter-movements experimented with new strategies of organisation and resistance in order to confront new pressures and challenges. The emergence of the Paris Commune in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 disturbed the established order of rival nation-states in proposing a vision of international, working-class solidarity that cut across national boundaries. The Commune lasted for a mere seventy-two days, during which time a workers' insurrection and occupation of the city created the nucleus of an alternative form of social organisation. Its brutal suppression cast a long shadow over *fin de siècle* Europe.

Ross approaches the subject by way of the idea of luxury. The presence of a heavily moralised discourse of luxury in Morris's milieu is evidenced in the work of the Belgian economist Emile de Laveleye, whose 1886 book on the topic was published in English translation in 1891. He commented that '[t]he philosophers of old times and the fathers of the Church alike condemned luxury in the strongest terms, and they were right in doing so. It is pernicious to the individual, and fatal to society.'<sup>7</sup> More recently, Christopher J. Berry's wide-ranging history of the concept, which deals at length with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual context, encompassing the contributions of David Hume, Adam Smith, Karl Marx and others, has drawn attention to ways in which the 'debate over

the status of luxury' is bound up with 'a fundamental fault-line in European thinking'.<sup>8</sup>

In this issue, three scholars of Morris, each of whom is distinguished by notable and valued research in her or his own right, take up such concerns in reflecting on the central arguments of Ross's book, and on what such arguments might mean for contemporary understanding and criticism of Morris. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller examines Ross's reconstruction of the potential for an eco-socialist supersession of capitalism, whilst Matthew Beaumont draws out some of the Benjaminian threads in Ross's argument. Michelle Weinroth, meanwhile, questions the extent to which Ross's focus on the Communal political imaginary underestimates the salience of a more traditional Marxist critique of political economy. Weinroth also accentuates some of the differences between Morris's and Ross's interpretations of the Commune, particularly with regard to its tragic demise.

The present issue opens with an obituary of the renowned historian, Asa Briggs, who served as the Society's President between 1978 and 1991. Celia Lewis's article rereads some of Morris's early Froissart poems in dialogue with Benjamin's reflections on history, persuasively establishing filiations and connections between these two differently situated thinkers. The latest instalment of David and Sheila Latham's biennial bibliography is also included in this issue.

Owen Holland  
Editor

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#### NOTES

1. John Purkis, 'Correspondence: What I Expect of the William Morris Society', *JWMS*, 1:1 (Winter 1961), 20-21 (21).
2. *Ibid.*
3. The V21 Collective: Victorian Studies for the Twenty-First Century, 'Manifesto of the V21 Collective', published online: <<http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>> [last accessed 23 June 2016].
4. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 463.
5. 'Manifesto of the V21 Collective'.
6. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols in 5, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. by Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996-2003), 4, p. 396.
7. Emile de Laveleye, *Luxury* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891), p. 2.
8. Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 139.