
William Morris's Romantic Revolutionary Ideal: Nature, Labour and Gender in *News from Nowhere*

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William Morris's celebrated utopian romance *News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest* (1890) constituted his most singular attempt to present a revolutionary ideal aimed at inspiring a 'movement towards Socialism' in his day.¹ Centering on the overcoming of human alienation in relation to the three primary forms of the division of labour – social production, town and country and gender relations – it provided a holistic, ecological outlook extending far beyond most nineteenth-century socialist views. Although *News from Nowhere* was subtitled *Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, it followed a pattern that left it free from the criticisms that Marxian thinkers, including Morris himself, had levelled at utopian socialism, since its role was didactic rather than prophetic. The object was not to forecast the victory of socialism as a superior way of organising the mechanism of production, but rather one of radically refashioning the movement toward socialism in the present by widening the whole conception of the revolutionary project, building on the romantic tradition.

Set in England during the early twenty-second century, but with its most vivid historical treatment, 'How the Change Came', referring to a mid-twentieth century revolution, the text presented a society of equality which was geographically and historically connected to Morris's own life environment.² *News from Nowhere* was a 'Romance' in the double sense that it took from the past to re-imagine the future, while inscribing within it a relationship of love and recognition between William Guest, the protagonist, and Ellen, the text's most fully developed character, the embodiment of the complex dialectic of labour, ecology and gender.

Morris's utopian romance was structured as a vivid dream, with William Guest (representing a fictionalised Morris) awakening at the end to the new needs of the struggle, and the importance of imparting the glimpse of the utopian future to others. It ends with the words: 'if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a

vision rather than a dream'.³

I. A Revolutionary Utopia

The chief inducement to write *News from Nowhere* was Morris's dissatisfaction with Edward Bellamy's extremely popular 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward* in which Bellamy's hero, Julian West, wakes up in the year 2000 to discover society entirely transformed along socialist lines.⁴ 'The only safe way of reading a utopia', Morris observed in his review of Bellamy's book, 'is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author'.⁵ And it was Bellamy's temperament as revealed in his book that Morris objected to, since it projected an altogether too mechanical version of socialism. *Looking Backward* focused almost exclusively on the mechanism of change. The great monopolies were transformed peacefully into a new realm of centralised state-organised production. Technological improvements allowed for enhanced production and increased leisure. The historical, human or aesthetic elements of a completed socialist (or communist) society were down-played or missing. Hence, Bellamy's 'temperament', Morris wrote, 'may be called the unmixed modern one, unhistorical and unartistic; it makes its owner (if a Socialist) perfectly satisfied with modern civilization, if only the injustice, misery and waste of class society could be got rid of; which half-change seems possible to him'. The book was a good example of 'the economical semi-fatalism of some Socialists', which was 'deadening and discouraging'.

All individuals in Bellamy's utopian Boston were required to begin work at twenty-one, spend three years as a labourer, and then move on to some skilled occupation, retiring at forty-five. Work was a pain, not a pleasure. The point was to enjoy a life of leisure beginning in one's mid-forties. Bellamy's novel, Morris argued, gave the 'impression' of 'a huge standing army, tightly drilled'. Bellamy had 'no idea beyond existence in a great city'. The future Boston that formed the background to *Looking Backward* was 'beautified' in a purely utilitarian fashion, with huge aggregations of population. Yet, from Morris's perspective, such a mechanical socialism was an iron cage.⁶

News from Nowhere, which first began to appear in serial form in *Commonweal* in January 1890, was thus an attempt to provide a utopian romance reflecting Morris's own very different, artistic temperament. Nevertheless, in writing it, Morris was responding not simply to Bellamy's *Looking Backward* but also to the two factions of the Socialist League with which he had been struggling: the parliamentarians, who like Bellamy tended to focus on the mechanism of change and not the substance, and the anarchists, who, in Morris's interpretation, saw the change as requiring the actual dissolution of society.⁷ Significantly, *News from Nowhere* opened with the reference to a meeting of the Socialist League in which four anarchists were disputing with two

others, one of whom was clearly meant to represent Morris himself, 'as to what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution'.⁸

Seen in this way, Morris's utopian romance sought to provide a wider cultural description of the revolutionary ideal of a communist society, and in that way to address what he perceived as the narrowness and deficiencies in the visions currently being projected within the socialist movement. For this reason, he concentrated on those aspects distinguishing his views from others, putting most of the emphasis in his utopian romance on: town and country (the ecological problem), work and art (social labour) and men and women (gender relations).⁹ Much less attention was given to the socialisation of production, beyond the withering away of state and the demise of the world market. His famous chapter on 'How the Change Came' was meant to counter Bellamy's notion of a purely mechanical change via monopolies, and to substitute a realistic historical conception of revolution, without which the larger transformations that Morris perceived would not have been possible.

II. Two Journeys

The structure of *News from Nowhere* is fairly simple, and takes the form of two journeys. William Guest, representing Morris himself, wakes up in the early twenty-second century in what is now a Guest House but which is on the spot once occupied by Morris's home, Kelmscott House in Hammersmith.¹⁰ He soon learns to his surprise that there are salmon in the Thames, and that he is in a dreamlike future. On his first day in Nowhere, Guest travels by carriage through London with his friend Dick, a young boatman. They more or less follow the line of the Thames from Hammersmith to Bloomsbury, ending up at the British Museum, where he is to have a long discussion with old Hammond, Dick's 105-year-old great grandfather, a former custodian of books. This journey involves travelling through urban London, and seeing the many changes that have taken place: the decrease in congestion and the freeing up of parts of the city to greenery; the open markets divorced from selling; the conversion of the Parliamentary buildings to a dung warehouse; the new architecture resurrecting fourteenth-century forms, blending this with new forms of decorative art; the more artistic nature of work in general; the happy, attractively clad populace; and the absence of the former London poor. Nevertheless, the city remains populous, with 'the ghost of London still asserting itself as a centre'.¹¹

After returning to the Guest House at the end of the day, he journeys, beginning on the second day, up the Thames toward the source of the river and Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire (Morris's summer home). If the first journey is a one-day journey through the city, the second occupies several days in a leisurely, 137-mile expedition in the countryside via the Thames. The first journey, as Krishan Kumar

has pointed out, can be seen as urban-intellectual, the second as rural-emotional.¹² It is only during the second journey – following the route of a boat-trip that Morris made with a number of friends in the summers of 1880 and 1881 – that some of the deeper truths of *Nowhere* are revealed, with respect to the relationships between town and country, art and labour, as well as gender and earthly love. Travelling up the river Guest is introduced to the haymaking festival in the country; the new age of handicraft; a countryside no longer sacrificed to railroads and factories; the new women of the new age; and sensuous and earthly love. It is a romantic journey, but one tinged with the new socialism of substantive equality.

Although old Hammond is the pivotal character in the first journey through London, the young woman, Ellen, Morris's love interest, is the central figure in the second journey, in the countryside. The second journey ends with William Guest's departure: that is, the end of the dream, and, as Morris indicates in the final lines, the hopeful vision of complete socialism that his readers will share – and thus not merely a dream.¹³

III. Revolution in Nowhere

The long, remarkable treatment of 'How the Change Came' in which the venerable Hammond, during the stop at the British Museum, tells the story of the mid-twentieth century revolution, plays a key role in the utopian romance. Here Morris imparts a sense of historical realism, and a connection to the nineteenth century. He borrows concrete elements from the main revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, primarily in France: the revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1871. Aspects of the English Civil War can also be perceived; and the chronicle of events is rendered more vivid through Morris's inclusion of his experience of Bloody Sunday on 13 November 1887 in Trafalgar Square.¹⁴

The English Revolution of the 1950s depicted in vivid colours in *News from Nowhere* is a complex, spiralling dialectical process of change in which reforms, economic crisis, repression, struggles of the press, dual-power relations, massacres, organised resistance, right-wing vigilantes, guerrilla warfare and the final triumph of socialism all form a part. As Perry Anderson wrote: '[t]he care and depth of thought that Morris devoted to the nature of a computable revolutionary process in Britain – with its dialectic of social reforms and economic crisis, political moves and counter-moves by capitalist and popular centres of sovereignty, brusque pauses and accelerations in mass mobilization, oscillations by intermediate forces, military actions unleashed within and outside the State apparatus – represents an extraordinary *theoretical* feat, in historical retrospect. There is nothing like it in any other national literature of the time or since.'¹⁵

Despite old Hammond's vivid historical account of the tempestuous revolutionary struggle of the 1950s, William Guest is told that all of this is now distant, having occurred around a century and a half before. The bulk of Morris's utopian romance is thus free to focus on describing the world of the twenty-second century, now long removed from that struggle. Moreover, the romance centres not on the mechanisms of this new society of equality so much as its effects in healing the main nineteenth-century estrangements of town and country, art and labour, men and women. It is through the transcendence of these various alienations that the main rewards of complete socialism, or 'pure Communism', as he called it in *News from Nowhere*, are to be found.¹⁶

Morris's utopian romance thus extends well beyond a socialist political-economic critique, borne of the revolt against capitalism. Its focus is rather on the next stage of post-revolutionary society (the morrow of the revolution), and the making of complete socialism or communism. The object is to provide an extended, but still open-ended vision of an ideal, humanistic world: the structure of feeling in a long revolution.¹⁷ In Morris's two-stage view, the socialist insurrection, the Great Change or civil war in *News from Nowhere*, brings into being a transitory society full of possibility; but one that will abort if it does not continue on the journey to full communism, eradicating first and foremost capitalist labour relations, along with all of its other alienations.¹⁸ *News from Nowhere* is thus mainly concerned with *the change beyond* the Great Change, or, in other words, the long-term effects of revolution, a century and a half further down the road, with the advent of pure communism.

Writing in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* Morris and his co-thinker and comrade Ernest Belfort Bax explain: '[i]t is essential that the ideal of the new society should be always kept before the eyes of the mass of the working classes, lest the *continuity* of the demands of the people should be broken, or lest they should be misdirected'.¹⁹ Complete socialism is thus not envisioned in Morris's utopian romance simply in terms of the mechanisms of the state, economy, science and technology. All of these are present but are pushed into the background in order to focus on life itself.

News from Nowhere is also about an *Epoch of Rest*. Morris depicts a 'life of repose amidst energy', using the word 'repose' in the sense of tranquillity and harmony – or the *ataraxia* of Epicurus.²⁰ He creates in the twenty-year-old Ellen the very embodiment of Nowhere as an earthly society: '[s]he smiled with pleasure, and her lazy enjoyment of the new scene seemed to bring out her beauty doubly as she leaned back amidst the cushions, though she was far from languid; her idleness being the idleness of a person, strong and well-knit both in body and mind, deliberately resting'.²¹

This emphasis on a pause in the material development of society, a moment of peace and repose within a longer historical process, is crucial to the description of

Nowhere. It is an age in which invention of new productive machinery is less emphasised, as compared with the quality of human existence. Nevertheless, the society rests in part on ‘immensely improved machinery’ that reduces irksome labour. The real age of revolution and reconstruction, as Henry Morsom (an antiquarian working at a museum of relics dating back to the age of machines) informs Guest during the journey up the river, occurred only *after* the civil war. The machine-determined age was at its worst immediately following the Great Change. It was only gradually, after the workers had triumphed, that a new handicraft movement was to emerge. This constituted the central element in the long revolutionary transformation that followed, changing work into art and art into work – to the point that they could practically no longer be separated. And it was here, through the passion for unalienated, creative, artistic work, as Hammond had earlier intimated in the discussion in the British Museum, that the incentive for labour in the new society arose.²²

Morris stresses the importance of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier in *News from Nowhere*, rather than the historical materialist Karl Marx, despite Morris’s deeper overall reliance on the latter. (Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* had not yet been published, and he had left few clues otherwise about the morrow of the revolution). Fourier was to be commended since he recognised the necessity of making work pleasurable. In Morris’s modified Fourierist vision, what drives people in their everyday creative activities is the maximisation of pleasure and the fulfilment of genuine human needs, together with the approbation of the society regarding work well done. This is the argument Morris had outlined two years before in his lecture ‘The Revival of Handicraft’.²³ In the new society machinery exists, but it is utilised exclusively to eliminate the worst kinds of work. On his journeys, Guest encounters at a distance a revolutionary form of energy, replacing steam power, which propels ‘force vehicles’, used on both land and water, and presumably within production itself. The result is that the smoke from burning coal that so dominated Victorian London is gone.

The role of technology has thus been altered in the century and a half since the Great Change. The machine is now viewed as an appendage to human labour, not human labour an appendage to the machine. It is this central transformation of labour, as the historian Hammond explains, that forms the basis of the society of equality itself. A community of associated producers nurtures the creativity of each individual, while dull, utilitarian individualism and capitalist exploitation have vanished.²⁴

In Nowhere, science, which under capitalism had been commercialised and made a mere instrument of the industrial system, is now turned to the benefit of human beings. People are free to choose old ways where they are deemed better, such as an

old-fashioned lock for going upriver rather than a new mechanical lock, which ‘would have been ugly and would have spoiled the look of the river’. Mere economic productivity and the resulting technological determinism no longer rule all. Yet science, now that it has been put in the service of humanity, is clearly respected. Old Hammond characterises art and science as the two ‘inexhaustible’ forms of human endeavour. What is no longer in evidence is the alienated science of Victorian England, which Morris associated with the utilitarianism and dualism/agnosticism of Thomas Huxley. In his 1890 essay, ‘Capital – The Mother of Labour’, Huxley had sought to reintegrate materialist science with the bourgeois order, legitimising the latter. For this Morris exhibited nothing but scorn. The socialist society of Nowhere, in contrast, celebrates science for science’s sake, and science standing on the same side as art, unsullied by the ends of profit-grinding.²⁵

Labour in Nowhere is free to be artistic due to an abundance that comes from historical gains in productivity and a transformation of both use and want. There is no longer useless labour devoted to useless and destructive commodities, driven by pure pecuniary gain. As Hammond explains: ‘[i]t would be mere insanity to make goods on the chance of their being wanted; for there is no longer any one who can be *compelled* to buy them [...]. All work 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’.²⁶ Where actual want is not the chief concern, art triumphs.

If the pivotal change in Morris’s revolutionary utopia is the transformation of alienated mechanical labour into unalienated artistic labour, its overarching manifestation is the metamorphosis of town and country, standing for the new relation to the earth, no longer the object of mere conquest. In the beginning of the new epoch townspeople had dispersed into the countryside, causing much disruption, but eventually a new equilibrium was created. Population too had stabilised, though partly through emigration to aid people in other parts of the world. As old Hammond said to Guest: ‘[t]he 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 in their turn, as they became more numerous than the townsmen, influenced them also; so that the difference between town and country grew less and less; 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’. The slums of the East End of London had been demolished in what was called the Clearing of Misery and replaced with more and ample housing, better spaced, surrounded by gardens. Predominantly industrial cities like Manchester had largely disappeared as industrial work was dispersed.²⁷ The factories or mills, in which people still laboured, were less machine-dominated,

organised around collective labour, located in communities, and made attractive – surrounded by gardens, as Morris had written in ‘The Factory as It Might Be’.²⁸

Towns in Nowhere were dominated by their ‘streets and squares and market-places’. Life in the country villages, in particular, was centred in the mote or assembly house. But in the city, too, the mote was preeminent, since the most important form of public management of daily life – though not the only one – was the commune, in which ‘the Mote’ loomed large, with decisions being made by democratic, majoritarian means. Just as Kensington Gardens had been turned into a wood, so had ‘wild nature’, in addition to gardens and farms, been encouraged in the countryside. Urban suburbs were no more having vanished in the blending together of town and country.²⁹

IV. For Love of the Earth

In the socialist civilisation of Nowhere the country has been repopulated as the city has been depopulated, marking a return of nature in the society as a whole. The second journey up the Thames, by boat to Oxfordshire, in which William Guest travels together with the two rejoined lovers Dick and Clara, highlighted the changed relations in the countryside in minute detail. Much of the journey is a celebration of nature’s beauty all along the river. But it is also a story of recovery, reconstruction and ecological revolution. Old iron bridges are torn down, and stone ones put in their place. All signs of the railroad vanish. The mills that remain are beautified. The oldest architecture remains. The ugly nineteenth-century brick is mostly gone, while a new modern architecture more reminiscent of the fourteenth century emerges. The river in the upper waters, as in London itself, is all a bright blue, rather than a muddy brown. Beauty had replaced the Victorian age of coal and soot.

In the chapter on ‘The Upper Waters’ the Baconian metaphors of the conquest of nature, and the making of nature into a slave, viewed as constituting the governing mores of the former capitalist civilisation, come in for sharp criticism:

Clara broke in [on the discussion] here, flushing a little as she spoke: ‘Was not their mistake [of seeing work as onerous] once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? – a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – “nature”, as people used to call it – 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.’³⁰

Near Runnymede, during the haymaking festival, Guest and his two companions

become acquainted with Ellen, a ‘slim girl’, ‘grey-eyed’, the new woman of the novel, with her intelligence, vivaciousness and ‘wild beauty’.³¹ Soon she joins them on their river journey, and a strong attachment between Ellen and Guest arises based on a common attraction.

Ellen, we learn, comes from ‘the once-poor’, her father a tiller of the earth, which in nineteenth-century England would have meant a life of drudgery, exploitation and early death. In her first appearance in the romance she enters into a dispute with her grandfather who idealised the capitalist Victorian age and disliked the new revolutionary communal order:

‘But in those past days, you, grandfather, would have had to work hard after you were old; and would have been always afraid of having to be shut up in a kind of prison 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, so that no one could have guessed that I was once a beautiful girl.’³²

Later, near the end of the romance, she declares to Guest:

‘My friend, you were saying that you wondered what I should have been if I had lived in those past days of turmoil and oppression. Well, I think I have studied the history of them to know pretty well. 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’ (she spoke with no blush or simper of false shame) ‘would have been sold to rich men, and my life would have been wasted indeed; for I know enough of that to know that I should have had no choice, no power of will over my life; and that I should never have bought pleasure from the rich men, or even opportunity of action, whereby I might have won some true excitement. I should have wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or luxury. Is it not so?’³³

In the sensuous trip up the Thames, Guest’s attraction to this irrepressible young woman and his love for the earth merge together, and become one. When Kelmscott Manor is at last reached, Ellen is ecstatic: ‘[s]he led me up close to the house, and laid her shapely sun-browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, “O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and the weather,

and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it, – as this has done!”³⁴ It was Ellen, Morris’s finest creation in the novel, then, who represented the highest level of human development in Nowhere, in terms of intelligence, revolutionary commitment, beauty of body and soul and the organic connection of humanity to the earth.

V. Toward the Substantive Equality of Women

Morris’s views on women, however, were complex, and at times contradictory. It is clear that his utopian romance was meant primarily to extend the revolutionary ideal of socialism to the artistic conception of labour, the substantive equality of women and the ecology of the earth itself. In all of this the transformation of gender relations occupied a central place. If the society of Nowhere had solved some of the problems, the issue of gender equality still in some respects remained, and was the measure of not only how emancipated the society had become, but also of its limitations and the need for future emancipation. In his *Theory of the Four Movements* Fourier had declared: ‘[t]he extension of the privileges of women is the basic principle of all social progress’. As Frederick Engels put it in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Fourier ‘was the first to declare that in any given society the degree of women’s emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation’.³⁵ Throughout his writings, and particularly *News from Nowhere*, Morris sought to give concrete meaning to this principle, initiated by Fourier. In 1885 he told George Bernard Shaw that he did not ‘consider a man a socialist at all who is not prepared to admit the equality of women as far as condition goes’, and added that ‘as long as women are compelled to marry for a livelihood real marriage is a rare exception and prostitution or a kind of legalized rape the rule’.³⁶

Complete socialism or communism was only possible by means of equality of condition of the sexes. Like Marx and Engels, Morris insisted that this would require the complete dissolution of bourgeois marriage, based as it was on relations of property and patriarchy. He argued that ‘genuine unions of passion and affection’ were denied women (and men also) due to women’s lack of economic security and the double standard, which supported a whole patriarchal system of adultery and female prostitution. Marriage itself under such a system was little more than ‘legal prostitution’, and thus a mechanism for the enslavement of women. What was needed in place of such a ‘venal’ marital system, he raged, was a more natural set of relations, consisting of ‘decent animalism [...] plus human kindness’.³⁷

Marriage continues to exist in Nowhere, but there are no divorce courts, and Dick and Clara, who had divorced in the past, due to Clara’s attraction to someone else – an indication of greater sexual freedom for women – are driven by their renewed love to remarry. This sequence of events is seen as perfectly natural and easy, in the

sense of being free from legal obstacles. The absence of property, and of hopeless marriages from which parties cannot escape, along with the general equality of condition of men and women, has eradicated the fundamental basis of bourgeois patriarchy, and with it much of the conflict between the genders. But Morris nonetheless emphasises throughout his utopian romance that many of the trials and tribulations of love between men and women (he does not consider relations other than heterosexual ones), associated with uncontrolled passions remain – and continue to generate conflicts. ‘Love’, Dick tells us, ‘is not a very reasonable thing’.³⁸

The position of the children in such marital breakups is unclear, but it is specified that neither parent has the right to tyrannise over them. Children are generally brought up collectively, and the education of the genders is the same. They are free of the rigid forms of schooling that characterised the life of boys in the Victorian upper classes. They are able to move around with considerable freedom, following their interests, within the context of a more communal upbringing.³⁹

The strict, forced division of labour between the sexes (genders) has disappeared in twenty-second century Nowhere. But Hammond tells Guest that if women turn out to be especially good at and disposed toward managing the household, and wish to do so, then they should be allowed to follow that path like any other. In the third chapter, we find the women in the Guest House serving the meal to Guest and the men he was visiting with – yet in a joyous and playful way that tends to dispel the sense that they are engaging in mere servile work based on rigid distinctions in status.⁴⁰

A number of feminist critics have understandably centred on this chapter in his book, suggesting that the condition of women in Morris’s utopia remained fundamentally unchanged from the Victorian reality of his day. But much of the rest of the book raises challenges for such an interpretation. Indeed, Morris not only showed women serving the men in the Guest House in an early scene, but then went on to question that directly, and to pose several different – not altogether consistent – answers with respect to women and labour in the course of the text, thus highlighting it as an issue that is not fully resolved in the society, and subject to change.⁴¹

There is no doubt that Morris here was struggling within himself, caught in seemingly contradictory sentiments, the tangled product of his Victorian patriarchal upbringing and his revolutionary socialist values. In his weaker moments he suggested that women were especially suited by innate gifts or inclinations, to work as household managers – but even then should be free to choose their occupations.⁴² At the same time he contended that childbearing generally made women more dependent on men and even ‘inferior’ to men from the standpoint of the material-work world of a capitalist society.⁴³ Such positions were close to those of Laurence Gronlund in *The Co-operative Commonwealth*, a work that Morris recommended as the best introduction to

historical materialism in English, prior to the translation of Marx's *Capital* in 1886.⁴⁴ In alluding on a number of occasions in interviews and correspondence to some kind of natural sexual division of labour – though impacted by an alienated capitalist society – Morris appears to have fallen somewhat short of the more advanced views propounded in his day by Engels, August Bebel and other contemporary socialists, including Clara Zetkin and Eleanor Marx. For Bebel 'the argument that it is a woman's natural vocation to be housekeeper and nurse' had no basis in science or history, and was the result of a patriarchal view equivalent to the divine right of kings.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Morris made it clear that he believed in 'absolute equality of condition' of men and women, and that he did not think that women should be restricted to any particular role. Women as well as men should be allowed to develop their talents fully. There were 'many things', he argued, 'which women can do equally as well as men, and some a great deal better'. Women, he suggested in an 1894 interview with the *Woman's Signal*, were especially gifted in such areas as the 'medical profession' and 'business affairs'. Indeed, women, he contended, have 'a born faculty for business'. 'They can hold their own, too', he stressed, 'in the intellectual field' – if not in 'the arts or in inventive power'. Morris pointed to Philippa Fawcett as definitive proof that women could excel in mathematics, going beyond men. Morris was a strong advocate of women's trade unions and the demand for equal pay for equal work, as well as for universal suffrage.⁴⁶ If not 'a thoroughgoing feminist', by today's measure, he ranks, according to Fiona MacCarthy, as a kind of 'semi-feminist'.⁴⁷ And in his art and his most advanced ideas he arguably even surpassed that.

Indeed, Morris's position on gender was considerably more nuanced, progressive and dialectical than may appear at first glance, since his model was ultimately one of revolutionary transformation, requiring a changed society, a changed relation to labour and the earth and a changed humanity. Thus, while adhering, as we have seen, to the view that women were especially suited for (but should not by any means be confined to) domestic work, Morris gave to such work a much more central importance and a larger scope in the unalienated society of the future – hearkening back to a time when the household was the centre of production. He argued that men could not altogether refrain from such work in a society of equality without being mal-developed, and contributing to the 'enslavement of women'. In his March 1889 lecture 'How Shall We Live Then?', delivered at a meeting of the Fabian Society, he stated emphatically, with regard to the future socialist society, that 'the domestic arts' consisted of 'the arrangement of a house in all its details, marketing, cleaning, cooking, baking, and so on: sewing with its necessary concomitant of embroidery and so forth [...]. Whoever [among the population] was incapable of taking interest and a share in some parts of such work would have to be considered diseased; and the

existence of many such diseased persons would tend to the enslavement of the weaker sex.’⁴⁸ As Paul Meier noted, ‘[i]n no other of his writings is Morris so positive and practical in his advocacy of sex-equality’.⁴⁹

Still, a direct statement on the need for men as well as women to engage in the domestic arts is missing from *News from Nowhere* itself, written only a year later. As Ady Mineo has pointed out, Morris’s failure to ‘translate these propositions’ on gender equality directly ‘into fiction can be imputed to two main reasons’ related both to his own time and readership and to the complex structure of his text itself, which represents an incomplete ideal:

Firstly, his disagreement with some of his comrades, especially Belfort Bax, who held very traditional views about women’s role, and secondly his concern about the response of his reading public, who might be shocked by the depiction of men engaged in household tasks and thus be diverted from the core of his message: the radical dismantling of the patriarchal order. As is well known, the uprooting of deep-seated cultural habits, which challenges one’s own interiorized identity, creates a feeling of dislocation *both* in women and in men.

However, since *News from Nowhere* is not a detailed blueprint of a future society, its open-endedness and dialogism suggest further developments in every arrangement of human life [...]. The reader can therefore envision a further stage when the young man laying the table in Chapter XXVI will not be an isolated figure but a common sight.⁵⁰

Indeed, it was precisely in Chapter Twenty-Six of *News from Nowhere*, ‘The Obstinate Refusers’, and in his depiction of Ellen as the embodiment of the highest values of his utopian romance, that the artist Morris most clearly triumphed over his own inner hesitations with respect to gender. If the first journey, by carriage along the Thames, focuses on the coming to be of twenty-second century London, and on the sociology of Nowhere, it is only in the journey up the Thames that Guest’s observations take on an active, living form, raising the question of a long, continuing revolution, extending to more earthly concerns.

Here it is significant that it is in the addition of the important Chapter Twenty-Six, ‘The Obstinate Refusers’, representing a key passage in that upriver journey, that the published book version of *News from Nowhere* differs most from the version serialised in *Commonweal*. This was the one new chapter added by Morris when his serialised 1890 utopian romance was released in book form in 1891. Here he upends almost completely the division of labour between the genders. The ‘Obstinate Refusers’

chapter introduces the only instance of a master craftsperson seen at work in his story – representing the most esteemed role in Morris’s utopia, and the one corresponding most closely to his own role in nineteenth-century society. When we are introduced for the first and only time in the text to an example of higher craftsmanship, and of the most strenuous kind, it is an occupation filled by a woman.

Mistress Philippa, the stonemason, is engaged in carving with mallet and chisel, indicating strength and dexterity as well as artistic sense. She is sculpting ‘a kind of wreath of flowers and figures all round it’. So singly dedicated is she to her work that she, along with her fellow workers, are good-humouredly jeered at by others, as the ‘Obstinate Refusers’ of the chapter’s title, since not joining in on the communal haymaking work festival. Philippa just as obstinately refuses to interrupt her work with a meal. Previously the work on finishing and decorating the new house had had to wait, affecting the whole work crew, since Philippa was ill, and they were not able to continue without her – so great was their dependence on her craft. Her gruffness and obstinacy is clearly a parody of Morris himself. The other, apprentice stonemason is a young woman, Philippa’s daughter. In contrast, a young man sets the table for the meal. The foreman, as if in concession to the male ego, is a man, but clearly has a secondary role to Philippa as the master mason.⁵¹

Here Morris dramatically reverses the dominant gender roles of his time. There is little doubt that the sculptor Philippa is named after the mathematician Philippa Fawcett, who achieved the highest marks in mathematics at Newnham College, Cambridge, and whom Morris, as we have noted, strongly praised, leading Morris to conclude that women might be better than men in innate mathematical ability.⁵² Morris admired Clara Zetkin’s speech at the International Socialist Congress in Paris in 1889, where she declared: ‘[w]hile women fight side by side with the Socialist workers, they are ready to share all sacrifices and hardships, but they are also firmly resolved to take as their due after victory [in the struggle with bourgeois society] all the rights that belong to them’. The ‘Obstinate Refusers’ chapter in *News from Nowhere* seems to reflect this view of a transformation of gender relations developing out of revolutionary struggle, playing out over a long period of time.⁵³

Women in *News from Nowhere* are not depicted as the languid, idle ladies, or as the gaunt, working-class drudges, so familiar in the Victorian novels of Morris’s day. Instead they are physically, intellectually and artistically vibrant. They no longer wear massive layers of clothing characteristic of Victorian women’s fashions – as if they were ‘upholstered’ furniture rather than human beings – but lighter clothes that allow them to move. Ellen is tanned on her face, arms and feet. She dresses in a way so as to emphasise freedom of movement, while walking barefoot in the fields. The free women of Nowhere engage in labour like men, participating in the haymaking

festival. Ellen takes part in the work in the fields, as well as being an excellent sculler, able to row much more efficiently in terms of strength and skill than Guest – none of which takes away from the fact that she is the most powerful critical-intellectual voice in the text as she argues with her grandfather on literature and history (a fact highlighted by her close connection to the British Museum historian Hammond).⁵⁴ Indeed, Ellen’s considerable charm derives from her independence, spontaneity, confidence, intelligence and a clear sense of her own value, combined with a love for the world of nature all around her. It is she who, in a departure from Victorian mores, takes the sexual initiative, overwhelming Guest, who is unaccustomed to this from women.⁵⁵

This is in line with Morris’s historical romances, set in primitive communist societies and among Germanic peoples, in which women are presented as taking on the role of warriors, wearing armour and fighting side by side with the men. In *The Roots of the Mountains*, Bow-may, whose archery is unrivalled, and Bride are at the forefront of the battle for Silverdale – while the former was a leader in the guerrilla war that preceded it. Morris’s clear intention here was to strike directly at Victorian notions of ‘the weaker sex’.⁵⁶

In *News from Nowhere* and Morris’s other romances, women (and also men) express their emotions and sensuousness in direct, relatively uninhibited ways that break radically with the frozen mores of the Victorian age. Women are relatively free to express open physical affection for men. Men are allowed to weep in public, to blush and to wear gaudy clothes. As Mineo has argued in ‘Beyond the Law of the Father’, Morris ‘prefigured the changes envisaged by post-feminism’ in which both femininity and masculinity are opened up, allowing for more expansive, overlapping gender roles: ‘[i]n syntony with the destructuring of the traditional male identity, Morris [...] also deconstructed the female model as it was inscribed in Victorian collective imagery. In depicting the new woman, Morris erases every form of discrimination based on the criterion of the double standard’.⁵⁷

Morris’s goal – though not in all respects successful – was to portray an equality of condition between men and women, as a reflection of the ideal of substantive equality.⁵⁸ In this respect his greatest, most generous literary creation, Ellen, stands out as a ‘new woman’, giving credence to the notion that ‘The Emancipation of Women’, as stated by Hammond, is no longer the central question that it once was – and that society in the century and a half since the Great Change has moved substantially forward. Ellen’s role as William Guest’s love interest is secondary to her larger role as the embodiment of all that is most healthy and revolutionary in the new society. It is Ellen who recognises the vital importance of the recovery of a historical perspective that has been largely lost in *Nowhere*, in order to ensure the future

development of the new society.⁵⁹ As a prospective mother – in a world where motherhood has lost much of its burden with society collectively caring for children – she insists that she intends to pass on her critical knowledge and her whole essential being to her children. As someone close to the sages of her time (she has embraced the knowledge obtained directly through dialogue with old Hammond and others – preferring that to mere book learning); as the only person in the book said to have travelled abroad (she had been on the Rhine); and as the embodiment of love and beauty and the love of the earth itself, Ellen symbolises the romantic-socialist utopia that is Nowhere. She personifies, for Morris, the whole movement toward *complete socialism*, the struggle for which extends to future ages *beyond the epoch of repose*, when ‘times may alter’.⁶⁰ Mere emancipation of labour is not sufficient, it must embrace substantive equality, including full gender equality, the flourishing of art and beauty at all levels of society and the sustaining of the earth itself.

Indeed, in a relatively few, brief pages, in the last third of the novel, centred on this twenty-year-old woman, Morris seems to have embodied his full revolutionary vision of communism, the earth and love, challenging the predominantly mechanistic views of socialist thought in his age. For Morris, only such an ideal can animate the necessary revolution and carry it forward.

Guest’s dream ends with Ellen’s last words floating in his mind as he fades away from Nowhere, challenging him to go back and continue the struggle:

‘No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you. Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship – but not before. Go back again, then, and while you live you will see all round you people engaged in making others live lives which are not their own, while they themselves care nothing for their own real lives – men who hate life though they fear death. Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. 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.’⁶¹

It is this expansion of the idea of revolution to encompass the reconstitution not only of society but of the human relation to the earth and the substantive equality of all individuals, that Morris hoped to convey in *News from Nowhere* – and to give to the movement toward socialism in his time and *ours*.

NOTES

1. William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal' 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), pp. 222-27, 460. (Afterwards Morris, *Political Writings*).
2. The dates provided in the text leave matters somewhat uncertain. Morris changed some of the dates in the serialised version in *Commonweal*, pushing events further into the future. For example, the bridge, mentioned in Chapter 2, is said to have been built in 1971 in the *Commonweal* version, while in the book edition this is changed to 2003. Following the dates in the 1891 book edition, the Great Change occurs during the early 1950s. The civil war begins in 1952, and appears to be over by the time of the 'clearing of houses' in 1955. William Guest is informed early in the text that the bridge built in 2003 was 'not very old'. Hammond later refers to the new epoch as having lasted for around 150 years, which would presumably place it in the early 2100s. A more oblique reference to two hundred years would appear to have referred to the time since the end of the nineteenth or the beginning of the twentieth century. William Morris, *News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest*, ed. by David Leopold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 8, 14, 46, 69, 94, 184. (Afterwards Morris, *News from Nowhere*).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
4. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (New York: New American Library, 1960).
5. Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 420.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 419-25.
7. Morris provides a scornful assessment of anarchism as he understood it in *News from Nowhere*, making it clear that he did not see it as a viable way forward. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 77.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
9. Krishan Kumar, 'A Pilgrimage of Hope: William Morris's Journey to Utopia', *Utopian Studies*, 5: 1 (1994), 89-107 (97). (Afterwards Kumar).
10. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 12-14.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 56.
12. Kumar, pp. 96, 98.
13. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 20-44; Ruth Levitas, *Morris, Hammersmith and Utopia* (London: William Morris Society, 2005), pp. 21-22, 9.
14. See E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Merlin, 1977), pp. 482-96.
15. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 89-111; Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 180-82.
16. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 90.
17. The notions of a 'structure of feeling' and of a 'long revolution' are, of course, associated with Raymond Williams, but reflect his own lifelong study of the romantic revolutionary tradition, including the work of Morris. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with 'New Left Review'* (London: New Left Books, 1979), pp. 155-59.
18. On Morris's two-stage view see Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, 2 vols (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), II, pp. 288-327. (Afterward Meier, *William Morris*).
19. William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), p. 278. (Afterwards Morris and Bax).
20. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 176; on the contrast between the views of work to be found in Morris and Bellamy see Harry Magdoff, 'The Meaning of Work', *Monthly Review*, 34: 5 (October 1982), 1-15.
21. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 162.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 153.
23. Morris and Bax, p. 215; Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 79. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Longmans Green, 1910-1915), XXII, pp. 331-41. (Afterward Morris, *CW*).

24. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 40, 78-85, 140, 153-55.
25. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 84, 145-46; Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', *CW*, XXIII, p. 280; *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (Downton, Wiltshire: Spire Books, 2005), p. 76. (Afterwards Pinkney). Christopher Kendrick, *Union, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 7-9. Huxley used a physiological argument to defend the notion that capital, not labour, was the preeminent source of economic value. T.H. Huxley, 'Capital—the Mother of Labour', *Nineteenth Century*, 27 (March 1890), 513-523, available online at: <<http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/CE9/CaML.html>> (last accessed 1 July 2017). The pseudo-mathematical nature of the argument caused Morris to refer scornfully to 'the Huxley-mathematical sort of thing'. Pinkney, p. 76.
26. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 83-84.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-64.
28. Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 32-35, 39-46.
29. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 60, 76-77; Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 32-35; Hassan Mahamdallie, *Crossing the River of Fire: The Socialism of William Morris* (London: Redwords, 2008), pp. 87-89.
30. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, p. 154.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 137, 155.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 136, 173, 176.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
35. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, ed. by Gareth Stedman Jones, trans. by Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 132; Frederick Engels, *Socialism, Utopian or Scientific* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), p. 39.
36. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-96), II, pp. 404-05. (Afterwards Kelvin).
37. Kelvin, II, p. 584.
38. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 45-54, 142-43.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 31; Ady Mineo, 'Beyond the Law of the Father: The "New Woman" in *News from Nowhere*', in *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), p. 203. (Afterwards Mineo).
40. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 51-52.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 52. On the wider discussion see Florence S. Boos, 'An (Almost) Egalitarian Sage: William Morris and Nineteenth-Century Socialist Feminism', in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. by Thais E. Morgan (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 187-206; Jan Marsh, 'Concerning Love: *News from Nowhere* and Gender', in *William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, ed. by Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green Books, 1990), pp. 107-26. (Afterwards Marsh).
42. Pinkney, pp. 91-93.
43. Kelvin, II, p. 545.
44. Laurence Gronlund, *The Co-operative Commonwealth in its Outlines: An Exposition of Modern Socialism* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1884), pp. 219-34; Kelvin II, 393-94, 695.
45. August Bebel, *Women in the Past, Present and Future* (London: Modern Press, 1885), p. 113.
46. Pinkney, pp. 93-94; William Morris, 'A Morris Speech on Women's Trade Unions', *William Morris Society in the United States, Newsletter* (Summer 2008), pp. 21-23; Kelvin, II, p. 545.
47. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 637-38. (Afterwards MacCarthy).
48. Paul Meier, 'An Unpublished Lecture of William Morris', *International Review of Social History*, 16: 2 (August 1971), 217-40 (217). (Afterwards Meier, 'Unpublished Lecture').
49. Meier, 'Unpublished Lecture', p. 217.

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50. Mineo, p. 206.
 51. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 148-51; Marsh, pp. 119-20.
 52. Pinkney, pp. 94-95; Marsh, p. 119; Mike Dash, 'The Woman Who Bested the Men at Math', *Smithsonian.com* (website), 28 October 2011, available online at: <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-woman-who-bested-the-men-at-math-120480965/>> (last accessed 1 July 2017).
 53. Clara Zetkin quoted in Vijay Singh, 'Clara Zetkin Remembered', *Revolutionary Democracy*, 13: 2 (September 2007), available online at: <<http://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv13n2/zetkin.htm>> (last accessed 9 June 2014); Meier, *William Morris*, II, p. 503.
 54. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 13, 128-37, 157. Morris and Bax, p. 311.
 55. See MacCarthy, pp. 635-36.
 56. Morris, *CW*, XV, pp. 143-44, 178, 245, 324-25, 334-35, 339, 350.
 57. Mineo, pp. 201-05.
 58. On the concept of substantive equality and the necessary revolution in women's place in society, see István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), pp. 203-7.
 59. See Clive Wilmer, 'Introduction', in William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.
 60. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, pp. 165-67.
 61. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-82.