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Someone once wrote that there are decades where nothing happens, and there are sometimes weeks where decades happen. Quite a lot has happened over the course of the last decade, but, of late, there have also been rather a few weeks during which it has felt as if decades have happened, and the pace of events shows no sign of slowing down. The utopian imagination, with its extended temporal horizon, offers a kind of mooring during such a period of widespread social crisis, ecological breakdown and political destabilisation. At the same time, it challenges those of a more quietist and apolitical bent to confront the reality of the crisis from which many would prefer to keep their eyes averted as they seek the spurious comforts of retrogressive nostalgia, an obsolete and irrelevant centrism or a retreat into private life.

This issue opens with two theoretically informed and politically enriching engagements with News from Nowhere. Tony Pinkney imagines an encounter between Morris and Fredric Jameson, the American Marxist and theorist of utopia. He extends this critical thought-experiment, via Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse and several twentieth-century utopian texts, to offer a persuasive (and sometimes playfully speculative) reading of News from Nowhere’s ‘Jamesonian negativity’ (p. 11). Pinkney’s article has previously appeared in Chinese in the Spring 2013 issue of the journal Research on Marxist Aesthetics, and I am pleased to publish it here for the first time in English. Andrew J. Wood, meanwhile, opens some intriguing lines of dialogue between Morris and another important twentieth-century thinker, Georges Bataille, the French theorist of excess and ‘base’ materialism. Wood focuses on a single chapter of News from Nowhere in order to elucidate some striking patterns of similarity between Morris’s and Bataille’s thinking about art as the ‘most fundamentally human production’ (p. 17).

Elsewhere in this issue, Anna Vaninskaya considers the various challenges that faced socialist lecturers and agitators as they engaged with working-class audiences during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. This piece was originally written for oral presentation as an extension of the section on ‘Apathy or Enthusiasm’ in chapter 5 of her 2010 book William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda 1880-1914, and therefore reproduces some material from the published book. Peter Faulkner, meanwhile, offers a concise overview of Eric Hobsbawm’s reflections on Morris, drawing on Hobsbawm’s How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism (2011).

Owen Holland
Editor
I want in this article to bring together what is in my view the finest of nineteenth-century utopias, Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890), and the work of the most important recent Western theorist of utopia, the American cultural critic Fredric Jameson. In the course of his forty-year meditation on utopia as both a literary genre and a political issue, Jameson has many times mentioned Morris’s great work, but usually en passant, in the course of a discussion of some other utopian text or topic, never in any full way as a sustained object of attention in its own right. I will in the course of this article often have recourse to these glancing Jamesonian accounts of Morris, but I will be ultimately endeavouring here to offer something more thorough-going, to effect what I believe is the first full-scale encounter of Morris and Jameson. This will not necessarily turn out to be the essay on *News from Nowhere* that Jameson himself would have written had he ever got round to it; I shall be strongly dependent here on my own sense of what the most challenging dimensions of Morris’s text are, and they may or may not coincide with a Jamesonian analysis proper. But I do believe that *News from Nowhere* and Fredric Jameson’s theory of utopia can be mutually illuminating, and that the dialectical relationship between them will help us sketch out the ways in which Morris’s magnum
opus reaches powerfully forwards towards some of the finest postmodern utopias of the cultural epoch just gone.

It is one of the commonplaces of utopian studies that, during the nineteenth century, a major shift takes place within the genre. In the classic texts, such as Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) or Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627), utopia exists within one’s own time period but in some far-flung corner of the globe; it therefore takes an epic effort of spatial travelling – often involving adverse winds, loss of bearings and even shipwreck – to get there. From the nineteenth century, however, utopia more typically becomes a future political possibility of one’s own society: it exists within one’s own social space, but not yet, and it therefore involves some complex time-travelling to advance forwards to it. If you are not handy enough to bricolate yourself a time machine for the purpose, as H. G. Wells’s Time Traveller does, then other textual devices will have to come into play – the 113-year mesmeric sleep of Edward Bellamy’s Julian West in *Looking Backward* (1888) or the dream-vision of Morris’s William Guest, which takes him forward from Victorian London to twenty-second-century England.

Utopian journeying, then, becomes a matter of time rather than of space; and this makes perfect sense in a fully historicised period in which utopia has become something one could politically build through a mass movement, rather than just a hypothetical possibility one might serendipitously stumble across somewhere. All well and good, then. Onceric time travelling gets William Guest from the dysfunctional Socialist League meeting on the first page of *News from Nowhere* to the fully formed post-revolutionary society of the far future; and once there he tours London with Dick Hammond to experience the new world at first hand, and subsequently in the British Museum encounters the Old Man Who Knows Everything (to borrow a nice phrase from H. G. Wells) who can explain to him both the underlying social principles of the new order and how, historically, it came into being in the first place. Morris’s utopia would thus seem to conform perfectly to the new – temporal rather than spatial – model of the genre.

But no sooner has it done so than William Guest is propelled on a further, spatial, journey: 130 miles up the Thames from the Hammersmith Guest House to Kelmscott Manor. This may not compare with the epic travels of More’s Raphael Hythloday or Francis Bacon’s anonymous narrator, but it is, quite clearly, a reversion to a mode of utopian voyaging which history, including the history of the genre, seemed to have left definitively behind. And what happens to Guest on this second – spatial rather than temporal – expedition is of unusual intensity, far beyond anything that had occurred to him previously in the transformed garden-city that London has become. As he heads upriver he meets the young woman Ellen at Runnymede, who will
subsequently leave her grandfather, pursue Guest and party up the Thames, and
attach herself very determinedly to the visitor to her world. As an anecdotal measure
of that intensity, we might turn to the memoir by the young Scottish socialist John
Bruce Glasier, who told Morris enthusiastically that in reading News from Nowhere he
had fallen in love with Ellen – to which Morris replied that ‘he had fallen in love with
her himself’.¹

Much of the rest of this article will be a meditation on the meaning of this curious
structural self-division in Morris’s utopia, its reversion from a fully nineteenth-century
to a much earlier utopian mode and its generation of the extraordinary figure of
Ellen in the process. There are, I believe, many theoretical frameworks in which this
schizophrenic bifurcation of the text could be discussed: in earlier articles on this topic
I have invoked H. G. Wells’s distinction between ‘static’ and ‘kinetic’ utopias in his A
Modern Utopia (1905) and aspects of the modernism-postmodernism contrast to
account for this phenomenon.² Here, however, my guiding thread will be the
challenging theory of utopia which Fredric Jameson has been developing over the
last forty years.

Jameson’s most notorious claim during this period has been that utopias always
fail, that far from achieving any satisfyingly full representation of a new society all
they can do in the end is tell us something – albeit something crucial and illuminating
– about the limits of the society which we already inhabit. This argument can be
taken, I believe, both as a neutral descriptive position and, more interestingly for our
purposes, as a kind of ethics of utopian reading and writing. First, as a descriptive
claim, Jameson maintains that however complexly a utopia imagines the institutions
of its perfect society and however sensuously it tries to embody the physical and social
detail of that world, these attempts will always be shot through with gaps, absences
and contradictions. These structural limits of its imaginings will then tell us more
about its own historical moment, about the constraints which that situation places on
thought, than they do about the nature of its would-be perfect new world.

But you can see how that neutral analytic position very soon becomes an ethics
of utopian reading. For somebody – that is to say, the analyst – has to demonstrate
that an apparently seamless representational surface is in fact cracked and flawed in
interestingly unconscious ways; and to do this we will have to read utopia in a
peculiarly active, demystifying way, refusing the self-evidence of the smooth surfaces
of the text. As Jameson puts it in his review-article on Louis Marin’s important study
Utopies: Jeux d’Espaces:

To understand Utopian discourse in terms of neutralization is indeed precisely
to propose to grasp it as process, as energeia, enunciation, productivity, and
implicitly or explicitly to repudiate that more traditional and conventional view of Utopia as sheer representation, as the ‘realized’ vision of this or that ideal society or social ideal.³

On the reader’s part, then, an active hermeneutics of suspicion replaces the old representational hermeneutics of restoration.

But it is only one small further step to argue that this ‘productionist’ ethics of utopian reading should characterise utopian writing too, that utopias themselves should not be content with pure representation, that they should, rather, in sophisticated ways themselves actively expose the limits and absences of their putative ideal worlds – not just wait for the Jamesonian analyst to come along and do this for them. On this showing, a utopia should not only sketch out its would-be perfect society, not just continue the task of utopian representation as the genre has always done, but should also somehow dramatise the limits of that world, both thematically and formally, in terms of both its political limits and of the ways in which it has been represented in the text in the first place.

Such an ethic of utopian writing can then give rise to a new literary history of the genre. Once upon a time, all the way from Thomas More through Edward Bellamy to Ernest Callenbach’s very fine Ecotopia (1975), say, utopia was a naive, hubristic genre which thought it could perfectly delineate good societies in every last detail – societies which would win immediate consent from the rational reader and, in their achieved ideality, would endure unchanging forever after. At some crucial historical point, however, a fall into Jamesonian generic self-consciousness takes place. Utopia all at once becomes aware of its own frailities, of the impossibility of full representation, technically speaking, and, indeed, the undesirability of such representation, politically speaking; for a fully delineated society which allows for no gaps, contradictions or possibilities of change very quickly turns itself inside out like a glove and becomes a dystopia. In his excellent study Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination (1986), Tom Moylan has rewritten the history of utopia in just such terms, and has shown how a new mutation of the genre, what he helpfully terms the ‘critical utopia’, comes into being during the 1970s, with Ursula Le Guin’s The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974), Joanna Russ’s The Female Man (1975) and Samuel Delaney’s Triton (1976), among others.⁴

How, then, does my whistle-stop tour of the Jamesonian theory of utopia relate to Morris’s News from Nowhere, and more particularly to that dual utopian structure which we identified in it: a nineteenth-century time-travelling utopia, which gets William Guest from Victorian to post-revolutionary London, and the subsequent ‘reversion’ to a more classical spatially-travelling utopia, as he heads up the Thames
from Hammersmith to Kelmscott and meets the remarkable Ellen on the way? If we put together the fact that Morris’s text seems obliged to set out on its second utopian journey quite late in the day and Jameson’s theoretical insistence that utopia always in one way or another fails, then I think we will be required to look back with a sceptical eye over everything in the text which precedes Guest’s late spatial journey up the Thames. That is to say the vision of a transformed London as revealed to us in the first half of the book and as populated by figures like Dick Hammond, Bob the weaver, Annie, Boffin the Golden Dustman and so on. Now that new London, which has become a spacious, unhurried, green garden-city which seems to contain as many fruit trees as people, and its new socialist Londoners are entirely preferable to the class-divided city, the slums and the broken-spirited city-dwellers of the late nineteenth century, no doubt at all about that; one has to be altogether supportive of the book’s many Great Clearings in this respect. And yet, in the very middle of Morris’s depiction of this genial and neighbourly new world, the utopian expositor himself, Old Hammond, suddenly announces to his visitor: ‘I am old and perhaps disappointed’. 5 It’s an obscure remark, which Hammond does not, alas, follow up in any detail in the text; but I want to suggest that, if the Wellsian Old Man Who Knows Everything, the very keeper of utopia’s conscience and history, is himself disappointed, then utopia is indeed in trouble.

Various critics over the years have argued that Morris’s News from Nowhere, though it gives a wonderfully invigorating account of ‘How the Change Came’, of the actual revolutionary process itself, is in the end, in terms of its depiction of the post-revolutionary world, too placid, too pastoral, too benignly quietistic and, well, just ultimately plain dull! 6 One can put the point another way, I think, in terms of the history of the book’s composition, though in a generic rather than simply biographical sense. News from Nowhere comes into being as a point-by-point refutation of Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, of which Morris had published a powerfully hostile review in Commonweal. But as it does so, as it counters Bellamy’s vision of an entirely urban, highly technological and centralised society in the Boston of the year 2000, so it bends the stick too far the other way, throwing out the baby of urban dynamism and excitement (everything that the Italian and Russian Futurists would so passionately celebrate a generation or so later) with the bathwater of urban class division, slums, exploitation and crime. Genial though it may be in so many ways, Morris’s garden-city London and its neighbourly inhabitants may well be too limited a vision of what a post-revolutionary world can be. As Fredric Jameson himself has noted, reflecting on the book’s subtitle, ‘An Epoch of Rest’: ‘[i]t is as though – after the immense struggle to free ourselves, even in imagination, from the infection of our very minds and values by an omnipresent consumer capitalism – on emerging suddenly and
against all expectation into a narrative space radically other, uncontaminated by all those properties of the old lives and the old preoccupations, the spirit could only lie there gasping in the fresh silence, too weak, too new, to do more than gaze wanly about it at a world remade’. 7

Except, of course, that William Guest does not just lie in this placid green London gasping gratefully: he in fact embarks on a second utopian journey, spatially rather than temporally, and towards Ellen rather than Dick or Bob or Annie. Let me briefly make this contrast another way, in terms of the very different utopian theories of Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch, before I return to the Jamesonian framework which essentially governs this essay (such Germanic references seem appropriate enough in relation to Ellen, who, as we learn, had been travelling on the Rhine two years before Guest’s encounter with her). 8 For Marcuse, utopia is essentially a matter of memory, of anamnèsis, of the social recovery of a state of happiness which once existed for us in infancy. Now this is surely true too of Morris’s transfigured London in the opening chapters of News from Nowhere, though we are talking of our historical rather than personal ‘infancy’ here. Very early on indeed in the book we are told that Dick Hammond’s clothing ‘would have served very well as a costume for a picture of fourteenth-century life’ (p. 7), and quite soon thereafter Guest is pronouncing definitively that ‘I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century’ (p. 20). Reculer pour mieux sauter: we have leapt over capitalism – or Bellamy’s Looking Backward for that matter – by leaping behind it, back to a Marcusean memory of the fourteenth century which has behind it the whole weight of Romantic and Victorian medievalism as Morris inherited it from Walter Scott, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin.

But no such fourteenth-centuryisms attach to Ellen; this whole medievalist code fades to some extent out of the text as it embarks on its journey up the Thames, and that code has been so ubiquitous in the earlier chapters that this is a resonant relative silence. Moreover, Ellen herself speaks powerfully against a slavish worship of the past in her wrangles with her grandfather in their cottage at Runnymede. She is from the start defined as the unknown, as that which breaks with any of the models Guest brings with him from the past. ‘Strange’ is the epithet that clings to her as regularly as the adjective ‘fourteenth-century’ does to the objects of the first half of the text: her ‘strange and almost wild beauty’ (p. 130), ‘this strange girl’ (p. 157). And Guest very effectively defines the ways in which she incarnates the radically and indefinably new in the book:

of all persons I had seen in that world renewed, she was the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of. Clara, for instance, beautiful and bright as she was, was not unlike a very pleasant and unaffected
young lady; and the other girls also seemed nothing more than specimens of very much improved types which I had known in other times. But this girl [...] was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise and please me.

(p. 157)

So used are we to thinking of Morris’s Nowherians as colourfully individuated characters in contrast with the anonymous generic figures of so many earlier utopias, that it may come as a shock to hear them described by the text itself as ‘types’ in this way. In a discussion of the anonymity of utopians in general, Jameson notes that ‘it will be objected that when we get to utopias of the type of William Morris [...] this depersonalization will no longer obtain’, but in his view ‘perhaps [Morris’s] formulaic characters are, as Victorians, merely a little closer to us in time’.9 Dick Hammond confirms Jameson’s critical intuition when he describes Bob the weaver, in his persistent questioning of the newly arrived Guest, as reminding him ‘of the radical cobblers in the silly old novels, who, according to the authors, were prepared to trample down all good manners in the pursuit of utilitarian knowledge’ (p. 15). That clearly enough gives us our literary model or derivation for Bob, and it is an account that could, I suggest, be extended to all the Hammersmithians in the book. And Ellen is so far beyond all the other Nowherians, so protean in her own being, that she is capable of seeing Guest himself as a derivative literary ‘type’, as when she accuses him of ‘wanting to nurse a sham sorrow, like the ridiculous characters in some of those queer old novels’ (p. 170).

Ellen herself, however, is much more associated with the motif of a radically new energy than with the stasis of a known literary archetype; it is as if she incarnates within herself the enigmatic ‘force’ that powers the vehicles and barges that Guest and party pass and are passed by on the Thames. Guest registers ‘her beauty, so delicate, yet so interfused with energy’ (p. 174), and that dynamism vibrates through her every least gesture and motion within the book: ‘springing up suddenly from her place without any obvious effort’ (p. 162), ‘one hand laid on her bosom, the other arm stretched downward and clenched in her earnestness’ (p. 166). Up to this point in her life that dynamism has mostly manifested itself sexually; for Ellen, as she herself admits, has ‘often troubled men’s minds disastrously’ (p. 162), but it seems to me that such turbulence will cut loose from sexuality and become open for new dispositions in the course of the book. If Marcusean memory is the right utopian-theoretical frame for the early London chapters, then I would suggest that Ernst Bloch is the theorist we need to invoke in relation to Ellen on the waters of the upper Thames. As Phillip Wegner insists, utopia for Bloch is a ‘horizon’ rather than a presence; it is an
ungraspable ‘not yet’, rather than a lost Proustian or social memory to be recovered, as for Marcuse.\footnote{10} Ellen herself appropriately speaks of ‘a feeling of going somewhere, of coming to something strange, a feeling of adventure’ (p. 163).

What I am inclined to call the ‘Ellen text’ in \textit{News from Nowhere} thus effectively cancels out the garden-city London vision of the earlier sections of the book. Morris’s work implicitly accepts that its first developed sketch of the new, would-be perfect socialist society has (as Fredric Jameson predicted) failed – to the point indeed where even its own expositor in the British Museum is ‘disappointed’ with it. In her enigmatic energy, Ellen marks the moment where Morris’s text shifts, in Jamesonian terms, from a detailed project of utopian representation, with Dick’s tour of London and Old Hammond’s lengthy exposition of its history and underlying principles, to utopia as ‘process […] energeia […] enunciation, productivity’, to a new opening towards an unrepresentable future, a Blochian ‘not yet’. No positive content can be given to the Ellen utopia in its own right; we do not have any institution-building, or what Jameson neatly calls the ‘constructional principle’ of utopia, in the later upriver chapters. Ellen instead represents a pure negative energy which cancels out what has already gone, marks it with a Derridean \textit{sous rature} (under erasure), without substituting for it a positive – and thus equally vulnerable – representation in its own right, which might have been based on a code of memory other than the fourteenth century (the Icelandic, say, or the Italian or Japanese). To reinstate the spatially-travelling utopia in a text initially governed by its Victorian time-travelling successor is not, in fact, in any full sense to restore the former, to believe that the old Morean or Baconian utopian generic mechanisms can be dusted off and put to work again. The new spatial utopia, the ‘Ellen text’, cancels its garden-city precursor without for all that being a new place or space at which one could ever finally arrive. If William Guest, as various critics including myself have argued over the years, is a kind of ghost, the very same is true of Ellen too – though I will go on to suggest later in this paper that we can at least say something about the kind of literary ghost she may turn out to be.\footnote{11}

Now I can imagine a strong objection to the kind of reading I have been proposing of the later chapters of \textit{News from Nowhere}, and I must give it some space and attention here before proceeding. For while it is indeed the case that there is no institution-building in the upriver chapters there is, one might argue, a good deal of representational positivity coming through here; and indeed, this has always been felt to be one of the text’s most charming features. For we get a very beautiful picture of the life of the upper Thames in these later chapters: its reedbanks, its warblers and corncrakes, its gentle bends and hillocks, its hay-making; and this sensuous specificity then seems to communicate itself to William Guest himself who, as he rows Ellen in the upper stretches, feels himself becoming stronger and more youthful, plumped full.
of new substance rather than hollowed-out into ever-increasing ghostliness.

I do not imagine any enthusiastic reader of *News from Nowhere* has failed to respond to the magical spell of these later chapters. We could relate this sensuous glamour to Morris’s own personal love of the upper Thames landscape; but in the theoretical reading of the book which I am proposing here I would relate it rather to the text’s own structural ambivalences about Ellen. On the one hand, she is the negative force, the Blochian ‘not yet’ which cancels out the earlier garden-city utopia; on the other hand, *News from Nowhere* also holds out the possibility that she is a figure who may, in some obscure way, actually mend that failed vision, the knight on a white horse (or multi-coloured rowing boat in her case) who might bring it what it lacks, put it back on its feet and get the whole thing moving again. So Ellen’s fierce negativity in the book is indeed counterbalanced by this impulse towards the redemptive, the positive, which then, in displaced fashion, makes itself compellingly felt in the text’s nature descriptions, since it cannot be given any actual social substance in the book. Indeed, all Ellen herself can say of her own long-term future in Nowhere itself pertains to the biological rather than the social: ‘I shall have children; perhaps before the end a good many’ (p. 167).

We, however, as readers of the text within or just after postmodernity, who have experienced that great mutation within the utopian field which Tom Moylan has dubbed the ‘critical utopia’ of the 1970s, may be able to say rather more of Ellen’s future than this, and in ways that are true both to the Jamesonian negativity and failure of utopia, and to the redemptive possibilities that Morris’s work wants to keep fitfully circulating around Ellen. ‘Books, books! always books, grandfather!’ (p. 129) complains Ellen in the cottage at Runnymede, just as she will later crossly inform Guest that the young men thereabouts ‘fell to making stories of me to themselves – like I know you did, my friend’ (p. 162). I am going to fall foul of Ellen myself here in exactly the same way, though we can first of all invoke against her the fact that story-telling is an honoured activity in her society, as we discover when it turns out to be one of the ways in which the utopians at Hammersmith Guest House entertain themselves after Dick, Guest and Clara have returned from the British Museum. Since *News from Nowhere* does not narrate Ellen’s future beyond its own textual boundaries, I want to offer some speculations, some stories, about her based on the books to which we, as readers of recent postmodern utopias, have had access. ‘What is to come after this?’ (p. 155) is a question that Guest poses to Henry Morsom in the crafts museum at Wallingford, and it is an issue that genuinely concerns us in relation to Ellen, who, as I have noted, herself speculates about her own future, if only in terms of maternity. I have noted above that Ellen is contrasted in her startling novelty with the known literary and social ‘types’ from whom the other inhabitants of
Nowhere derive; but this may in fact only mean that she derives from literary types who have not been invented yet, but who reflect illuminatingly back upon her from a far distant utopian or science-fictional literary future which News from Nowhere cannot possibly anticipate in any detail, but for which it holds open a receptive space within itself.

In the cottage at Runnymede Dick Hammond reflects that ‘we have come to a fairy garden, and there [Ellen] is the very fairy herself amidst of it: I wonder what she will do for us’ (p. 133). The question resonates for us as readers too: what will she do for them? Let us accordingly try out some retrospective modelling of Ellen’s possible futures within Nowhere from the newer utopias of our own period. It seems certain that Ellen will have a significant political, and not just maternal, role to play within Nowhere. She alone of the younger Nowherians has a sense of the political danger her society faces: so divorced is it from its own history that, as she argues forcefully, ‘we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid’ (p. 167). Faced with a threat of this magnitude, Ellen will surely have to take action of some kind; and the narrative trajectory of her chapters of News from Nowhere charts a progress from isolation in the cottage at Runnymede to reintegration amidst the younger Nowherians in the haysel feast in Kelmscott Church. Ellen, it seems, has realised the need for renewed engagement with her culture, and I like to think that this process will continue to the point where we could perhaps imagine her, like Vera Allwen, the leader of the woman-dominated Survivalist Party in Ernest Callenbach’s Ecotopia, as promoting an organised movement for renewal in her own society.12 Ellen’s leadership capabilities are, to be sure, only there in embryo in the book – implicit, for example, in Guest’s description of her as a ‘fairy godmother’ (p. 155); and it is, after all, Dick Hammond who steps into Kelmscott Church with ‘an air of proprietorship’ in the proceedings (p. 180). But Dick, as I shall suggest below, is a false leader in this context, one who represents worryingly anti-intellectualist trends in his society, and of the other Nowherians whom we meet in the course of the book it is quite clearly only Ellen who has the stature to take him on and defeat and displace him.

Guest realises soon after Ellen has rejoined himself, Dick and Clara at Wallingford that she has divined his status as a visitor from the Victorian past, as a time-traveller, and he then resolves to be fully frank with her about this fact. But how is it she has been so astute? Dick, Clara, Bob and Annie may occasionally be baffled by some of Guest’s more careless remarks, but without getting anywhere near a true assessment of his time-travelling nature, yet Ellen has divined the truth after only an evening’s
acquaintance with him. One speculative hypothesis here, which I am not going to argue in full but suggest we just hold experimentally in the mind for a moment or two is that, as Dick says earlier to Bob, ‘birds of a feather flock together’ (p. 19), that she may just possibly be a time-traveller too, but from the far future rather than from the distant dystopian past. We certainly have examples of this narrative paradigm in some recent utopias, as with Janet Evasion in Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*, who travels back in time to earth from the planet Whileaway to try and inculcate utopian values in an oppressively patriarchal present; and Luciente in Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) travels back to our present from twenty-second-century Matapoisett to radicalise Connie Ramos as the latter battles social, gender and racial oppression in New York. May it be, then, that Ellen has been sent back by some future Nowhere, its twenty-fourth- rather than twenty-second-century incarnation, say, where force-barges have been superseded by Wellsian time-machines, to do battle with the recidivist tendencies that are alive and active in that earlier moment?

If this were so, then we would have to revalue our sense of the revolutionary time-frames sketched out for us in the early pages of *News from Nowhere*. For the distinction there made for us between the immediate ‘Morrow of the Revolution’ and the much later ‘fully-developed new society’ is normally taken to indicate the post-Civil War period in which Old Hammond was a young man and the actual present of Nowhere, respectively. But if Ellen is indeed a visitor from a distant utopian future, then the historical time frames become vastly extended. The Morrow of the Revolution, in this longer vista, would be Nowhere itself, the world of Dick, Clara, Bob, Annie and Boffin, and the fully-developed new society would be whatever far-future version of Nowhere Ellen herself hails from. So: Ellen as a Joanna Russ-ian time-traveller from the future attaching herself to a time-traveller from the past – this hypothesis would certainly account for that elusive, enigmatic energy which so distinguishes Ellen from the other Nowherians in the book. I am not pressing this theory hard here, but it might be an illuminating heuristic notion that is worth holding briefly in the mind, in a spirit of Keatsian ‘negative capability’ in which we do not at once irritably ask ourselves if it is true or not.

But we do have another, and perhaps more plausible, recent utopian narrative paradigm available to us in which to model a possible future for Ellen. For she, it appears, is not entirely alone in Nowhere, however different she seems from Henry Morsom or Walter Allen and their like. In the midst of a discussion of the vulgarity of Victorian architecture with Guest, she announces: ‘[y]es, friend, I see what you mean. We have sometimes – those of us who look into these things – talked this very matter over’ (p. 165). So there are other Ellenists in the post-revolutionary society after all – at which point a helpful analogy might be provided by Shevek and his
Syndicate of Initiative in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*. The anarchist revolution of the Odonian movement on the moon Anarres has in Le Guin’s novel gone stale. Though much of value still remains, a narrow-minded intellectual and political conformism now governs that once daring culture; and it is precisely, as in Nowhere, the loss of history, the Odonian exiles’ walling of themselves off from their Urrastian-capitalist past, that starts the rot. It is then the younger generation, led by the theoretical physicist Shevek, which grows restive under such philistinism, reopening communications with the home planet Urras, which is still a brutally class-divided society; and eventually setting up a Syndicate of Initiative on Anarres itself to promulgate their new social thinking and scientific discoveries.14

Can we not at once see certain parallels between Shevek’s research institute, held in the tightly philistine grip of Sabul, and the Hammersmith Guest House as William Guest first experiences it on his arrival in Nowhere? I am not suggesting that Bob the weaver, in his passion for mathematics, is potentially a theoretical physicist of the order of Shevek himself, who in the course of Le Guin’s novel develops his path-breaking Principles of Simultaneity; yet it is certainly the case that the restless intellectual curiosity of Bob and Boffin, authors of historical novels and treatises, is held sternly in check by the determinedly anti-intellectual Dick Hammond, who will not let them interrogate the Victorian visitor to their hearts’ content. Nor am I quite suggesting that Ellen has returned from the moon to visit the old world back on earth, though we might note that the science-fictional narrative paradigm of a ‘being from another planet’ (p. 47) is one that floats metaphorically around Guest earlier in the text. Yet she clearly has the intellectual energy and personal dynamism to be the Shevek of her own generation, to reactivate in the placid world of Nowhere the kind of social turbulence represented in the book by the presence of the four anarchists at the Socialist League meeting on its opening page. She will have, in short, to turn her own capacity for ‘disastrously troubling’ from the sexual to the political sphere. And if there are other Ellenists – ‘those of us who look into these things’ – then it may be that they are gathering in force in the haymaking at Kelmscott at the close of the book; for as Dick informs Guest, the ‘scientific men and close students generally’ (p. 177) will be turning up en masse in the next day or two. So it could be that a Shevekian Syndicate of Initiative is indeed in the making here, and that, led by Ellen, it could generate a sufficient head of intellectual and political steam to revivify the Nowherian revolution, concentrating the assorted discontents of its society, its old Grumblers and Obstinate Refusers, but in ways that propel them dynamically forwards to a new socialist Cultural Revolution, rather than allowing them (as Ellen at one point fears) to backslide towards a restored capitalism.

Late in the book William Guest struggles to ‘break the spell she [Ellen] had cast
about me’ (p. 174); and you may well feel, reading this article, that Ellen has cast a
spell about me too, leading to all sorts of unlikely ventures into postmodern utopia
and science fiction. But such is the role of what I have been calling the ‘Ellen text’ or
perhaps the ‘Ellen effect’ in *News from Nowhere*: that second utopia beyond utopia, that
reversion to spatial rather than temporal utopian travelling, the journey up the
Thames and the extraordinary young woman who attaches herself to Guest during it.
The first utopia, the garden-city version of London with its neighbourly
Hammersmithians, has failed, as Fredric Jameson’s theory of utopia had predicted.
Utterly preferable though Nowhere is to Victorian London, this first attempt to
imagine a future beyond capitalism eventuates in a culture that is too placid, too
pastoral, too one-dimensionally the opposite of Bellamy’s high-tech centralist urban
vision in *Looking Backward*, and which seems moreover, in its neglect of history, to be
in some political danger of regression to a past it thought had been left behind for
good. But *News from Nowhere* does not end here. Rather does it launch itself into a new
utopian project, the invention of Ellen on the Thames journey, not a project of
Marcusian memory or a reinvention of the fourteenth century, but a radical openness
to a Blochian ‘not yet’, to a utopian future that cannot be given as a developed
representation but instead takes the form of Ellen’s protean ‘strangeness’ and
unpredictable energy. She is an open space in the text where the future might enter,
a generative field that prompts multiple new narratives among her contemporaries,
who fall to making stories of her, and she does exactly the same to us, as twenty-first-
century readers; for we can aptly apply to her Dick Hammond’s remark about Guest –
she ‘makes us think of all kind of things’ (p. 116). I do not offer any of my own
narratives around Ellen – Callenbach’s Vera Allwen, Russ’s Janet Evason or Le Guin’s
Shevek – as definitive. They could not be, for Ellen is simply the pure principle of
utopian narrativity; she is utopia as process, *energeia*, productivity, to borrow Jameson’s
terms, rather than utopia as achieved representation. Utopia fails in *News from Nowhere*,
as for Fredric Jameson it has to do; but in so doing it generates the figure of Ellen,
who is a kind of Jamesonian utopian theory in her own right, and about whom we
will be telling open-ended stories, offering speculative analogies, venturing heuristic
hypotheses, for a long time to come.

NOTES
2. See my ‘Kinetic Utopias: William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and H. G. Wells’s A Modern Utopia’,
*JWMS*, 16: 2-3 (Summer-Winter 2005), 49-55; and ‘News from Nowhere, Modernism, Postmodernism’,
*A/E Canadian Journal of Aesthetics* (electronic journal), Fall 2008, available online
<[https://www.uqtr.ca/AE/Vol_15/ReadingMatters/Reading_matters_Pinkney.htm] [last accessed 15


6. For a representative instance of this opinion, see Philip Henderson’s remark that ‘Morris was merely abolishing everything he disliked in the nineteenth century and replacing it by everything he nostalgically yearned for’, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1986), p. 328. Raymond Williams and Perry Anderson have made a similar case in criticising Morris for attaching the idea of simplicity to achieved socialism.


This Is A Pipe: The Aesthetic Object in Morris’s Nowhere

Andrew J. Wood

Georges Bataille, the twentieth-century philosopher, is primarily known for an oeuvre that extends across many media and genres (from philosophy to poetics, fiction and anthropology) and for the bizarre aesthetic of his dark eroticism and his celebration of useless expenditure. He promotes unbridled consumption of luxuries, fineries and even superficialities as not only fundamentally human, but as a framework for more thoroughly understanding our economies by turning away from production-based analyses to a consumption-based framework. He loudly and full-throatedly declared himself the inheritor of Friedrich Nietzsche, not necessarily the Nietzsche of the übermensch, but rather the gleeful, Dionysian celebrant of life’s excesses.¹ What, then, could this French theorist of eroticism and excess have in common with William Morris, aside from a passing coincidence of a vaguely similar bourgeois education? Why open an essay on the utopian objects of Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890) with this later thinker who never so much as glances at Morris (and rarely discusses utopianism at all), and who seems to promote categorically different priorities and values? For one, in slightly different terms (and for different reasons), Bataille, like Morris, positions art as the most fundamentally human production. He points to the earliest known cave paintings, for instance, as a way to analyse the representational aspect of the visual. This particular representational quality, Bataille argues, reveals a higher form of consciousness than that possessed by beasts. Bataille also uses art, as the exclusive domain of humans, to open discussions of freedom and self-creation under the category of what he calls ‘the sovereign’.² As we shall see, Bataille’s category of the sovereign is also a lens through which we can analyse and problematise Morris’s objects of beauty – particularly the memorable pipe that William Guest procures in Nowhere – and it can help us to interrogate the valiance or continuing political efficacy of aestheticised labour in our contemporary moment of economic and
ecological crisis.

So much of Morris suggests that he had a declared preference for a simple, perhaps minimalist, but certainly an agrarian aesthetic. This is visible in his fiction (most especially in the agrarian aesthetic of *News from Nowhere*) and in his lectures, the aesthetic of his own visual art and the work that he did to preserve ancient buildings whose aesthetic he did not want to see ‘cockneyfied’ or ‘commercialised’. He openly admits in his review of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888) that the ‘only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author’. Given this admission, readers of Morris’s own utopian romance might scarcely be surprised at what they discover in *Nowhere*, as the aesthetic seems consistent with much of Morris’s stated and actualised aesthetic proclivities.

Yet, despite the array of evidence in *News from Nowhere* that suggests a simple, agrarian lifestyle, Morris also includes in this supposedly minimalist utopia numerous moments of what we might call ‘luxury’. Morris has not stinted in his inclusion of luxuries such as fine wine, plentiful and nutritious food and fashionable attire for the residents of his imagined future. And, of course, sexuality appears to be relatively liberated, the institution of marriage has become irrelevant and somatic pleasure not a cause for Christian guilt, but rather unabashed enjoyment. Bataille, too, finds an important role for expressions of pleasure, especially in excess. Sovereignty is, for Bataille, an expression that connotes freedom from labour and the ability for useless consumption (for example, useless consumption can take various forms, such as sacrifice, eroticism, idleness or alcohol). In other words, the sovereign is one who consumes without producing. This could be either the richest or the poorest in a given society, for the definition of sovereignty relies only on excessive consumption or consumption without production (taking without giving). Another such sovereign who consumes without producing could be the stranger or the guest.

In the absolute expression of desire and useless consumption and the complete attention to the present moment (rather than possible futurities or the horror and spectre of death), the symbol that Bataille presents as representative of sovereignty is the festival. What must be understood, however, is that even in the festival – that which is closest to sovereignty – full sovereignty is but an ideal. Indeed, sovereignty is ‘the impossible’ ideal toward which Bataille strives, and ‘the impossible thus revealed is not an equivocal position; it is the sovereign self-consciousness that, precisely, no longer turns away from itself’. This ‘sovereign self-consciousness’ that faces itself encapsulates the ideal of a never fully realised, impossible authenticity. In other words, not only is the accursed share excessive, but it is categorically opposed to all possible (and hitherto realised) modes of labour and use value (those fundamental features of capitalism). Such is the framework that Bataille suggests we incorporate into a
consumption-based analysis (as opposed to the more typically Marxian production-based one).

Productive work is clearly useful, and in Morris’s calculation all humanely created goods can be both useful and beautiful (or useful in their very beauty, provided the work is ‘worth doing, and […] of itself pleasant to do’).9 Though he emphasises consumption, Bataille never denies the labour that goes into the accursed share, for example, the labour that is invested in preserving cheese (the accursed share of milk) or fermenting wine (the accursed share of grapes). Yet this labour is not performed by the sovereign who enjoys the excess, but by the workers who do not. The sovereign enjoys in luxury what the workers who produce the surplus are denied. Luxury, for Bataille, is but one of two options for expenditure of surplus, that excess of energy in the economic ecosystem, the other being war.

In fact, any such expenditure must be a squandered, useless investment, for any use value will not in fact be an expenditure of excess but a cyclical reinvestment of the productive system. However, in imagining a future in which class division and exploitative labour will have been abolished, Morris outlines the ways in which finery can be produced and consumed by workers, such that the workers are not excluded from sovereignty, but, in contradistinction to Bataille, claim it through their practices of pleasurable labour. On the reading offered here, then, the figure of the guest is to Morris akin to Bataille’s sovereign, because in the utopian epoch of hospitality imagined in News from Nowhere the guest (specifically William Guest) is welcomed and provided for, without the necessary expectation of reciprocity, payment or labour. But how does this selfless hospitality unfold?

In Chapter 6 of News from Nowhere, ‘A Little Shopping’, we witness William Guest in what initially appears as a strikingly ordinary and mundane set of errands at a market. The brilliance of this short chapter is that it concisely encapsulates the kernel of Morris’s politico-aesthetic theory. The encounter with the aesthetic object, the tobacco pipe, affords Morris’s utopian protagonist the opportunity not only to reflect on the value of beauty, but also the pleasure within labour processes in Nowhere. We ought to be especially attuned to such ‘pretty’ objects and enjoyment in this narrative, for Morris himself places an important emphasis on them. At least part of this emphasis continues his critique of the cold, urban, mechanised and ugly utopia of Bellamy’s Boston in Looking Backward (1887). Clearly, however, providing an alternate vision of a post-revolutionary society is not the only motivator for giving such objects seemingly disproportionate attention. As John Helmer illustrates, Guest stops in his tracks, ‘interrupting conversation and delaying his narrative’ in order to give detailed accounts of said objects.10 Guest seems to relish these opportunities to describe the aesthetic objects he encounters, indicating that they express some deeper truth of
Nowhere than even its inhabitants could fully explain. In other words, the aesthetic object is the literal materialisation of pleasurable – and hence non-alienated – labour. The point is not that the pipe is some unique object in Nowhere, but rather that it is positioned as an exemplar that represents the average produced object. Every object in Nowhere is similarly thought out and well made, yet few other objects described in the text are given the same amount of attention or praise as the pipe. This seemingly insignificant foray into a ‘market’ underlines the radical potentiality of a Morrisean reimagining of both labour and exchange. Indeed, one could consider among Morris’s prime motivations for composing *News from Nowhere* the desire to ‘diagnose and analyse’ the de-aestheticised labour of his time, in an attempt to better understand and adequately counter the vast ‘alienation between creativity and labour’ that characterise his (and our) society. This reimagining of labour as pleasurable and exchange as equitable is materialised in the aesthetic object of the pipe that Guest acquires in Nowhere. Such a reimagining bears even greater social relevance in our own historical moment, as globalised capital has increasingly prioritised so-called ‘creative labour’ in new yet increasingly hegemonic ways.

In ‘A Little Shopping’, the time-travelling Victorian William Guest appears perplexed by the fact that no one is engaged in commerce, strictly speaking, even though the buildings and interactions of the London market seem and feel familiar. However, Guest does witness many goods, though no currency, changing hands. This is neither a credit-based system, nor a barter system, but one in which goods are recognised as belonging collectively to all Nowhereans. This arrangement is not against private ownership of individual goods (or personal property), but rather recognises that individual members of this society have a legitimate claim to the goods they need and the goods they desire. Of course, one should not overemphasise the rights-based discourse here, as this may carry undue consumerist overtones. Indeed, the ‘right’ to fulfilment of desires in Nowhere is entirely dependent on the communal, gift-based economy (as well as recognising that the claim to goods and services is understood and interpreted variously as based in ‘rights’ or ‘entitlements’ or even in positive participation).

The short and seemingly unimportant interaction at the tobacconist’s shop actually pulls together the most crucial aspects of Morris’s interrelated aesthetic and economic arguments. Not only is this the moment that Guest begins truly to understand his new temporal surroundings, but it is also the reader’s first real glimpse into the relational functioning of a post-capitalist economy of exchange. It is significant that Guest’s primary desire is to procure an unessential, yet very much desired good, for his necessities are met immediately with nearly no expenditure of effort on his part.
In a reversal of Dickensian London, Morris’s utopian iteration of London envisages a society in which wants are met and abundance is keenly felt. Guest is accompanied to Piccadilly, which he learns is ‘a very good market for pretty things, and is mostly kept for the handsomer goods, as the Houses-of-Parliament market, where they sell cabbages and turnips and such like things, along with beer and the rougher kind of wine, is so near’. The space of the Houses of Parliament has been converted to the sale of necessary goods, means of subsistence and baser goods. But, and this is the crucial point of this chapter, these necessities are not the limit of productivity or consumption. Indeed, there are ‘pretty things’ for enjoyment nearly everywhere Guest turns.

The object of beauty plays an important role in the interactions, movements and desires that feature in Morris’s Nowhere-England. In being an aesthetic object, the tobacco pipe acts as both a materialisation of beauty (brought about not simply in the end product of the object, but in its very productive and consumptive processes) and an example of Morrisian handicraft. The aesthetic object in Nowhere represents a multi-faceted critique of the mechanisation and alienation of the worker under capitalism, both from her work and from the other members of her community. To elaborate, what we find in Nowhere is not just the reorganisation of the modes of production, but also the introduction of a categorically different aesthetic regime. The revolution that occurred in the interim between Morris’s late nineteenth century and the early twenty first century in which the utopian romance is set was clearly and evidently fought with reference to simultaneously social and aesthetic registers.

The most remarkable example of desire invested into an object is the aforementioned tobacco pipe that Guest procures early in the novel. Guest enters the shop with no money or goods for barter, and leaves with a beautiful pipe and a full pouch of tobacco. His interactions with the adolescents working there is a pleasure in itself, as they view him as having done them a service, simply by sharing part of the day with them, enjoying their company and partaking of their goods. His presence and patronage are appreciated as compliments to their non-alienated labour, as hospitality has become reciprocal and mutually beneficial in this utopian society. After requesting tobacco, and producing a tired and tattered piece of cloth that Guest embarrassingly uses as a pouch, the girl at the counter insists that she be allowed to give him a proper pouch to use:

The girl held up in her finger and thumb a red morocco bag, gaily embroidered, and said, ‘There, I have chosen one for you, and you are to have it: it is pretty, and will hold a lot.’

Therewith she fell to cramming it with the tobacco, and laid it down by
me and said, ‘Now for the pipe: that also you must let me choose for you; there are three pretty ones just come in.’

She disappeared again, and came back with a big-bowled pipe in her hand, carved out of some hard wood very elaborately, and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems. It was, in short, as pretty and gay a toy as I had ever seen; something like the best Japanese work, but better.

‘Dear me!’ said I, when I set eyes on it, ‘this is altogether too grand for me, or for anybody but the Emperor of the World. Besides, I shall lose it: I always lose my pipes.’

The child seemed rather dashed, and said, ‘Don’t you like it, neighbour?’

‘O yes,’ I said, ‘of course I like it.’

‘Well, then, take it,’ said she, ‘and don’t trouble about losing it. What will it matter if you do? Somebody is sure to find it, and he will use it, and you can get another.’

This scene from Nowhere demonstrates several key points about the aesthetic object and its liberation from exploitative processes. The material beauty (or, more quaintly, the ‘prettiness’) of the object is of course important, and Morris describes the ‘gold sprinkled with little gems’ to show the sparkling splendour and extravagance of the pipe. Yet this gold- and gem-encrusted pipe also demonstrates the way in which these materials that were once considered so precious, and hence were the exclusive property of wealthy elites and the cause of much bloodshed, have now been broadly democratised. The value of gold and gemstones are purely aesthetic here, for exchange is of no concern, and the commodity form has passed out of existence.

For these imagined citizens of Nowhere, the pipe is pretty and has aesthetic value, but exchange and commodity value is not even within their consciousness. There is no typical separation between the useful and the beautiful in this object, for it fulfils both aesthetic and ostensibly utilitarian purposes and the beauty of the pipe is its use. An avid clay pipe smoker himself, Morris was undoubtedly aware of the unnecessary excess in the design and crafting of the pipe (not to mention the fashioning of it, which may negatively affect the evenness, smoothness and pleasure of the pipe while actually smoking). Why, then, present a pipe made of gold and encrusted with gemstones? The most straightforward interpretation is that the pipe is demonstrative of the total disregard for previous tokens of wealth, embodied here in gold and gems.

Another possible interpretation of Guest’s tobacco pipe is that the extravagance of its design indicates the pleasure of the maker. In Morris’s politico-aesthetic theorisation, work itself (or ‘useful labour’) is a source of pleasure when it is chosen freely and perfected by the producer (or, at least, when perfection is the goal).
Handicraft labour, for Morris, both in his own artistic practice and in his utopian vision of Nowhere, is a source of great pride and pleasure. The pipe-maker, for instance, would have no need to churn out large numbers of ugly or flawed pipes once she escapes from the capital-exchange economy. The productivity of the pipe-maker, like that of any craftsman or craftswoman in Nowhere, is only limited by time and skill. Of these, only the latter is a true limitation, for though there would be training and education available, the social functioning of Nowhere acknowledges the heterogeneous nature of talents and skills, encouraging but not demanding that people pursue those activities most suited to their aptitudes, sympathies and skills as well as desires. Time would therefore only be a limitation on the labour of a certain craft (pipe making, for example) insofar as the labourer may wish to spend time outside one particular craft in order to pursue different and divergent tasks.

The other particularly striking thing about this scene is the evident pleasure the young girl has in the older man’s consumption of her wares. So, the pipe is not only pleasurable to its maker in its making, and to the consumer in his consumption, but also to the maker (and in the case of these children, distributor) in its consumption. The young girl seems unduly anxious at the suggestion that Guest may not accept the pipe, initially thinking that the only possible explanation is that he is unhappy with it. Luckily, he alleviates this concern by stating that it is too grand a piece for him to possibly accept. To assuage his guilt about possessing, and possibly even losing, this splendidiferous pipe, the girl assures him that he is not only entitled to such a pipe, but also gives the distinct impression that he may be hard pressed to find a pipe that is not similarly adorned. If no one is forced to make ugly commodities, then their existence in the world will largely fade away. In Nowhere, Morris envisages a society in which only beautiful objects (or aborted attempts at beautiful objects, as practice or learning and experience-based objects may still be put to use) are produced at all. Guest then graciously accepts the grand pipe, which he will put to good use later in the narrative. This consumption of the beautiful takes heart from Morris’s great teacher John Ruskin, who wrote in *Unto This Last* (1860) that ‘[w]ise consumption is a far more difficult art than wise production […]. The vital question, for individual and for nation, is, never “how much do they make?” but “to what purpose do they spend?”’. The pleasure in the shopkeepers’ labour also has an especial resonance in increasingly service-based economies.

In keeping with some of the ideas that Morris explores in his lectures, it is possible to view the tobacco pipe in Nowhere as a materialisation of the kind of beauty that Morris defines as radical. Morris argues that his aesthetic goal of perfecting beauty has a two-fold political agenda. In ‘The Aims of Art’ (1886), Morris tells us that his goal (achievable through art and art alone) is to soothe and mitigate suffering, and in
short to increase the pleasure and happiness of humanity. This goal is only universalised when capitalism, most especially the mechanisation and industrialism so prevalent in capitalist modes of production, is negated. The second, and more radical, of Morris’s goals in pursuing aesthetic beauty is to instil discontent in the working classes by demonstrating the possibilities for beauty that are denied to them. In other words, the aesthetic experience of beauty can be politically mobilising when it teaches the working classes about the limits of their experience under capitalism. Of course, in this future context, the beauty of the object is no longer considered radical, but rather ordinary, because beauty is the norm in a post-capitalist world. The elimination of commerce also eliminates a good deal of ugliness in Morris’s thought, for once the useful is linked to the beautiful, ‘trade finish’ is forever done away with, yielding to ‘artistic finish’. But beyond being the ontological other to ugliness, or the counter to utilitarian limitations, beauty is for Morris a necessary feature of economies that both precede and postdate capitalism. Art is the necessary norm in such an economy for it ‘adds beauty to the results of the work of man’, which has the multiple effects hitherto discussed (for example, alleviating suffering, adding to the potentiality for happiness and so on), but art also, and perhaps more importantly, ‘adds pleasure to the work itself, which would otherwise be painful and disgusting’. The medieval past and utopian future underline Morris’s playfulness with temporality.

Guest’s response to being given the gilded pipe gives an incredible account of the subject position of a nineteenth-century consumer. He complains that the object is so beautiful that it should rightfully belong to a monarch. He wonders: why do I, of all people, deserve this? To borrow a phrase from Peter Kropotkin, anyone and everyone in Nowhere should have a claim to such objects of beauty, for this is truly a site of ‘well-being for all’. Guest’s reaction to the beauty of the pipe demonstrates how culturally embedded definitions of beauty are, in striking contrast to Morris’s usual, more universalist understandings of beauty. His Victorian definition of excess and his view of the pipe as elaborate demonstrate well the value of gold and jewels in Victorian England, but also the status these aesthetics goods have in imparting value to their owner. The definition of the pipe as beautiful has a lessened meaning in Nowhere, for beauty is normative, while such a pipe would clearly have been considered exceptional (except in the hands of a monarch) in Victorian England.

Guest’s very sensory perception (in the case of the pipe, sight and texture, but in other cases he is astounded by the sounds, smells and tastes of Nowhere) has been conditioned and dulled by his Victorian experience. He is categorically unable to accept the evidence of his senses at first, and even believes that his compatriots must be deceiving him or that he must be dreaming. We witness an instance where the regime of the sensible is incompatible with the observer because his perception was
trained by a different (and opposed) regime. His repeated use of the phrase ‘very fine’ to describe his meals, tobacco, buildings and clothing indicates almost an excess of finery, and Guest’s inability fully to enjoy all that his surroundings can offer him.  

What he comes to learn in Nowhere, however, is that such needless but beautiful excess is precisely the expression of the freedom that humanity enjoys after escaping capitalist alienation. Such objects of beauty are examples of the excess that Georges Bataille celebrates, as they are neither necessary nor connected to the reproduction of productive cycles nor the reproduction of cycles of life. Such consumables, despite their capacity for being usable, are not utilitarian in that the labour, materials and energy expended in the production of such aesthetic objects are useless expenditures, precisely insofar as they do not contribute to further circulation of energy. With tobacco, for example, energy is expended by going up in smoke. Indeed, Bataille even identifies tobacco smoking specifically as a ‘purely glorious expenditure, having for its goal to procure for the smoker an atmosphere detached from the general mechanics of things’. How is it that Morris, then, can come to have such seemingly Dionysian excess and pleasure in Nowhere? Pleasure is indeed a crucial aspect of Morris’s vision, as the subtitle even indicates that this is the tale of An Epoch of Rest. In other words, Morris is not so interested in describing the economic efficiencies of full employment and non-alienated labour. Rather, he focuses on the improved pleasures of a more leisurely, non-capitalist countryside. The purpose-driven labour of Nowhere-England is importantly not useless toil; work itself is a source of pleasure, because of its usefulness, voluntary nature, vigour in pursuit and the creative possibilities it affords. This can be a powerful tactic connecting revelation with revolution, in terms of revealing attractive improvements in lifestyle that could appeal to oppressed classes on an affective level that the cold economic arguments of Marxist orthodoxy often cannot reach.

We witness a similar excessive expenditure as Chapter 6 continues and the children request that Guest toast a glass of wine with them. The ugliness and distaste of inferior goods is gone now, as the end of commercial competition has removed mechanistic efficiency from producers’ concerns. The absence of inferior goods also perplexes Guest, and he comments that he ‘made a mental note to ask Dick how they managed to make fine wine when there were no longer labourers compelled to drink rot-gut instead of the fine wine which they themselves made’. Under capitalism, finery is reserved for the leisure class, as the ‘public needs are subordinated to the interest of capitalist masters’ who can indeed ‘force the public to put up with the less desirable article’ while the workers producing said finery are explicitly excluded via scarcity and price. In this forcing of the inferior, Morris even declares that under such exploitative power relations, the ‘gross luxury’ of the rich coupled with the
‘useless toil’ and suffering of the exploited classes, results in a degradation of humanity, a state in which ‘our boasted individuality is a sham’.  

Yet, in Nowhere, everyone labours (that is, all who are able), though they engage in activities that are both productive and pleasurable, and voluntary labour is pursued by each. No one lives off inherited wealth, derived from trust funds and private estates, but rather all live off the collective wealth of the community’s past and present accumulation of ‘wealth’ more broadly defined than capital could ever allow. Wealth here is collectively shared knowledge, resources and pleasure. Something as banal as pipe-making ability, for instance, can be the result of collectively shared practices and techniques of smelting, carpentry, design and aesthetics, as well as the practical demands of a smoking instrument. So, although the folks of Nowhere are engaged in labour, they themselves benefit from this labour on multiple registers; they enjoy the fruits of their labour, and find pleasure in freely choosing which talents to hone and hence what labour to participate in, and they enjoy the benefits of leisure without the past attachment of leisure to class position. Scarcity does not exist in Nowhere, but an excess of the very finest goods. In addition, the happenstance of this scene also demonstrates the lack of distribution and consumption regulation. Guest simply walks into the tobacconist, and there is no suggestion that an individual figure of authority or any institutional structure mandates his access to either this class of goods or these specific goods. In fact, there are no ruling institutions at all in Nowhere, but rather an intricately connected form of cooperation among residents. Indeed, as Ruth Levitas comments, Morris abolishes calculus and rationing, and imagines a society in which ‘the free development of each is the free development of all’. The absence of a social machinery of rationed distribution in News from Nowhere then appears as a deliberate act of negation, not of social institutions per se, but of those specific processes.  

There is no need for such an apparatus of distribution, for abundance in subsistence exists, and mutual cooperation makes it discourteous to take more than what one will rightfully use. Such communal abundance only occurs at the expense of individual miserliness, and also demonstrates the shift in morality that occurs with this equitable utopia, a shift that accompanies parallel shifts in labour, exchange and aesthetics. If there is no need to supervise distribution, there is truly no need for the state in Morris’s vision, for the organic organisation among the people in Nowhere means that their labour processes, consumption habits, travel, discourse and everyday practices require no regulatory or controlling institutions of governance. There is no sovereign state, but rather a more complex understanding of sovereignty at work in this text.
But people in Nowhere do not fit neatly into either of Bataille’s categories of the sovereign non-labourer; for they are neither king nor queens nor the homeless.\(^3\) On the one hand, *everyone* that Guest encounters is engaged in some sort of productive, agricultural, artistic or hospitable labour. On the other hand, *everyone* also seems completely free to indulge in luxurious goods and activities. These expenditures are not excessive in Bataille’s sense, but they are sovereign in terms of free expenditure – or consumption without the expectation of reciprocity or payment. Objects such as tobacco pipes, especially those as magnificent as the one which Guest comes to possess, are not part of an accursed share, but rather they are the necessary and inevitable outcome of totally liberated labour, of a society comprised entirely of self-creating, self-ruling sovereigns.

The pipe itself is well crafted, showing the agreeableness of its production to the maker. There is nothing necessary in the pipe, insofar as necessity relates to subsistence and survival, but rather there is something necessarily human, and perhaps even sovereign, in the enjoyment of this object on the parts of both producer and consumer. It is also at this point that we can turn to Kropotkin on the social necessity of luxury goods. The tobacco pipe is a materialisation of the very needs that Kropotkin outlines as luxurious under capitalism, but simply human (as humans possess artistic needs and aspirations) under anarcho-communism.\(^3\) Of course, Kropotkin differs from Morris on the definitions and exact social roles of luxury (not to mention other more foundational differences between the two), but nonetheless it seems they reach agreement on luxurious qualities and how they fulfil some basic human desires (both in the labour to create and the enjoyment of consumption). The very existence of the pipe in Nowhere, within an open and free market for ‘pretty things’, assumes that the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing have already been met. Indeed, bread has been conquered – as Kropotkin might have put it – so luxury may now follow, as another important human need.

The splendour of the pipe also represents an inter-temporal rupture for Guest, as it is reminiscent for him of the luxurious goods of the former elite. In other words, the pipe is not so much out of place as it is out of time. Luxurious goods owned by elites in Guest’s native nineteenth-century London seem fundamentally incompatible with the agrarian simplicity of Nowhere. Yet, the exuberance of the pipe demonstrates that such artisanal processes from the pre-modern era produce precisely the most beautiful objects, surpassing the supposed efficiency and invisible hand of the modern era. The rupture represented by the pipe also indicates a coming together of aesthetic and utilitarian goals, goals that were only falsely separated under capitalism, but ‘the two elements of use and beauty’ can very much be adjoined.\(^3\) In Nowhere, then, we find in the pipe a radically inter-temporal object, anachronistically
presenting the ‘finest work’ of the past in the context of the future.

The existence of the tobacco pipe, as it is described, is also of such importance because elsewhere Morris takes such pains to discount bourgeois luxury as not only unnecessary but as directly harmful through the exploitation of the working classes. It is again helpful to consider Kropotkin, for the kind of luxury he describes is qualitatively different from the bourgeois kind, and the features of his account that are connected to Guest’s tobacco pipe in Nowhere mean that it is not ‘luxurious’ in the strictly bourgeois sense. The nuanced shift in definition is also a product of the fact that alienated, exploitative labour no longer exists in Morris’s future England, and all goods are therefore made freely, as a result of pleasure rather than suffering. In his own time, Morris was an outspoken critic of bourgeois luxury, on both political and aesthetic grounds. As a critic of capitalism, he wrote and lectured on what he refers to as the ‘foppish frivolity’ of luxury, a concept which is categorically opposed to art in his thought. Elaborating on the frivolous nature of bourgeois luxury, he claims that not only are these products not necessary but they are the direct cause of working-class exploitation, as wage labour serves to fulfil the desires of the rich few rather than the needs of the many.

Beyond this political economic critique, however, he also critiques bourgeois taste for its aesthetic ugliness. ‘Frivolous luxury’ is concerned with show, displaying the wealth and means of its owner, while ‘art’ is concerned only with beauty (and all that Morris believes beauty can accomplish in one’s life). Such bourgeois luxury is thus yet another form of exclusion with regard to the working classes. Morris established his design company in an effort to combat the ugly aesthetics not only of industrialism, but also the callous display of wealth in Victorian Britain. Wealth too is ugly to Morris, as he writes in ‘Making the Best of It’ (1879) that ‘[a]rt was not born in the palace; rather, she fell sick there, and it will take more than the bracing air of rich men’s houses to heal her again’. So, in Morris’s formulation, luxury is the ugly, garish display of a bourgeois misunderstanding of the beautiful and the societal role of art. Hence, in Nowhere, Morris is able to describe seemingly excessive, beautiful products without referring to them as luxuries, not only due to the absence of wage slavery but also due to the inherent functionality of the useful art-object. These objects are all goods but not ‘luxuries’, for the latter descriptor relies upon a class separation that no longer exists.

The other key component in redefining such goods as pleasurable rather than bourgeois luxuries is that the excellence seen in the pipe is not exceptional after all. Goods in Nowhere are crafted, not machined, and according to Morris’s sympathies this always yields superior products. From a different angle, the commonplace excellence found in Nowhere also confirms the supersession of class exploitation, as
there is no group or body of people in Morris’s utopian society that is forced to consume lesser quality goods or services. It is not as if the existence of the exuberant décor of the pipe Guest is given only exists as an exception. Indeed, there is no mention of the use of the small, cheap, clay pipes that were once so common among the working classes. To consume in Nowhere means to consume only the very best, for with the abolition of the class system comes the abolition of inferior and shoddy goods.

In his lectures, Morris is clear that the beautiful and the useful are categorically not luxurious in the bourgeois sense. In describing the adornment of tapestries, for instance, he claims in ‘The Beauty of Life’ (1880) that ‘this is not luxury, if it be done for beauty’s sake, and not for show: it does not break our golden rule: Have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful’. Among the many historical events that informed the position that Morris takes on the utility of beauty, or more precisely the interactions between the beautiful and the useful, is the Paris Commune of 1871. As Kristin Ross demonstrates, the art of the Commune was multifaceted, and not limited to so-called finery. Ross writes that:

In this imagining, the post-capitalist world would see more efficient labour, in that only the useful and the beautiful would be produced. In other words, though the move away from capitalism may decrease the efficient production of quantity, Morris argues that in the post-capitalist world where handicraft thrives, a demonstrable amelioration of the quality of goods shall take place. No more shall anyone labour at a task they do not choose, and no longer will artificial needs hold a central economic function. In fact, the entire labour force will be employed in tasks of their choosing ‘in making nothing but useful things; among which, of course, I include works of art of various kinds’.

Morris elaborates on this point that items of beauty and utility are not luxurious (most especially when they are produced in the absence of any form of exploitation) when Guest and Dick are invited to share a glass of wine at the tobacconists’ shop. The children that give Guest his pipe and tobacco do not imbibe, not because it is forbidden, but simply because it is not to their taste. Yet, upon their recognition of
the special status and features of Guest, noticeable in their claim that ‘we do not have guests like this everyday’, they insist that he try the wine of which they are clearly proud. And while Guest enjoys his delicious glass, partly due to propriety and partly due to his thirst on a hot day, he makes a ‘mental note’ to ask how this could be made when workers themselves also had access to it, he indicates that it is not only honoured visitors that receive the fineries of the community, but everyone within it. Social status is negated all the way down the line, including the very ability to enjoy all the fruits of the community’s many varied labours.

Additionally, we have the somewhat awkward excuse that Guest gives to the child for why he is especially unworthy of such a magnificent pipe; that is that he is bound to lose it. If the pipe is lost, someone else will find it, so there is no loss to the community. Not only does this indicate the unimportance of property in Nowhere, but also that the disposability of capitalism has been replaced by an impulse to reuse, or put to use that has been discarded. We may continue to dwell on the pipe, for it is not only a ‘glorious expenditure’, but perhaps also paradoxically an example of idyllic imperfection (or the sovereign accursed share). We must ask why of all possible products for Guest to look for, find and enjoy, it had to be a tobacco pipe.

Tobacco is not a crop usually sown and grown in England, having only been introduced to the European continent through imperialistic exploitation of the New World, so its presence may suggest prolonged global commerce, if not outright imperialism. Yet, would not such international trade depend upon alienated labour, if not at home then certainly abroad? Certainly, this is the case in our globalised world in which so-called ‘post-industrial’ economies exploit so-called ‘developing’ ones through relocation of production to regions where labour and environmental abuse is rife. Or are we to believe that in the future Nowhere, the English have cultivated a tobacco strain that can be produced domestically? This is a remote possibility, further undermined by the fact that Guest requests and receives Latakia, a tobacco grown and cured almost exclusively in Syria, Cyprus and Turkey. What are we to make of the ease with which Guest can procure and enjoy this particular type and blend of tobacco? The most probable explanation is that this future Nowhere-England is still engaged in international commerce, suggesting either the perpetuation of national borders, trade and something that serves as currency in such transactions, or a universalisation and globalisation of the communistic social relations that Morris envisages in England. This begs the question: need we demand of such utopias as Morris’s that they take a more internationalist perspective in explaining their visions of communism? If we do not, and are content to imagine utopias limited to a domestic context, how might this cause problems in a world in which global elites really do live exuberantly as a consequence of their vicious exploitation of the
international working class? Without a clear picture of the international context in which Nowhere exists, it is more than conceivable that an imperialistic mechanism is at work, and what props up the idyllic communal living of the metropole is the labour of people of colour in the global south.41

On the other hand, the attending girl encourages Guest to fill his (new) pouch, for he may not have access to Latakia for some time. Is it a rare commodity after all? Do we find in Latakia an example of scarcity? If scarcity does exist in this future, then we must account for the deprivation that some will experience. Such deprivation is clearly a source of inequality, for some will gain access to rare goods while others will not, though importantly this deprivation is not a source of oppression. Here again we witness Morris playing with uncertainty, tension and imperfection. We may read this detail of the pipe scene as indicative of the uncertainty in the procurement of certain pleasurable, but unnecessary, goods. This could demonstrate that other more essential goods are of greater priority, for though a particular blend of tobacco may be in greater or lesser supply, we never encounter a moment in Nowhere with an analogous shortage of food, shelter, clothing, hospitality, aesthetics or the other necessaries of life. Additionally, we may read the projected shortage of Latakia as the recognition of seasonal limitations on crops in an economic mode of production that does not ruthlessly exploit the globe to provide uniform supply in the metropole.

What, then, does Guest’s pipe demonstrate about Morris’s theory of the uniqueness of the aesthetic object? The uniqueness that Morris sees in the aesthetic object has a bearing not only on the enjoyment of the consumption, appreciation or use of the object, but also on its unique qualities of production. All objects made in pleasurable circumstances contain elements of art for Morris, and the pleasure in production exponentially increases the pleasure in consumption. Beyond this, however, the interactions with the pipe suggest something deeper at stake in the luxurious, freely and pleasurably produced object. This deeper, embedded claim is that only such art objects are authentic goods, for in a classless society a lesser pipe would not only be considered inadequate, but indeed not a pipe in actuality but only in simulacra. It is therefore only by eschewing the efficiency models of modern industrial capitalism that genuine aesthetic objects can be made.42 Such a pipe, in other words, could only be available for Guest in a post-capitalist world.

Luxuriously beautiful objects are, in this sense, anachronistic, for the pipe Guest holds in enamouring attention would only materialise beyond the strictures of mass, mechanised production. Yet, and this is similarly important, the luxurious pipe is not a commodity. The art object cannot be a commodity, for commerce (and hence exchange value) has come to an end. Owing to the end of exchange value, the emphasis on authenticity often encountered in the modern, liberal Enlightenment
and in Romanticism is undermined through its very fulfilment. Whereas it was once the case that ‘commodities are vehicles of individual expression, even the self-definition of identity’ through consumer manipulation, fashion in Nowhere is most often the expression of the individual’s desire (and often the product of their own hands).\(^{43}\) Charles Taylor’s critique of the ‘culture of “authenticity”’ is particularly pertinent here. Taylor expands on this concept as follows:

I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.\(^{44}\)

This Romantic-liberal conception of the authentic individual, Taylor argues, is manipulated by a cultural industry selling fashions as ‘lifestyles’. Even Romanticism itself is attached to a particular market emphasising the autonomy of the individual, and a concept of beauty that reveals truth through its individual representations, perceptions and authentic experiences. However, in the chapter of Morris’s News from Nowhere that has been read here, we have encountered a paradoxical development of fulfilment of authentic life in its individual complexities, absent of the manipulation of consumer culture. Must we, in abandoning the liberal-capitalist couplet, finally also abandon this language of authenticity? If so, what could we replace it with? Species being? Potentiality? Or, on a deeper level, could it be that such terms would be fundamentally problematic in a post-capitalist world in which human freedom has been actualised? In other words, would claims to authenticity even be necessary if all humans were truly free to pursue whatever tasks they wished, and goods were no longer made simply as commodities to maximise profit?

Of course, we must acknowledge the ambiguity contained in the fact that the pipe is a fictional object that Morris imagines, not an actually existing aesthetic object in the world. Yet, in this future, we see the pipe as one among many examples of public, freely enjoyed beauty. Again we see an influence and overlap with the Paris Communards, for whom ‘beauty [must] flourish in spaces shared in common and not just in special privatized preserves’, with the implication that this entails ‘reconfiguring art to be fully integrated into everyday life and not just the endpoint of special excursions’.\(^{45}\) Morris consistently calls for an art for all, a goal that shifts Morris’s relationship to his own artistic production, and leads him in at least some capacity to a politics of socialist liberation. In other words, Morris concludes that art
must be liberated from the rich, and this is part and parcel of the liberation of workers from capitalist exploitation. According to Ross:

Despair for art fueled [Morris’s] desire for a full systemic socialist transformation and his decision to work for the end of class society […]. Senseless luxury, which Morris knew cannot exist without slavery of some kind, would be replaced by communal luxury, or equality in abundance […]. Where his critics see a nostalgic entrancement on his part with art objects from the past, Morris saw an art that was not external to the everyday or, as is supposed, elevated above it and trying vainly to enter it. Morris saw a style of life […]. 46

Such a publicly experienced art would paradoxically liberate beauty from the domain of the rich while sheltering the experience of the beautiful from its potentially shocking elements. Further, Morris refuses to see his utopia – and the shared enjoyment of such niceties as the splendid pipe – as an imagined impossibility; for the changes that he describes, including the entry of the beautiful into all areas of social life, he sees as concretely achievable. Many readers of Morris, from his contemporaries like G.K. Chesterton and H.G. Wells, to later critics like E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, have been sceptical of the agrarian simplicity, naïve faith in human goodness and other predictive and reflective aspects of Morris’s utopia. We may find great value in such critiques and in broadly discussing the socio-political role of utopian thinking as critique. Regardless of the different critical views on the efficacy of Nowhere as an ideal (or even more shortsightedly, as some sort of model for emulation), it can perhaps be agreed that some value is attached to the act of imagining a future in which everyone may in fact partake in a share of the beauty in the world, even if only in so insignificant an object as a smoking pipe. Perhaps if we start there, with democratising singularly beautiful objects, then we can form the basis for more broad-scale actions or demands for change in the aesthetics and functionality of our communities, forms of labour and even social interactions. Morris put it as follows: ‘[a]s to its being impossible, I do not believe it. The men of this generation even have accomplished matters that but a very little while ago would have been thought impossible.’ 47

NOTES
1. Bataille’s life also intersected with other, more high profile occultists, scholars and avant-gardists of the early- to mid-twentieth-century European bourgeois intelligentsia, including most notably Alexander Kojève and Jacques Lacan. It is also arguable that Bataille was among the most significant influences on the thought of Michel Foucault.


11. Of course, there is an extensive body of scholarly work focusing on objects and concepts of beauty in Morris's thought. See, for example, Jeffrey Petts, 'Good Work and Aesthetic Education: William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Beyond', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 42:1 (Spring 2008), 30-45; and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered by the Beauty of Life', in *William Morris and the Art of Everyday Life*, ed. by Wendy Perkins (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 109-32.


14. *CW*, XVI, p. 34.

15. This is also the only aesthetic object that Morris compares to the 'finest Japanese' work. When so many of the other cultural references in Nowhere are Gothic or Italian, this allusion to Japan stands out prominently. For further discussion, see Tony Pinkney, 'Japaneseising Morris's Utopia' [in Japanese, trans. by Yasuo Kabawata], *Eigo Seinen/Rising Generation*, 154:3 (March 2009), 682-86.


17. It is also worth noting that (mostly cheap, clay) pipes were ubiquitous in Morris's time. Given what we now know about tobacco's links to cancer and other health concerns, we could certainly imagine a different example that is perhaps more germane today. It is anachronistic to impose our own knowledge upon Morris's century, but the idea here is that he likely describes the pipe not only because he was a smoker himself, but because so many of his contemporaries were smokers as well (especially among the working classes). We could imagine an equally (or more) common commodity now, and perhaps imagine a twenty-first-century description along the lines of a particularly beautiful cell phone or other such handheld device.

18. For example, Dick presents his handcrafted belt-buckle as an 'early' attempt (and one that he is not particularly proud of) that is still utilised and is indeed still beautiful, *CW*, XVI, pp. 6-8. In fact, part of the beauty of this object has to do with its imperfection. Aside from the obvious Ruskinian resonances here, Morris presents a respect for the handcrafted object strikingly similar to the sixth-century BCE Chinese sage Lao-Tzu's connection between achievement (and so-called high perfection) and minor imperfections elaborated upon in the Tao Te Ching.
20. CW, XXIII, pp. 81-97. See also Morris's discussion in 'How We Live and How We Might Live', CW, XXIII, p. 21.
21. Ibid., XXII, p. 365.
22. Ibid., p. 356.
24. CW, XVI, pp. 14, 37, 38, 45, 97.
26. CW, XVI, p. 34.
27. CW, XXII, pp. 332-33.
28. Ibid., pp. 341, 333.
31. Kropotkin, pp. 94-106.
32. CW, XXII, p. 155.
33. Ibid., p. 165. See also Morris's opposition between 'luxury' and 'art' in ibid., p. 148.
34. Ibid., p. 113.
35. In this way, Morris anticipates the luxury and maker cultures that followed during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that often put a premium on the hand-crafted, the tool marks of the crafts worker and notions of authenticity in both production and consumption practices.
36. CW, XXII, p. 77.
38. CW, XXII, p. 350.
39. Ibid., XVI, p. 38.
40. Ibid.
42. CW, XXIII, pp. 192-214.
44. Ibid., p. 475.
45. Ross, p. 58.
46. Ibid., pp. 62-63.
47. CW, XXII, p. 173.
Cheers and Jeers: Lecturer-Audience Interaction in the Socialist Movement

Anna Vaninskaya

Introduction

During the nineteenth century, lectures and lecturers came in many shapes and sizes, from a ‘Greats’ lecture for the Oxford University elite to the scientific lecture ‘for the people’, disseminating useful knowledge to the general public.1 ‘Edutainment’ lectures were particularly popular – audiences of half a thousand would gather to hear George Birkbeck’s free lectures on the ‘mechanical arts’ in Glasgow during the 1800s, and at mid-century thousands would flock to see the optical illusion lectures at the Polytechnic Institution in London. If public science lecturing had attained the status of visual spectacle, literary, artistic and political lecturing turned international: big names such as Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde went on lecture tours to America (as did hundreds of lesser names such as the Findlater sisters), while Americans like Henry George made highly influential trips in the other direction.

The types of speakers were as varied as the types of lectures. There were central committees supplying professional speakers for local venues, but also small armies of itinerant individual demonstrators who made a precarious living dragging around their cumbersome equipment, and star lecturers who shared their wisdom for free. Oxford fellows interested in science would lecture about their passion on the side, while successful speakers from one religious or educational circuit (of Unitarians or Quakers, or learned, Lit. and Phil. or county antiquarian societies) would be invited to contribute to another. Clergymen had been engaged in lecturing throughout the nineteenth century, teaching local history, archaeology, geology and natural history (though rarely touching politics and economics). Some were motivated by religion, others saw lecturing as a parish duty, and community education as part of the clergyman’s vocation. At the turn of the twentieth century they supplemented regional university staff, or contributed to the rural tutorial movement, while in the cities lower middle-class self-improvers like E. M. Forster’s fictional clerk Leonard Bast attended
evening lectures by literary and popular scientific speakers.

National lecturing circuits also developed early on to service the Mechanics' Institutes, which could draw on a pool of amateurs as well as professional speakers from the universities. Later in the nineteenth century these linked up with the University Extension Movement, which generated its own national infrastructure, and by the early twentieth century a whole world of adult education lecturing – the Workers' Educational Association most famously, but also Labour Colleges, as well as women's higher education bodies – had come into being. Children were not left out of account: Socialist Sunday school lecturers during the 1900s were provided with manuals and instructions on content and lecture organisation. Some of this content was generated by socialists such as Edward Carpenter, who himself started out as an astronomy lecturer in the Extension Movement. More was supplied by famous lecturers of the Ethical, Positivist, Secularist and Moral Education movements, such as Frederick James Gould.

Carpenter left Extension lecturing because it was wreaking havoc on his health. Here is how he describes it in his autobiography My Days and Dreams (1916), in the long chapter devoted to University Extension during the 1870s:

As long as the lectures went on I was in perpetual suffering with my eyes, and anxiety – sometimes being really unable to prepare the work before me. Then on this came the strain of lecturing – traveling to a place with a great box of apparatus, arriving there three or four hours before the time of the meeting, getting all one’s apparatus and experiments ready (in some wretched schoolroom with no assistance), having often in those days to make my oxygen gas myself for the lantern; to rush out when all was ready for a cup of tea, to return in time to take an hour’s preliminary class, and then to give the lecture; all this was terribly exhausting. But it by no means ended there. After the lecture some local manufacturer and patron would carry one off to his residence for the night, there to meet a few friends at supper, and to talk and be talked to till the small hours of the morning. When one got to bed – a vibrating mass of nerves – sleep was out of the question. There were all the pupils and their faces, and their needs and their personalities; there were the tiresome patrons and committee people, in endless dance on my brain. Often and often I never slept a wink – only to get up the next day and go through a similar round. Often and often when I got back to my lodgings I had to lie on my back on the sofa for hours – not even then to sleep – but simply to rest and soothe the nerve-pain throughout my body. I felt my life was becoming wrecked and I remember at last swearing a great oath to myself that somehow
or other I would get out of it and find my health again.\textsuperscript{2}

He also describes another feature of lecturing that one does not usually associate with its educational variety, but that loomed very large for the political lecturer of any stripe:

One term […] I was lecturing at Barnsley. The place was a little local theatre, unused at the time; but about the middle of the term it was taken by a traveling company, and we had to move into another building. The last evening of our occupation, some scenery was already up, and I, having affixed my star diagrams to the shifts and side-scenes, was lecturing from the stage when a belated stranger, a rough navvy or collier – no doubt attracted by the theatrical bills already out – came stumping down the middle gangway and ultimately dropped into a seat. He remained quiet for a good time; and then – his patience fairly giving out – he rose up and spoke. ‘Look ’ere’, he said, ‘I’ve been sittin’ ’ere ’alf an hour – and I haven’t understood a word of what you’ve been saying, and I don’t believe you do neither.’

I felt for the poor man – I deeply sympathized. He had come in no doubt on the expectation of a theatrical treat – got in too without paying at the door, which was nuts, as they say – and now – what had he come to?

There was a scene. Everybody jumped round on their seats. The local Secretary – a tiny little man, a Frenchman, a dentist – approached the bold stranger.

‘You must sit down’, he said.
‘\textit{Shan’t} sit down!’
‘Den you must go out of de room.’
‘\textit{Shan’t} go out of the room.’
‘Den I shall have to make you.’

The situation was too ludicrous – this tiny Gallic David and this huge and beery Goliath! What might have happened we know not. Fortunately the stranger took the better part, and said –

‘I’m sure I don’t want to stay ’ere any longer’ – and left us with contempt to our Astronomy.\textsuperscript{3}

\textbf{The Socialist Lecture}

The altercation with a member of the audience, or more precisely, the exchange with the heckler, was a familiar pastime for any political or religious street corner orator of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period, whether suffragette or socialist, Tory or
Liberal, Secularist or Salvation Army. The street lecture or the public meeting address was by definition an interactive event, and often the lecturer gave back as good as he, or she, got. We lack a proper history of heckling, but we know that the audience’s engagement could range from provocative questioning to pelting with rotten vegetables, while the speaker in turn could respond with anything from a witty retort to a heavy-handed insult. In the lore of the fin-de-siècle socialist movement, George Bernard Shaw, who could speechify non-stop for three hours, was known to court hecklers, countering their ‘yells of rage’ with his renowned wit; while William Morris, who found public speaking an uphill battle, simply grew infuriated, and was known to growl ‘Dam fool! Dam fool!’.

Audiences had more methods at their disposal. When Ramsay MacDonald gave an anti-war speech in Leicester in 1918 he was first drowned out by strains of Rule Britannia and then attacked with a flag by retired soldiers. He had to be escorted from the scene by the police (and eventually lost his seat). The audience could also turn against itself: people trying to ask questions at National War Aims Committee meetings during the Great War were shouted down by cries of ‘pacifist’ and ‘coward’,
and it was not unknown for a public meeting to end in a fight between adherents of different political factions. Audience abuse took not only verbal and physical, but print form. It was not just to each other’s face – during the lecture itself or in the give-and-take afterwards – that opinions were aired, they could also be made public in newspapers and autobiographies, or shared privately in letters and diaries. Lectures by eminent persons were routinely reported in the national and local press, sometimes sparking an exchange of hostilities in print, such as the flurry of letters that followed Morris’s lectures in Manchester in 1883 and 1884, the latter of which resulted in the dismissal of the lecture organiser from the Manchester City Council.

It is one of the clichés of the historiography that ‘preaching the Word’ was the primary function of socialist bodies during this period, and lectures were indeed at the centre of late-Victorian and Edwardian socialist propaganda activity. Debates about the nature of the intended audience: whether metropolitan middle class, ruling elite, or Northern labourer, determined socialist policy and the formation of various societies and organisations, for education, agitation and the making of working-class socialists involved speech-making of a very different sort from the kind practised in Parliament. Delivery styles were analysed: Shaw, in his capacity as a popular professional orator, wrote to H. G. Wells during his brief stint in the Fabian Society advising him on his posture and voice projection, and explaining how he too could become an ‘effective public speaker’ or ‘platform athlete in propaganda’. The cockney novelist and Fabian Edwin Pugh explained that ‘[o]ne has only to stand in a crowd gathered round a speaker to discover that when he deals in mere figures his listeners yawn; but when he gives them visions they are rapt in attention’. But apathy was not the only problem. Audiences could be downright hostile, and making socialists of people against their will was a tough business. It was no wonder if the street-corner orator, hoarse from responding to the taunts and heckles, lost his patience – he was not dealing with ideal or implied readers in a text, but with real listeners present in the body in the street or lecture hall.

But audience recalcitrance only led to a renewal of efforts on the socialists’ part. In a single year – 1891 – ninety Fabian speakers gave a total of 1,400 lectures at public meetings of every imaginable stripe, and they were but one sect, and not a particularly numerous one at that, of the broad church radical movement. Once one factors in all the anarchists, Social Democrats, trade union organisers, Independent Labour Party activists, and the like, one can begin to picture what Wells called the welter of ‘gatherings and talks’, ‘meetings and conferences’, ‘the comings and goings of audiences and supporters that were like the eddy-driven drift of paper in the street’.

Even an otherwise busy person like Morris managed to deliver up to five lectures...
a week during the peak years of his activity in the mid 1880s, skimming up and down the country along the railways, crossing paths with the Russian anarchist Prince Kropotkin or the secularist turned socialist turned theosophist Annie Besant. To get a sense of the extent of this world one need only thumb the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of ephemeral publications with titles like *Lectures Delivered to the Young Socialist*...
Guild, or look at the Commonweal ‘Lecture Diary’ and listings of ‘Open-air Propaganda’ with times and places, or the Clarion reports of branch life in its ‘Notes from the Front’ section, with lists of meetings and lectures by town, and advertisements of bazaars and fairs. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that every issue of every newspaper of the socialist and labour movements from the 1880s until the Great War (not to mention local papers and national papers such as The Times), carried lecture notices. Pamphlets advised potential converts who wanted ‘to help the Socialist movement’ to become ‘public speaker[s]’, ‘to form an audience indoors, or make a crowd at an out-door meeting’. The lectures themselves, often accompanied by bands and choirs as a kind of opening or closing act, could take place anywhere. In London, possible venues included Hyde Park Corner, the South Place Institute, St. James’s Hall, Essex Hall, Caxton Hall and Morris’s Hammersmith coach house. And all over the country Free Trade and town halls, assembly rooms, theatres, schools, working-men’s clubs, Radical clubs, wagonettes in fields (rain or shine) and the backs of Clarion Vans were used for lecturing purposes. The Red Vans of the English Land Restoration League and the Yellow Vans of the Land Nationalisation Society travelled the country holding meetings and distributing literature.

Outdoor lectures were generally free, with audiences ranging from a score to tens of thousands, while indoor ones usually charged admission, though star speakers easily got a full house with minimum advertising. Female lecturers were just as popular as male ones. Some of the most effective of the first generation of socialist itinerant propagandists were women like Annie Besant, Katharine Conway, Margaret McMillan and Caroline Martyn: they and many others like them eclipsed their male counterparts on the platform. There was also a constant movement between centre and periphery: important activists (such as Robert Blatchford, McMillan or Alex Gossip) relocated to London from Manchester, Bradford or Glasgow; lecturers and branch organisers dispersed from London to every town and hamlet across the land.

The socialist lecture circuit was thus not much different from any number of other religious, political, educational or entertainment circuits: it was the product of a national network of socialist societies, centrally based in London or a handful of other cities, with local branches throughout the country, and varying regional distributions. Orators from one society would lecture for most others; verbatim reports of set-piece debates between socialists and prominent ideological opponents like Charles Bradlaugh would be published, and lectures of all kinds were often reprinted as pamphlets by the various socialist society presses, or as essay collections by more mainstream publishers. This was typical of a culture where academic lectures, for instance, routinely formed the basis for printed works of scholarship; but while a Friedrich Max Müller lecture looked much the same in print as a Morris one, the
original live setting could not have been more different. Morris spoke to his share of dignified middle-class audiences, but he also lectured at political meetings accompanied by songs and music, surrounded by banners and rowdy hecklers.10

In the decade from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties he left meticulous records of his reception by various audiences, and reading these accounts gives a good taste of the ups and downs of an itinerant speaker’s punishing schedule. Morris’s lecture tour of Scotland, including all the major cities and a number of villages, was plagued by bad turn-out due to inclement weather; a few months later over the course of five days he lectured in Manchester, Bolton, Blackburn, Liverpool and Rochdale.11 He got his share of cheers of course, especially up North; in fact, he ‘couldn’t help contrasting our cockneys much to their disadvantage with the northerners’.12 ‘I had about a dozen [Manchester working men] round me after my Saturday’s address’, he wrote in an 1885 letter to Andreas Scheu, ‘and we had a brisk conversation’, and, on another occasion, ‘very eager discussion’.13 Generally, Morris enjoyed question time, as it was an opportunity to find out ‘what the audience thought about Socialism’, and tea ‘with enquirers and carpers […] [was] a usual feature of these gatherings’.14 In Sheffield, his lectures were well attended and well received, ‘indeed I have never stood before a more sympathetic audience’. In Liverpool ‘the hall was crowded with an audience mostly of working men, who not only listened with very great attention, but took up all the points […] with very hearty applause’. They were ‘eager to ask questions’ and to ‘learn’. The eight hundred-strong working-class audience in Norwich ‘seemed to be quite in sympathy with the movement’, and a few years later the Norwich branch welcomed him and the other speakers with ‘singing and recitation, and agreeable converse generally’; speeches were ‘received with much enthusiasm’, and the questions demonstrated that the working-class audience ‘took up every point in the [difficult] lecture’.15 ‘They did ‘not come to stare or loaf, but to listen’.16 Especially exciting was a meeting on a ‘waggonette’ in front of an audience of ten thousand, which opened with the singing of ‘No Master’ by the ‘comrades of the Branch’, and competed with a Salvation Army band.17

The members of these audiences left their own recollections: one branch report described an ‘enthusiastic reception’, audience participation in the discussion, and the conversion of four new members: ‘[w]e closed as usual with singing’.18 The reaction to another of Morris’s lectures was described by a listener thus: ‘we workmen […] soon realised the presence of a champion, forgot ourselves, and frequently burst into rounds of applause’.19 Charles Rowley, founder of the Ancoats Brotherhood, remembered how Morris ‘lectured for us at Ancoats in his Socialistic days to enthusiastic audiences of nearly a thousand […]. It was delightful to watch his patience when the same old questions were asked by labouring men, or his vehemence
when flooring some well-to-do jabberer.\textsuperscript{20} James Leatham, an activist in the Social Democratic Federation, and John Bruce Glasier, future chairman of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), recalled Morris’s preaching in their memoirs. Leatham described Morris as follows:

He was speaking from a lorry pitched on a piece of waste land close to the Ship Canal, his whole environment probably as distasteful to him as possible. It was a wild March morning, and he would not have been asked to speak out of doors, but he expressed a desire to do so; and so there he was, talking quietly but strenuously, drawing a laugh every now and then by some piece of wagish wisdom from the undulating crowd, of working men mostly, who stood in the hollow and the slopes before him. There would be quite two thousand of them […]. In spite of the bitter cold of the morning, scarcely a man moved from the crowd […].\textsuperscript{21}

One of those present in that crowd poured his response to Morris’s lecture into verse:

\begin{quote}
Like an archangel in the morning sun
He stood with a high message, and men heard
The rousing syllables, and scarcely stirred,
Rough though they were, until the tale was done.
Then there arose full many a doubting one
Who craved interpretation of a word
So big with meaning, but so long deferred:
And the great Poet scorned to answer none.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\textbf{‘Sick of talking to you’}

Reporting lectures such as these in \textit{Commonweal} some years earlier, Morris concluded that ‘every where people are willing and eager to listen to Socialists’; but to his diary he confided a very different story.\textsuperscript{23} Of a set of lectures in 1887 he wrote: ‘I thought the applause rather hollow […] they seemed to me a very discouraging set of men […] . The frightful ignorance and want of impressibility of the average English workman floors me at times’; ‘[m]y Socialism was gravely listened to [by the audience at a Radical Club] […] but taken with no enthusiasm; and in fact however simply one puts the case for Socialism one always rather puzzles an audience’; and on another occasion: ‘the audience was all made up of labourers and their wives: they were very quiet and attentive […] but I doubt if most of them understood anything I said […] . I wonder sometimes if people will remember in times to come to what a
depth of degradation the ordinary English workman has been reduced.’ The diary entries are peppered with admissions of ‘dead’ or ‘wretched’ failures, each providing a ‘fresh opportunity (if I needed it) of gauging the depths of ignorance and consequent incapacity of following an argument which possesses the uneducated averagely stupid person’.24

These opinions were not meant for the ears of the stupid people in question, but there were those in the socialist movement who made a habit of saying such things out loud. H. M. Hyndman, the leader of the Social Democratic Federation, was notorious for taunting his listeners from the platform ‘with their apathy, indifference and ignorance’. In his autobiographical account of ‘speaking at public meetings in halls and in the open air’, he painted a picture of working-class crowds in the East End of London, at once hopelessly debauched and sharply inquisitive. He accused them to their faces of being ‘idiots’, incapable of understanding their own power, ‘destitute of any sense’ to put up as they did with their conditions of life instead of organising politically; his disgust with the ‘beer-swilling, gin-absorbing’ public of the Radical Clubs is apparent.25

Hyndman was never one to hide his real views: on separate occasions he called the working class ‘rotten’, ‘reactionary’, ‘ignorant’, ‘conceited’, ‘degraded’, ‘embruted’, ‘stolid’, ‘apathetic, addicted to gambling and drink […] [and] indifferent to their own welfare’: ‘the English working classes are not nice people to work for’.26 In 1887 he identified the calm acceptance of references to ‘their apathy and ignorance, which I do not believe would be put up with by the men of any other nation’, as a notable characteristic of the English workers.27 But docility would have been a prerequisite in order to withstand lectures by the likes of James Leatham, the bulk of which were devoted to the chastisement of the ‘men in this hall’ for their belief in the necessity of capitalism, their acceptance of the status quo, their trades unionism, their selfish thriftiness and their acquiescence in half-measures like temperance, vegetarianism and Co-operation. It was quite in the order of things for Leatham to tell his listeners: ‘you prefer the man with money to the man with brains and good intentions. You snub your political friends, and send them away sick at heart, and despairing of you and your cause. It is little wonder if at times we get sick of you, get sick of talking to you […]’.28

No socialist leader failed to leave behind a record of insults, even if they were not always delivered in the lecture hall. Beatrice Webb confided her contemptuous thoughts to her diary, but the influential propagandist Robert Blatchford asked his intended audience outright in his best-seller *Merrie England*: ‘[i]s there any logic in you, John Smith? Is there any perception in you? Is there any sense in you?’ 29 To his friend and *Clarion* cofounder Alex Thompson he wrote: ‘[a]re these creatures worth fighting
for; are they fit to fight alongside of? By God, Alec, I feel ashamed. I do. I feel degraded. We cannot win battles with such a rabble rout." To J. B. Glasier he complained of their selfishness, ‘apathy, ignorance, stupidity, and meanness’. Glasier himself, a veteran of the lecture circuit, described workers as ‘dunderheads and donkeys […] sneaks, flunkeys, cowards, traitors and nincompoops’; John Trevor, founder of the Labour Church, called them ‘docile, idle and stupid’; H. G. Wells berated ‘the ignorance, the want of courage, the stupid want of imagination of the very poor, too shy and timid and clumsy to face any change they can evade’.

But the poor got their own back, not just in real life, but in literature. Robert Tressell’s Edwardian working-class novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), not only featured what is probably the quintessential scene of abuse by the audience – the stoning, nearly to death, of an itinerant socialist lecturer – but also included the whole spectrum of responses from jeering, heckling, laughter and catcalls, to witty interchange, cries of ‘it’s a lot of bloody rot’, questioning interruptions and indignant broadsides, the latter from the increasingly exasperated socialist characters. Frank Owen, the socialist hero and house decorator by trade, periodically harangues his workmates during the lunch hour, or is persuaded to lecture from a stepladder for their entertainment. The ensuing descriptions of interaction between speaker and audience, very likely autobiographical, are probably the best evidence we have, in the absence of actual recordings, of the dynamics of a hundred other such meetings in real life. But one should not neglect the stylisation: note, for instance, the difference between the fluent literary English of the working-class lecturer and the ungrammatical phrases and dropped aitches of his anti-socialist audience.

On one occasion, Owen proceeds as follows:

‘In some of my previous lectures I have endeavoured to convince you that money is in itself of no value and of no real use whatever. In this I am afraid I have been rather unsuccessful.’

‘Not a bit of it, mate’, cried Crass, sarcastically. ‘We all agrees with it.’

‘Ear, ear’, shouted Easton. ‘If a bloke was to come in ’ere now and orfer to give me a quid – I’d refuse it!’

A bit later:

‘Therefore while the money system lasts we are bound to have poverty and all the evils it brings in its train.’

‘Oh, of course everybody’s an idjit except you’, sneered Crass, who was beginning to feel rather fogged.
'I rise to a pint of order’, said Easton.
‘And I rise to order a pint’, cried Philpot.
‘Order what the bloody ’ell you like’, remarked Harlow, ‘so long as I ’aven’t got to pay for it.’
‘Mine’s a pint of porter’, observed the man on the pail.
‘The pint is’, proceeded Easton, ‘when does the lecturer intend to explain to us what is the real cause of poverty.’
‘Ear, ’ear’, cried Harlow. ‘That’s what I want to know, too.’
‘And what I should like to know is, who is supposed to be givin’ this ’ere lecture?’ inquired the man on the pail.
‘Why, Owen, of course’, replied Harlow.
‘Well, why don’t you try to keep quiet for a few minutes and let ’im get on with it?’
‘The next B—r wot interrupts’, cried Philpot, rolling up his shirt-sleeves and glaring threateningly round upon the meeting. ‘The next b—r wot interrupts goes out through the bloody winder!’
At this, everybody pretended to be very frightened […]
‘Poverty’, resumed the lecturer, ‘consists in a shortage of the necessaries of life – or rather, of the benefits of civilisation.’
‘You’ve said that about a hundred times before’, snarled Crass.
‘I know I have; and I have no doubt I shall have to say it about five hundred times more before you understand what it means.’
‘Get on with the bloody lecture’, shouted the man on the pail. ‘Never mind arguin’ the point.’
‘Well, keep horder, can’t you?’ cried Philpot, fiercely, ‘and give the man a chance.’
‘All these things are produced in the same way’, proceeded Owen [...]34

And still later:

‘All these people help to consume the things produced by labour. We will now divide them into separate classes. Those who help to produce; those who do nothing, those who do harm, and those who are engaged in unnecessary work.’

‘And’, sneered Crass, ‘those who are engaged in unnecessary talk.’35

On another occasion the housepainters arrange a mock lecture and the ‘chairman’ promises to use his hammer-cum-gavel to bash out the brains of anyone who ventures
to disturb the meeting. Nevertheless, following a particularly intricate passage about the change from chattel slavery to feudalism to capitalism, the speaker is interrupted with a cry of ‘I believe you must ’ave swollered a bloody dictionary’. When the lecture proceeds to an explanation of the nationalisation of the railways and the fate of the shareholders, Crass interrupts: ‘[t]hey could all be knocked on the ’ead, I suppose’ […]. “Or go to the workhouse”, said Slyme. “Or to ’ell”, suggested the man behind the moat.” During a lull in the question and answer session, the chairman asks sardonically: ‘[i]s there any more questions? […] Now is your chance to get some of your own back, but don’t hall speak at once.’

Numerous similar scenes pepper the novel, but they are not there solely for comic effect. Every jeer from the fictional audience is a reminder of the very real difficulties and failures a socialist activist like Tressell himself had to face. From the 1890s members of certain socialist bodies were urged ‘to “permeate” their workplaces […] and to compile lists of speakers willing to cycle up to 50 miles at the weekends to address public meetings in towns and villages with no socialist organisations’. The town dwellers in the novel receive just such a visit, but the hostility and violence with
which the visiting lecturers meet dampen the hopes of the home-grown agitators. The speaker who gets seriously injured by a stone turns renegade and hires himself out as an orator to the Liberals. He gives up trying to ‘reason with [the workers], to uplift them, to teach them the way to higher things’. They have never had an ‘independent thought in their lives’, he tells one of the novel’s heroes; they are savages and beasts: ‘[t]he only things they feel any real interest in are beer, football, betting and [sex]’. They are the enemy of those who try to help them. When he served his fellow workmen out of love and ‘sought to teach them how to break their chains’ they hated and injured him, when he helped their masters to rob them they respected him.41 The renegade’s predicament would have sounded familiar to numerous real-life activists for the cause. But unlike James Leatham’s ideal agitator, whose ‘hopes [are] dashed again and again’, who is abused and mocked and ‘plunged in despair and doubt’, but does not let his ‘hopes and [his] desires go’, the traitor in Tressell’s novel has lost all faith in the people’s potential for enlightenment.42 Frank Owen nearly follows suit. Like Hyndman, Blatchford and Leatham, he is forever being appalled by the behaviour of the workers. Instead of listening to him and trying to understand things for themselves, they prefer to believe the propaganda of their masters: ‘a flock of foolish sheep [who have] placed themselves under the protection of a pack of ravening wolves’.43 When he expresses his indignation with his audience he is merely countering abuse with abuse.

Conclusion

A description of audience reaction very much in the vein of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was offered by a contributor to the New Age in 1908, in an article called ‘The Pathos of the Poll’. A working-class crowd gathers in the ‘Market-place in front of the Town Hall’ to hear the results of a poll. They cheer the Liberal and Tory candidates, then there is a silence, this time broken by laughter from various parts of the great concourse. Then came the final figures; an insignificant total. It was the poll of the Socialist, and the crowd booed! Booed and jeered; rocked with laughter at such a huge joke; exercised their wit on the subject. It was great! ‘Should think that’ll about finish t’ Socialists!’44

The crowd is poor and overworked, yet it exults when it is told by the ‘victors’ that the

‘exhausted seedling of rampant Socialism’ had been strangled […] that the
people had some common sense, and would not have ‘this Socialist twaddle rammed down their throats’. […] Not five minutes after, the representatives of the ‘exhausted seedling’ were on the market-ground. The red flags were held aloft, and from a humble chair it was announced that that meeting was the first of the campaign for next November.15

No sooner are they knocked down than the socialist lecturers rise again. And no matter how many of them shared Ramsay MacDonald’s perception that, as he once told an ILP meeting: ‘[w]e can talk socialism seriously to [the man in the street] and we will likely disgust him’, many more believed that the show, or rather, the lecture, must go on.16

NOTES
1. There is a very large secondary literature dealing with different aspects of Victorian lecturing. For two important kinds, see Bernard Lightman’s Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2007) and Lawrence Goldman’s Dons and Workers: Oxford and Adult Education since 1850 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
3. Ibid., pp. 84-85.
7. Edwin Pugh, ‘The Figure Habit’, New Age, 13 June 1907, p. 103.
9. H. G. Wells, Ann Veronica (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909), pp. 124, 137. Wells also left documentary accounts of such meetings, such as this one from New Worlds for Old (1908), in the chapter on ‘Revolutionary Socialism’: ‘[m]y memory […] carries me to the dusky largeness of a great meeting in Queen’s Hall, and I see again the back of Mr. Hyndman’s head moving quickly, as he receives and answers questions. It was really one of the strangest and most interesting meetings I have ever attended. It was a great rally of the Social Democratic Federation, and the place – floor, galleries and platform – was thick but by no means overcrowded with dingy, earnest people. There was a great display of red badges and red ties, and many white faces, and I was struck by the presence of girls and women with babies. It was more like the Socialist meetings of the popular novel than any I had ever seen before. In the chair that night was Lady Warwick, that remarkable intruder into the class conflict, a blond lady, rather expensively dressed, so far as I could judge, about whom the atmosphere of class consciousness seemed to thicken. Her fair hair, her floriferous hat, told out against the dim multitudinous values of the gathering unquenchably; there were moments when one might have fancied it was simply a gathering of village tradespeople about the lady patroness, and at the end of the proceedings, after the red flag had been waved, after the “Red Flag” had been sung by a choir and dimply echoed by the audience, some one moved a vote of thanks to the Countess
in terms of familiar respect that completed the illusion. Mr. Hyndman’s lecture was entitled “In the Rapids of Revolution” […]’. H. G. Wells, New Worlds for Old (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), pp. 250-51.


16. Ibid., p. 385.

17. Ibid., pp. 128, 383-84.

18. Morris, Socialist Diary, p. 34.


20. Quoted in Frow, p. 10.


22. Quoted in Frow, p. 23, from the Clarion of 31 March 1894.

23. Morris, Political Writings, p. 130.

24. Morris, Socialist Diary, pp. 23, 26, 33, 42.


31. Quoted in Manton, p. 16.


34. Ibid., pp. 265-66. (Afterwards Tressell).

35. Ibid., p. 268.
41. Tressell, pp. 543-46.
42. Leatham, *Class War*, p. 16.
43. Tressell, p. 541.
45. Humphrey, p. 90.
The tenth chapter of Eric Hobsbawm’s *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (2011) is entitled ‘The Influence of Marxism 1880-1914’. In it Morris is, as we would expect, a significant presence. He first appears, in a rather complicated formulation, when Hobsbawm observes that ‘the most interesting left-wing theorist in England […] was, characteristically, not even a Fabian socialist but a progressive liberal: J. A. Hobson. The native middle-class intellectuals were numerically and intellectually negligible, with the exception of William Morris.’

We are thus led to expect to see Morris as a striking exception to the rule, as far as England is concerned, though his appearance is deferred. He next appears in a general discussion of the relationship between artistic and political avantgardes: ‘[t]here is no necessary or logical connection between the two phenomena, since the assumption that what is revolutionary in the arts must also be revolutionary in politics is based on a semantic muddle’. Nevertheless, the two groups may often be ‘pressed into a not unfriendly coexistence’ by their shared hostility to ‘the morals and value systems of bourgeois society’. Cultural historians are well aware that heterodoxies often overlap, and the British socialist movement of the 1880s ‘provides several examples’, including Eleanor Marx and Bernard Shaw. Hobsbawm concludes convincingly: ‘[t]he avantgarde Arts and Crafts movement (William Morris, Walter Crane) was drawn into (Marxian) socialism’, while ‘the avantgarde of sexual liberation (Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis) operated in the same milieu’, as did Oscar Wilde.

Hobsbawm then remarks that, as Marx and Engels had published little about the coexistence of artistic and political avantgardes, the early Marxists were ‘not seriously constrained in their tastes by a classical doctrine’. They worked out an aesthetic based on the belief that art should cast light on contemporary capitalism, with special...
attention to and sympathy with the workers. This did not limit them to avantgarde art – traditional artists and writers could also fulfill these expectations. The 1880s and 1890s was ‘an era dominated, at least in prose literature, by realistic writers with strong social and political interests, or those who could be interpreted in that way’. These included ‘the great Russian novelists’, the drama of Ibsen and other Scandinavian literature, but ‘above all the writers of schools described as “naturalist”, who were patentely preoccupied with those aspects of capitalist reality from which conventional artists turned aside’. These naturalists included the French novelists Zola and Maupassant, the Germans Hauptmann and Sudermann, and the Italian Verga. The working class also assumed an important position as a subject in visual art at the time, particularly in the Low Countries; the paintings of Constantin Meunier (1831-1905) provide notable examples, followed later by ‘Van Gogh’s explorations in the world of the poor’.

The applied and decorative arts showed a closer ‘direct and conscious’ link with socialism than the fine arts. This was especially true in the British Arts and Crafts movement, ‘whose great master William Morris (1834-96) became a sort of Marxist and made both a powerful theoretical as well as an outstanding practical contribution to the social transformation of the arts’. Hobsbawm continues:

> These branches of the arts took as their point of departure not the individual and isolated artist but the artisan. They protested against the reduction of the creative worker-craftsman into a mere ‘operative’ by capitalist industry, and their main object was not to create individual works of art, ideally designed to be contemplated in isolation, but the framework of human daily life, such as villages and towns, and their interior furnishings.

For economic reasons, their main market was found among ‘the culturally adventurous bourgeoisie and the professional middle classes – a fate familiar to champions of a “people’s theatre” then and later’. A footnote states that for the same reasons a ‘people’s opera’ did not develop at all, despite the revolutionary composer Gustave Charpentier having created a working-class heroine in Louise in 1900, and the entry of an element of verismo in opera of this period like *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

No other historical account that I know of includes drama and music in its discussion of the reasons why socialists failed to reach their target working-class audiences. Hobsbawm goes on to argue that the Arts and Crafts movement, and the *art nouveau* that followed it, ‘pioneered the first genuinely comfortable bourgeois lifestyle of the nineteenth century, the suburban or semi-rural “cottage” or “villa”’. He mentions Brussels, Barcelona, Glasgow, Helsinki and Prague as places where ‘young
or provincial bourgeois communities [were] anxious to express their cultural identity'. But here he is able to strike a more positive note. This avant-garde did not only satisfy middle-class needs: ‘[t]hey pioneered modern architecture and town-planning in which the social-utopian element is evident’; Hobsbawm names a number of those in this category, including W. R. Lethaby and Patrick Geddes and ‘the champions of garden-cities’, who all came from ‘the British progressive-socialist milieu’. On the continent, too, the expositors of these values were associated with social democracy: Victor Horta designed the Maison du Peuple in Brussels in 1897, where the German H. Van de Velde lectured on William Morris, while the Dutch architect H. P. Berlage designed the Amsterdam Diamond Workers’ Union offices in 1899. The new politics and the new arts converged at this point:

Even more significantly, the original (mainly British) artists who had pioneered this revolution in the applied arts were not merely influenced by Marxism, as for instance Morris, but also – with Walter Crane – provided much of the internationally current iconographical vocabulary of the social-democratic movement. Indeed, William Morris developed a powerful analysis of the relations between art and society which he certainly considered Marxist, even though we can also detect the earlier influences of the Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin. Curiously enough, orthodox Marxist thinking about the arts remained almost completely unaffected by these developments. William Morris’s writings have not, to this day, made their way into the mainstream Marxist aesthetic debates, though after 1945 they became much better known and found powerful Marxist champions.

A footnote refers us to E. P. Thompson’s William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (1955) and Paul Meier’s La pensée utopique de William Morris (1975). But the truth of Hobsbawm’s assertion that ‘Morris’s writings have not, to this day, made their way into the mainstream Marxist aesthetic debates’ is not easy to assess, since the whereabouts of that mainstream is not defined bibliographically. However, the seventy-seven notes to the chapter, referring to texts from a range of European languages, show the impressive extent of Hobsbawm’s reading.

In Hobsbawm’s view, the Marxism of the Second International did not have an adequate theory of the arts and made no effort to create one. This was despite the fact that Morris had developed an intelligent account of the matter, which ‘looked beyond the structure of the arts in the bourgeois era (the individual “artist”) to the element of artistic creation in all labour and the (traditional) arts of popular life, and beyond the equivalent of commodity production in art (the individual “work of art”)
to the environment of ‘everyday life’. This was the only branch of Marxist aesthetic theory to pay particular attention to architecture, which it saw as the most important of the arts. According to Hobsbawm, this was not recognised at the time:

It was neglected because Morris, who was one of the earliest of British Marxists, was seen merely as a famous artist but a political lightweight, and no doubt because the British tradition of theorising about art and society (neoromantic medievalism, Ruskin), which he merged with Marxism, had little contact with the mainstream of Marxist thought. Yet it came from within the arts, it was Marxist – at least Morris declared that it was – and it converted and influenced practitioners in the arts, designers, architects and town-planners, and not least the organisers of museums and art schools, over a large part of Europe.

For Hobsbawm, it is not surprising that this line of thought was developed in Britain, although Marxism was not strong there, since Britain was ‘the only European country sufficiently transformed by capitalism for industrial production to have transformed artisanal production’. It is therefore not surprising that ‘the Marxist element in this significant movement within the arts has been forgotten’. Morris himself recognised that ‘while capitalism lasted, art could not become socialist’. Hobsbawm quotes as his source a sentence from ‘The Socialist Ideal’, first published in the New Review for January 1891 and included by Holbrook Jackson in his 1947 selection William Morris: On Art and Socialism, published by John Lehmann: ‘[c]onsidering the relation of the modern world to art, our business is now, and for long will be, not so much attempting to produce definite art, as rather clearing the ground to give art its opportunity’. Hobsbawm develops his argument in the following terms: ‘[a]s capitalism emerged from its crisis to flourish and expand, it appropriated and absorbed the arts of the revolutionaries. The comfortable and cultured middle class, the industrial designers, took it over.’ Thus the greatest work of the Dutch socialist architect H. P. Berlage is not his building for the Diamond Workers’ Union, but the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, while the ‘nearest Morrisian town-planners got to their people’s cities were “garden suburbs”, eventually occupied by the middle class, and “garden cities” remote from industry’. The Second International would bear no more democratic fruit. I am not alone in thinking that the garden cities made a more significant contribution to town planning than this implies. In 1994 Fiona MacCarthy, in William Morris: A Life for Our Time, praised Morris’s description in News from Nowhere of the ‘very pretty houses’ on the river-edge at Hammersmith, as showing that Morris held ‘an extraordinary and deeply imagined image of urban possibility’. She went on: ‘[w]e
can see its effect as the Garden Cities burgeoned early on in the next century’.\(^{20}\)

The cover of *How to Change the World* offers a quotation from Ben Wilson in the *Daily Telegraph* to the effect that ‘Hobsbowm is one of our greatest historians. There is plenty with which to argue and engage.’ The account of Morris given here, however, while it certainly encouraged my engagement, only occasionally led me to argue; instead, it eloquently reinforced my sense of the significance of Morris to political thought in the nineteenth century and beyond.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 246.
3. Ibid., p. 247.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 249.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. *Cavalleria Rusticana* is an opera in one act by Pietro Mascagni to an Italian libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci, adapted from an 1880 short story of the same name and subsequent play by the Italian Giovanni Verga.
11. Ibid., p. 250.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., pp. 250-51.
15. Ibid., p. 259.
16. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 259.
Reviews

Edited by Rosie Miles


The Last Utopians consists of four essays on Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose utopias are respectively characterised as orderly, artful, homogenic and motherly. The four writers are interconnected: Morris wrote News from Nowhere as a riposte to Bellamy’s Looking Backward; Carpenter and Morris were both involved in Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation and both supported its periodical, Justice; Gilman was an early supporter of the Nationalist Party that sprang from Bellamy’s book, met Morris when she spoke at Kelmscott House and became a lifelong friend of May Morris. Robertson describes the tradition that the four exemplify, and indeed helped to create, as having four key elements. First, there is a commitment to economic equality, or what Morris called equality of condition. Second, patriarchal relations and family forms are called into question, with support for women’s independence (and in Carpenter’s case celebration of same-sex relationships). Third, there is a strong environmental theme. Fourth, all manifest
what Robertson calls a ‘progressive spirituality’ that ‘regards the divine as immanent within humans and the natural world’ (p. 242).

Each of the four main essays is forty to fifty pages long, and they sit between a brief contextual chapter and a discussion of some examples of contemporary utopianism. This structure could risk both superficiality because of the relative brevity of each chapter, and discontinuity. In fact, both dangers are avoided, as the common themes and connections between the writers, and their overlapping milieux, lend coherence to the overall narrative. The book is aimed less at historical, literary or utopian scholars than at a wider public, whom Robertson seeks to convince of the merits of utopian thinking. It deserves to succeed in this because it is beautifully written, with clarity, elegance and a complete lack of pomposity. It also has much to say to more specialist readers (as well as being a thoroughly enjoyable read). It is bound together by a distinctive approach that seems drawn from Morris’s own claim, quoted by Robertson, that ‘[t]he only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author’ (p. 79). Each chapter, then, is a narrative of a life, demonstrating that the protagonist’s individual temperament and struggles to find their place and voice in the world (perhaps especially acute for Carpenter and Gilman) fed into their utopian vision and political engagements. Thus we learn, for example, that Bellamy was not only a frustrated military man, but that his ‘extreme reticence and apparent agoraphobia’ contributed to the enclosed experience of Julian West in Looking Backward (p. 56). Morris, says Robertson, ‘crafted his very personality into a dismissal of the world as it is’ (p. 79). Carpenter’s struggle, besides seeking an environmentally-friendly socialism, was to find a way of being in the world as a homosexual in a context where the category did not exist, and to argue for and live out different forms of masculinity and relationship. Indeed, Carpenter argued that Urnings (as he called them) were the vanguard of change because of their capacity for non-hierarchical relationships. Gilman, as is better known, came to her views about the central importance of women’s participation in the public sphere through her own difficulties – most notably the constraining effects of marriage and motherhood, but also the problematic nature of a series of relationships with women and men.

The various arguments made by the four protagonists about the nature of the good society, and the vicissitudes of their political involvements in its pursuit, are cogently presented, accompanied by both affirmation and critique. In that sense, this is a very skilful account. Yet these are not exactly brief intellectual biographies. They are, perhaps, existential biographies. Thus Robertson’s approach, without stinting on cognitive and structural matters, foregrounds the element of existential quest in utopian longing and speculation. The fourth theme he identifies, that of ‘progressive spirituality’, is rarely discussed elsewhere in relation to socialist and feminist
utopianism, notwithstanding occasional references to socialism itself as a religion. This is a post-Christian, non-theistic spirituality – perhaps what has elsewhere been described as the perennial philosophy – that believes in the unity of all things and the possibility of individual access to this ground of unity. A particular manifestation of this in the late nineteenth century was Theosophy, a syncretic system claiming that all religions are directed to the same end, the unity of mankind, and contain only partial truths.

When we look at the four writers through this lens, we can see how they shared this pursuit of being at one with the world and how this contrasts with the feelings of being at odds with it that coloured their daily lives. Bellamy is most often read as a proponent of authoritarian, state-centred socialism (a judgment Robertson largely shares), yet his early essay on ‘The Religion of Solidarity’ makes its appearance in Looking Backward as a sermon on the new society. We also now know that the first Nationalist club and the manifesto of Nationalism were heavily dominated by Theosophists and Unitarians. The religious element in Bellamy was therefore critical to his early reception. Carpenter was a Cambridge don, ordained as young man into the Anglican Church, where his immediate superior was the erstwhile Christian Socialist Frederick Denison Maurice (himself a convert from Unitarianism). But he abandoned both Cambridge and the Church for Sheffield and a life as a market gardener. Carpenter’s influences included Walt Whitman and the Hindu sage Ramaswamy. He came to believe in a ‘cosmic consciousness’ (p. 167), which would heal the split between self and the world. Gilman wrestled with conventional religion and its androcentrism, eventually devoting a whole book to this. Morris went to Oxford, intending and expected to enter the Church, but after a journey through Northern France with Edward Burne-Jones he abandoned this in favour of a life dedicated to art. Morris refers in News from Nowhere to the new ‘religion of humanity’, and Old Hammond says that ‘the spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world’ (p. 118). That connection of the person to the wider and deeper life of the natural world is figured, of course, in the character of Ellen. Robertson does not, I think, push the spiritual element as far as one might in Morris’s case, but it seems to me to fit well with the Romantic and Transcendentalist ‘substitution’ of nature for God.

The final section of the book contains a series of instances of ‘partial’ utopias or prefigurative practices in the present day, around the themes of community, education (where Theosophy recurs through contemporary Steiner schools) and food production. Fascinating as these counter-cultural examples are, they seem to me to be predicated on a widespread but problematic assumption. Although Robertson partially defends the order envisioned by Bellamy in comparison with the vicissitudes
of life for the mass of the population in late nineteenth-century America, he repeats several times the charge of authoritarianism, and suggests this can no longer be read without conjuring the spectre of totalitarianism. The utopias of Morris and Carpenter are endorsed in part because of their affinity with Kropotkin’s communal anarchism. The group are deemed the ‘last’ utopians because the holistic, systemic nature of their envisaged transformations has been overwhelmed by dystopian fears and downright anti-utopian sentiments at least since the middle of the twentieth century. All that is left, then, is the prospect of partial utopias as people try to live out some aspect of betterment in their everyday lives.

I have two reservations about this position. One is an interpretive question in relation to Morris. In a study of this length it was not, of course, possible to engage with the voluminous literature on how News from Nowhere should be read, nor with all the details of Morris’s wider politics. But Robertson’s account does avoid emphasising Morris’s Marxism – possibly in order not to put off a United States audience. It also accepts the prevailing orthodoxy about Morris’s (and every right-thinking person’s) antipathy to the state. Yet the Manifesto of the Socialist League, which Morris wrote, asserts that ‘the land, the capital, the machinery, factories, workshops, stores, means of transit, mines, banking, all means of production and distribution of wealth, must be declared and treated as the common property of all’. I think there remains a real question about how News from Nowhere sits alongside Morris’s own practical politics and what is to be done. Secondly, the anti-statist ideology that is even more prevalent in the USA than in Britain leads to a false perception of the disappearance of these utopian themes from popular discourse after 1950. For this was the era, in Britain, of the building of the welfare state, a utopian project in its own right – and one which, with the disappearance of decent council housing, a welfare safety net and our National Health Service, some of us are fighting to defend. Bellamy was invoked in this project of protection from the cradle to the grave: when Looking Backward was republished in 1952, the Daily Herald greeted it as ‘A prophet reprinted – and he’s right so far’!

If we cast the net of utopianism wider than the field of literature, the understanding that systemic change is needed, on a global as well as on a national scale, is, I think, more widespread. It has been there in the feminist movement, and it is there now – especially – in the struggle against climate change. This is, of course, not to diminish the importance of the partial utopias Robertson discusses, nor their importance in sustaining a sensibility that life could be otherwise. For as he concludes: ‘what was true during the last utopians’ era is true today: visions of a transformed world, along with efforts to live out some portion of it in the here and now, are crucial to a better future’ (p. 271).

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