The period when England was undergoing a manifold transformation due to what E. Hobsbawm has called the "dual revolution" is considered to be of crucial importance by historians of education. Profound changes were brought about in the educational field by the combined action of illuminist principles, utilitarian doctrines and evangelical religion, opening up a wide-ranging debate which ran throughout the Victorian age. The progressive thinkers stressed the importance of education in promoting a wider democracy, maintaining that every human being had a natural right to be educated; the Benthamites fostered "useful knowledge" to meet the needs of a society based on an increasingly specialized division of labour; the conservative forces opposed the extension of education to the lower classes for fear of its vulgarization, and sought to defend liberal education from the contamination of utilitarian notions.

Whether based on the educational paradigm of the gentleman, as seen in the Public and Grammar Schools, or on the Gradgrind philosophy of Facts, applied in the Board Schools and Technical Institutes, teaching fell far short of forming fully developed human beings. Both traditional learning and skill training aimed primarily at accumulating wealth for the state and ensuring a livelihood for the individual, linking personal formation more and more to economic needs and subordinating all individual capacities to "the great end of 'money-making' for oneself - or one's master", in William Morris's words. The other main purpose of education was the formation of the 'moral character' by means of intellectual despotism and indoctrination of prescribed social codes and values, which varied according to the future position of the individual in the social hierarchy. In all kinds of schools, even where a liberal education was supplied, the stress was increasingly put on the role the individual would play in society, completely disregarding his or her unity as a 'subject'. Far from being formed into a rounded human being, the child was 'deformed' into a mere 'function' in terms of economic, social and gender-loaded requirements;
the damage caused to the child's identity depended on the amount of resistance opposed to such a dehumanizing educational system.

What it meant to be brought up and educated in Victorian England is poignantly re-created in several novels such as *Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, Hard Times, The Mill on the Floss* and *The Way of All Flesh*, where illustrations of family and school life are largely based on autobiographical memories. Adopting the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, they depict the development of the main characters from childhood to maturity, and dramatize the cruel and repressive ways in which the educator figures tried to mould their 'charges' into obedient and conformist adults.

Both in reality and in fiction, the principles which governed the upbringing of children were inspired by traditional religious pessimism, which postulated the innate nature of evil. It was the duty of parents and teachers to eradicate from the children's soul all negative inclinations and punish any expression of self-will, rebellion or pleasure-seeking which would impinge on the development of the moral character and be conducive to 'bad habits' and transgressive behaviour.

In the novels mentioned above, the path of the protagonists to adulthood is experienced as a nightmarish tunnel in which they undergo psychological mortification and physical violence. *Jane Eyre* is repeatedly accused of being morally and socially inferior, imprisoned in the “red room” when she rebels against her cousin's aggression, and sent to a boarding-school after a confrontation with her aunt, to be cured of being a “liar”; *David Copperfield*, who reacts to his stepfather's incessant psychological tortures by biting his hand, is sent to Salem House where he is exposed to the ridicule of his school mates by being obliged to carry on his back a placard with the inscription “Take care of him! He bites”; *Maggie Tulliver* is frequently compared with the 'Dodson model' in order to warp her lively mind and correct her tom-boy inclinations, regarded as marks of wickedness; *Ernest Pontifex's* father “began to whip him two days after he had begun to teach him”, charged him with obstinacy and punished him accordingly when he could not pronounce the word ‘come’ correctly.

The educative figures portrayed in these novels represent a gallery of insensitive and authoritarian characters, armed with the cane and short on genuine knowledge, who instil only fear and hate in their pupils. In *David Copperfield* Mr. Creakle, who boasts of being a Tartar, is depicted as a severe, ignorant, merciless man who takes a sadistic pleasure in making the children miserable:

> Half the establishment was writhing and crying, before the day's work began; and how much of it had writhed and cried before the day's work was over I am really afraid to recollect, lest I should seem to exaggerate. (p.85)

In *Jane Eyre* Mr. Brocklehurst is a champion of hypocrisy who interprets religion to his own ends and deprives the pupils of mental and bodily nourishment; in *Hard Times* Mr. M'Choakumchild's application of the notorious Gradgrind philosophy of Facts aims at banning imagination and feeling from the children's realm, inculcating only mechanical and scientific notions. Paradoxically and emblematically, Bitzer's precise definition of the horse is clearly abstract, whereas Sissy's account, though approximate in expression, is substantially more accurate since it is based on direct experience; in *The Way of All Flesh* Roughborough School is ruled by Dr. Skinner who is described as having “the harmlessness of the serpent and the wisdom of the
dove”; though on the liberal side in politics, he is very hard on the boys who do not
conform to his will, thus imbuing in them perennial hate:

They not only disliked him, but they hated all that he more especially embodied,
and throughout their lives disliked all that reminded them of him. (p. 139)

Even such a eulogistic novel of the public-school ethos as *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*
depicts, in its shift from the Muscular Christian ideology of Part I to the piety and
sentimentality of Part II, just how class-biased, conflictual and cruel public-school
culture was, exemplified by the prefect system with its concomitant practices of
fagging and bullying and the cult of athleticism? Moreover, much of the tension
and violence which inevitably built up in an authoritarian self-contained institution
found an outlet in despicable raids against people and animals in the neighbourhood.

Sensitive and unobtrusive students who did not conform to the brutalizing and
sadistic atmosphere of school life had to find a protector in order to survive. If we
consider that *David Copperfield* is largely autobiographical, it is interesting to note
that both Dickens and Morris resemble latter-day male Scheherazades in winning the
protection of an older boy by telling stories in the night.

None of the characters in the novels comes unscathed through the painfully
frustrating stages of ‘character training’. There is nothing more harmful to bodily and
mental health than a repressive upbringing and schooling: a split personality dominated
by the superego whose dictates are at variance with natural feelings and instincts. In
the attempt to reconcile their biological and social existence and discover their true
identity, they suffer severe conflicts: Jane Eyre, for instance, is torn between her sense
of duty and desire for self-fulfilment. In other cases they make errors in their choice
of work or love relationships, as happens to David Copperfield and Ernest Pontifex.

Ernest Pontifex’s remarks about his school life epitomize very well the overall creed
of the Victorian didactic ethos:

> We had no business with pleasant things at all . . . We were put into this world not
> for pleasure but duty, and pleasure had in it something more or less sinful in its
> very essence. (p. 157)

This alienating attitude to life on earth is just the reverse of William Morris’s view
of the purpose of human existence and, consequently, of education.

Morris’s conception of human nature has to be seen in the light of the philosophical
doctrines of the Enlightenment which had been incorporated into the Radical and
Socialist traditions. By maintaining that no ‘original sin’ mars the soul of the human
being, the principle of self-perfectibility comes to the fore, along with the theory of
the influence of the environment on the formation of character. Thus it is necessary
not only to improve the material conditions of life, but also to provide a new kind
of education which would eradicate all erroneous notions in order to achieve a true
humanity, as Robert Owen argued:

> From the earliest ages it has been the practice of the world to act on the supposition
> that each individual man forms his own character, and that therefore he is
> accountable for all his sentiments and habits, and consequently merits reward for
> some and punishment for others . . . it is a fundamental error of the highest possible
> magnitude; it enters into all our proceeding regarding man from his infancy; and
it will be found to be the true and sole origin of evil. It generates and perpetuates ignorance, hatred, and revenge, where, without such error, only intelligence, confidence, and kindness would exist.13

In Morris’s ideas about education one can discern an attitude like William Godwin’s on the negative aspects of the traditional educational institutions. The Radical thinker objected to a system of national education because “all public establishments include in them the idea of permanence”; therefore they transmit obsolete knowledge, “restrain the flights of the mind, and fix it in the belief of exploded errors”, impinging on the individual freedom to learn what one desires by moulding “all minds upon one model”. Only through self-education can one discover one’s potentialities: “It is our wisdom to incite men to act for themselves, not to retain them in a state of perpetual pupillage.”14 In News from Nowhere Morris shows how this principle can be realized in a society which is no longer authoritarian, acquisitive and competitive, and where human existence is unfettered from all ‘artificial’ social and political institutions.

In Morris’s romance, the renewed society is characterized by the structuring motifs of childhood and rest as an idyllic state of innocence akin to Schiller’s concept of the idyll. Schiller envisages a transmutation of the genre in which the characteristic calm of the idyll shall be “the calm that follows accomplishment, not the calm of indolence – the calm that comes from the equilibrium re-established between the faculties and not from the suspending of their exercise.”15

Before writing News from Nowhere, Morris had participated in the contemporary debate about education, expressing his ideas in several lectures as well as in articles from Commonweal, pointing out that education had surrendered to economic need, and indicating an alternative conception that would be expounded and translated into imaginative terms in his utopian romance:

At present all education is directed towards the end of fitting people to take their places in the hierarchy of commerce – these as masters, those as workmen. The education of the masters is more ornamental than that of the workmen, but it is commercial still; and even at the ancient universities learning is but little regarded, unless it can in the long run be made to pay. Due education is a totally different thing from this, and concerns itself in finding out what different people are fit for, and helping them along the road which they are inclined to take.16

As is well known, Morris was a reluctant utopist, being prompted to formulate his vision of a renewed world by his disagreement with Edward Bellamy’s conception of a future socialist society as depicted in Looking Backward. The highly technological society conceived by Bellamy, though egalitarian, is authoritarian and mechanical; it envisages a compulsory system of “universal high education” until the age of twenty-one, which is uniform in methods and contents and pays no heed to individual capacities and interests. After schooling, the young people are “mustered into the industrial service” on Muster Day, while at the same time “those who, after twenty-four years’ service, have reached the age of forty-five, are honorably mustered out”.17

Morris’s reaction in reading Bellamy’s text was both emotional (“If they had brigaded me into a regiment of workers, I’d just lie on my back and kick”) and political:

I believe that variety of life is as much an aim of a true Communism as equality
of condition, and that nothing but a union of these two will bring about real freedom.\textsuperscript{18}

This firm belief, informing all aspects of life in Nowhere, constitutes the ground on which the process of bodily and mental growth, called education in the old, rests.

William Guest – the awkward ‘dreamer’ from the nineteenth-century – will gradually learn that in the renewed society, where “the pleasurable exercise of (human) energies is at once the source of all art and the cause of all happiness”\textsuperscript{19}, the aims of education consist in developing individual potentialities in such a way that pleasure and fulfilment may be found in a variety of manual and intellectual activities, in making individual freedom harmonize with collective welfare, and in learning to understand and to enjoy the richness of existence.

The most innovative feature, and so far unique in utopian fiction, is that in Nowhere there is no compulsory formal schooling, as is made clear from the start: Dick is puzzled and does not understand what Guest means when enquiring about the “boy farms” which he had been used to calling schools. Moreover Dick hints that learning is not a matter for children only, implying that education is now a kind of lifelong dynamic process involving both young and adults.\textsuperscript{20} This point is further expounded by Old Hammond in Chapter X. After criticizing the authoritarian methods and the “conventional course of ‘learning’” in the class-divided society of the past, when “real education was impossible for anybody”, he tells Guest that knowledge is now freely available to everybody at any age:

“... the information lies ready to each one’s hand when his own inclinations impel him to seek it. In this as in other matters we have become wealthy: we can afford to give ourselves time to grow.” (p. 246)

As to the actual children, in the undogmatic and secure educative society of Nowhere they have been freed from the direct tuition not only of teachers but also of their parents.\textsuperscript{21} They are brought up in a communal way and are free to choose their activities and to move about without restraint as grown-up people do. Moreover both boys and girls share the same upbringing and education. In Nowhere there is no little Maggie Tulliver reproached for being a ‘tom-boy’ and craving for her brother’s Latin books.

The quality of the new educational ethos is expressed with great symbolical force when Guest meets some children for the first time: they are camping in a green forest, greatly enjoying lively intercourse with each other and with nature. (p. 207) The development of children’s abilities and knowledge is based on direct experience, and this is underlined again in the shop scene where pretty lightweight goods are dealt with by a boy and a girl:

“The children like to amuse themselves with it, and it is good for them, because they handle a lot of diverse wares and get to learn about them, how they are made, and where they come from, and so on”. (p. 219)

The overall character of the children’s upbringing is aimed at achieving a harmonious balance between bodily and mental abilities. Dick informs Guest that both boys and girls can swim, go on horseback, cook, mow, thatch, do carpentry and so on; as to “book-learning”, they can read at four, write at a later stage when
it is easier to produce a “handsome writing”, learn Greek and Latin, and speak foreign languages. (pp. 209–210) In illustrating the children’s training, Dick points out two basic features of the new kind of education: the revaluation of manual jobs (“... don’t you run away with the idea that it doesn’t take some skill to do them, and doesn’t give plenty of work for one’s mind”; p. 209), and the importance of the environment in helping young people to choose activities that will provide pleasure:

“... children are mostly given to imitating their elders, and when they see most people about them engaged in genuinely amusing work, like house-building and street-paving, and gardening, and the like, that is what they want to be doing.” (p. 211)

Although Nowherian people “don’t encourage early bookishness”, the stress is put on the voluntary character of learning; nobody will “thwart children who will take to books very early”. Dick’s further comment (“I don’t think we need fear having too many book-learned men”) reveals Morris’s polemical intention to challenge the notion of the pre-eminence of bookish knowledge in the formation of a full human being. Instead he prefigures a society where there are no more “brain-sick brain workers”, as well as “heart-sick hand workers”.

It is a misconception to charge Morris with anti-intellectualism, as critics sometimes do. The emphasis put on manual jobs and outdoor activities does not prove his disregard for learning; rather it is a device in the rhetorical organization of the text which aims at showing how “the sensuous pleasures of life” are restored in human experience:

... we shall not be happy unless we live like good animals, unless we enjoy the exercise of the ordinary functions of life: eating sleeping loving walking running swimming riding sailing we must be free to enjoy all these exercises of the body without any sense of shame; without any suspicion that our mental powers are so remarkable and godlike that we are rather above such common things.

The consequence of these fundamental notions is twofold: knowledge is no longer held to be a superior ‘separate sphere’ of experience, and the rotation between manual and intellectual jobs freely chosen allows people to achieve a balance between physical and mental powers.

Those people who devote most of their time to intellectual studies no longer constitute powerful cultural élites founding their authority on intellectual arrogance, as in the past. They do not arrogate to themselves the monopoly of knowledge, nor believe that they are the only depositories of absolute truth. No ‘clerisy’ or exclusive educational institutions are to be seen in Nowhere: they are merged into the larger flowing of existence, like Eton where “folk from round about come and get taught things that they want to learn” (p. 348), or Oxford:

... I missed none of the towers and spires of that once don-beridden city; but the meadows all round, which, when I had last passed through them, were getting daily more and more squalid, and more and more impressed with the seal of the “stir and intellectual life of the nineteenth century”, were no longer intellectual, but had once again become as beautiful as they should be. (p. 374)
Moreover, the ‘sages’ of the new society like to alternate theoretical studies with bodily exertion, joining in the communal hay harvest:

“... in this haymaking work there is room for a great many people who are not over-skilled in country matters: and there are many who lead sedentary lives, whom it would be unkind to deprive of their pleasure in the hay-field – scientific men and close students generally”. (p. 395)

The enjoyment of both outdoor and indoor activities has become a regular habit: Dick, the boatman, must spend some of his time in book-learning since he knows Latin (p. 208), history (p. 159) and Shakespeare’s plays (p. 230); Bob, who is a weaver as well as a mathematician, takes over Dick’s job for a while to do “some outdoor work” (p. 190); Boffin, the Dickensian dustman, writes “reactionary novels” (p. 201); Ellen, though very active in the fields, can discuss literature with competence and her ‘philosophical mind’ is seen at work in the dialogues with Guest during the journey up-river.

In Nowhere there is also room for a variety of traditional cultural activities. Following Guest’s itinerary, the reader learns that there is a theatre inside Hammersmith market place (p. 27); the British Museum has the same function it held in the past, and Guest notices several people sitting reading on the benches outside, while Dick informs him that “in the afternoon there is generally music about the fountain (p. 231); during dinner in the Hall of Bloomsbury market, the visitor can admire beautiful pictures on the walls and is told that people prize painting very much. (p. 283)

The integration of sensuous and mental pleasures, which is the main purpose of the new kind of education, is epitomized in the description of the “balmy evening” spent at the Hammersmith Guesthouse. In the hall “redolent of rich summer flowers”, the friendly Nowherians honour the newly arrived visitor with excellent food and wine, and delight in each other’s company with singing and story-telling while admiring the moon shining through “the beautiful traceries of the windows” (pp. 325-326). As on other similar occasions, the reader is made to visualize how deeply individual happiness is merged with communal welfare and with nature.

Closely related to the topic of education is the argument about literature and history. They are considered to be obsolete forms of learning in a society where the new ethos is based on the here-and-now relationship of the individual with nature and with his/her fellow creatures, as Ellen reminds her grandfather:

“Books, books! always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much? Look!” she said, throwing open the casement wider and showing us the white light sparkling between the black shadows of the moonlit garden . . . “look! these are our books in these days – and these,” she said, stepping lightly up to the two lovers and laying a hand on each of their shoulders; “and the guest there, with his overseas knowledge and experience – yes, and even you, grandfather . . . with all your grumbling and wishing yourself back in the good old days . . .” (pp. 336–337)

The new approach to existence is later voiced also by Dick. His words underline the active role of the new human being who is aware of the cyclic rhythms of nature.
Life is no longer endured as a chain of alienating or vicarious experiences, out of tune with the "beautiful and interesting drama of the year":

"... I can't look upon it as if I were in a theatre seeing the play going on before me, myself taking no part of it. ... I mean that I am part of it all, and feel the pain as well as the pleasure in my own person. It is not done for me by somebody else, merely that I may eat and drink and sleep; but I myself do my share of it". (pp. 396-397)

Although experiencing life in all its authentic aspects is the main concern of Nowherian people, in the undogmatic new society there is also room for those who want to cultivate interests linked to the past. Literature and history are not altogether neglected. There are several people engaged in writing novels like Boffin or the anonymous young man who instead of joining the hay-harvesters, prefers to stay at home to write (p. 350); Ellen's grandfather is 'possessed' by Victorian realistic novels. Old Hammond has an excellent knowledge of history, and historical documents are well preserved.

The representation of eccentric figures cultivating obsolete disciplines has a dual purpose: on one hand, it is clearly meant to show that in Nowhere the principle of freedom of choice obtains in the intellectual field as well as in the emotional and working spheres; on the other hand, it encourages debate as to why the functions performed by history and literature in the past are no longer relevant in the new society.

History is not a popular subject since "it is mostly in periods of turmoil and strife and confusion that people care much about history" (p. 210); it has also lost its ideological power after the complete overturning of the old system when tradition was based on blood, property and religion. Rather, history can be valuable to the new people as a memento of past injustice and struggle, to prevent them from being tempted to restore the old order, as Ellen cogently argues:

"... I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past - too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men like Hammond. Who knows? Happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid". (p. 383)

Further implications, alluding to the elitist character and escapist function of both historical and literary studies, are suggested by William Guest's musing during the lively evening spent at the Hammersmith Guest-house already mentioned:

Here I could enjoy everything without an after-thought of the injustice and miserable toil which made my leisure; the ignorance and dulness of life which went to make my keen appreciation of history; the tyranny and the struggle full of fear and mishap which went to make my romance. (pp. 326-327)

This personal evaluation can be extended to the intellectuals of the past who acted according to the Cartesian postulate cogito, ergo sum, whereas the new people behave more in the light of the impassioned criticism of the mechanical "stock notions" which undermined the harmonious development of the individual, emphasized the mental
powers of the human being by conceiving culture as “an inward condition of the mind and spirit”⁴, thus neglecting the bodily dimension of human life.

The issue that literature used to be a form of escapism affording vicarious experiences is also raised by Ellen, in terms very similar to Guest’s, during her contention with her grandfather about the claims of life:

“As for your books, they were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, and when they must needs supplement the sordid miseries of their own lives with imaginations of the lives of other people.” (p. 337)

The function of novel writing and reading, with its ideological effect of reconciling individuals to gratification indefinitely deferred, is no longer meaningful once the human being has been restored to unity of mind and body. Furthermore, the traditional literary works embodied those negative values such as aggression, competition and conflict which pervaded all aspects of the unregenerated society of the past. This frame of mind is clearly incompatible with the ethos of the new society⁵. When Ellen’s grandfather asks why nobody writes any longer novels such as Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, silence follows for, as Patrick Brantingler has pointed out, “the answer to his question is self-evident: novels like Thackeray’s are impossible ‘now’, because life is no longer a “Vanity Fair”⁶.

In the regained state of innocence and symbiosis with nature, the vast majority of people are fully engaged in the all-absorbing art of living and do not feel the lack of literary or speculative works, at least for the time being. However, no definitive prescription is offered concerning the choices of future generations, since life is conceived as a dynamic and dialectical process, involving movement and change, like the highly symbolical journey up-river and “the changing drama of the year”. Commenting on the “neglect of the whole contemplative side of education” and referring to Ellen’s ideas about the role of history already mentioned, Northrop Frye plausibly suggests that “perhaps this society will need to mature sufficiently to take account of the more contemplative virtues if it is to escape the danger of losing its inheritance, as Adam did, through an uncritical perversness of curiosity⁷.”

In the meantime, William Morris’s dream vision represents an active ideal for those who do not belong to the party of people “who hate life though they fear death” (p. 401), and cultivate the pedagogic principle of ‘rebellion’ against the most accredited cultural assumptions which prevent mankind from liberating itself from all artificial ties of civilization. As Old Hammond points out, the palingenesis of society was brought about by those people who resisted being enslaved by the ‘mill’ of the traditional educational system:

“. . . those only would avoid being crushed by it who would have the spirit of rebellion strong in them. Fortunately most children have had that at all times, or I do not know that we should have reached our present position”. (p. 245)

NOTES

⁶ Among the several studies on this subject see, for instance, R.D. Altick, The English


7 C. Dickens, David Copperfield (Ware-Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1992), pp. 74–76. Hereafter indications of the pages will be given in brackets in the text.


10 C. Dickens, Hard Times (London, Dent, 1970), pp. 3–4. See also Chapter IX, Book I, on Mr. M’Choakumchild’s teaching methods.


21 Morris was adamant about parents’ unsuitability to educate their children. In a
letter to William Sharman, dated April 1886, he writes: “On the whole, experience has shown me that the parents are the unﬁttest persons to educate a child; and I entirely deny their right to do so, because that would interfere with the right of the child as a member of the community from its birth to enjoy all the advantages which the community can give it”. N. Kelvin, ed., The Collected Letters of William Morris (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton U.P., 1987), Vol. II, 547.