

Utopia as Critical Practice in the
Transformation of William Morris

by


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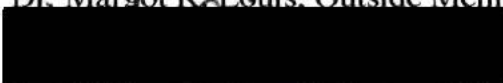
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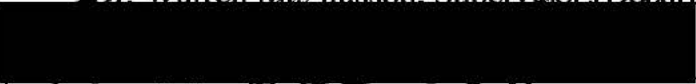
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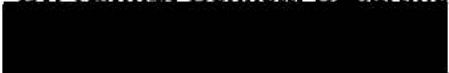
ABSTRACT

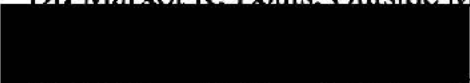
William Morris's approach to politics has been regularly ignored or devalued. His political thought has been judged on its perceived associations to a utopian form that is customarily characterized in a negative way. However, Morris dismissed the conventional form of the utopian novel and his own fiction is of a different character. A close examination of *News From Nowhere* and *A Dream of John Ball*, in conjunction with specific lectures, essays and correspondence, reveals the weakness of rejecting Morris as a 'mere utopian'. His own utopias educate a desire for transformation, but rather than demanding specific reforms or dictating the perfect social plan, he encouraged individuals to think and act for themselves in creating the terms of revolution. Morris's approach resonates with later 'critical utopians' and the type of personal politics he promoted and exemplified has become relevant in recent debates on the general nature of oppositional politics.

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Introduction

William Morris was a prominent campaigner for socialism whose colourful design work influenced the formation of the Arts and Crafts movement. His contribution to pre-Labour Party British socialism is defined in lectures, essays, poems and utopian novels which speculate and experiment with ideas of revolutionary movement. Nevertheless, Morris was regarded as a lightweight, anti-Marxist socialist for many years after his death in 1896. He became labelled as a harmless and eccentric romantic who idly dreamed of a golden age that could never be. Since the 1950s, however, he has come to be regarded as a more important figure who has something significant to contribute to debates within socialism and political thought.

Morris was motivated by contemporary politics to write lectures and essays on art, socialism and political transformation. His activism was characterised by an early rejection of established political conventions at a time when politics referred primarily to restricted franchise elections and the activities of governments. He first became politically active in 1876 when he co-founded a short-lived campaign against the British Government's tacit support for the repression of Christians in Bulgaria. Lobbying proved ineffective due to the institutionalised intransigence and reluctance of the

Government to change the direction of its policies. This experience helped to persuade Morris of the fundamental inability of established politics to make effective changes, leading him to conclude that “on all sides I am driven towards revolution and I am growing clearer and clearer on the speedy advent of it”(1). After reading a French edition of *Capital*, he joined the left wing Democratic Federation (which later became the Social Democratic Federation) in 1883. This move alienated many of his liberal, middle-class contemporaries but strengthened the socialist cause with the addition of a renowned poet and leading associate of the pre-Raphaelite movement in art.

There were early clashes of personality and policy direction between Morris and Hyndeman, the leader of the S.D.F. In particular, Hyndeman sought Parliamentary representation for his party in order to bring Establishment recognition and respectability to the socialist cause. Morris, recalling the reactionary character of conventional politics, argued that revolution could not be successfully pursued through the established discourses and institutions of the status quo. He claimed that any new socialist Members of Parliament would struggle to remember that “they go there as rebels and not as members of the governing body prepared by passing palliative measures to keep ‘society’ alive”(2). The issue split the party and Morris became reluctant leader of a breakaway Socialist League in 1884. This new organisation lacked the campaigning skills of the S.D.F. and it also began to splinter over the issue of

Parliamentary representation.

Morris remained steadfast in his 'anti-political' views and he became increasingly isolated as Fabian Socialism and emerging Labour Party policies moved the left away from the pursuit of imminent revolution. After being ousted as editor of *Commonweal*, the journal of The Socialist League, in 1890 he withdrew his financial support from that organisation and established the small Hammersmith Socialist Society. From this time, Morris's political activism - which had included an average of three public lectures per week - diminished considerably due to failing health and a disillusionment with the direction of organised socialism. Nevertheless, he did not abandon his opposition to established politics during his final years and he continued to speculate and encourage theories of transformation that challenged conventional ideas about political change.

Morris's life-work is characterised by a willingness to speculate and experiment. He endorsed an openness - in opposition to the prevailing closure of the status quo - through which revolutionary movement could be expressed and focussed. For example, he wrote utopian novels that promoted and exemplified ways in which individuals could reflect critically on society. These include *A Dream of John Ball* (published in 1888) in which a nineteenth century socialist activist, who appears to be Morris, experiences the vivid dream of a meeting with John Ball during the initial stages of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Morris followed this in 1890 with *News From Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest: Being Some Chapters From a Utopian Romance*. This novel describes a deindustrialised, anti-commercial order of the future that is 'visited' in a dream by William 'Guest' from the nineteenth century. He is escorted by Dick and Clara on a journey of discovery through the historical background and contemporary features of the 'new age'. One of the most significant characters he meets is Old Hammond, who describes 'How the Change Came' in the 'revolution of 1952'.

Morris does not feature significantly in most histories of political thought. He was not a prominent academic or theorist and is often marginalised as an unsophisticated political thinker. For example, in *English Political Thought of the Nineteenth Century*, Crane Brinton regards Morris's socialism as "old-fashioned and utopian"(3) and "vague beyond most social thinkers"(4). He also asserts that "Marxism sat lightly on him"(5) and that he was "an anarchist at heart"(6). Brinton suggests an image of Morris as a lightweight political thinker who lacks the ability to be a credible member of established schools of political thought.

Morris cannot so easily be dismissed in histories of socialist movements. His presence in late nineteenth century socialist debates and activism is well documented. Nevertheless, despite the reverence with which some commentators treat Morris - Anthony Wright, for example, regards him as "the

greatest and most original of the early British socialist thinkers of the modern period”(7) - his contribution to socialist theory is rarely analysed. This can be largely attributed to the early dismissal of utopia made by Marx and Engels and the later pre-eminence of Marxism within socialism. In *Socialisms*, Wright records that “as the nineteenth century progressed, socialism established itself... and Marxism its proprietorship over it”(8). Marxist theorists have consistently devalued Morris in order to protect themselves from any damaging associations to utopia. As Keith Taylor recalls, “socialists...did not like the term ‘utopian’; indeed they all made great efforts to show that their theories could not possibly be regarded as ‘mere utopianism’ (this was a common phrase)”(9). For his part, Morris did not fully embrace Marxism: although in agreement with many Marxist ideas he stated, in a letter to E.J Collings, that “socialism does not rest on the Marxian theory”(10).

For Morris, the prevailing scientific socialism encouraged “the crudest form of state socialism (which I do not agree to)”(11). Although he called himself a communist, he understood that term in its older anarchist associations to small communities of common ownership. For G.D.H. Cole, when Morris “used the word ‘*communism*’ he clearly meant by it something much more closely akin to the Anarchist-Communism of Kropotkin, with its insistence on the small neighbourhood group, than to the authoritarian structure of one-party control that was built up in the Soviet Union”(12). Morris asserted that he was

not an anarchist (13) but he was attracted to anarchism's rejection of both state coercion and piecemeal reformism. For Norman Kelvin, "the association between Morris and philosophical anarchism [is] too close to dismiss as an error in interpretation"(14). Nevertheless, George Woodcock is correct to assert that Morris's "relationship to anarchism is not easy to define"(15). For example, Cole suggests that Morris "had no sympathy at all with...[militant] Anarchism, which he regarded as criminal folly"(16).

Nevertheless, the anarcho-communism of Morris stands in contrast to mainstream Marxist socialism. One consequence of this is that Morris has not been targeted in post-Soviet attempts to discredit Marxism and communism. In fact, E.P. Thompson, suggests that "Morris's relation to Marxism raises acutely the question, not as to whether Marxists should criticise Morris, but whether Marxism should criticise itself"(17). Morris has received most attention from those socialist thinkers, including Thompson and Raymond Williams, who speculate on new directions for socialist thought. Morris's multi-socialist approach - influenced but not claimed by ideas of Marxism, anarchism, communism and utopianism - makes him a figure of potential interest in debates on post-Soviet socialism.

Morris's life is characterised by a search for types of critical practices that are not reliant upon prevailing assumptions. His approach raises questions about the strategies and tactics individuals can adopt to move towards social and

political transformation. For example, his utopian fictions and artistic productions counterpoise alternative ideas of creativity and work to the bourgeois concepts of art and labour. For Morris, art, which he defined in the lecture *The Aims of Art* as “a definite sensuous pleasure” (18), had become a “superficial manifestation”(19) in society dominated by bourgeois pretensions to ‘high art’. In addition, conventional theories of labour did not demand any creative input from the labourer and endorsed a kind of Useless Toil. In *The Beauty of Life*, he regarded his “cause...[as] the Democracy of Art [and] the ennobling of daily and common work”(20). Morris’s theory of creative labour - or Useful Work - was not a simple call to reform the existing system but the demand for transformation to a more open, speculative order. He believed that individual creativity could be freed to speculate on new values and alternative societies.

In this sense, Morris’s utopian fictions were part of an attempt to educate a desire for transformation. For him, revolution could “only be won by first educating people into desiring it”(21). He believed that the “province of art [was] to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life”(22) before the individual and he held “that we need not be afraid of scaring our audiences with too brilliant pictures”(23) of utopia. But he was not simply a propagandist for his own alternative order. In fact, John Goode claims that “it is obviously absurd to expect anybody to be converted to socialism by reading *A Dream of John Ball*

or *News From Nowhere* and Morris clearly did not intend that they should be”(24). The significance of his utopias does not lie in their portrayal of a socialist paradise but in their indication of the possibility of other values and ideas about existence. In *Demand the Impossible*, Tom Moylan accurately characterises this by claiming that the strength of some utopias “lies not in the particular social structures [described]...but in the very act of portraying a utopian vision itself”(25). Morris’s life exemplifies an exploration and expression of personal creativity that opposed the concept of individual conformity endorsed by the hegemony of capitalism. His activities are a demand for individuals to actualise their own revolutionary consciousness through activities that speculate beyond established conventions. Realising our individual creativity is one means for this, another is to dream our own utopias.

For Morris, utopian fictions should set the precedent for a type of open, speculative dreaming that transcends the status quo. He did not accept that these novels could deliver a useful blueprint for transformation. Instead they should be regarded as personal speculations that may help to educate a desire for transformation. In this respect, utopian fictions and dreams are part of the same revolutionary process: the utopian novel is a published statement of personal ideals that should encourage individuals to speculate and dream for themselves. Consequently, utopias may encourage a desire for change but only through the development of our own ideals can a sustained revolutionary

consciousness emerge. Dreaming, therefore, is a valuable activity that can move individuals towards revolution.

Morris wanted individuals to react to his utopias with their own.

Nevertheless, in some ways his utopian novels are distant from the political debates of his day. With their bizarre images of a 'fourteenth century of the future', they lack the obvious calls for reform that characterise some of Dickens's fiction, for example. However, Morris distrusted the established political system and regarded calls for reform as a futile transaction with the status quo. Kelvin, in his introduction to *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, claims that Morris separated "the word 'political' in its usual nineteenth century meaning of negotiation in Parliament among conflicting interests, from the word 'change' which presumably is to come about in some way that is other than 'political'"(26). Morris indicates this, in *The Present Outlook in Politics*, by suggesting that "the politics of the old kind, the shuffle of Ins and Outs are waning away and the new politics that are taking the place of the old mean a struggle against stupidity for the reconstruction of society"(27). He claimed that revolution - which for him was nothing less than "a change in the basis of all society"(28) - could not begin within the bounds of conventional politics. The absence of a discernable political manifesto or blueprint in his utopias owes much to this rejection of conventional political process and discourse.

However, Morris's death was followed by a prolonged period during

which his challenge to politics was misrepresented. For example, Brinton imposes a negative bourgeois understanding of Morris by claiming that he was “one of the misguided superiors, born into comfortable middle-class surroundings”(29) who “took a certain Bohemian pleasure in defying mere convention”(30) and “was touched by that peculiarly English eccentricity which, in the upper classes, is usually disciplined into cleverness and Toryism”(31). Lyman Tower Sargent claims that “Morris’s politics were deliberately forgotten. For example, the twenty four volumes of his collected works [published between 1910 and 1915] excluded most of the political essays, apparently at the publisher’s behest”(32). R. Page Arnot elaborates by suggesting that this was so readers would not “be shocked by coming across some of the ‘cruder’ or ‘more violent’ expressions of Morris’s hatred of the bourgeoisie”(33). Levitas suggests that Morris’s unconventional socialism was devalued and denied by critics who read *News From Nowhere* as a politically unsophisticated fantasy:

in the years following its publication, the very wide circulation of the book, combined with the deliberate suppression of Morris’s political writings by his biographers and the strongly anti-utopian attitudes characterising Marxism, led to the propagation of two myths about Morris. In one, ‘the bourgeois myth’, his socialism was ignored and denied

altogether; in the other, 'the Menshevik myth', he was portrayed as a gentle, eccentric and above all anti-Marxist, English Socialist(34).

The reversal of these damaging distortions began with Arnot's *William Morris: A Vindication* in 1934. Arnot asserted that Morris' was not a "literary Socialist, or any other middle-class parody of a Socialist...[but] a revolutionary Socialist"(35). Arnot is useful in drawing attention to the processes of cultural embourgeoisement that denied Morris's commitment to transformation. He refers to these processes as "the veil with which the capitalists have surrounded"(36) Morris. However, for him, Morris only used utopia as part of his quest to promote socialism. For example, he claims that "the essence of *News From Nowhere* is the insistence on the necessity of an armed rising and bitter civil war as the only path to socialism"(37). A more important attempt to rehabilitate Morris's unconventional approach to politics came with E.P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* in 1955. This addressed Morris's utopianism more directly and refused to reduce it to a category of Marxism or socialism.

Thompson is significant because he raises the issue of Morris's utopian thought without trying to vindicate it as a form of established socialism. He

adds credibility to Morris's approach with the claim that reading *News From Nowhere* simply as a socialist text is "an exercise in closure, confining the utopian imagination within textually approved limits"(38). Whether he was a socialist or not is disregarded in Thompson's claim that Morris "was somewhere else, doing something else, and the question is not so much wrong as inappropriate"(39). For him, "Morris was a Marxist *and* a Utopian, but we must not allow either a hyphen or a sense of contradiction to enter between the two terms. Above all, the second term may not be reduced to the first"(40). Thompson indicates that any attempt to vindicate Morris must not only take account of his utopias but recognise their primary position in his political thought.

Utopias ultimately fail to muster sufficient credibility because they "have most commonly arisen within the realm of literature," states M. Keith Booker, "and they are informed (like literature) by fictionalized visions"(41). Politics has evolved traditions of rationalism, realism, empiricism and scientific approach that are opposed by the irrationality, illogicality and fantasy of utopian fiction. It may be that utopias are not politically important but it is significant that within academe, as Thompson stated, there is a widespread "piety towards politics-as-text and timidity towards the term Utopian"(42). There is a

difficulty in ascribing political value to surreal, absurd, and fantasy fiction and this has encouraged the potential significance of utopian novels to be pre-empted, pacified and avoided. However, as Thompson suggests, the problem may not be utopia's inability to fit into acceptable politics but political science's failure to accept the visionary challenges that utopianism brings with it.

Clearly, although post-modernism opposes the traditional categories and taxonomies of politics, there is an older and perhaps more significant challenge in the form of utopian fiction.

Morris's political writings are suffused with utopian images and are predictably defined and devalued by these utopian associations. Goodwin and Taylor's assertion that "utopia has been devalued by making it a synonym for fantasy and illogicality"(43) is exemplified in conventional perceptions about Morris. However, Morris is significant for being an unconventional utopian writer. He used the utopian form in his own way and as such avoided some of the pitfalls of conventional utopias. A.L Morton, for example, describes *News From Nowhere* as "the first utopia that is not utopian"(44), indicating that Morris's approach may challenge and undermine the easy dismissal of all utopian thought. The importance of his original approach prompted Thompson's suggestion that "to vindicate Morris may at the same time be to

vindicate Utopianism itself”(45).

Utopia is usefully defined by Darko Suvin as “the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio-political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organised according to a more perfect principle than in the author’s community”(46). In practice, many utopian societies are characterised by those features - rigidity, stagnation, blandness, conformity and impossibility - that make them least attractive as alternatives to the status quo. This renders suspect their ability to promote transformation. For example, there have been no attempts to realise Gilman’s parthenogenic paradise or discover Swift’s society of talking horses. Morris, as an agitator for revolution, became aware of the inability of conventional utopian novels to bring about transformation. He identified a two-fold danger in idly predicting the perfect solution in fiction:

there will be some temperaments to whom the answer given to the question, How shall we live then? will be pleasing and satisfactory, and others to whom it will be displeasing and unsatisfactory. The danger to the first is that they [the readers] will accept it with all its necessary errors and fallacies (which such a book *must* abound in) as conclusive statements of fact and rules of action, which will warp their efforts in futile

directions. The danger of the second...is that they also accepting its speculations as facts will be inclined to say, if that is Socialism, we won't help its advent as it holds out no hope for us(47).

The socialist Morris did not believe that a glittering counter-capitalist paradise could be imposed or discovered in the pages of a utopian novel. The images of utopia that he produced in lectures, essays, poems and novels were not intended to be taken prophetically but were personal dreams. This reflects his insistence that it was "impossible to build up a scheme for the society of the future, for no man can really think himself out of his own days; his palace of days to come can only be constructed on the aspirations forced on him by his present surroundings, and from his dreams of the life of the past, which themselves cannot fail to be more or less insubstantial imaginings"(48). He opposed the idle prediction of most utopian fiction and claimed, for example, that it was "no use prophesying as to the events that will accompany [utopia]"(49) because utopias should be regarded as "more or less personal"(50). Consequently, in a review of *Looking Backward*, Morris criticised Edward Bellamy for falsely implying that his assumptions were universal truths. This also implicated the wider traditions of utopian thought and fiction. Morris claimed not "to object to a one-sided way of looking at

matters so long as we understand that it is one-sided”(51) but conventional utopian novels failed to allow for such speculation and openness.

Morris perceived that “people have been made so timorous of change by the terror of starvation that even the unluckiest of them are stolid and hard to move”(52). Nevertheless, he believed that an accessible and potentially productive means for questioning the status quo was the capacity to imagine oneself out of it: to dream personal fantasy alternatives that, in disregarding the boundaries of what is known and accepted, can be held up critically to the real world. Morris understood there to be an important relationship between fantasy and reality. Clearly, although dreaming can be regarded as an idle and escapist pastime, it is motivated and influenced by our experiences in the real world. Dreams can also be regarded, therefore, as personal interrogations of conventional and unconventional values. Morris saw utopian dreams - with their capacity for political speculation - as potentially unveiling of the established order. The importance of the dream to Morris’s utopian thought is recognised by some critics. For example, in *William Morris Now: Socialism By Design*, Roger Simon claims that “dreaming was not a form of escapism for him [Morris]; rather it was an exploration of different ways of living and thinking”(53). In addition, Goode, in his essay *William Morris and the Dream*

of Revolution, states that Morris's own dreams - particularly his utopian novels - are "above all...not polemical but exploratory"(54).

Ernst Bloch, writing fifty years after Morris's death, suggested that all dreams could be regarded as a type of political activity. Morris, however, believed that our more specific dreams of personal utopian societies could best be used to question, undermine and transform the existing order. He noted that there were "some who will tell you that we are going on very well on our present lines...and they imply that the progress will be steady and uninterrupted"(55). In opposition to this conservatism, Morris encouraged individuals to dream their own utopias to undermine the prevailing tacit consent to the status quo. He saw that the doctrine of irrevocable social progress maintained the established order at the same time as promising to deliver the perfect society. It was the explicit and tacit consent of individuals to this doctrine that Morris aimed to oppose. For example, it was not an ideological superiority that made capitalism pre-eminent but an unquestioning adherence to it. A personal utopian dream or fiction could not simply uncover a replacement system, however, but should be used to interrogate the one in existence. "I do not believe in the world being saved by any one system," Morris claimed, "I only assert the necessity of attacking systems grown corrupt"(56). He hoped

that individuals would undertake their own critical practices so that
“everywhere - in State, in Church, in the household - we endure no tyranny,
accept no lie, quail before no fear, although they may come before us
disguised”(57)

The intention of this study is to challenge some of the misinformed dismissals as well as some of the silences that characterise Morris's reception in political thought and socialist theory. Morris's political thought has been unjustly devalued by those - including communists, social democrats and liberals - who thought that they knew how to effect basic political change. Morris's own approach is embodied in his utopian fiction, where he promotes and exemplifies personal critical practices that he believes can be politically effective. These practices are characterised by openness and experimentalism, as well as an enduring belief in the creative capacities of ordinary individuals. These beliefs resonate throughout Morris's life-work: from his arts and crafts, to his public lectures and his commitment to political activism. Although the utopian form has become characterised by negative perceptions, Morris's utopian fictions are of a different character: they challenge the standard blueprint model and - both in intent and practice - suggest a type of 'critical utopian fiction'. This understanding of utopia resonates and anticipates late

twentieth century post-dystopian movements in utopian literature.

Chapter One of this study will examine the identification of a 'utopian tradition' in political thought that supports a standard form and limited way of thinking about utopia. Morris's utopias challenge the tradition and the model of utopia it maintains. As such, his utopias are more usefully regarded as critical or non-utopian. Utopias are a type of political fiction and *Chapter Two* will begin by reviewing some of the definitions of the concept of political fiction. Morris, angered by the lack of success that met most appeals for change that came from political fictions, provided utopias that tried to seduce the reader into practices through which they would educate their own desires for transformation. This chapter will analyse the success and influence of this approach to political fiction. *Chapter Three* will address the critical strategies that Morris exemplified and promoted through his 'non-utopian utopian fiction'. These resonate with later theorists' attempts to identify effective ways for producing revolutionary transformation based on individual participation.

Notes

1. William Morris, letter, recipient unknown (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.395.
2. William Morris, letter to John Glasse (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.658.
3. Crane Brinton, English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century, p.260.
4. Ibid., p.264.
5. Ibid., p.260.
6. Ibid., p.263.
7. Anthony Wright, British Socialism, p.44.
8. Anthony Wright, Socialisms: Theories and Practices, p.3.
9. Keith Taylor, The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists, p.2.
10. William Morris, letter to E.J Collings (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.729.
11. William Morris, letter to George Bainton (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.766.
12. G.D.H. Cole, William Morris as a Socialist, p.12.
13. William Morris, letter to Andreas Scheu (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.569.
14. Norman Kelvin, introduction to The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II, p.xxx.
15. George Woodcock, Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and

Movements, p.517.

16. G.D.H. Cole, William Morris as a Socialist, p.13.

17. E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, p.788.

18. William Morris, "The Aims of Art" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.121.

19. Ibid., p.133.

20. William Morris, "The Beauty of Life" (in William Morris: Selected Writings) p.563.

21. William Morris, (in William Morris Now: Socialism By Design) p.19.

22. William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist" (in William Morris: Selected Writings) p.659.

23. William Morris, William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist, p.307.

24. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.246.

25. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.26.

26. Norman Kelvin, introduction to The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II, p.xxxi.

27. William Morris, "The Present Outlook in Politics" (in The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris) p.21.

28. William Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.1.

29. Crane Brinton, English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century, p.232.

30. Ibid., p.253.

31. Ibid., p.253.
32. Lyman Tower Sargent, "William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition" (in Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris) p.66.
33. R. Page Arnot, William Morris: A Vindication, p.22.
34. Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, p.112.
35. R. Page Arnot, William Morris: A Vindication, p.15.
36. Ibid., p.3.
37. Ibid., p.25.
38. E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, p.789.
39. Ibid., p.791.
40. Ibid., p.791.
41. M. Keith Booker, The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism, p.14.
42. E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, p.792.
43. Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor, The Politics of Utopia: A Study in Theory and Practice, p.17.
44. A.L. Morton, The English Utopia, p.213.
45. E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, p.792.
46. Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre, p.49.
47. William Morris, William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist, p.248.
48. William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome,

p.17.

49. William Morris, "The Hopes of Civilisation" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.116.

50. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.252.

51. William Morris, letter to Edward Carpenter (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.430.

52. William Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.35.

53. Roger Simon, William Morris Now: Socialism by Design, p.11.

54. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.246.

55. William Morris, "Art and Labour" (in The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris) p.112.

56. William Morris, letter to C.E Maurice (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.202.

57. William Morris, "The Aims of Art" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.140.

Chapter One. The Non-utopian

The urge to locate political ideas and concepts on lines of 'historical development' is highly influential. The imposition of subjective traditions and origins promotes powerful ideas about what is significant in political thought.

As R.B.J. Walker suggests, references to such traditions

may be justified as a simple practical convenience. The story to be told has to begin somewhere. But it is not always easy to begin at the beginning, if only because the identification of point of origin depends on where we think we are now. Thus a practical convenience is always liable to turn into a powerful myth of origin. Other points of departure can be rendered trivial or even unthinkable(1).

Many influential secondary texts uphold the idea of a 'utopian tradition' in political thought. For example, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* by F.E. and F.P. Manuel and *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* by Krishan Kumar trace the historical development of utopia. However, the theory of a utopian tradition is based on a powerful myth of origin that imposes a limited definition of utopia. The origin of utopia is commonly presented as Plato's *Republic* or More's *Utopia* and these promote a particular model or standard

form of utopia. From these texts, the 'classic utopia' is defined as a detailed manifesto for political organisation or blueprint for social perfection. Utopias from Bacon and Butler to Bellamy and Wells, for example, accept and promote this form. This standard model dominates ideas about the tradition of utopian thought. The Manuels and Kumar support the classic form by asserting that the most significant utopias are those featuring the most sophisticated concepts of political organisation. The Manuels, for example, claim that "the great utopia is recognized as conceivable"(2). This devalues those utopian expressions that, like Morris's, are not intended to be conceivable and do not provide a political blueprint. Consequently, the utopian tradition upholds a canon of great works that reflects a subjective myth of origin and promotes a limited understanding of utopia.

News From Nowhere, for example, is significant because it deviates from the conventional classic utopia. Where the accepted utopian form relentlessly itemises the details of a fictitious political organisation, Morris avoids describing one altogether. The inhabitants of the classic utopia are usually so content as to be one-dimensional and the society itself is often bland and stagnant. In contrast, not all the characters in Morris's utopia are perfectly happy and the society they live in continues to develop beyond the initial

revolution that established it. Consequently, Morris opposes the conventions of utopia in three interesting ways: he does not present a political blueprint, he does not expect universal conformity to be attainable or useful and he does not hope for an end to the possibility of further change.

Firstly, then, Morris rejects the political blueprinting that compelled Bellamy, Wells and most other utopians. The absence of a detailed sociopolitical manifesto in *News From Nowhere* leaves the specific features of Morris's imagined order tantalizingly vague. This invites readers to fill in the gaps from their own imaginations and avoids the sense of entrapment invoked by the reading of most utopias. As Clara warns, there will be "not too much detail for him [the visitor]...Let him find out for himself"(3). Morris does not try to anticipate the future in the way that Bellamy predicts the technological innovations that are to come. The only new machines that Morris refers to are the "force vehicles...[about which the visitor] took good care not to ask any questions...as I knew well enough that I should never be able to understand how they worked"(4). Similarly, the canal system "worked in some way the explanation of which I could not understand"(5). In *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil*, Morris reasserted his belief in the "impossibility of creating a scheme for a new society out of the materials of the old"(6). In his speculative

and experimental utopias he avoids this pitfall of the classic blueprint model.

Morris replaces the delivery of answers with a critical strategy that invites readers to think about their own ideas of utopia. Cole describes this strategy as “here is the sort of society I should like to live in. Now tell me yours.”(7).

The second approach marking Morris apart from the conventional utopia is the recognition of non-conformity and dissent. Where the citizens of More’s *Utopia* are content to live as functionaries of the social order, those in *News From Nowhere* expect to be treated as individuals with diverse demands. There are five areas indicating that universal conformity and contentment are not promoted by Morris. These are frequent arguments, the Grumblers, the Obstinate Refusers, broken relationships and crimes of passion. These combine to confirm that human frailties cannot be ordered away by a perfect manifesto - an understanding not accepted in most utopias. In *News From Nowhere*, then, there are disagreements between Dick and Boffin, Ellen and her grandfather and Old Hammond and Guest. The value of alternative opinions in challenging complacency is exemplified by the Grumblers and the Obstinate Refusers. The former are those unhappy with the ‘happy life’ who fondly recall the wide disparities and differences of the old system. Ellen’s grandfather, for example, claims that previous economic inequality provided the essential differences in

society. Similarly, the Obstinate Refusers are those who abstain from communal haymaking because they have something better to do. In addition, the relationships in *News From Nowhere* can be imperfect. Where Julian and Edith know they are perfectly suited in *Looking Backward*, Dick and Clara in Morris's utopia have separated but are seeking a reconciliation. Also, the jealous rival in another relationship has attempted to murder the partner of his unrequited love. Moylan indicates the importance of Morris's recognition of differences by asserting that some utopias focus "on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection...and thus render more recognisable and dynamic alternatives"(8). Morris's recognition of non-conformity and dissent in *News From Nowhere* indicates a separation of personal and political arrangements that most utopias ignore.

The third of Morris's unconventional approaches is that his utopia has not stopped developing. Whilst Wells takes the end of history for granted in *A Modern Utopia* and *Men Like Gods*, Morris asserts the importance of further social and political movement in *News From Nowhere*. The on-going liquidity of his utopia is shown in the stages that follow the initial socialist revolution. Significantly, this event does not mark the final transformation of society. Old Hammond relates that the revolution produced an age of leisure (sufficient as a

utopia in itself for many authors) during which a general sense of boredom developed and a “kind of disappointment seemed coming over us...[coupled with] a dull level of utilitarian comfort”(9). Francis Fukuyama refers in his 1989 essay to “the boredom at the end of history that will serve to get history started again”(10). Morris anticipates this idea by suggesting that the revolution must eventually be followed by a period where alternative forms of existence are pursued. He asserts in *A Dream of John Ball* that it is impossible accurately to predict the details of these “Changes Beyond the Change”(11). However, in order to promote the strategy of critical reflection amongst readers, Morris outlines two alternatives in *News From Nowhere* that are personal to him. As well as undermining nineteenth century assumptions about labour and the environment, these confirm his belief that utopias should not predict an end state.

In Morris’s first alternative, post-revolutionary society is enjoying a period of universal creative production that addresses the problem of individual boredom induced by an age of leisure. Guest arrives in Nowhere during an age characterised by ‘Useful Work’. For example, all inhabitants are skilled in their chosen crafts and once menial tasks such as refuse collection have attained a level of prestige related to their importance to the functioning of society.

However, Morris does not suggest this as the final manifestation of his dreamed society. A second personal alternative is implied through the character of Ellen. There is some evidence to suggest that she represents the utopia to which Morris truly aspired. For example, Guest - who is most often the representation of Morris within the text - is attracted to this woman who "has a beauty quite different from that of a 'young lady' ...[that makes her] strangely interesting"(12). Ellen appears at the end of the symbolic journey along the Thames to Kelmscott House; a place where nature and civilisation are becoming synthesised. At Kelmscott, it proves difficult to know where the gardens end and the walls of the house begin. In addition, the love of crafts and manufactured ornament - so important in the age of useful work - is replaced here by a reverence for nature which prefigures a closer affinity between humanity and the natural environment. This implies a natural alternative order that opposes the unchecked industrialism of Morris's own age. This alternative is embodied in the character of Ellen who differs from the other citizens of Nowhere. Her closeness to the natural environment is emphatic: "O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it and all things that grow out of it"(13). The young Ellen is the dream of a possible alternative to the existing society of *News From Nowhere*.

The character of John Ball in Morris's earlier novel is similar to Ellen in this respect because he also indicates the possibility of further transformation beyond the initial revolution. He is part of the agitation for the seizure of the means of production that motivates the peasants but he dreams beyond this with his hopes for a society based on fellowship and community. Ball suggests an alternative where "the reaper shall reap in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he hath won...and all shall be without money and price. And man shall help man, and the saints in heaven shall be glad, because men no more fear each other"(14). Both *News From Nowhere* and *A Dream of John Ball* articulate Morris's belief in the importance of a lasting capacity for transformation in society.

The utopian tradition maintains a powerful set of prejudices about all utopias. But not all utopias conform to the same standard model. Morris opposed those conventional utopias that were not effective in promoting revolution. He undermined the acceptable model for mild reformism that utopias had become. For example, his suggestion that "it is utopian to put forward a scheme of gradual, logical reconstruction of society that is liable to be overturned at the first historical hitch it comes to"(15) implies the criticism that established utopian thought is politically ineffective. For Morris, the standard

blueprint utopia always follows “naturally from the author’s satisfaction with the best part of modern life”(16). He understood utopias to have become an exercise in conservatism - a description implicitly supported by the Manuels and the utopian tradition they exemplify.

The conventional utopia endorsed by the utopian tradition presents a static model of an ideal future but Morris’s writing does not fit this conception. For the Manuels, since the tradition of the classic utopia has come to an end in the twentieth century, utopias have languished. However, the death of the standard utopian form cannot be conflated with the demise of all approaches to utopia. As Morton has suggested, Morris’s fiction has to be read as a type of ‘non-utopia’ because it deviates from the standard form. In addition, his political fictions are purposely ‘non-political’ because they reject the nineteenth century understanding of politics.

Any misunderstanding of Morris’s utopias can be addressed by recalling his intention to educate a desire for transformation. For example, the medieval imagery he favoured is commonly regarded as an indication of anti-progressive sentiment. The Guest visiting the future in *News From Nowhere*, for example, is made to feel as if he were “alive in the fourteenth century; a sensation helped out by the costume of the people we met or passed, in whose dress there was

nothing ‘modern’”(17). However, Morris does not advocate a Luddite regression to a golden age that never was but reverts to the past “with the distinct aim of showing you where lies the hope for the future and not in mere empty regret for the days which can never come again”(18). For Michael Wilding, “his [Morris’s] is a selective medievalism, based first on a rejection of the repressive aspects of medieval society and second on a negation of the repressive aspects of nineteenth century industrial capitalism” (19). Similarly, Morris’s pastoral images have been regarded as evidence of a hatred of all machinery. But Morris often asserted that “machines of the most ingenious and best-appointed kinds...[should] be used...to save human labour”(20) although they “should be our servants and not our masters”(21). He also repeatedly stated that “the only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author”(22). Consequently, his utopias are not prophecies or blueprints but images opposed to existing assumptions that indicate the *possibility* of alternatives.

Morris’s speculative utopias and experiments with arts and crafts are an aesthetic challenge to the nineteenth century. He opposed political complacency and the shallow understanding of art with the critical example of his own life practices. These practices combine in his attempts to educate a

desire for revolution. His utopias, for example, are significant because they are an attractive and calculated negation of the contemporary order. *News From Nowhere* and *A Dream of John Ball* are not blueprints for the perfect political organisation but a type of critical reflection of conventional assumptions. His utopias invite the reader to hold a critical mirror to reality. For example, in *News From Nowhere*, the bridges of the Victorian era have been replaced with “handsome pieces of very solid oak framing”(23) and there is a “superabundance of beauty”(24), endlessly fine weather and more attractive babies. Clearly, there is no intention to represent these as serious predictions but they do serve as sustained aesthetic challenges. In addition, he opposed the sparse futurism of Bellamy’s utopia by replacing Bellamy’s electrical telegraphic system with a “beautiful silver bugle horn”(25) for communicating. Also, the clothing in Morris’s utopias echoes his experiments with colourful medieval tapestry designs: the dress in *News From Nowhere* “would have served very well for a picture of fourteenth century life”(26) in common with the “black cloth gown...neatly embroidered about the collar and wrists”(27) in which the visitor finds himself clothed in *A Dream of John Ball*. Both these texts operate as seductions to attract the reader into thinking about alternative ways of life. This led Morton to claim that *News From Nowhere* is the only

utopia “in which we could wish to live”(28)

To the aesthetic challenge to the status quo can be added the more satiric attacks. In *News From Nowhere*, for example, the former capitalist idle classes have entered into colloquial legend as the Blue Devils and the Mulleygrubs and the police are remembered as “the civic bourgeois guard”(29). In addition to the Houses of Parliament being now a dung shed, Dick recalls M.Ps as “Parliamentary sham-kings”(30). Nineteenth century schools are remembered as “boy-farms”(31) and the slums were “places of torture...or stews for rearing and breeding men and women in such degradation that that torture should seem to them mere ordinary and natural life”(32). The new age is conversely “not an age of inventions”(33) and the old order was a “tyranny of bricks and mortar”(34). To encourage the desire for revolution, Morris delivered utopias where “the nineteenth century, of which such big words have been said, counted for nothing”(35).

During the nineteenth century, utopian thought and fiction became more explicit in reflecting and commenting on political debate and theory. Previously, utopias had been fantasies that seemed to relate only remotely to the real world. Both More and Bacon, for example, had situated their utopias on remote islands and Voltaire’s and Butler’s were located behind almost

impenetrable mountain ranges. These techniques ensured that any critique of contemporary society was obscure and ambiguous: a smokescreen that protected the author but made utopias ineffective in influencing political events. For example, More attacks the materialism and lack of faith he saw in his own times but his text did not form part of a widespread political response.

The utopian writers of the nineteenth century were less affected by concerns for public or monarchical wrath and were more able to comment on and reflect political debates. The French Revolution and the rise of the industrial capitalist phase in history influenced utopian writers and made utopias a more explicitly political phenomenon. During this period, utopias moved from being an exercise in compensatory fantasy towards being a political concept. One response from utopian thinkers to the failure of the French Revolution, for example, was to establish experimental utopian communities. These communities were inspired and founded by Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon, for example, who were regarded by Engels as “the three great utopians”(36) as well as “the founders of socialism”(37). The communities established by these utopian socialists mostly failed after a few years, discrediting the utopian enterprise and the type of speculative socialism it represented. Utopian socialism became identified with unworkable fantasy and

practical failure. Consequently, Marx, Engels and later scientific socialists attempted to distance themselves from these experiments. As Vincent Geoghegan records “their desire to stress the political distinctiveness of their own stance, led them to be less than fair to their ‘utopian’ predecessors”(38). For example, Engels changed the title of his early essay from *Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft* (*The Development of Socialism From Utopia to Science*) to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*: the former suggesting the debt owed by the new socialism to the old and “the latter implying a sharp dualism of world-views; one true, one false”(39)

A second influence on utopias was capitalism. The Victorian era delivered virtually unchecked capitalist expansion that harnessed the age of industrial innovation. The most prominent response to this, embodied by Bellamy, and, more problematically, Wells, was to embrace the theory of relentless progress. This belief became indicative of the Victorian age. Bellamy, for example, suggested that capitalism would evolve smoothly into a form of state socialism. This led Morris to suggest that Bellamy was “perfectly satisfied with modern civilisation”(40) because he predicted the future “by means of the final development of the great private monopolies that are such a noteworthy feature of the present day”(41). This response to capitalism

opposed the insistence of Marxists that transforming the status quo would necessitate a violent political struggle. Bellamy - and later Wells - suggested that humanity was yet in its infancy but would slowly grow into a benevolent system where the means of production were socially mediated by a central bureaucracy.

Wells had begun as a satirist of this theory of inexorable social progress. For example, in *The Time Machine*, he describes a future human race divided genetically between those who work and those who enjoy a meaningless age of leisure. Inspired by a belief in limitless innovation and advancement, however, Wells began to produce his own versions of the gradualist social manifesto produced by Bellamy. *Men Like Gods* and *A Modern Utopia* located Wells with the author of *Looking Backward* as compliant with the belief that utopia would soon be delivered in practice. The defining features of these utopias is that they promise the arrival of socialism without the need for a revolutionary breakdown in the current order. This ideal dominated the politics of utopia during the late nineteenth century.

Morris's utopias deviate from this by promoting a more active response to capitalism. In this sense, Morris is an interesting figure in relation to utopianism because he tries to give utopias a different political function from

that suggested by Bellamy and Wells. He does not endorse the belief that socialism will simply evolve and he regards the political expressions in conventional utopias with suspicion. His utopianism is more consistent with the Marxists because he demanded the active participation of all in a necessarily bitter revolution. For example, in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, Morris asserts that “communism can never be realised until the present system of Society has been destroyed by the workers taking hold of the political power”(42). Morris opposed the doctrine of passivity promoted by conventional utopias and his approach is significant in addressing the relationship between political fiction and the status quo.

Utopias from the early nineteenth century onwards can be organised between authors who explicitly or tacitly comply with hegemonic assumptions and those who seek to undermine them. Moylan relates that “the literary utopia has functioned within the dominant ideology that has shaped the capitalist dream and within the dominant ideologies that have pushed beyond the limits of that dream”(43). Although distinctions are difficult, it is useful to understand that these approaches - one compliant and the other critical - are antithetical strands in utopian thought. For example, an author working within the former may produce a perfect society that essentially accepts and accentuates the major

assumptions of the contemporary order. Compliant utopias endorse conservatism and passivity by encouraging the hopeful, yet undemanding, expectancy that the future will deliver utopia in practice, without the need for individual participation or activism. Compliant utopianism is negative utopianism because it advocates individual acquiescence to convention and encourages our capitulation to prevailing hegemonies. Conventional blueprint utopias, including those of Bellamy and Wells, are uncritical, negative and compliant.

In opposition, critical - or defiant - utopias aim to engage readers in a destabilising dialogue against convention. This involves the deployment of an imagined society that challenges established assumptions and encourages revolution. The critical utopia - also termed the heuristic utopia by Williams - encourages an awareness of potential otherness to assert that the future can be other than a logical extension of present assumptions. Critical utopias aim to educate a desire for transformation by suggesting that other values can be envisioned, fought for and established. For example, *News From Nowhere* is a fantasy of alternative values embodied in an alternative way of life - and "the point," asserts Levitas, "is not whether one agrees or disagrees with the institutional arrangements, but rather that the utopian experiment disrupts the

taken-for-granted nature of the present”(44). The key functions of the critical utopia are, therefore, educative and speculative: they raise awareness of the possibility of alternatives and encourage individuals to speculate on these. Morris claimed that “we have at present one thing to do: to convince people ...that the change must come”(45). His critical utopias were not intended to provide individuals with the final details of the New Jerusalem but to lead us towards the self-activity of questioning what is given. The critical utopia begins the process of undermining the relevance of pre-established assumptions, enabling individuals to question Bellamy’s *logical* paradise or one of the twentieth century’s own utopias, Disneyland. Both are coherent extensions of established assumptions. The critical utopia advocates open self-interrogation of our acceptance of established assumptions. The compliant utopia, operating with the pretence of conveying the ultimate solution, is a text suffused with closure, offering the reader no part in the realisation of new societies.

In some ways Morris can be regarded as a conservative utopian: a romantic dreamer who embellished his daydreams of a medieval past because he was afraid of the uncertainties of a dynamic capitalist future. It can be argued that he sought the same certainty of closure invoked by Bellamy, not by logically extending the present but by projecting the past into the future.

However, his continual warnings that utopias should only ever be read as the personal fantasies of their authors and that “the function of the reformers now alive is not so much prophecy as action”(46) undermine suggestions that he is a conventional or compliant utopian.

The utopian tradition defended by the Manuels does not take account of Morris’s critical utopias. In spite of Morris’s opposition - which was largely disregarded and failed to stimulate a revolution - the compliant blueprint utopia emerged dominant at the end of the nineteenth century to await the triumphant arrival of utopia in practice. This defining characteristic of the Victorian era was devastated in the twentieth century by the combined crisis of Soviet totalitarianism (which resembled Bellamy’s state socialism) and the commanding emergence of anti-utopian and dystopian fiction. Orwell, Huxley, Zamyatin and Koestler responded directly to the passive optimism of their compliant predecessors. *1984*, for example, can be read as a careful satire on grandiose social plans as well as a perceptive realisation of the catastrophe of totalitarian politics.

Where the former century had been an age of passive utopian expectancy, the latter showed that the utopian dream implemented would turn to nightmare. The Manuels equate the bankruptcy of the classic utopian model

with the end of the utopian tradition in the twentieth century. They ignore the continuing production of utopian novels and the reinterpretation of utopia away from the classic model upon which they rely. It is significant, however, that the death of utopia conveniently facilitated by the arrival of the dystopians does not easily account for Morris: he had already anticipated the dystopian's assertion that paradise could not be found and implemented from the pages of a utopian novel.

Nevertheless, the idea that novels can be politically effective is ambiguous. Political fiction encompasses stories that use politics as the scenery for an otherwise apolitical narrative as well as persuasive appeals for social reform. It may be that a novel is only political if it produces an active response and can therefore be *proved* to be so. Morris's utopias address and reject some of these problems. For example, he does not try to convince readers of the universal truth of his socialism any more than he proves the need to reject all machinery and regress to medievalism. He wanted to bring all individuals into the revolution, not divide them into supporters and opponents and he believed that the simple advocacy of any one system would always produce this divisive effect. He attacked the dominant political system and the belief that a perfect solution devised now would have any relevance in the future. Morris's utopias

did not explain what was to come but speculated on the questions to be asked. For him, “the details can be filled in as much as you please; but always with the tolerable certainty that the actual details won’t be like the imagined ones”(47).

Morris’s utopias are precedents for a form of speculative non-politics that challenges established politics. They can be usefully examined to develop an understanding of political fiction that prefigures a reappraisal of utopian thought. However, Morris’s use of utopian fantasy and advocacy of dream strategies is also his most distinctive problem, causing his marginalisation within the utopian tradition, which is already devalued in political thought.

Goode’s damaging assertion that “only insofar as my dreams push forward into action, only insofar as they claim the understanding of other people through my commitment, can they become creative and revolutionary”(48) finds an easy target with Morris. His search for a revolutionary dialogue that did not rely on established political concepts and conventions transformed his utopias from the emancipatory *News From Nowhere* and *A Dream of John Ball* to the fantasies of *The Well at the World’s End* and *The Sundering Flood*. These were not as successful as the earlier novels but they confirm Morris’s belief that personal alternative dreams can challenge and reject the status quo.

Notes

1. R.B.J. Walker, Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory, p.27.
2. F.E. and F.P. Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World, p.14.
3. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.123.
4. Ibid., p.140.
5. Ibid., p.153.
6. William Morris, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.171.
7. G.D.H. Cole, introduction to William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays, p.xvi.
8. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.10.
9. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.115.
10. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History" (in The National Interest) p.21.
11. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.257.
12. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.157.
13. Ibid., p.174.
14. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.219.
15. William Morris, William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist, p.248.

16. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.249.
17. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.19.
18. William Morris, "Art and Labour" (in The Published Lectures of William Morris) p.96.
19. Michael Wilding, Political Fictions, p.86.
20. William Morris, "A Factory as it Might Be" (in William Morris: Selected Writings) p.648.
21. William Morris, "Art and Labour" (in The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris) p.115.
23. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.248.
23. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.125.
24. Ibid., p.175.
25. Ibid., p.19.
26. Ibid., p.6.
27. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.200.
28. A.L. Morton, The English Utopia, p.221.
29. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.95.
30. Ibid., p.147.
31. Ibid., p.23.
32. Ibid., p.55.

33. Ibid., p.146.
34. Ibid., p.147.
35. Ibid., p41.
36. Friederich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" (in Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy: Karl Marx and Friederich Engels) p.70.
37. Ibid., p.73.
38. Vincent Geoghegan, Utopianism and Marxism, p.29.
39. Ibid., p.30.
40. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.249.
41. Ibid., p.249.
42. William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome, p.217.
43. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.2.
44. Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, p.122.
45. William Morris, letter to Fred Pickles (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.466.
46. William Morris, "The Society of the Future" (in William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist) p.453.
47. William Morris, letter to George Bainton (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.770.
48. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.272.

Chapter Two. Political Fiction and the Education of Revolutionary Desire

A concept of politically effective fiction has not been clearly defined . Edmund Speare, for example - writing in the 1920s and assuming that politics related solely to the institutions and activities of government - defined the political novel as “a work of prose fiction which leans rather to ‘ideas’ than to ‘emotions’; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct”(1). In his own imposition of a subjective myth of origin, he asserts that the genre of political fiction was “born in Disraeli’s prismatic mind”(2). Speare’s understanding does not encompass Morris’s utopias. Morris used his political fictions to promote a desire for change. Part of this was the undermining of the conventional idea of politics that Speare takes for granted. For example, rather than explain the complexities of the legislative process, Morris’s novels suggest that we examine its relevance to us. Speare does not account for novels that try to be politically effective in this way.

Nevertheless, Speare’s definition is at least more specific than Irving Howe’s in *Politics and the Novel*. Howe languidly explains political fictions as those where “political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is dominant”(3). Howe’s loose definition reflects an uncertainty about the

nature and meaning of politics that did not much trouble Speare. However, he replaces the limitations of the former's understanding with the indecision of his own. Despite this, Howe asserts that authors cannot simply expect to brainwash their readers in order to make their novels politically effective. This suggests that authorial intent is no guarantee of effect with political fiction. Howe significantly implies that the way a reader uses the novel makes it politically effective. This resonates with Morris's demand that the education of revolutionary desire should be a conscious self-activity.

Booker later confirms that the role of the reader is to make the text political by initially "replacing conventional literary critiques, that are a staple bourgeois response to fiction, with approaches that highlight and emphasise transgressive elements"(4). He defines transgression as "the disruption of hierarchies, taxonomies or limiting systems of all kinds"(5). Using the text to help us transgress the boundaries of established conventions was one of Morris's aims in writing his utopias. He hoped that his fictions might help us to question our tacit consent to the status quo.

In *Political Fictions*, Michael Wilding does not elaborate much further on Howe's definition when he states that political fictions "are not something to be narrowly defined"(6) but they "should say something useful about

politics”(7). Although Speare, Howe and Wilding are significant representatives of the secondary literature, they each fail to encapsulate Morris’s approach. Their common methodological weakness is that they use ‘political’ simply as a label for classifying and cataloguing a fictional genre. In addition, they reduce the concept of political fiction to a set of literary references to politics. They fail to explain or support the idea that fiction can have an effect on established politics in the way that Morris and Booker indicate. Moylan agrees with the criticism and suggests that utopian political fiction “should not be reduced to its content. To do so would be to cut short the process and limit utopia to a closed set of images, character activities or ideological expressions”(8).

Despite the weaknesses of these definitions, political fictions can be understood as a way of writing about politics that differs from social and political science but that nevertheless can have important effects. Hannah Arendt, for example, indicated that phenomena such as the holocaust and totalitarianism are not meaningfully explained in conventional political discourse and that storytelling - by which she means novels, poems and fables - can help individuals to appreciate the otherwise inexplicable in more self-conscious ways. It is this ability to move readers that, for Booker, can give

fiction a special political function that is “not available in other discourses”(9).

In addition Lisa J. Disch asserts that fictional texts can be continually reinterpreted because they are open and speculative “in a way that invites discussion from rival perspectives”(10). This suggests that fiction is useful in politics because it can encourage critical responses to society that are not bound by established methodologies and discourses.

Nevertheless, Booker begins *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature* with a lengthy warning about the difficulties of establishing a concept of politically effective fiction. For him, the idea of the novel as a transformative force against dominant institutions and ideologies may be persuasive but “many of the works that have been acclaimed as politically effective...have been so difficult and complex that only professional scholars seem able to recognise their radical potential”(11). For Booker, these novels include the complex works of Samuel Becket, Chinua Achebe and Milan Kundera, where ideas of existentialism, disorder and nihilism are explored. The effects of political fiction, asserts Booker, are mostly subtle and subconscious: they may not turn people into immediate revolutionaries but they can “gradually chip away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures”(12). For Moylan some utopias manage this by

focussing “on the given situation...in a displaced manner to create a fresh view [that] is central to the subversive quality of the genre”(13).

Booker’s caution continues with his claim that the passive experience of reading cannot be equated easily with the activism of political subversion. For example, the tendencies of individuals to subvert the status quo may be pacified if these are reflected only in intellectual and private activities such as reading. The danger is that “books are almost always read silently, in private, by one reader alone with her thoughts”(14). Booker implies that the physical act of subversion may be lost if individuals become too reliant on fiction.

Consequently, a political fiction may “not be transgressive at all, but...in reality acts to reinforce the very acts it purports to oppose”(15). One potential weakness of utopian fictions, then, is that their passive creation and recreation of fictional perfect societies may prevent the physical - and more meaningful - subversion of the status quo in practice. Morris did not want reading novels to take the place of action and he uses Ellen to make this warning in *News From Nowhere*: “Books, books! always books!...When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in that interests us?”(16).

In addition, Morris attacked the compliance of many prominent utopian writers with the hegemonies they should be expected to question. In his review

of *Looking Backward*, for example, he accused Bellamy of being satisfied with the status quo. In a letter to Edward Carpenter, he also dismissed *Walden* because Henry David Thoreau “looks on life as a spectator only...a convenient and pleasant position to take up”(17). He also attacked Dickens’s novels that pleaded for social reform because “they show *some* feeling for those whom the history books call ‘poor’ ...but presently they give it up”(18). For example, in *Oliver Twist*, the orphaned middle-class lead is restored to bourgeois ‘normality’, whilst the dystopia of injustice, maltreatment and non-possession he leaves behind is offered no chance of transformation. In *News From Nowhere*, Morris attacks those fictions in which “we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily on an island of other people’s troubles”(19). For him, political novels had become a convention of bourgeois culture and their ability to effect transformation had become negated by their subsumption within that culture. Political fictions rarely helped to educate a desire for transformation because they had become shaped by processes of cultural embourgeoisement. Morris indicated an awareness of these processes and their general effects on conventional methods of protest in a letter to C.E Maurice:

I used to think that one might further
realise Socialist progress by doing
what one could on the lines of ordinary

middle-class Radicalism: I have been driven of late into the conclusion that I was mistaken; that Radicalism will never develop into anything more than Radicalism...and will always be under the spell of rich Capitalists: they will have no objection to its *political* development if they think they can stop it there: but as to real social changes, they will not allow them(20).

This anticipates Booker's recognition of "the remarkable ability shown by bourgeois society throughout history to absorb and appropriate whatever subversive energies are directed against it"(21).

Despite his opposition to fictions that acquiesced with prevailing hegemonies, Morris did not believe that novels which presented opposing ideals as the 'real truth' about society were any more effective. Political fiction is often a graphic exercise in propaganda, advocating a specific authorial standpoint. In the most didactic of these, readers are persuaded and manipulated into accepting the dogmatic stance of an author. However, blindly accepting the assumptions of a novelist are as damaging as tacitly consenting to the status quo. Consequently, Morris did not want readers to be convinced that his utopian fiction was supremely insightful.

Morris is not explicit about his own intentions in writing political novels

and interpretations differ widely. For example, Arnot understands Morris's "whole high purpose of expression in prose and verse [as a] revolutionary weapon"(22) but Williams regards the novels as those "weaker parts of his work"(23) that are not politically important. Booker reflects this general ambiguity by not knowing if *News From Nowhere* should be read as "a practical goal towards which society should strive or whether it simply represents a critique of Morris's contemporary society"(24). This uncertainty reflects Morris's desire that his utopias should provoke open debate. As he indicated: "I will not compare my visions with those of other Socialists, but will simply talk to you of my own; and let you make the comparison yourselves, those of you who are visionaries, or let you unassisted by me criticize them"(25). Thompson confirms this by characterising Morris's utopias as attempts "to help people find out their wants, to encourage them to want more, to challenge them to want differently, and to envisage a society of the future in which people, freed at last of necessity, might choose between different wants"(26). James Redmond, in his introduction to the Routledge edition of *News From Nowhere*, supports this by suggesting that Morris's aim is to make us ask ourselves:

how can we create the society we would
most like to live in?...do we spend our
lives satisfying real needs and desires?...

do we often enough ask ourselves what we want from life? Morris's main purpose in *News From Nowhere* is to ask such questions and encourage us to ask them of ourselves...he asks us to consider the conditions of society and to measure it against the qualities of life that we hold most valuable(27).

Morris's utopias are attractive and accessible to a mass audience. They have the character of fables that can be easily related, discussed or exploited by readers. Morris was attracted by the fables and folk tales of Iceland and medieval England and the seductive simplicity of his utopias draws more from the tradition of Arcadianism than the rigid scientific socialism of contemporary utopian writers. The pastoral paradise of *Nowhere*, for example, echoes the folk utopia of *The Land of Cockayne* that resonates throughout medieval peasant culture. For example, an enduring image of Morris's novel is the festival of communal haymaking that takes place on endlessly sunny afternoons. Morris echoes what he regarded as a significant tradition of political fables and storytelling that operated outside the conventions and language of literary English rooted in the experience of a privileged elite. For example, he produced short political fables such as *A King's Lesson*, in which a monarch learns the values of socialism. There were also poems, including *The Pilgrims of Hope*

which glorifies revolution as “the first fight of the uttermost battle whither all the nations wend”(28). In addition, Morris composed revolutionary songs that continued to be sung at socialist gatherings long after Morris’s death. These include *Chants for Socialists* that features the chorus:

Hark the rolling of the thunder!
Lo the sun! and lo thereunder
Riseth wrath, and hope, and wonder,
And the host comes marching on(29).

The visitor from the nineteenth century in a *Dream of John Ball* is the political storyteller that Morris hoped to be. This character is described as “having a tongue that can tell rhymes”(30) and he appeals to a gathering of revolutionary peasants with an Icelandic fable intended to inspire them with hope for their struggle: “such a tale I told them, long familiar to me; but as I told it the words began to quicken and grow, so that I knew not the sound of my own voice”(31). The fable he tells describes a society where the environment is harsh but the people are strong enough to overcome it. “God send us such men here,” responds one member of the audience. “Nay,” asserts another, “such men have been and will be, and belike are not far from this door even now”(32)

Morris’s entire creative output, from crafts to novels, can be seen as a

search for ways of expressing ideas that do not fit comfortably into the status quo. His crafts and designs, for example, opposed the processes of mechanisation that had undermined the personal creativity of the worker involved in small-scale production. In addition, the language of his utopias opposes the conventions of bourgeois language in which revolutionary ideas are pacified. For example, some of the words in *A Dream of John Ball* may be unfamiliar but Morris uses them to suggest that an altogether different vocabulary may be needed to express unconventional ideas more effectively. The language encountered by the visitor in *A Dream of John Ball*, for example, has been translated for the reader because “the very words of those who spoke to me you would scarce understand”(33). Morris created a stylised fourteenth century language in some of his utopias to more effectively articulate revolutionary ideas. This aim is developed throughout his writing. In *A Dream of John Ball*, for example, he complains that “he had more things to say than the words I knew could make clear: as if I wanted to get from others a new set of words”(34). Kelvin confirms that Morris’s utopias explored ways of expressing unconventional ideas that would be free from the processes of embourgeoisement :

in *News From Nowhere*, he...

attempted a kind of minimalist reduction of the vocabulary of politics. The entire work is an extended dialogue in which inhabitants of Nowhere take up key nineteenth century social and political terms like 'payment', 'competition', 'aristocracy', 'vulgar' and indeed 'politics' itself (meaning Parliamentarianism) - words introduced in Guest's queries - and answer Guest by eliminating the words, by explaining that they have become meaningless in this society of the future(35).

For example, at just over one hundred words, the chapter entitled 'Concerning Politics' is the shortest in *News From Nowhere*. This underlines Morris's assertion that "we [in Nowhere] are well-off as to politics because we have none"(36).

Morris's political fictions and fables try to seduce and provoke the reader with attractive images of places that do not exist. These utopias also oppose the inability of conventional political fiction to create a means of expression for unconventional and revolutionary ideas. Morris hoped that his utopias could help individuals to express their own revolutionary ideas. His approach, therefore, combines the education of revolutionary desire with the demand for more effective anti-hegemonic language. Consequently, his utopias exemplify a type of critical practice and speculative thinking that can be emulated by others.

Harold Laski, Paul Thompson, Arnot, and Wilding assert that Morris's utopias did become influential in the formation and expression of revolutionary desire amongst the working classes. Laski reveals that during the 1930s, copies of *News From Nowhere* could be found in the houses of unemployed miners long after the furniture had been sold(37). In addition, Arnot claims suggestively that Morris's most popular utopia was "translated into German and was circulating in Russia before the revolution"(38) and Wilding records that "as a Socialist pamphlet, [it] has"been translated into French...and Italian"(39). Evidence for this kind of political influence is necessarily difficult to come by but even during Morris's life, some commentators drew attention to the widespread appeal of his utopian fictions. For example, an 1888 review of *A Dream of John Ball* suggested that "Morris is about the only Socialist who can write with the pleasing certainty that his literary productions will be read"(40)

Morris's type of critical utopia resonates with later feminist utopias and 'ecotopias'. Moylan claims that 1970s feminist fictions saved utopia from the 'death by dystopia' described by the Manuels. Significantly, Moylan characterises Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, for example, as recalling "the radical alternatives of nineteenth century utopian writers such as William Morris"(41). Authors such as Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy and

Margaret Atwood combined the dismissal of facile optimism - which is now an accepted critique of the classic utopia - with a hopeful (but not benign) belief that transformation could be made. These novels try to express ideas and educate for transformation without upholding patriarchal conventions. Many of these utopias re-asserted that the perfect society could not be found in a novel. They also echo Morris's hope that utopias can challenge the status quo to make the process of transformation more immediate.

In addition, Morris has influenced the post-dystopian emergence of ecological or pastoral utopias. Morris was 'rediscovered' as an early advocate of 'green politics' in the 1960s. In the essay *A Factory as it Might Be*, for example, Morris demands that industry should "make no sordid litter, befoul no water, nor poison the air with smoke"(42). In addition, in *News From Nowhere*, buildings are "designed so as not to hurt the character of the country"(43) and animal cruelty has been outlawed because "the days of the gamekeeper are over"(44). Significantly, Morris displayed an obvious respect for the environment in *News From Nowhere* through his positive descriptions of nature and the importance of the character of Ellen. These combine to oppose the unregulated ecological degradation that characterised Morris's era. Green utopias became prominent in the 1970s with Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* and

Ecotopia Emerging. These utopias called for transformation to halt the spiralling environmental crisis. The critical utopias produced by feminists and environmental campaigners ignored the blueprint model of utopian fiction in order to encourage their readers to engage with the debates. This is part of the function of Morris's novels and Moylan's definition of the feminist utopias of the 1970s, confirms their common approach:

[they are] expressions of oppositional thought...[aware] of the limitations of the utopian tradition, these texts dwell on the conflict between the existing world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated(45).

Significantly, Morris's utopias exemplify the types of speculative critical thinking that have attracted a proletariat readership and influenced later utopian novelists. Nevertheless, it remains problematic to assert a concept of politically effective fiction unless that concept is transformed from the passive understanding upheld by Speare, Howe and Wilding. Disch claims that the most effective political fictions are those that encourage debate and do not try to win arguments. For her, fiction must provoke "spontaneous critical thinking in its audience"(46) if it is to have any effect. She recalls Morris's utopias by

suggesting that transformation comes from an acute awareness that things can be other than they are now. Disch describes reading fiction as 'visiting' alternative values and assumptions and she suggests that we should try to experience these visits more fully: for example, by "imagining what the world would look like to me from another position, imagining how I would look to myself from within another world, and coming to understand that I might define my principles differently if I did not stand where I am accustomed to."(47).

Booker builds on this by asserting that the reader must appropriate the novel to make it politically effective. For example, Morris's utopias can be politically effective only if they are challenged by the reader. Booker notes that potentially effective novels have been continually dismissed by those critics - Marxist, feminist, post-modernist - who should be more encouraging of subversive projects. "Perhaps," he suggests, "it is time to focus on the ways in which works are subversive, rather than on the ways they aren't"(48). He asserts that the transgressive capacity of novels should be reconciled with the inclinations of the subversive reader through open, discursive reading strategies. This would prefigure a "more affirmative stance to artworks"(49). In addition, it would confirm that "much of the transgressive energy must come from the reader"(50) and that "critics have to supply additional transgressive energies of

their own to supplement those of the work”(51). Booker, therefore, endorses a type of transgressive reading strategy that would aid the self-development of revolutionary desire that Morris hoped for. For Booker *and* Morris, the subversive intentions of a novelist should not simply be criticised and denied but identified and used to contribute to revolutionary discourse. Consequently, the political significance of utopian novels lies not in an easy criticism of the details they provide of a political organisation but in their expressions of faith in the capacity for change. For Booker, the primary function of transgressive fiction is the “indication of alternatives...[and] the suggestion that things need not necessarily be as they are”(52).

Morris used his own transgressive reading strategy to expropriate More's *Utopia* for the cause of socialism. In admiration of More's work, Morris commissioned a typically decorative edition of Ralph Robinson's first English translation from his Kelmscott Press. Morris wrote the preface during the most politically active phase of his life. In this, he claims *Utopia* as “a socialist tract”(53) which is “not a vision of the triumph of the new-born Capitalist society...but a picture of the real New Birth [of socialism]...[that is] against the ugly brutality of the earliest period of commercialism”(54). It is unlikely that More would fully recognise this ‘intention’ but this illustrates the purpose of

transgressive reading strategies: to appropriate the text on any level necessary to facilitate revolutionary discourse. The continual reinterpretation of novels in this way can make them effective in politics. Morris defends his use of More by claiming that "it is no idle word to say that such men never die...the axe of More [is left] with us to produce fruit...[that] not even More himself could ever dream would come to pass"(55).

The effectiveness of Morris's political fiction depended as much on the way readers responded to his writing as on what he actually said as a writer. Certainly, Morris tries to influence the desires of his readers in order to promote revolution: his utopias carry a persuasive message about the failings of the capitalist status quo, for example. More significant, though, are the critical practices exemplified by his approach that can be emulated by individuals. Critical utopias encourage their readers to inform and create the discourses for transformation. For Booker, readers should appropriate novels to make them politically effective in this way and Morris's unsophisticated fables encourage this. Morris, later writers of critical utopias and Booker all assert that novels can be used by individuals to initiate the personal development of a revolutionary consciousness.

Notes

1. M.E. Speare, The Political Novel, p.1.
2. Ibid., p.4.
3. Irving Howe, Politics and the Novel, p.17.
4. M. Keith Booker, Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque, p.10.
5. Ibid., p.12.
6. Michael Wilding, Political Fictions, p1.
7. Ibid., p.5.
8. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.39.
9. M. Keith Booker, Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque, p.246.
10. Lisa J. Disch, "More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt" (in Political Theory) p.670.
11. M. Keith Booker, Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque, pp. 3-4.
12. Ibid., p.4.
13. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.33.
14. M. Keith Booker, Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque, p.246.
15. Ibid., p.7.
16. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.129.

17. William Morris, letter to Edward Carpenter (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.430.
18. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.187.
19. Ibid., p.187.
20. William Morris, letter to C.E Maurice (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.199.
21. M. Keith Booker, Techniques of Subversion on Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque, p.8.
22. R. Page Arnot, William Morris: A Vindication, p.30.
23. Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950, p.155.
24. M. Keith Booker, The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism, p.57.
25. William Morris, William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist, p.455.
26. E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, p.806.
27. James Redmond, introduction to News From Nowhere, p.xviii.
28. William Morris, "The Pilgrims of Hope" (in William Morris: News From Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs) p.158.
29. William Morris, "Chants for Socialists" (in William Morris: News From Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs) p.115.
30. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.202.
31. Ibid., p.206.

32. Ibid., p.206.
33. Ibid., p.200.
34. Ibid., p.237.
35. Norman Kelvin, introduction to The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II, p.xxxi.
36. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.72.
37. Paul Thompson, The Work of William Morris, p.233.
38. R. Page Arnot, William Morris: A Vindication, p. 22.
39. Michael Wilding, Political Fictions, p.46.
40. Anonymous review in "Today" (in William Morris: The Critical Heritage) p.315.
41. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.91.
42. William Morris, "A Factory as it Might Be" (in William Morris: Selected Writings) p.648.
43. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.147.
44. Ibid., p.148.
45. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.10.
46. Lisa J. Disch, "Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt" (in Political Theory) p.670.
47. Ibid., p.679.
48. M. Keith Booker, Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque, p.10.

49. Ibid., p.16.

50. Ibid., p.15.

51. Ibid., 10.

52. Ibid., p.244.

53. William Morris, "More's Utopia: Foreword by William Morris (1893)" (in William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist) p.289.

54. Ibid., p.291.

55. William Morris, "Art and Labour" (in The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris) p.107.

Chapter Three. Utopian Dreams and Creative Work as Critical Practices

Morris's life-work exemplifies and promotes accessible critical practices that oppose prevailing assumptions. For example, his utopian fictions exemplify personal dreams of utopia and promote a type of 'creative work' that celebrates the capacity of the individual for innovation. Morris demonstrated this capacity in his own arts and crafts. Both personal dreams of utopia and the exercise of our own creativity are critical self-activities through which individuals can speculate and experiment with alternative and unfamiliar ideas. In many ways these practices are the 'language' of revolution that Morris was searching for: unconventional 'discourses' unhindered by prevailing hegemonies through which individuals can educate their own revolutionary desires. Although they can be politically significant, these activities do not conform to conventional ideas about politics and political discourse. For example, Kelvin regards Morris's utopian fictions as expressions of "a 'poetic' language that distinguishes them from the conventional language of political power"(1). Although on one level they present a fairly typical socialist critique of capitalist society, Morris's utopian fictions are also significantly apolitical because they reject established political discourse.

News From Nowhere and *A Dream of John Ball* are personal dreams in which Morris speculates about different societies. However, although utopian novels may be useful in showing that alternative values are possible, it is through our own dreams of utopia that we can imagine what these values ought to be. As Goode states, dreams can be politically significant because they express “the freed consciousness...[and become] antithetical forces invisibly operating against the perceptible reality”(2). This is confirmed by Levitas who asserts that “dreaming is an activity necessary to transcending our present sorry state, and as such dreams have an educative and transformative function”(3). Dreaming can be a universal capacity - “a constant in any conceivable society”(4) - to powerfully oppose the assumptions of the status quo. In addition, Rosemary Jackson usefully recognises fantasy’s “obdurate refusal of prevailing definitions of the ‘real’ or ‘possible’, a refusal amounting at times to violent opposition”(5).

In *A Dream of John Ball* Morris promotes the dream as a form of critical practice that can be emulated and that can be politically effective. He discloses in the first paragraph that this is an account of a personal dream rather than a description of a scientifically logical future order that Bellamy and Wells claimed their utopias to be. Nevertheless, Morris also makes the early assertion

that this dream is none-the-less politically effective for being a dream and that, in fact, dreams are motivated by reflections on the real world:

Sometimes I am rewarded for fretting myself so much about present matters by a quite unasked for pleasant dream. I mean when I am asleep. This dream is as it were a present of an architectural peep-show. I see some beautiful or noble building new-made as it were for the occasion, as clearly as if I were awake(6).

For Morris, what Goode calls “the depressing actuality”(7) can be disempowered by such vivid personal fantasies in a way that undermines reality’s monopoly on political discourse. In *A Dream of John Ball*, the distinctions between the ‘real’ nineteenth century world of the narrator and the ‘unreal’ medieval world he dreams of are obscured by the fact that both seem ‘realistic’ to him: although very different, they are both real to the ‘time traveller’ because he was born into one but appears to be now living in the other. In addition, the title makes it deliberately unclear whether this is a narrator’s dream of a meeting with John Ball or the ‘real’ Ball’s dream about meeting a man from the future. This prompts Ball to tell the visitor that “thou hast been a dream to me as I to thee”(8). Nevertheless, the discussion between

the two characters on class oppression, transformation and fellowship encourages Ball to continue the revolution and leaves the visitor from the nineteenth century convinced that he must fight for change in his own society. Symbolically, then, this dream - whoever it was - has had a political effect on both.

Nevertheless, echoing his belief that utopian novels should not substitute for action, Morris did not want individuals to reside in dream worlds. We should not escape into our dreams but use them to develop our own ideas about transformation. This understanding is symbolised in *News From Nowhere* and *A Dream of John Ball* because the dream ends and the 'time traveller' returns to where he started from. In both novels, the dreamer awakes in his own era so that he can tell his dream to others and contribute his new faith in the possibilities of transformation. As Old Hammond in *News From Nowhere* suggests, "perhaps our guest may some day go back to the people he has come from, and may take a message from us which may bear fruit for them, and, consequently for us"(9). Clearly, for Morris, the utopian dream can be politically effective through being re-told in the form of a fable. In contrast, the visitor to Bellamy's utopia has physically left his own time and cannot return, breaking any symbolic suggestion that this vision of an alternative order can be

brought back to transform the visitor's own society. In contrast, at the end of *News From Nowhere*, the dreamer is told to "go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle"(10). One symbolic message of Morris's utopias, then, is that utopian dreams must end and be brought back to reality so that they can become politically effective.

The dreamer's return to his own time in these novels also gives Morris a final opportunity to counterpoise attractive alternative worlds with the "vulgarity of [contemporary] civilisation"(11). For example, the attractive pastoralism imagined in *A Dream of John Ball* is clearly more desirable than the world to which the dreamer returns. Here "the few willow trees left us by the Thames Conservancy looked doubtfully alive against the bleak sky...[and] the road in front of the house was sooty and muddy at once...in the air was that sense of dirty discomfort which one is never quit of"(12). However, the dreamer is now inspired to move into action so that this contemporary society might be transformed. The character of the dreamer in Morris's utopian novels is always a thinly disguised version of Morris: his 'visits' to his own utopian dreams helped inform and clarify his own revolutionary desire. This is the critical practice that make his utopian fictions exemplary.

Morris's assertion that personal dreams of utopia can be politically

effective in this way is prefigurative of later attempts to restructure utopian thought. For example, Ernst Bloch explained that “the essential function of the utopian dream is a critique of what is present”(13). In *The Principle of Hope*, written between 1938 and 1947, Bloch suggests that

to limit the utopian to the Thomas
More variety, or simply to orientate
it in that direction, would be like
trying to reduce electricity to the
amber from which it gets its Greek
name and in which it was first noticed.
Indeed the utopian coincides so little
with the novel of an ideal state that
the whole total of *philosophy* becomes
necessary...to do justice to the content
of that designated by utopia(14).

Instead, Bloch regarded utopian dreams as “any overstepping of the boundaries given to man...hence a quality inherent in all creative thought and action”(15).

Utopian dreams do not have to be dreams about a utopian order; any dream that recognises alternatives to existing assumptions and boundaries is utopian, for Bloch. He includes day dreams, myths and escapist fantasies, for example, that are linked by their common rejection of prevailing assumptions about reality.

Bloch refuses to limit utopias to a literary genre that describes an ideal state and instead asserts that utopia is a function or critical practice that is significant

because it opposes the existing order. Bloch's focus on the function rather than the form of utopia echoes Morris's promotion of individual utopian dreams as a strategy in the self-education of personal revolutionary desire.

Our utopian dreams, claims Bloch, can draw our attention to what is 'not yet' in existence in opposition to what is. He suggests that since we can readily accept 'what is', we must recognise anything outside this as the 'is not'. Bloch promotes this area of non-reality and calls it the Not Yet: concepts, ideas and values that do not currently prevail in the real world but that are nevertheless challenging and politically significant. In utopian dreams, then, we address and realise beliefs that are Not Yet. Consequently, it is in these dreams of otherness that oppositional movement is generated. For Bloch, "the world is full of propensity towards something [and] latency of something"(16) and the ever-present Not Yet is the recognition that hegemonic assumptions have alternatives. For Bloch, the Not Yet is the utopian core in everything: a dimly perceived faith that assumptions can be overturned and the world can be other than it is.

This resonates with Moylan who states that "utopian discourse articulates the possibility of other ways of living in the world"(17). His understanding of utopian dreams also echoes Morris. For Moylan, the significance of utopias is

that they can never be realised in practice. This is not an admission of defeat in 'the utopian project', however, but a recognition that dreams play a continuing role in the formation of those desires that transform the prevailing order. For Moylan, "there can be no Utopia, but there can be utopian expressions that constantly shatter the present achievements and compromises of society and point to that which is not yet experienced in the human project of fulfilment and creation (18)". This is exemplified in Morris's utopias. In *News from Nowhere*, for example, Ellen dreams of the transformation to a future ecotopia and in *A Dream of John Ball*, Ball expresses his fantasy of 'The Change Beyond the Change' where "fellowship is heaven, lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death"(19). Morris did not accept the end state that characterised many conventional utopian fictions. In his utopias, the possibility of further change is ever-present and dreams play a central role in informing these changes. Moylan's assertion that "utopia[s] indicate what cannot yet be said within present conceptual language or achieved in current political action"(20) illuminates Morris's understanding of utopian dreams as a continuing critical practice that is not restricted by prevailing hegemonies. Cole echoes this by suggesting "that *News From Nowhere* had to be taken as a personal vision of a good society and not as a prophecy of what could come

about...in any complete achievement of mankind”(21). Moylan’s suggestion that later critical utopians “rejected utopia as blueprint, while preserving it as dream”(22) also resonates with Morris’s approach. It is the critical practice of utopian dreams that challenges the conservative blueprint form and makes Morris’s utopias exemplary and politically effective. For Moylan, then,

if those whose lives are oppressed and unfree are able to dream beyond the present, then the utopian impulse as a non-exclusive activity no longer limited to imposed models will play an increasingly significant role in the oppositional project. Since no perfect reality is ever achieved, in so far as human understanding and activity as well as the reality of nature push ever beyond a given ‘totality’, that role will be a permanent one(23)

Nevertheless, Levitas warns that although personal utopian dreams “may indeed have a transformative and emancipatory function...[they] may also be merely compensatory; wishful but not willful thinking”(24). Bloch argues that wishful thinking is effective utopian dreaming but Morris was aware of the dangers of basing revolution on the uncertainty of individual fantasies. In *A Dream of John Ball*, for example, he warns of the need “to do and not to dream”(25) and to pass “from the light of the moon to the glimmer of the dawn

and thus...beyond fantasy”(26). Utopian dreams, therefore, may help to educate a desire for revolution but Morris remained equally committed to another critical practice that could help to transform society.

The second critical practice exemplified by Morris in his fictions and his own life is the artistic creativity of the individual. Williams shows that creativity emphasises human “originality and innovation” (27) and, therefore, exercises a personal capacity for open, speculative thinking. Morris’s own creative output suggests that art can be a form of expression that is not restricted by the conventions of established discourse. ‘Utopian art’, then, is art that helps the individual to challenge the assumptions of the status quo. Geoghegan recalls that “the notion of art as a bridge to an order outside and beyond the given has a long history; so to has an appreciation of the subversive role of art”(28). Nevertheless, as with utopian dreams, Morris understood utopian art in terms of function rather than form. He did not believe that those who viewed or observed art would become instant revolutionaries any more than he expected those who read a conventional political fiction or blueprint utopia to automatically want to transform society. There was no standard form of utopian art that could avoid degenerating into a passive genre or ‘school’ , reflecting the way that utopian novels had become standardised by the passive blueprint form.

For Morris, the consumption of art was not an effective critical strategy. Instead, he suggested that the production or creation of art was an open, speculative activity of the self that could be politically significant in recognising alternative values.

Morris regarded established art as a “sham...dead art”(29). In his time, ‘the arts’ had become that produced by a privileged elite for the consumption of an idle bourgeoisie. Arnot affirms that, for Morris, “all that art had meant in the life of mankind had become narrowed down to fine arts for fine ladies and gentleman”(30). Sculpture, opera or ballet, for example, were neither practiced nor experienced by the wider population. Arnot claims that “Morris reached the two-fold conclusion that, first, art must perish unless it be a people’s art; secondly that the worker must be an artist and the artist a worker”(31). Consequently, Morris practiced and promoted those ‘lesser arts’ that were more accessible and open to emulation. He mastered twelve crafts, including book binding, tapestry weaving and furniture making, that echoed a tradition of artisanship. These arts and crafts had been made less important by the emergence of high art. In addition, the cottage industries that trained individuals in the practice of such personally creative production had been largely eradicated by the enormous demand for unskilled machine labour that

characterised the industrial revolution. In *Art and Labour*, Morris claimed that the demise of personal creative skills prefigured “the end of art, properly speaking”(32). He opposed the high arts by recalling the innate creativity of individuals and demanding “the democratisation of art”(33). This was not simply to show that everyone could be artistic but a recognition of the importance of individual expression and an assertion that creativity could be a valuable critical practice.

In his review of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Morris defines “art, using that word in its widest and due signification...[as] the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness”(34). He believed the freeing of creative expression in society could set a precedent for speculative, innovative thought and action. This undermined the established understanding of art. It also opposed the established system of production that favoured ‘useless toil’ over creative ‘useful work’. Combined with his rejection of conventional art, then, Morris proposed a new understanding of work and production. For him, in the prevailing capitalist system “the goods are forced on him [the consumer] by their cheapness, and with them a certain kind of life which that energetic, that aggressive cheapness determines for him”(35). In *Useful Work Versus Useless Toil*, he asserts that “the produce of such work cannot be worth the

price of it”(36). Work had become an exercise in disillusionment, associated with the production of goods that engendered despair in their producers and disappointment in their consumers. For the most part, work denied the creativity of the individual in favour of conformity within the factory system.

Nevertheless, Morris asserted that “to all living things there is a pleasure in the exercise of their energies”(37). His own “ideal of the future...[did] not point to the lessening of men’s energy by the reduction of labour to a minimum, but rather the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum”(38). He counterpoised his own ideas about creative artistry to show that an individual “at work, making something he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as his body”(39). It was clear to Morris that this prefigured a significant critical practice that could produce positive political effects. Consequently, he promoted all creative activities “which will one day put hope and pleasure in the place of fear and pain, as the forces which move men to labour and keep the world-a-going”(40). This is echoed in Morris’s essay *The Beauty of Life* where he states that “the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself”(41). In addition, in *The Aims of Art*, he promoted the idea that creative work fosters “a lively hope”(42) for transformation.

Morris proposed that production must be liberated so that the critical practice of creative thought becomes central in society. In *News From Nowhere*, he symbolises the potential effectiveness of this. In this personal dream, the revolution is eventually followed by a period of creative production where all individuals are able to express their creativity. The significance of this 'Change Beyond the Change' lies in the visitor's observation that this transformation "from the condition of the older world seems to me far greater and more important than all the other changes...[in] crime, politics, property [and] marriage"(43). Old Hammond responds: "You are right...indeed you may say rather that it is this change that makes all the others possible"(44). This confirms the significance that Morris attached to creative work as a critical practice. Also in this dreamed society, there are no wages to influence the worker's creative expression because the "reward of labour is *life...and creation*"(45). In Morris's dream

all work is now pleasurable either because of the hope of gain in honour with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable *habit*, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is

of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists(46).

Morris demonstrated and promoted the critical practices of utopian dreams and creative work throughout his life. His utopian novels and arts and crafts challenged the status quo in a manner that was exemplary. These practices were not simply meant to be copied but they suggested examples of innovation and creativity to set a precedent for ways of thinking and acting in society. In the context of their own time, Morris's fictions and artistry undermined conventional conceptions of the political novel and high art. Debates on the nature and significance of these moved on after Morris's death through Booker, Moylan and Bloch, for example - although they often resonate with Morris's approach. Nevertheless, his assertion that original, individual practices are essential in the transformation of established conventions remains important. Morris would not have been surprised to learn that readers in the 1950s, for example, could no longer relate to the details of his personal dreams. His hope, however, was that the kinds of critical practice he continually endorsed would inform revolutionary change.

Notes

1. Norman Kelvin, introduction to The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II, p.xxxi.
2. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.246.
3. Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, p.127.
4. Vincent Geoghegan, Utopianism and Marxism, p.3.
5. Rosemary Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, p.14.
6. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.198.
7. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.272.
8. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.265.
9. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p. 116.
10. Ibid., p.182.
11. William Morris, preface to Signs of Change: Seven Lectures, p.vii.
12. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.266.
13. Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing" (in The Utopian Function of Art and Literature) p.12.
14. Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, p.15.
15. Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and

History of a Literary Genre, p.39.

16. Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope, p.18.

17. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.26.

18. Ibid., p.28.

19. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.212.

20. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.39.

21. G.D.H Cole, William Morris as a Socialist, p.2.

22. Ibid., p.10.

23. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.212.

24. Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, 125.

25. William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.216.

26. Ibid., p.252.

27. Raymond Williams, Keywords, p.83.

28. Vincent Geoghegan, Utopianism and Marxism, p.94.

29. William Morris, "The Aims of Art" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.140.

30. R. Page Arnot, William Morris: A Vindication, p.15.

31. Ibid., p.15.

32. William Morris, "Art and Labour" (in The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris) p.111.

33. William Morris, "The Beauty of Life" (in William Morris: Selected Writings) p.563.

34. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.253.

35. William Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.9.

36. William Morris, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.172.

37. Ibid., p.144.

38. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.252.

39. Ibid., p.144.

40. William Morris, "The Beauty of Life" (in William Morris: Selected Writings) p.564.

41. Ibid., p.565.

42. William Morris, "The Aims of Art" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.121.

43. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.80.

44. Ibid., p.81.

45. Ibid., p.80.

46. Ibid., p.80.

Conclusion

The inadequate treatment of Morris in many commentaries on political thought and socialism can be partly attributed to the customary difficulty of categorising him in left wing politics. Twentieth century Communism and social democracy became increasingly bureaucratic, and the type of personal politics which Morris promoted tended to be marginalised. Nevertheless, since the 1950s, the dominance of Marxism as the most credible ideology of opposition has been significantly challenged by other critical expressions. Some of these resonate with Morris's approach. For example, post-modernist critiques of politics deconstruct the pre-conceived categories and classifications that dictate the terms of discourse and knowledge; a project that had previously motivated Morris to search for a means of expression free from prevailing hegemonies.

In addition, the initiators of the New Left addressed Morris's political thought in their debates over the reinterpretation of socialism in a post-Stalinist age. For example, Thompson defended the significance of Morris's Romanticism in opposition to scientific socialism and Morton promoted the seductive appeal of Morris's utopian dreams. Roger Simon, influenced by the

sensuous utopia of *News From Nowhere*, suggested the “need to develop a politics of pleasure”(1) and Kelvin added “the recommendation that Engels’s dismissal of Morris as a mere poet be stood on its head, that Morris’s importance in political history be seen as dependant upon his being a poet”(2). Since the ending of Marxism’s sole proprietorship over socialism and oppositional politics generally, it has become possible to address the more unconventional themes raised by Morris without fear of being dismissed as an anti-Marxist or a ‘mere-utopian’.

The publication of Thompson’s lengthy defence of Morris in 1955, was followed by a resurgence of interest in Morris’s writings. Several new editions of *News From Nowhere* and anthologies of Morris’s other works were issued during the 1960s. Significantly, the political lectures and essays that had been left out of *The Collected Works* were re-issued in 1966 in *William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist* and Morton edited *The Political Writings of William Morris*, which was published in 1984. These publications suggest that Morris is a more important political thinker than either Brinton or the Manuels - who each reflect some of the established biases about Morris - are able to support. In addition, rather than obscure the originality of his use of utopian fiction, as Arnot had tried to do, E.P Thompson insisted that Morris’s utopias are central to his

political thought and must be addressed.

Nevertheless, in many ways, Morris was not so much utopian as speculative and experimental. His fictions are an aspect of that openness. For Suvin, Morris's departures from the utopian tradition deny *News From Nowhere* "the status of a utopia"(3) and prompt Goode to imply that *A Dream of John Ball* is not a utopia at all(4). These commentators defend the political importance of dreams and fantasies whilst upholding the definition of utopia as a standard literary form: in the end they conclude that Morris's deviations from this form make him a weak utopian. In opposition, and rather more significantly, Morton identifies Morris's departures from the utopian tradition as the strength of his approach. For him, Morris is a 'non-utopian' because although he rejects the limitations of the classic model, he suggests ways in which utopias can be more politically effective. For Morris, "the worst which can happen to us is to endure tamely the evils that we see"(5) but with the variety of critical practices that are demonstrated and exemplified in Morris's utopian fictions we can question our tacit consent to these 'evils'. Confirming this understanding of Morris's approach, Coleman and O'Sullivan, in *William Morris and News From Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, explain that "the utopian imagination, at its most radical, invades the prevailing concept of

reality, undermines the certainties about what humans must always be like, and casts doubt upon the inevitability of the relations of everyday life”(6).

Morris’s utopian fiction, therefore, educated a desire for transformation by demonstrating those self-practices that could raise a personal revolutionary consciousness. Morris continually asserted that the revolution must be based on informed revolutionaries. He is quoted in the *Daily News* of 1885 as insisting that transformation “should not be an ignorant, but an educated revolution”(7). “At the risk of being misunderstood,” he added in an article for *Commonweal* in 1886, “I say that our business is more than ever Education”(8). Paul Thompson relates that “as a socialist, Morris was criticised in his own time for the extent to which he placed the educational task first...but he [perceptively] saw the purpose of education as encouraging self-development and the natural creativity which he would observe even in the poorest children”(9).

According to Williams, the heuristic utopia “is an imaginative encouragement to feel and to relate differently, or to strengthen and confirm existing feelings and relationships which are not at home in the existing order and cannot be lived through in it”(10). Morris’s educative utopias operate in this manner: they try to seduce and provoke readers into an awareness of their own values and a recognition that these values are not being met in the

contemporary order. Morris hoped that this would lead individuals to agitate for transformation. The value of a self-educated awareness is symbolised in *News From Nowhere* by the character of Old Hammond. He is a self-taught historian whom William accuses of being “bitter about that unlucky nineteenth century”(11). “Naturally,” confirms the enlightened historian, “since I know so much about it”(12). In addition, E.P Thompson confirms that Morris wrote educative utopian fictions “to stir up revolt where no revolt was...to make contented men discontented, and discontented men into agitators for discontent”(13).

In many ways, the educative function of the critical utopia links it more with the powerful dystopian fictions of the twentieth century than with the conservatism of the established blueprint utopian form. Both critical utopias and dystopian fictions demand action to transform the present. Morris’s critical utopias do this by providing an attractive dream of an ideal order in opposition to what exists, so that the need and possibility for transformation is made vital. Dystopias - *1984* and *Brave New World*, for example - demand change by projecting the negative features of the present into a repellant nightmare of the future to indicate that, unless opposing action is taken, the nightmare will become real. For Booker, “one might, in fact see dystopian and utopian fictions

not as fundamentally opposed but as very much part of the same project”(14).

For Moylan, the dystopian movement was formed when conventional utopias began to move away from social critique during the nineteenth century. For him, “as the socialist state or the consumer society claimed to have achieved utopia, the more radical critique that the genre is capable of escaped into the mountains of negativity and re-emerged as the dystopia”(15). For Wilding, the link between some utopias and dystopias is that both can be “fables drawing on the observations of a specific reality...and designed to be readily applicable to a range of different social situations”(16).

However, whereas critical utopias exemplify the faith that revolution can take place and will be of positive benefit, dystopian novels do not. For example, in Orwell’s *1984*, the revolution has taken place but has led to the foundation of a totalitarian police state. In addition, the politically impotent ‘Proles’ are unwilling or unable to combine and produce a further revolution. Morris did not anticipate that totalitarian regimes would emerge in practice in the twentieth century and he retained the hope that revolution would provide positive change. He envisaged a non-authoritarian transformation founded on the self-aware participation of individuals. As such, he rejected the ‘benevolent state bureaucracy’ and “machine life”(17) that Bellamy predicted and that

arrived, in nightmarish form, with the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union.

In a letter to Georgina Burne-Jones, Morris confirmed his disappointment that the practices he demonstrated and promoted had not led to a revolution during his lifetime. "I cannot shake off the feeling," he wrote, "that I might have done much more in these recent matters than I have; though I really don't know what more I could have done: but I feel beaten and humbled"(18).

However, Morris cannot be 'blamed' for the failure of the revolutionary movement in late nineteenth century Britain because he did more than most to promote it. Nevertheless, although he advocated politically significant critical practices of the self, he transmitted his faith in these through the necessarily conservative medium of the novel. His mainly middle-class readers, the beneficiaries of the status quo, were those least likely to challenge it. In addition, the proletariat, driven by unregulated Victorian laissez-faire to a subsistence level, were rarely in the position to address the deeper questions of existence. Clearly, although the theory of critical self-informing practices is politically significant, the means for carrying "this insight into the world of action"(19) remains elusive.

Morris's utopian fictions did connect with a significant working class readership after his death and this suggests that his ideal of a counter-language

rooted in utopian fables and creative activity which opposed the conservatism of conventional discourses is valid. Morris hoped these discourses would eventually overwhelm society in what Bloch terms the 'fulfilled moment.'

Morris's life-work demonstrates ways of thinking about the world that are critical and positive but, as Booker showed, it is up to individuals to take these practices on for themselves. In addition, Levitas suggests that, even if these discourses "operate effectively in terms of the education of desire, this will not automatically be read off into political action. Desire must be transformed into hope, the wish for change into the will for change and the belief that there is an agency to execute it"(20). Morris, reflecting his anarchist influences, distrusted and opposed the establishment of political parties and agencies to advance and promote revolution. Instead, he relied on the individual as the most effective 'agency' for legitimate transformation. He believed that individuals - if they could become aware of their revolutionary consciousness - offered the best hope for effecting transformation.

For Morris, revolutionary hope comes from joining the struggle itself. In *News From Nowhere*, Old Hammond recalls that in the nineteenth century "there was no hope; nothing but the dull jog of the mill-horse under compulsion of collar and whip; but in the fighting time that followed, all was hope"(21). In

The Hopes of Civilisation, Morris confirms his belief that “times of change, disruption and revolution are naturally times of hope also”(22). Morris did not pretend that transformation would be easy or comfortable. For example, Old Hammond recalls that “knowledge, discontent, treachery, disappointment, ruin, misery, despair - those who worked for the change went through all these stages of suffering”(23). In addition, in *A Dream of John Ball*, revolutionary individuals may “fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant”(24).

E.P Thompson suggested that to understand Morris’s approach to politics would be to vindicate utopia “and set it free to walk the world once more without shame and without accusations of bad faith”(25). But Morris was only interested in redefining utopia if it served the function of encouraging individuals towards revolutionary activity. Although he structured his own utopian fictions in terms of a politically educative function in opposition to the languid classic form that utopia had become, to use Morris simply to redefine utopia is to limit his political thought to a single political concept to which he was not committed. The key point is that Morris did something with his utopian fictions that was in many respects non-utopian and that this ‘non-utopianism’ is

reflected in the critical practices that are present in his political actions more generally. That he used utopian fiction as a way of bringing individuals towards a recognition and acceptance of their role in transformation, indicates his faith in revolution rather than in utopia. He did dream of a time where utopia would be established in practice but he hoped for a more immediate future - based on "freedom and cultivation of the individual will"(26) - where informed individuals would seize the initiative and transform society for themselves. "I cannot," he wrote in *The Aims of Art*, "bring myself to think that it much matters which doom awaits us, so long as it bears with it some hope...since here, as in other matters, there is no hope save in revolution"(27).

Notes

1. Roger Simon, William Morris Now: Socialism By Design, p.28.
2. Norman Kelvin, introduction to The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II, p.xxx.
3. Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre, p.183.
4. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.246.

5. William Morris, "The Aims of Art" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.40.
6. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O' Sullivan, William Morris and News From Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time, p.9.
7. William Morris, "The Daily News" (in Why William Morris Matters Today: Human Creativity and the Future World Environment) p.25.
8. William Morris, "Commonweal" (in Why William Morris Matters Today: Human Creativity and the Future World Environment) p.25.
9. Paul Thompson, Why William Morris Matters Today: Human Creativity and the Future World Environment, p.25.
10. Raymond Williams, Towards 2000, p.13.
11. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.82.
12. Ibid., p.82.
13. E.P. Thompson, The Communism of William Morris, p.8.
14. M. Keith Booker, The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism, p.15.
15. Tom Moylan, Demand the Impossible, p.9.
16. Michael Wilding, Political Fictions, p.4.
17. William Morris, "Looking Backward" (review in The Political Writings of William Morris) p.251.
18. William Morris, letter to Georgina Burne-Jones (in The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II) p.755.
19. John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution" (in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century) p.256.

20. Ruth Levitas, The Concept of Utopia, p.174.
21. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.112.
22. William Morris, "The Hopes of Civilization" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) P.116.
23. William Morris, News From Nowhere, p.88.
24. William Morris, " A Dream of John Ball" (in William Morris: Stories in Prose and Verse, Poems, Lectures and Essays) p.214.
25. E.P. Thompson, William Morris; Romantic to Revolutionary, p.792.
26. William Morris, William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist, p.457.
27. William Morris, "The Aims of Art" (in Signs of Change: Seven Lectures) p.134.

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