THE BEAUTIFULLEST PLACE ON EARTH

NEWS
FROM NOWHERE
& THE HERE AND NOW:
REIFICATION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE PRESENT

by

Matthew Beaumont

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This pamphlet is part of a collaborative project between the Sculpture Area at Slade School of Fine Art, UCL and National Trust at Red House, the only house commissioned and lived in by artist and socialist William Morris.

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The Here and Now stands too close to us. Raw experience transposes us from the drifting dream into another state: into that of immediate nearness. The moment just lived dims as such, it has too dark a warmth, and its nearness makes things formless. The Here and Now lacks the distance which does indeed alienate us, but makes things distinct and surveyable.

Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope (1: 180)

In *Degeneration* (1895), his bitter diatribe against the decadence of the *fin de siècle*, Max Nordau offered an evocative description of the neurotic effects of everyday metropolitan society on the individual. In vociferous tones, he complained about "the vertigo and whirl of our frenzied life, the vastly increased number of sense impressions and organic reactions, and therefore of perceptions, judgements, and motor impulses, which at present are forced into a given time" (39). "Given time" had become a site of over-stimulation, particularly in the city. There, the accelerated metabolism of commodity culture had rendered the present moment scarcely comprehensible. Some eight years later Georg Simmel characterized this phenomenon in terms of "the rapid crowding of changing images" and "the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" that shape mental life in the metropolis (175). By the close of the nineteenth century the concept of the present— "given time"—had been decisively displaced, as William James and Henri Bergson, among others, recognized. The idea that it was a distinct temporal category that could be confidently defined against the past and future appeared inadequate or outdated. Instead, it seemed that the present had all but dissolved into what might be called the "lived moment." And as such it was almost impossible to represent.

The collective experience of modernity at the end of the nineteenth century, ultimately premised on the acceleration and concentration of European capital in the age of empire, can be adumbrated at its most general level in terms of a double movement: the opening up of geographical space, under the impact of imperialism; and the contraction of social space, as a result of rapid developments in the technologies of transportation and telegraphic communication. A "radical readjustment in the sense of time and space in economic, political, and cultural life" took place at that time, according to David Harvey (260-61). The official expression of this "time-space compression" was no doubt the standardization of time announced at the Prime Meridian Conference in 1884. It also had an impact, however, on aesthetics, occasioning what Harvey calls a "crisis of representation" (260). Specifically, in the field of literary production, the realist novel— which had rested on the assumption that stories can be chronicled as if events occur in a coherent, consecutive order—appeared to be inconsistent with a world shaped by temporal and spatial insecurity. If challenges to the realist paradigm had first been manifest from the 1840s and 1850s, they were reinforced to particularly dramatic effect at the —in the formal experimentation of the Symbolists and the Naturalists, for example. Anticipations of a slightly later modernist aesthetic can be detected in these artistic tendencies not least because, in quite different modes, they tried to capture the mental and physiological experience of everyday life under the spatio-temporal conditions of modernity. The ambiguous energy with which they staged the contemporary crisis of representation is the reason behind Nordau's splenetic complaints about the Symbolists and Naturalists in the pages of *Degeneration*. Subsequently, so-called high modernist literature celebrated this crisis, immersing itself fully in the fetishized details of quotidian life in order to find an aesthetic solution for the problem posed by an unrepresentable present.

This problem was set out in 1878 by Walter Pater in an essay on Charles Lamb, when he quotes the Romantic critic: "'I cannot make these present times,' he says once, 'present to me'" (111). Lamb's comment serves as a kind of rationale for Pater's aesthetic, which self-consciously revelled in the aleatory quality of the lived moment. And it neatly formulates my claim that under the conditions of modernity the present disappears in the instant that it is apprehended. In industrial capitalist society, the present cannot be made present.

It is in part this problem that lies behind the reappearance of utopian fiction at the . From the 1880s in particular there was a startling resurgence of the genre. "At the present day," wrote the Secularist G. W. Foote in 1886, "social dreams are once more rife" (190). *Looking Backward* (1888), by the sublimely optimistic American state-socialist Edward Bellamy, sold approximately two hundred thousand copies in the United States during its first year in print. In England, where it proved almost as successful, sales of some one hundred thousand copies had been reported by 1890 (Marshall 87-88). On both sides of the Atlantic, and in continental Europe, it inspired numerous popular imitations. As the example of *Looking Backward* implies, utopianism at this time scarcely found expression in experimental literary forms. On the contrary, utopian fiction commonly relied on narrative structures that reflected a view of history as a successive process, and it was therefore almost structurally incapable of capturing the impact of modernity on the experience of social life. But like the radical aesthetics decried by Nordau, such fiction was nonetheless a literary response to the challenge of conceptualizing a present that seemed inaccessible to the habits of rational consciousness. Modernity might be said—in the absence of a reliable historical narrative—to mean immersion in the lived moment. Utopian fiction sought to escape this miasmic condition. It purported to be clairvoyant—that is to say, not so much prophetic as simply clear-sighted. It was used to read an unreadable reality that, because of "the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" experienced in daily life, seemed at the same time too abstract and too concrete to be understood. Utopia tried to grasp the fragmentary parts of the present as a singular totality by glimpsing it from an imaginary future.

In this pamphlet, I interpret *News from Nowhere* (1890) as a solution to the problem posed by what Ernst Bloch, the philosopher of utopia associated with the Frankfurt School, called "the darkness of the lived moment" (1: 180). Morris's utopian romance historicizes the present in terms of an imaginary trajectory into the future. But in addition, and in contrast to other utopian novels of the 1880s and 1890s like *Looking Backward,* it also presents an ideal socialist society that repudiates or negates the empty present of capitalism. It is this political treatment of the time of modernity that marks the novel's transformation of the utopian form. Morris's "Epoch of Rest," to cite the novel's subtitle, depicts a utopian temporality that is in some positive rather than simply negative sense the opposite of capitalism. Rest in this imaginary epoch is characterized not by empty exhaustion, or by mere leisure, but by a sense of plenitude and self-fulfillment. In Nowhere, the here and now is not alienated but disalienated. The present is not absent, but present to itself. *News from Nowhere* proposes no less than a redemptive ontology for utopia.

My argument unfolds in two main phases. In the next section, I examine the problem of the perception of the present, reviewing the Marxist theory of reification in order to propose a materialist explanation for the almost impenetrable opacity of the present in capitalist society. I then try to codify the utopian thought of the late nineteenth century in terms of its historicizing function, which I read as a response to the "darkness of the lived moment." This forms the theoretical and historical basis on which my reading of *News from Nowhere* rests. In the subsequent section, I explore the way in which Morris's utopian fiction depicts a world wherein the present is finally present to itself, even as I draw attention to the fact that Morris ultimately questions this fantasy of utopian presence. Finally, I conclude with a brief reflection on the possible implications of this interpretation of Morris's utopia for our understanding of his politics.

I

The present appears to represent a well-nigh insuperable phenomenological problem. Any attempt to capture the presentness of the present results in something like a short circuit of the logic of cognition. Grasping the present is like trying to stop what James called "the wonderful stream of our consciousness" in order to subject it to "introspective analysis": "[It] is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks" (3). And if we cannot conquer its fundamental resistance to signification, we are forced to accept that a concept of the present must be produced, constructed.

"*The problem of the present*," as Georg Lukács counseled, must be treated as "*a historical problem*" ("Reification" 157). In the Victorian period, the perceptual problem of the present is at some level the result of the reifying effects of commodity culture under capitalism. I therefore want briefly to explore its socioeconomic preconditions. A crisis of representation, it can be asserted at the outset, is endemic to the capitalist mode of production, as the career of the term "ideology" indicates. But this ideological deformation is not simply a species of "false consciousness," that is, the purely mental operation whereby capitalism produces its own misapprehension. As Karl Marx reveals in the first volume of *Capital* (1867), a book that Morris laboriously read in French translation, the sense of alienation that haunts human beings is not a hallucination but instead a structural property of their social relations under capitalism. Marx's theory of commodity fetishism represents an attempt to come to terms with the interior hiatus of these relations. It explains that the exploitation of the proletariat, which establishes the foundation of the capitalist mode of production, is systematically concealed by the fact that commodities, the products of social labor, function as if they are subject solely to their mutual interrelation in the marketplace. In this way, as Marx says, the social relations between producers assume "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). But this fantastic form is not merely the lamination of reality with an illusory relation: it deforms reality itself. For to the producers, commodified as they are, "the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things" (166).

In "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," Georg Lukács reformulated the "phantom objectivity" of capitalist relations in terms of "the phenomenon of reification," the process of alienation whereby the fetishism of the commodity form diffuses into "capitalist society in all its aspects" (83). According to Lukács, the rational mechanization of capitalist production breaks up the labor process and corrodes "the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker" (88). Under the impact of this atomization, the worker's activity becomes "more and more *contemplative*." And this attitude "transform[s] the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world": in particular, "time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things'" (89-90). In these desiccated conditions, the worker cannot totalize or intellectually transcend society. But the reification of consciousness is not restricted to the worker, because "the objective reality of social existence is *in its immediacy* 'the same' for both proletariat and bourgeoisie" (150). Thus bourgeois consciousness loses sight of the social totality too. Science "find[s] that the world lying beyond its confines, and in particular the material base which it is its task to understand,...lies, methodologically and in principle, *beyond its grasp*" (104). And this obstruction to the totality of knowledge makes it impossible to ascertain the silent movement of reality. The present time, that is to say, becomes impenetrable; it is inapprehensible as a historical moment.

The paradox of reification is that it naturalizes the present even as it alienates it from human understanding. Life is experienced as a plasmic flux beyond the power of human apprehension. Lukács captured this contradictory phenomenon when he proposed in another context that "when the surface of life is only experienced immediately, it remains opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended"; and, further, that "what lies on the surface is frozen and any attempt to see it from a higher intellectual vantage-point has to be abandoned" ("Realism" 39). Utopian thought is an attempt to attain this "higher intellectual vantage-point," this transcendent perspective: it projects a fictional future from which it defamiliarizes the present state of society and reconceives it as an objective historical totality rather than a subjective way of life. In utopia, the present is the past of a specific, fictional future. Time-traveling to the future, it turns out, is about the return journey to the present traced by the forward motion of the time machine itself.

In the late Victorian period Morris and some of his contemporaries struggled with this precise problem of grasping the present in an estranged form. In "The Hopes of Civilization" (1888), Morris tried "to realize the face of mediaeval England": "How strange it would be to us if we could be landed in fourteenth-century England!" (61-62). There was nothing nostalgic about this exclamation. Historicizing the past, he wanted too to historicize the present, "the great commercial epoch in whose *latter* days I would fain hope we are living." To this end, Morris there posited an imaginary people who in the future "will wonder how we lived in the nineteenth century" (62). *News from Nowhere*, like other utopian fictions of the period, is an equivalent exercise in historicity. "No age can see itself," as Morris averred: "We must stand some way off before the confused picture with its rugged surface can resolve itself into its due order, and seem to be something with a definite purpose carried through all its details" ("Dawn" 121). Utopia provides Morris and his contemporaries with a kind of meta-perspective from which the present appears in its approximate proportions.

Utopian thought is eccentric; or, as Morris's friend and collaborator Ernest Belfort Bax phrased it in his *Outlooks from the New Standpoint* (1891), it is "a hybrid pseudo-reality... which is neither past, present, nor future" (ix). Bax complained that contemporary utopian romances represented a pointless attempt to escape the inescapable opacity of the lived present:

> When we ourselves are part and parcel of a social state, when we ourselves are a portion of the reality of a given society, bathed in its categories and inhaling its atmosphere, our imagination cannot transcend it to any appreciable extent, if at all. Our logical faculty can, indeed, pierce through, or, as it were, dissolve the reality for

> abstract thought, and show the lines on which the new principle growing up within it is going, but our imagination is quite incapable of envisaging the reality in its final and complete shape. We can just as little conceive how the men of the future will envisage our civilisation of to-day—how they will represent to themselves our thoughts and feelings, aspirations and antipathies—for when all this social life has become objective, with all its categories stiff and lifeless, it will be seen in its true proportions and significance. (ix)

Bax's somewhat contemptuous comparison between, on the one hand, utopian thought and, on the other, the hopeless attempt to imagine how those of the future will view our civilization of today is quite instructive. It provokes a suspicion that these imaginative gestures are in fact mutually complicit. To think a future civilization is to think the future of civilization—that is, to picture civilization in a historical context. It is an effort to freeze the flow of contemporary social life in order to identify its posterior significance. But the present is peculiarly resistant to this interpretative discipline. And in spite of his close attention to the darkness of the lived moment, Bax is insensitive to the fact that, as Bloch indicates, "the lived darkness is so strong that it is not even confined to its most immediate nearness" (1: 296). Not even the passing of time can be relied upon to resolve the present into its proper shape.

Most importantly, Bax fails to appreciate that utopia may be an important part of the struggle to apprehend reality. The utopian wager is that the imaginative faculty furnishes a more effective means than the logical faculty for penetrating what Morris called "the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us" ("On Some Practical" 338). The best utopian fiction is about clairvoyance, seeing clearly. In H. G. Wells's words, utopias are "shadows of light thrown by darkness" ("Utopias" 119). They try to detect, to quote Morris once more, "the silent movement of real history which is still going on around and underneath our raree show" ("Architecture" 315). In this sense, they are less about the future (as a distinct category in opposition to the past) than they are about the outer limit or horizon of the present. Utopia creates a caesural space in the present, opening up a distance that is internal to it.

Wells outlines a similar interrelationship of utopian and non-utopian perspectives in the concluding pages of *A Modern Utopia* (1905). The narrator notes that his utopian narrative ends, on his return to the present, "*amidst a gross tumult of immediate realities*," surrounded by "*a great multitude of little souls and groups of souls as darkened, as derivative as my own*" (372). But, as he insists, it is unsettled by a flickering anamorphic perception of the total system of which he and his fellow citizens form a part:

> Yet that is not all I see, and I am not altogether bounded by my littleness. Ever and again, contrasting with this immediate vision, come glimpses of a comprehensive scheme, in which these personalities float, the scheme of a synthetic wider being, the great State, mankind, in which we all move and go, like blood corpuscles, like nerve cells, it may be at times like brain cells in the body of a man.
>
> (372)

Wells explains that these two viewpoints comprise a bifocal optic—like the vision of someone who is at the same time far- and near-sighted. The utopian capacity for "looking backwards" from the future is something like this far-sighted perspective.

In 1895, the novelist Grant Allen published a utopian satire, *The British Barbarians*, on nineteenth-century social conventions from the vantage point of a visitor from the twenty-fifth century. Significantly, he subtitled this book "A Hill-Top Novel"; frustrated by the censorious influence of magazine editors after the controversy surrounding his best seller *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Allen had formulated this descriptor to identify novels free from editorial interference before their publication. These novels were to be marked, he claimed, by their independence and "purity" (*British Barbarians* vii). It is no accident that he coined the phrase in conjunction with a fiction set in the future. As Allen explained, he picked his emblematic image because he wrote from a study high up above the city in the pellucid air of a hilltop:

> But away below in the valley, as night draws on, a lurid glare reddens the north- eastern horizon. It marks the spot where the great wen of London heaves and festers. Up here on the free hills, the sharp air blows in upon us, limpid and clear from a thousand leagues of open ocean; down there in the crowded town, it stagnates and ferments, polluted with the diseases and vices of centuries.
>
> (xvii-xviii)

The hilltop is a Romantic vantage point from which contemporary society can be comprehended in its totality. It therefore functions as the spatial equivalent of the temporality of the future. The same principle shapes the symbolic landscape of Havelock Ellis's *The Nineteenth Century: A Dialogue in Utopia* (1900), a novel that is set on a hilltop that, emblematically, is "crowned by an observatory" (1). The hilltop symbolizes the objectivity of perspective realized in the critical gaze of both Allen's alien visitor from the twenty-fifth century and Ellis's twenty-first- century student of nineteenth-century culture. This is the totalizing, historicist perspective of utopia.

This system of perspective forms the premise upon which Morris had himself founded the narrative practice of *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) in the previous decade. There, the nineteenth-century narrator tells John Ball that he can see the fourteenth century through the lens of future history:

> And we, looking at these things from afar, can see them as they are indeed; but they who live at the beginning of those times and amidst them, shall not know what is doing around them; they shall indeed feel the plague and yet not know the remedy (274).

Romance, Morris wrote, "is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present" ("Address" 148). But as John Goode once stated, romance for Morris also "becomes a power for seeing the future in the present" (239). "Utopian Romance," to cite another component of *News from Nowhere's* subtitle, fulfills this capacity for history by making the present part of the future as well. Like many contemporary utopians, Morris is in this sense the inheritor of the Romantic tradition central to his mid-Victorian forebears: his foray into a fictional future is equivalent to those "long, deep plunges into the past" taken by Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, as well as by Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle, in the course of their search for what V. G. Kiernan calls "an observatory from which to survey their own epoch" (147). The famous account of "How the Change Came" in

News from Nowhere is in effect a history of the turn of the twentieth century written in the future perfect tense. In this way, Morris may be said to interpret the present from what Theodor Adorno, in one of his melancholic attempts to redeem the hopes of the past, termed “the standpoint of redemption” (247).

II

Old Hammond, who is a professional historian, performs the quasi-historiographical function of *News fro Nowhere.* He traces the revolutionary process whereby, some time in the twentieth century, "a longing for freedom and equality" was translated into a force for social transformation (104-05). In so doing, he penetrates what Morris elsewhere refers to as "the silent movement of real history" ("Architecture" 315). But Hammond is an anachronism in Nowhere. He is an anomalous presence precisely because of his passion for making the past part of the present. For if his narrative serves to historicize the late nineteenth century, then this series of "tales of the past" cannot interest most of the inhabitants of Nowhere, since they have no sense of what Marx styled "pre-history." "The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place, is history enough for them," Hammond observes (*News* 54). Morris uses this comment to articulate Hammond's criticism of the semi-conscious amnesia characteristic of Nowherean citizens. But, significantly, he also uses it to emphasize the fact that in this future socialist society, history itself has been redefined. In Nowhere, history is made not in the macrological events of an evolving civilization but in the micrological processes of daily life. Utopia, Morris implies, redeems history as the process by which we produce and reproduce ourselves in our everyday lives. So Morris's utopian romance is more than an attempt to grasp the present of capitalist modernity as history. It is also an attempt to imagine a communist society in which it is possible to grasp history as the present, that is, in which history is simply being.

The inhabitants of Nowhere, so Hammond says, are "assured of peace and continuous plenty" (54). As Morris emphasizes in his lecture "Useful Work versus Useless Toil" (1884), "when revolution has made it 'easy to live', when all are working harmoniously together and there is no one to rob the worker of his time, that is to say, his life; in those coming days there will be no compulsion on us to go on producing things we do not want, no compulsion on us to labour for nothing" (96). Impossible under capitalism or any competitive system, these material and social circumstances are the foundation of a future socialist society in which all work is useful and every useful activity is a form of work. Work will at last fulfill its fundamental promises—"hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself," as Morris itemizes them (87). For when capitalist relations of production are abolished, and labor is made "pleasant to everybody," people will be free "to take a pleasurable interest in all the details of life" (96-97).

Morris associates these "details of life" with what he subsequently calls "the ornamental part of life": "We must begin to build up the ornamental part of life—its pleasures, bodily and mental, scientific and artistic, social and individual—on the basis of work undertaken willingly and cheerfully, with the consciousness of benefiting ourselves and our neighbours with it" (100). Morris's celebration of "social" ornament is based on his assessment of material ornament. He draws a crucial distinction between, on the one hand, ornamental objects produced under alienated conditions and, on the other, those produced under disalienated conditions. In capitalist relations of production, "the workman is [as] compelled to produce ornament, as he is to produce other wares," and ornament is therefore "but one of the follies of useless toil" (102). Ornament signifies the pretence of happiness in work, a forced declaration of satisfaction. It camouflages the exploitation structural to commodity production under capitalism and consequently reinforces the opacity of social life. In communist society, on the contrary, ornament is an expression of the pleasure of production and, paradoxically, of the transparency of non-exploitative social relations. And this aesthetic serves as a model for the ethic indicated by Morris's injunction "to build up the ornamental part of life." In the future socialist society, even the most trivial aspects of everyday life will serve as an aesthetic pleasure because they will embroider the basic activity of creative labor.

Morris explores his conception of ornament in the episode from in which William Guest is given a pipe in the little girl's shop. The pipe is free, like all the products of labor in utopia, but more importantly, it is *ornamental.* It is "carved out of some hard wood very elaborately, and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems" (217). In Morrissian terms, this implies that it is stamped "with the impress of pleasure" ("Useful Work" 102). We are now in a world in which the act of production is rendered transparent to the consumer because, in a celebration of emancipated labor, it is openly inscribed into the commodity. The demise of commodity fetishism means that labor itself is returned from the realm of exchange-value to the realm of use-value. Thus the split between appearance and reality that is typical of capitalism disappears. Under capitalism, as Marx argues in *Capital,* "the products of labour become commodities, sensible things which are at the same time supra-sensible." "The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears," he continues, "have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this" (165). In utopia, the case is the opposite: the products of labor fully realize their physical properties. Appearance disappears into essence. "In the happy days when society shall be what its name means," as Morris once put it ("Present Outlook" 216), the signifier is finally conflated with its signified: *Ceci c'est une pipe*.

History, to return to an earlier contention, and to cite the title of another well-known lecture by Morris, is in this sense merely "How We Live" (1887). In Nowhere, history is rendered ordinary, here and now. Returned to a people participating in pleasurable labor, it is the opposite of those epic spirals and crises typical of pre-history. To filch Hammond's phrase, it is simply "the present pleasure of ordinary daily life" (*News* 254)—a whole way of life, self-consciously felt in all its fibers. In "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," Morris represents this utopian culture in terms of a holiday:

> How rare a holiday it is for any of us to feel ourselves a part of Nature, and unhurriedly, thoughtfully, and happily to note the course of our lives amidst all the little links of events which connect them with the lives of others, and build up the great whole of humanity. But such a holiday our whole lives might be, if we were resolute to make all our labour reasonable and pleasant.
>
> (97)

In this glimpse of a utopian epoch of rest, the totality of social relations is not absent and unrepresentable, as it is under capitalism, but present and spontaneously apprehended. In his lecture "The Society of the Future" (1887), Morris reaffirms that, in a socialist community, "the social bond would be habitually and instinctively felt, so that there would be no need to be always asserting it by set forms" (201). The present, that is to say, is transparent in Morris's utopia.

News from Nowwhere is a fantasy of effortless self-fulfillment. Terry Eagleton has proposed that it is possible to explain utopia as "a condition in which Freud's 'pleasure principle' and 'reality principle' would have merged into one, so that social reality itself be wholly fulfilling" (185). It is because of something like this lack of conflict that, for a moment, roughly halfway through his stay in Nowhere, Guest enjoys what he refers to as "a dreamless sleep" (*News* 141). Successfully choking down his fears, as he himself phrases it, Guest briefly experiences the pacific harmony of Nowhereans like Ellen. Ellen is, in fact, the exemplary utopian. If she admits to Guest, as they travel up the Thames by boat together, that she doesn't like "moving about from one home to another," because "one gets so used to all the detail of the life about one," then she also happily contemplates the prospect of "go[ing] with [him] all through the west country—thinking of nothing" (190). Rest of this sort is not a bestial stasis. As the metaphor of the drifting journey upstream emphasizes, Ellen is the model for a kind of dynamic immobility, outlined elsewhere by Morris when he rejects the notion that a state of plenitude necessarily results in stagnation: "To my mind that would be a contradiction in terms, if indeed we agree that happiness is caused by the pleasurable exercise of our faculties" ("Society" 202-03).

Rest is a familiar trope in utopias of the *fin de siècle*. "We long to cast from our midst forever the black nightmare of poverty: we yearn for fellowship, for rest, for happiness," wrote the American Leonard Abbott in his book of 1898 on *The*

Society of the Future (4). Utopian fiction of this period often projected what was in effect a mirror-image reversal of life under capitalism. Consequently, rest most often resembled a state of blissful inertia. Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue probably offers the most programmatic expression of this tendency in *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883). Morris, however, upset the convention when he depicted his epoch of rest: his book's subtitle, as James Buzard points out, is quite inappropriate, because Nowhere "is characterized, above all else, by constant work" (451). Morris had a dialectical, or perhaps processual, understanding of the utopian state of repose, in comparison with many of his contemporaries. A. L. Morton helpfully distinguishes from W. H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), and maintains that "this time of rest, which for Morris is no more than a temporary and relative pause between periods of marked change ... is for Hudson unbroken, as far as can be seen, in either direction" (159). In other words, where Hudson perceives the time of rest as a sort of homogeneous space outside history, Morris sees the "epoch of rest" as part of history—or, as I have proposed, as its deepening, or redemption, in opposition to pre-history.

In his lecture "The Society of the Future," Morris defiantly celebrates his own notion of rest and defends it against possible criticism: "Where would be the harm?" he asks. "I remember," he continues, "after having been ill once, how pleasant it was to lie on my bed without pain or fever, doing nothing but watching the sunbeams and listening to the sounds of life outside; and might not the great world of men, if it once deliver itself from the struggle for life amidst dishonesty, rest for a little after the long fever and be none the worse for it?" (203). Morris here looks forward to his image of Ellen both attending to the details of life and "thinking of nothing." This form of rest is quite different from that which Morris identifies as "leisure" in "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization" (1881). Under capitalism, leisure is a refuge from work, and Morris confesses that he himself spends part of it "as a dog does—in contemplation" (72). Ellen's rest, by contrast, is an extension of the creative, quietly purposive activity of pleasurable labor. It is more closely akin to what Morris calls "Imaginative Work," because in its peaceful attention to life "it bears in its bosom the worth and the meaning of life and the counsel to strive to understand everything" (74-75). It is, precisely, "the pleasurable exercise of our faculties" ("Society" 202-03). Life in Nowhere, as Lionel Trilling once wrote, "is lived for itself alone, for its own delight in itself. In the life of each individual, the past now exercises no tyranny and the future is not exigent. The present is all, and it is all-satisfying" (219). In utopia, real life is no longer absent, as it is in pre-history; it is instead present.

But it is nonetheless necessary to recall that, before and after the fleeting self-forgetfulness of his "dreamless sleep," Guest is haunted by "a vague fear" (141) that he will "wake up in the old miserable world of worn-out pleasures, and hopes that [are] half fears" (153). In this way, the half-forgotten, the repressed—in the form of his own empty present, the present of pre-history—foreshadows its return. If, in Bloch's vocabulary, Morris's epoch of rest embodies "*the utopian primacy of rest*, as the schema of fulfilment, over motion, as the schema of unfulfilled striving for something" (2: 825), then this state of rest is after all simply epochal and impermanent. Socialism, as Morris stressed, "does not recognize any finality in the progress and aspirations of humanity; and...the furthest we can now conceive is only a stage of the great journey of evolution that joins the future and the past to the present" ("Theory" 153). Morris's utopia is dynamic.

In a perceptive essay on Morris, Miguel Abensour addresses this issue of impermanence by proposing that *News from Nowhere* comprises "a highly original utopian hypothesis on the 'hazy realm of non-history,' that moment of forgetfulness that alone clears the way for a new history, an amazing history beyond everything it has heretofore told or produced" (134). But if this interpretation is compelling, it has two problems. First, it cannot account for what Marcus Waithe has recently identified as "the progressive tendency, the victory of motion over friction" that characterizes Nowhere (462). Such an interpretation fails to grasp the utopian paradox whereby the "hazy realm of non- history" may in fact be this "amazing history" to which Abensour refers. Emphatic that our whole life might be a "holiday" if all our labor is "reasonable and pleasant," Morris effectively deconstructs the difference between work and play, history and non-history ("Useful Work" 97). Second, if Morris's novel freely acknowledges that, as Ellen puts it, "happy as we are, times may alter," Abensour's analysis fails to recognize that this moment of forgetfulness may itself clear the way for a return to some more alienated, fetishized condition of life. "We may be bitten with some impulse towards change," muses Ellen, "and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid" (*News* 194). Presumably, this refers to the fact that, as Hammond had earlier hinted, the inhabitants of Nowhere are increasingly fearful "of a possible scarcity in work" (97). Competition may yet upset this realm of "peace and continuous plenty" (54). Ellen's comment therefore amounts to an implicit criticism of Hammond, who idealizes the past and so opens up the possibility of its return. At the same time, however, it is a guilty admission of her attraction for Guest, who is himself a fragment "of what has been before," appealing to her precisely because of his emotional complexity, his "hopes that [are] half-fears" (153).

For Guest is a ghost, and he unsettles the tranquillity of utopia. His very presence is a disruption of the epoch of rest. He is the mark of non-contemporaneity. In his person, the spectre of pre-history haunts the realm of a redemptive history just as the "ghost of old London"still asserts itself as a center in Nowhere (33). This is the significance of Dick's conversation with Guest about the cycle of seasons before the feast:

> "One thing seems strange to me," said [Dick]—"that I must needs trouble myself about the winter and its scantiness, in the midst of the summer abundance. If it hadn't happened to me before, I should have thought it was your doing, Guest; that you had thrown a kind of evil charm over me."
>
> (207)

Guest has interrupted the unity of subject and object to which Dick referred a moment ago when he talked of being "part of it all," part of nature itself, in Nowhere (207). Like an anamorphic mark on a canvas, Guest unsettles the image of the "best ornament" of the church in which the harvest is to be celebrated by "the crowd of handsome, happy-looking men and women" wearing "their gay holiday raiment." As "the guest of guests" (208), Guest is also the ghost at the feast (as the common etymological root of "ghost" and "guest," the word *ghos-ti*, indicates). So the minatory advice that Dick offers Guest in Runnymede, that "you had better consider that you have got the cap of darkness, and are seeing everything, yourself invisible" (155), is, for a moment, fulfilled quite literally: he watches his physical presence fading quickly from the consciousness of his Nowherean friends (209), before experiencing his own painful apparition in *fin de siècle* London (210). An immaterial presence in Nowhere, he now returns to haunt "old London." Morris's protagonist is spectral because he unconsciously announces that the present—even the utopian present of happy plenitude—is not as complete or self-sufficient as it appears.

But it is noticeable that Dick draws attention to the fact that he has felt this disturbance before. In the past, old Hammond, representing the link between pre-history and utopia, has probably allowed a sense of the present's possible incompleteness to leak into Dick's consciousness. Guest is therefore not the cause of this spectral effect: he is merely its symptom. We might summarize this by saying that he is a sort of symbolic supplement to utopia. That is, he conforms to Jacques Derrida's logic of supplementarity, explained in "Speech and Phenomena," whereby an addition also makes up for a deficiency: "It comes to compensate for an originary nonself-presence" (28). Guest's very arrival in Nowhere reveals that the "filled present" of utopia is not in fact self-sufficient. He has broken through a crack in the outer walls of this world, like the crevice through which Edward Bulwer-Lytton's narrator breaches the hermetic kingdom of the Vril-ya in *The*

Coming Race (1871). The appearance of Morris's protagonist in utopia testifies to the ultimate impossibility of complete utopian plenitude. The opaque spot on the lived present in prehistory stains the apparently transparent present of utopia too.

"For ultimately the influence of the lived darkness is not confined...," Bloch remarks, "but the blind-spot, this not-seeing of the immediately entering Here and Now, also in fact appears in every *realization*" (1: 299). Continuing, Bloch explains this claim that the present is in some existential sense non-identical to itself, in his characteristically clotted, occasionally obfuscatory prose style:

> Everywhere else there is a crack, even an abyss in the realizing itself, in the actuated- topical entrance of what has been so beautifully foreseen, dreamed out; and this abyss is that of the ungrasped existere itself. So the darkness of nearness also gives the *final reason for the melancholy of fulfilment*: no earthly paradise remains on entry without the shadow which the entry still casts over it.
>
> (1: 299)

In his utopian fiction, Morris plays with the idea of a utopian present that is fully present to itself. But he is finally too dialectical to accept the possibility of this concept. After all, *News from Nowhere* is a political tract as well as a phenomenological fantasy. It addressed a tight circle of committed readers, at least in its first, serial form of publication. And for these readers, the concept of the utopian present was, crucially, a heuristic possibility. In the words of Robert Musil, "utopia is not a goal but an orientation" (qtd. in Suvin 131).

III

In his writings for *Commonweal*, the organ of the Socialist League, Morris repeatedly criticized those whom he called "practical" or "one-sided" socialists, because "they do not see except through the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us" ("On Some Practical" 338). This notion of what we might call "one- dimensional socialism" is the basis for his polemical review of Bellamy's *Looking Backward,* printed in *Commonweal* in 1889: "The only ideal of life which such a man can see is that of the industrious *professional* middle-class men of to-day purified from their crime of complicity with the monopoly class, and become independent, instead of being, as they now are, parasitical" ("*Looking Backward*" 421). *News from Nowhere* is in a dual sense an attempt to supersede this ideological impasse, and so to render the "smoked glass of the present" transparent, so to speak. On the one hand, it is an exercise in clairvoyant historicity: the late nineteenth century, despite its opacity, is refocused from the perspective of its future history. On the other hand, it is an exercise in imagining no less than an alternative reality, in the form of a kind of communistic structure of feeling: it recuperates the present by making it present to itself in the utopian future, if only in some incomplete and finally illusory sense.

This dialectical prospect of a moment of utopian fulfillment that cancels itself out generates the sense of poignancy that characterizes Morris's socialist romance as well as inspiring its political urgency. As William Guest had feared, his dream of Nowhere fades, and he finds himself at home, inferring the following message from Ellen's "last mournful look": "Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness" (210-11). All too quickly, Ellen's recommendation recalls the reader of *Commonweal* to the mundane activity of building a socialist movement in late-Victorian London. But it is important to register the fact that the terrain of politics has itself been defamiliarized, and transformed, by the protagonist's dream of the future—just as in daily life the people of whom one has dreamed seem subtly altered the following day. "Or indeed *was* it a dream?" Guest wonders (210). If "it may be called a vision rather than a dream" (211), if it is symbolic of some inchoate collective consciousness of the post-capitalist society with which the present is parturient, then the struggle for socialism will have been imperceptibly transfigured by the future.

Socialist politics in the present, according to Morris, are about helping to create those conditions of possibility in which the "great motive-power of the change," "a longing for freedom and equality," coincides with the objective conditions of capitalist crisis described in the discussion of "How the Change Came" (*News* 104-05). What Guest imports from utopia is a sense of the possibility of that redemptive present, and this in part redeems the present of capitalism from its emptiness. For Morris, ultimately, as Walter Benjamin would write almost fifty years later, "history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (262-63). Guest is an allegorical figure for this "conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (266).

For if William Guest represents a spectral rupture of the utopian present while he is in Nowhere, on his return to Hammersmith he represents a spectral rupture in the capitalist present. And this breach marks out what Benjamin termed "the strait gate" through which the Messiah, in the form of the moment of revolutionary transformation, might enter history (266). So when old Hammond tells his kinswoman Clara to "go and live in the present" during "The Drive Back to Hammersmith" in *News from Nowhere* (136), he is not simply reassuring her that she must rest in utopia's happy state of plenitude; he is implicitly pressing Guest to return to his present, opening it up to this future.

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