William Morris: ‘Back to the Land’, Pessimism and Utopia

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INTRODUCTION

There is a substantial problem in assessing the contemporary significance of William Morris’s social and political writings and the utopian vision of News from Nowhere. The theory of violent socialist revolution now seems implausible. Class is no longer the key feature of social identity which it once was. Inequality now also follows lines of fracture which encompass gender, ethnicity and (dis)ability as well as social class. Problems of risk and environmental impact across social fractures have led to the rise of a new politics and new forms of alternative social and economic life. At the same time, both the ethical and environmental arguments against globalised capital seem as strong as ever. In reviewing Morris’s work, we are well advised to seek alternative and new readings of Morris which go beyond Marxism and the important work of E. P. Thompson and other modern critics. We must also, as Krishan Kumar has pointed out, note the extent to which Morris was provoked into writing News from Nowhere itself by the enormous irritation he felt at the publication and success of Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward. Morris described it in a letter to John Glasier (13 May 1889) as a ‘cockney paradise’, a world in which the worst features of industrial Victorian Britain were only mitigated by a centrally imposed order and equality which later critics have found to be a precursor of both National Socialism (Hitler style) and State Socialism (Stalin style). As Kumar rightly suggests, the contrast with Morris is in the tone, as much as in the content, ‘a way of describing the look of people, and their relation with each other; in a particular sense of nature, as landscape, and as a way and means of life’.

If Bellamy is one significant influence, another is Richard Jefferies. The pessimism of After London: or Wild England contrasts vividly with the optimism of News from Nowhere, yet as Fiona MacCarthy points out, Jefferies book emphasised Morris’s own understanding that ‘political equilibrium must be preceded by upheaval, silence, a kind of blankness . . .’ It has long been customary to note in the writings of William Morris a tension between, on the one hand, a commitment to a Marxist view of history and the inevitability of violent struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, and on the other hand, an attraction to the idea of small self-governing communities. This has sometimes been understood as a tension in Morris between an intellectual commitment to socialism and an emotional commitment to anarchism. This article sets that particular argument as background, while foregrounding a brief exploration of the relationship of Morris to
other quasi-Utopian projects which turned their back on the predominantly urban life of modern England.

MOMENT I: 'GIVE ME THE SIMPLE LIFE': WILLIAM MORRIS VISITS EDWARD CARPENTER

A key episode in my understanding of Morris was the visit he made in 1884 to Edward Carpenter on his small-holding near Sheffield. Carpenter (1844-1929) was the nineteenth century apostle of the simple life, fellowship and open sexual relations (in particular between consenting men). At the moment of the final rift in the Social Democratic Federation (Morris's faction left to set up the Socialist League on 27 December 1884), Morris wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones on Christmas Eve 1884:

I listened with longing heart to his account of his patch of ground, seven acres: he says that he and his fellow can almost live on it: they grow their own wheat, and send flowers and fruit to Chesterfield and Sheffield markets: all that sounds very agreeable to me. It seems to me that the real way to enjoy life is to accept all its necessary details and turn them into pleasure by taking interest in them.

'It is a passage which accords well with the Morris of News from Nowhere, with its willed transformation of London, and exaltation of the virtues and attractions of rural life and hard manual labour. The 'moment' is significant: further on in the same letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones, when Morris refers to 'a decent community as a refuge from our mean squabbles and corrupt society', he is referring to both capitalism and the narrow sectarianism of his own political experience. On a second visit to Carpenter in 1885, Morris was reading Jefferies. Morris and Carpenter, while never political allies, were identified by Raymond Unwin, the architect of the English Garden City and New Town movements, as part of a general thrust of nineteenth century critical thinking which profoundly influenced young men growing to maturity in the last quarter of the century. Unwin, in his acceptance speech for the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal in 1937, said, in a sentence which sums up much of the practical influence of the nineteenth century tradition of social and aesthetic criticism:

One who was privileged to hear the beautiful voice of John Ruskin declaiming against the disorder and degradation resulting from the laissez-faire theories of life; to know William Morris and his work, and to imbibe in his impressionable years the thought and writings of men like James Hinton and Edward Carpenter, could hardly fail to follow after the ideals of a more ordered form of society, and a better planned environment for it, than that which he saw around him in the 'seventies and 'eighties of last century.

The theme of awakening explicit in Carpenter's work (for example, in 'England arise!', 1886) is one which links across the intervening century to modern concerns.
Jeremy Seabook and Trevor Blackwell in their important book *The Revolt against Change* (1993) begin by quoting from *News from Nowhere* and then note how the language of awakening was taken up in the 1960s and 1970s by ‘those groups who needed to articulate their opposition to the dominant values, carried then, paradoxically, by a pacified working class. Thus the black, women’s and gay movements took up the language of “consciousness-raising”, “liberation”, “becoming aware”.’ They saw the Green movement as the 1990s embodiment of this approach.

**MOMENT 2: ‘SOME DAY MY PRINCE WILL COME’: MORRIS AND KROPOTKIN**

It is now clear that while Morris rejected anarchism as a political doctrine, he was attracted not only to Carpenter’s small-group ‘solution’ to the capitalist problematic, but also to the personality and writing of the aristocratic Russian anarchist theorist and exile Peter Kropotkin, inviting him to lecture at the coach-house in Hammersmith and submit articles to *Commonweal*. The series of articles of 1889/90 which eventually became *Fields, factories and workshops* (1899), with an enlarged and revised edition in 1913, had an enormous influence, not least on town and country planners such as Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford. Colin Ward argues that: ‘With the small unit as a base, he [Kropotkin] saw the opportunity for a more responsible and responsive local life, with greater scope for the human agents who were neglected and frustrated by mass organisations’.

Kropotkin himself argued in the Introduction to the first edition of the book that people show their best side when they have ‘several pursuits in the farm, the workshop, the factory, the study or the studio, instead of being riveted for life to one of these pursuits only’, a view that suggests the free-wheeling life-style of *News from Nowhere*. There is a harmony in Kropotkin’s view of society which reconciles such characteristic modern binaries as town/country, work/leisure, discipline/autonomy and production/consumption:

> Harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups . . . freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.

However, this view of society is premised on a certain view of human nature which, while not widely shared, reverberates with a certain strand of late nineteenth century ethical socialist thought:

> It is not love and not even sympathy upon which society is based in man-kind. It is the conscience – be it only at the stage of an instinct – of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependence of everyone’s happiness upon
the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own. Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed.\textsuperscript{15}

For all that Morris read Marx (with the aid of the misogynist Belfort Bax) and called himself a communist, it is the communitarian strand of nineteenth century thinking (from Blake via Christian Socialism, Tolstoy and Kropotkin) that the lyricism of \textit{News from Nowhere} most strongly brings to mind.

**MOMENT 3: 'A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES': THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT AS A DUNG-HEAP**

If there is doubt about the anti-urban sentiments of Morris, then consider the potent symbol of the Houses of Parliament as a dung-heap in \textit{News from Nowhere}. Like most potent symbols, it is capable of a variety of interpretations. Firstly, it is an attack on parliamentary democracy in particular. Thus the authors of the 1984 ICA William Morris exhibition catalogue chose to include a photomontage by Michael Bennett of the Houses of Parliament with cattle, with the following words by Morris:

'Those who believe they can deal with capitalism in a piecemeal way very much underrate the strength of the tremendous organisation under which we live... it will not suffer itself to be dismembered, nor to lose anything which really is its essence... Rather than lose anything, which it considers of importance, it will pull the roof of the world down upon its head. ('Whigs, Democrats and Socialists', June 1886)\textsuperscript{16}

Secondly, and more controversially, it constitutes an attack on government in general. Tom Paine put it like this: 'Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one. Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise'. (\textit{Common Sense, 1776})\textsuperscript{17} And thirdly, it represents an attack on an urban capitalism which was out of control and already affecting the environment in devastating and (from our view a hundred years later) probably irreversible ways.

**MOMENT 4: 'DOWN ON THE FARM': MUCK-RAKING IN DORSET**

Not all the exponents of 'back to the land' were as attractive as Edward Carpenter and Peter Kropotkin. On a darker note, Patrick Wright has explored in some detail Rolf Gardiner and his activities centred on the Springhead community in inter-war Dorset. These activities were rooted in the youth movements in the 1920s in both
Germany and England, and ideas of national renewal, but Wright also emphasises more unsavoury links with Hitler and Mosley. It is distressing, but perhaps worth recalling, that the nationalist fascism of the Hitler Youth shares a common and not-so-distant heritage with the internationalist, socialist and co-operative Woodcraft Folk. Wright is ambivalent but emphasises both the ‘fellow-travelling’ of Gardiner and also the distinctive nature of his vision:

Gardiner’s view was closer to what he called the ‘Christian gnosticism’ of the seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne: he wanted not the communism of the sect, but the communion of ordinary men and women in work and art, in their relation with birds, beasts and flowers, stars, trees and men.18

If Gardiner is a dubious character, there is also an element of ambivalence in the work of H. J. Massingham, a guild socialist, associated with the pre-1914 journal New Age, whose particular search for roots led him back to both the Morris of News from Nowhere and the late prose romances, and, in a rather less likely move, to the megalithic cultures of Southern England: ‘The hilltop settlements represented an archaic federation of independent producers: “little townships and communities” of the sort that, during the last years of the great war, Massingham was drawing from the vision of William Morris’.19 Wright comments sarcastically that ‘these sun-worshipping primitives enjoyed a personal freedom remarkably like that advocated by D. H. Lawrence, whom Massingham met and admired; and they probably wore sandals too’.20 At the same time, Massingham’s advocacy of organic methods of husbandry, which becomes even more pronounced in his post-Second World War work, helps to create a link from the Ruskin/Morris moral criticism of capitalism through to New Age and Ecology. But in Gardiner, Massingham and Lawrence, as well as in contemporary New Age cults, there is always the danger of irrationalism and reaction. For example, the following passage from Massingham links across from Morris and Kropotkin to modern environmentalism:

The real division is between rival philosophies of life. The one believes in exploiting natural resources, the other in conserving them; the one in centralised control, the other in regional self-government; the one in conquering and the other in co-operating with nature; the one in chemical and inorganic methods imitated from those of the urban factory and the other in biological and organic ones derived from the observation of nature as a whole; the one in man as a responsible agent with freewill to choose between the good and the bad, the other [in man] as a unit of production directed from above by an elite of technologists and bureaucrats; the one in the divine creation both of man and nature, and the other in man as self-sufficient in himself, with nature merely as the means for extracting wealth for himself.

All is well until the final sentence. Wright, apparently carried away by enthusiasm for his own ‘case’ against Massingham, quotes it thus: ‘The one philosophy is dominant and possesses all the power but the other is in possession of the truth’.21 Truth claims of this order are, I would agree, part of the problem of the twentieth
century, rather than its solution. However, what Massingham wrote was: ‘For of
the two philosophies thus opposed, the one is leading the world on the road to
ruin and the other offers the only way out’. At a practical level, Massingham is
almost certainly right. There is concern about Massingham’s use of terms such
as ‘aliens’ (1934), his nostalgia for an English peasantry, but there was also
moments of real insight, as when he discusses in a 1951 publication the use of the
term modern:

Industrial methods, whether in garden, farm, forest or any type of land, have
proved so catastrophic that, by an ironic paradox, the word ‘modern’ is being
interpreted nowadays as the scientific study of traditional cultivation and the
discovery of new processes in harmony with it.

Whether or not there is anything peculiarly English in English ecology or
spirituality (Lawrence did, after all, turn his back on England, while Gardiner was
equally influenced by Germany) or whether we are simply dealing with the accident
of artists, poets, musicians and social thinkers interested in spiritual matters who
also happened to be English is a matter I leave happily to the reader. The
connections are certainly there to be made. To give a brief example: Ralph Vaughan
Williams’s ‘Five mystical songs’ with words by George Herbert was heard for the
first time at that most ‘English’ of musical events – the Three Choirs Festival in
Worcester. The baritone voice rises plaintively above the choir and orchestra in an
unmistakable way, the exquisite sound of a narrow, rural, and rather chauvinist
vision of England. But curiously the opposite can be true – that spirituality can be
internationalist and expansive in outlook, as it is in Michael Tippett’s wartime
oratorio ‘A child of our time’ with its use of American Negro spirituals as a timeless
commentary on the time-constrained action of the story.

There is, then, a spiritual and religious strand that winds its way through the
scientific unbelief of the twentieth century. The Enlightenment and modernity are
the apotheosis of the classical tradition, taken up by the Renaissance. Man is the
measure of all things. But science has not delivered the goods. Instead of a rational
well-ordered society, the twentieth century has given us pollution, environmental
degradation, catastrophic risks, inequality and untold violence. What maybe
required in the future is an attitude just as committed, but at the same time more
tentative, more open to dialogue and more aware of human life as one of
innumerable forms of ‘life on earth’.

MOMENT 5: ‘TO BE OR NOT TO BE’: MODERN PESSIMISM VERSUS
FUTURE UTOPIA

To warn of the dangers of utopia is not the same as accepting pessimism, either
in its modern or post-modern forms. While the arguments about post-modernity,
‘the end of history’, the impossibility and implausibility of socialist projects, the
end of the metanarratives of modernism, abound in our cultural exchanges, it is
interesting at this juncture to revisit briefly some of the earlier arguments about
pessimism. They suggest where William Morris was coming from as well as where he was heading.

Despair and pessimism are no strangers to readers of William Morris. Indeed, commentaries of a psychologising nature have often traced this back to the unsatisfactory nature of his marriage and the subsequent search for purpose in political arenas. I would argue that it is present in Morris from an early stage, for example, in ‘The Hollow Land’, an early contribution to The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, which MacCarthy, in her generally comprehensive treatment of Morris’s life and work, mentions only once and briefly.26 ‘The Hollow Land’ is Morris’s first utopia but stems from a deep-rooted pessimism:

Lives passed in turmoil, in making one another unhappy, in bitterest mis-understanding of our brothers’ hearts, making those sad whom God had not made sad: alas, alas! what chance for any of us to find the Hollow Land? what time even to look for it? Yet who has not dreamed of it? Who, half miserable yet the while for that he knows it is but a dream, has not felt the cool waves round his feet, the roses crowning him, and through the leaves of beech and lime the many whispering winds of the Hollow Land?27

Some years later, Thomas Hardy was to write of his character Clym Yoebright in The Return of the Native: ‘He did sometimes think he had been ill-used by fortune, so far as to say that to be born is a palpable dilemma and that instead of men aiming to advance in life with glory they should calculate how to retreat out of it without shame’.28

If such expressions of existential angst (from Kirkegaard in the nineteenth century to Sartre in the twentieth) are characteristic of modernity, then equally so is the hope of utopia. As Ruth Levitas states: ‘Utopia does not express desire, but enables people to work towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment, a broadening, deepening, and raising of aspirations in terms quite different from those of everyday life’.29

What then of prospects for the twenty-first century? While I accept that the kind of socialist revolution on which Morris predicated the world of News from Nowhere is no longer either possible or, indeed, wholly desirable, given the record of twentieth century socialist revolutions and the history of state socialism, the end of capitalism remains an imperative. It produces wealth but only at the expense of the poverty of the majority (I am thinking of the countries of the South as much as the poor of the North) and the degradation of the environment. Perhaps my first two ‘moments’ remain the most useful insights Morris can give us as we look towards the possible future – Morris, Carpenter, Kropotkin, and the ‘building blocks’ of a modest utopia which Levitas sees as already in place: ‘an emphasis on self-management, unalienated labour, ecological responsibility, distributive justice, sexual equality’.30 With at least some of this agenda William Morris can help, as we scour the past for inspiration and strength on our own particular journey to Nowhere.
NOTES

I am grateful to Martin Haggerty for a helpful reading of an earlier draft of this paper. Any remaining errors and the conceptual framework are, of course, my own.


3 *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, op. cit., p. 161.


8 *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, op. cit., p. 517.


11 See ‘William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition’, op. cit., p. 61: ‘Any discussion of the relationship of William Morris and anarchism must begin by recognising that Morris vehemently rejected the connection, opposed the contemporary anarchists in England, and called himself a Marxist or communist.’


13 ibid., p. 9.


19 ibid., p. 115.

20 ibid., p. 115.

21 H. L. Massingham quoted in ibid., p. 245.

23 Martin Haggerty has pointed out to me in correspondence that this ‘last sentence’ of the quotation, as used by both Abelson and Wright, is actually separated by an intervening passage in Massingham’s original, *The Faith of a Fieldsman*, (London: Museum Press 1951), pp. 226-228.


25 ibid., p. 152.

26 *William Morris: A Life For Our Time*, op. cit., p. 79. Curiously, Patrick Wright picks it up in *The Village that Died for England: The Strange Story of Tyneham*, op. cit., using as a head quote for Part 6: ‘no more dreams, but failure at last, and death, happier in the Hollow Land’.


30 ibid., p. 170.