

THEMATIC BLOCK: UTOPIA AND DEMOCRACY

“The (Difficult) Arts of Enjoying Life”: Democratic Aesthetics in the Late Nineteenth-Century Utopian Literature of William Morris

Harry Hall

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0652-4110>

HJEAS

ABSTRACT

While utopian literature’s emphasis on ordered happiness would seem to stand in an antithetical relation to democratic freedom, the late nineteenth-century writer, designer, and socialist William Morris sought to fashion an account of utopian democratic aesthetics. By analyzing Morris’s utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890) and a few of his key lectures, this essay extrapolates Morris’s democratic aesthetic theory grounded in the sensual experience of both aesthetic consumption and aesthetic production. Situating Morris’s work in the progressive, labor, and aesthetic discourses of his time, and considering its numerous historical and contemporary critiques, this essay draws on the theory of ritualization to outline the stakes and dimensions of a utopian politics based upon artistic practice. Though arising out of the individual—their desires, their actions—and thoroughly speculative, Morris’s utopian democratic aesthetics attempted to inscribe artistic practice into a social and political project centered on the free production of subjectivity and the realization of agency through aesthetic experience, both “utopian” and accessible in everyday life. (HH)

KEYWORDS: aesthetics, democracy, decoration, production, utopia, sacrament



Increasingly often in these increasingly hard times I am asked by people I respect and admire, “Are you going to write books about the terrible injustice and misery of our world, or are you going to write escapist and consolatory fantasies?” I am urged by some to do one—by some to do the other. I am offered the Grand Inquisitor’s choice. Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom? The only answer one can make, I think, is: No.

—Ursula K. Le Guin, “A Non-Euclidean View” (98)

Introduction: Beyond dystopian conceptions of democracy

While both dystopian and utopian novels flourished in the Anglo-American 1880s and 1890s, only dystopias would proliferate as prosperously in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This makes sense, both aesthetically and theoretically, for although dystopian literature has been criticized for its political pessimism (see Lepore), its narrative and ideological structures often offer a decisively positive view of democracy. Literary dystopias are never complete (insofar as there are stories to tell in them), and the totalitarianism consistent across the iconic dystopias of the twentieth century—such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949)—promotes the heroic individualism of the modern hero's journey. In such works, a lone protagonist, or a revolutionary, self-governing band of a few brave souls, struggles against the soul-crushing conformity of an *almost*-totally regulated future society. These dystopian novels assert the significance of the subjective, the local, the personal, and a salvific vision of democracy as the governmental form based upon popular consent. They worry not about the honest will of the masses or the mob (at least not so explicitly since Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* [1890], though that trope is certainly not extinct), but about the domination of the masses through state-sponsored cultural propaganda. Democracy stands in bold contrast to—it is the small-scale negative of—the large-scale dystopian society. Similarly, the protagonist's narrative struggle against the state's hegemony is an allegory for the novelistic struggle to achieve subjectivity. Through negation, dystopian novels accentuate the principles of democracy, aligning them with critique, freedom, and aesthetic production itself.

Formally, the progressive and socialist utopian novels of the late nineteenth century would seem to take the opposite stance. At least that is the view of utopia's critics (not always critics of progressivism or socialism), who often assert that the most individualistic, personal, or democratic themes within utopian novels—including aesthetics, religion, and the narrative form of the novels themselves—only ever clash with the idealistic and perfectly planned and plotted utopian societies. As Gorman Beauchamp argues, the “medium” of the utopian novel inherently negates the utopian “message,” for the medium demands ordered conformity, whereas the message purports to promote creativity and freedom (87). In a process reminiscent of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's description of the culture industry, any utopian forms of art or religion would be

subsumed into the state's pedagogical indoctrinating project, requiring utopian culture to be explicitly didactic, or merely diverting. In such views, one can have either the utopian promise of orderly "happiness" or the existential instability of democracy, only the latter being productive of genuine art and religious expression. To affiliate democracy and utopia would seem either hopelessly optimistic or deliberately ignorant. If democracy is the revolutionary lifeblood in the otherwise barren landscapes of dystopian novels, then utopian novels are corpses from the start.

In this essay, I will explore how William Morris, the late nineteenth-century British poet, designer, and socialist, fashioned an account of democratic and utopian aesthetics, specifically turning to his invocation of utopian sacrament and ritual. I will restrict this exploration to Morris's own utopian novel and a few of his key essays and lectures, for Morris wrote on culture and politics throughout his life, and everything from his epic poetry to his visual designs reveal his commitment to imagining forms of human expression and production different from the consumerist and capitalist norms of his day. As we will see, Morris regarded every artistic activity as the sacramental embodiment, incorporation, or incarnation of democracy, containing the seed of utopian potential in its productive performance.

But to be clear, the aim of this exploration is neither to argue for the real feasibility of Morris's ideas, nor to dispute the rationality of dystopian anxieties. All utopian novels are, in Louis Marin's terms, "ideological critiques of ideology" (xiv); their very form asserts a version of the "good," of desire and pleasure rightly oriented. If any of these value judgments differ from one's own (as is bound to be the case), the act of reading will produce at least the uncomfortable, embarrassing, discomfiting feeling of implication in another's philosophy of the world. As Lauren Berlant writes, "There is nothing more alienating than having one's pleasures disputed by someone with a theory" (5).

The goal of this essay, then, is not the political recovery of utopian proposals; instead, its orientation is historical. Literary genres do not necessarily establish certain ideas. Yet as forms of construction, modes of expression, they do condition particular ways of thinking (while establishing conceptual impasses for other ways of thinking). The purpose of this essay is to expand our historical understanding of what the project of utopian literature has involved, and to consider how Morris's speculative writing inhabits a framework alternative to dystopias for retheorizing and reimagining democratic practice.

Edward Bellamy: An American precedent of utopian anti-democracy

In 1890, Morris serially published in his socialist journal, *The Commonweal*, his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere, or An Epoch of Rest: Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*. By this time, Morris had been politically active for over a decade, organizing, speaking, and writing on socialist topics. But *News* was, to some extent, a strategic response to the American author and activist Edward Bellamy and his book, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888), a wildly popular utopian novel that sold over a million copies and inspired the wave of progressive utopian writings and their dystopian responses that flourished intensively until 1894 and did not fade until World War I, although the genre would never disappear (Pfaelzer 48). The above critiques of utopianism would be fair appraisals of Bellamy's novel: *Looking Backward* is, in Le Guin's sense, an "extrapolative" text (Introduction 1), in which Bellamy attempts to provide a serious "forecast, in accordance with the principles of evolution, of the next stage in the industrial and social development of humanity" (Bellamy, "The Rate of the World's Progress" 195). As such, it is also a *uchronia*, a work that sets utopia in a future time rather than a future place. (Place-based utopias were the norm before the nineteenth century.)

Looking Backward both reflected and shaped the traits of the late nineteenth century's progressive reform movement: its universal rhetoric, its cathexis upon a narrative of societal advancement, and its now bygone hope in the possibility of realizing an alternative to capitalism—a hope that reflected a pessimism about the prospect of capitalism's self-reform. To be sure, although *Looking Backward* and other utopian novels drew on the popular adventure and sentimental genres of their day, they were essentially political projects. They charted courses from their contemporary world to its reformed utopian future. They were tools for the creation, organization, and consolidation of various progressive collectivities. In *Looking Backward*, Bellamy's narrator Julian West goes to sleep in the nineteenth century, a setting suffused with inequality and social unrest, awakening in the year 2000, where he discovers the societal structures of the transformed utopian city of Boston. As H. G. Wells summed up in his meta-utopian *A Modern Utopia* (1905), "There is a common notion that the reading of a Utopia should end with a swelling heart and clear resolves, with lists of names, formations of committees, and even the commencement of subscriptions" (371–72). In *Looking Backward*, Bellamy set out to articulate a system of egalitarian governance that would reduce the hours of the working day and the length of one's working career. All labor would be coordinated in an

“industrial army,” an absolute monopoly controlled by the state, which Bellamy understood as a nationalized extension and evolution of, rather than a revolutionary repudiation of, the capitalist monopolies against which he railed (Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 88). Indeed, Bellamy’s utopian government is explicitly technocratic, implicitly anti-democratic. “The industry and commerce of the country, ceasing to be conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations,” his fictional historian of the twenty-first century recounts, “were intrusted [*sic*] to a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit” (77).

All uchronian utopian novels have a dual objective: the first to resolve the problems of the contemporary world out of the present’s conditions and resources, the second to promise happiness in these resolutions (and specifically, a happiness recognizable to and desirable for the novel’s contemporary readers). Therefore, uchronian utopian novels must imagine future forms of aesthetics and religion, insofar as their authors see these dimensions of life as human goods (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 184–5). Within *Looking Backward*, the aesthetic and religion concomitant with technocracy are based on a principle of consumption: centralized specialists produce literature, music, and sermons, which the state syndicates and distributes nationally. Thus, the necessities of bureaucratic labor, on the one hand, and artistic and religious experience, on the other—what Marx might call the realms of “necessity” and “freedom”—remain structurally distinct. Like this sharp incongruity between work in Bellamy’s industrial army (“a necessary duty to be discharged”) and citizens’ state of retirement at the age of forty-five (when they can develop “the higher exercise of our faculties, the intellectual and spiritual enjoyments and pursuits which alone mean life”), collective organization and individual freedom—government and democracy—stand in essential contradiction (Bellamy, *Looking Backward* 270).

Before writing “Looking Backward,” Morris organized, wrote, and lectured prolifically on socialist aesthetics and politics, but his 1889 review of Bellamy’s novel offers a dialectical entry into his attempts to synchronize art, utopia, and democracy. In his review, Morris critiqued Bellamy’s utopia as being the result of an “unmixed, modern” and “unhistoric and unartistic” temperament that celebrated “machinery of life” in service of what Morris critically called “State Communism” (Morris, *Looking Backward* 194–95). Bellamy’s novel had prompted critiques from both conservatives and progressives, from the former for being too charitable to workers and

(ironically) too pacifistic in state organization, but also from the latter for imagining transformation without revolutionary practices or events. Morris's response was unsurprisingly left-oriented, and he argued that Bellamy's utopian aspirations would do relatively little to disrupt the fundamental manner of one's alienated relation to work and the process of production. Such a world under a state monopoly might promote egalitarianism, as all would have equal access to happiness-promising technologies of aesthetic and religious consumption, but it would hardly be democratic, or utopian, in a productive sense.

Morris also challenged Bellamy's presumption of the intractable tension between freedom and happiness. He asserted that behind that intractability lay an implicit support of the status quo of alienation in capitalistic labor. "I believe that the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of men's energy by the reduction of *labour* to a minimum," Morris wrote, "but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be a pain" (Morris, "Looking Backward" 195). Indeed, this is a more conservative statement than much of Morris's work, which focused less on mitigating the debilitating effects of hard labor (in which, nevertheless, he was invested politically), and more on the transformation of labor itself into a positive, non-alienated activity. He wrote later in the review, "It cannot be too often repeated that the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself" (195). Unlike Bellamy's use of sublimated, humanistic patriotism to lighten the inherent burden of labor, Morris held pleasure itself as the driving force of all utopian work, resignifying the very notion of labor's "burden." Utopian labor would be the expression, the realization, the result of pleasure, rather than the vehicle to achieving pleasure, leisure, or freedom. As was consistent throughout Morris's oeuvre, he associated pleasure with both the expression and production of art: "art, using that word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life which free and happy men can do without, but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness" (195). As we will see, this account of what I will call "democratic aesthetics" was both the means and the ends for Morris's speculation of utopian change.

William Morris: Pleasure, artistic experience, and utopian beauty

Morris's *News from Nowhere* uses the same time-traveling narrative contrivance as *Looking Backward* to imagine a post-revolutionary London of the future, through which the narrator, William Guest, travels with a series

of utopian guides. The Palace of Westminster is pointedly a storage place for manure, because, as one guide explains, “the whole people is our parliament” (Morris, *News* 77), and the British Museum, though maintained, has become the home of the rare antiquarian who expounds for Guest the history of the future. Throughout his life, Morris was critical of the Victorian faith in the advancement of “civilization” even as he envisioned progress in the future. *News* elucidates such a revolutionary imagination. In chapter twelve, Guest asks his guide how politics work in the future society, to which the guide responds: “we are very well off as to politics—because we have none” (87). Yet the guide explains in the subsequent chapter, “How Matters are Managed,” that people reject the term politics for a more local process of collective organization and cooperative direction under the democratic principle of the communal “Mote,” a term meaning “assembly of people,” which Morris borrowed from pre-Norman English history (Morris, *News* 26, footnote 16). Similarly, chapter nine, which articulates the utopians’ anti-institutional view of state authority, is followed by a chapter on the utopian “arrangements of life,” by which people have “simplified” their lives and “got rid of many conventionalities and many sham wants” (82), in place of a production-oriented aesthetic complexity that Guest discovers in his eventual journey up the Thames. Therefore, *News* is explicit about the participatory quality of utopian government.

Throughout the novel, Morris is as committed to stylistically depicting aesthetic flourishing as he is to explicating democratic precepts of civic life. Indeed, *News* is suffused with art and beauty: beautiful scenery, beautiful people, beautiful buildings, beautifully ornamented objects, from bridges to belts to pipes. The word beauty and its cognates appear at least 137 times in the novel, and the prose is thick with ornate, sensory detail: “The garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious superabundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty . . . And the house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer” (Morris, *News* 210). Thus, one of *News*’s projects involves instituting both human-made and natural beauty (with aesthetics more generally) into ethical and political discourses. Morris thus celebrated styles of decoration, ornamentation, and visual beauty for their potential to support a harmonious coexistence within the natural world that they would replicate. “Art will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-sides,” he wrote in one lecture (*Collected* 22: 27). Morris juxtaposed a call for the extinction of

“luxury,” defined as purely human design, with a concomitant extinction of asceticism, which would refuse the notion of beauty itself. He often repeated the “golden rule” of the Arts and Crafts Movement: “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful” (*Collected* 22: 73, 76).

But more importantly for our subject, *News* dramatizes the visual appreciation of, and the verbal recognition and naming of, beauty as such. Throughout his journey, Guest both desires and experiences utopian transformations through his sense of sight. In the first chapter, Guest leaves a chaotic nineteenth-century meeting of socialists discussing potential policies to reorganize society, and he laments the frailty of these mere ideas: “‘If I could but see a day of it,’ he said to himself; ‘if I could but see it!’” (Morris, *News* 4). Soon after, Guest sleeps and awakes in the future. When he reaches a utopian town in his travels, he remarks, “The whole mass of architecture which we had come upon so suddenly from amidst the pleasant fields was not only exquisitely beautiful in itself, but it bore upon it the expression of such generosity and abundance of life that I was exhilarated to a pitch that I had never yet reached. I fairly chuckled for pleasure” (26). When conversation fails to provide utopian clarity, visualization succeeds. Guest’s encounter with the utopian aesthetic typifies the novel’s main drama, the experience of utopian subjectivity.

Guest shares exclamations of wonder with his utopian friends and guides; similarly, the novel orients itself toward the reader’s parallel encounter with beauty. Like Bellamy, Morris set *News* in the city of its production and first publication. Bellamy, a resident of Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, placed *Looking Backward* in nearby Boston. Morris placed *News* even closer to home: first at a manor resembling his real-life home of Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, then in Bloomsbury, and finally in the landscape surrounding the River Thames on the way to Morris’s former home, Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire. This uchronian device highlights the dual character of utopian novels’ critical orientation—an orientation requiring a degree of narrative distance *and* a degree of identification—prompting the reader to perceive the utopian potential in their contemporary world, the metaphorical canvas for utopian ornamentation. Throughout *News*, London contains the traces of both the past and the possible future; it acts as an object onto which social and ecological desires might attach themselves.

In these instances of affective connection, *News* is less interested in the meliorist’s association of aesthetic experience with moral education (a

discourse prominent in the Victorian era, see Maltz, especially 19–40) than with the sensuous pleasure of aesthetic experience, which acts as a sign of utopian possibility. With this former discourse of aesthetic education, one could place Thomas Carlyle’s “modern hero,” the artist who takes the place as the “Bishop and Archbishop, the Primate of England” (162), and Matthew Arnold’s “national museum” of aesthetics that would contain “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (viii). With such figures, venerated artists instruct consumers in moral values from a structural distance. In contrast, for Morris, aesthetic experience does not teach extra-aesthetic values; if anything, aesthetic experience as a species of pleasure is an end in itself. “If we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy,” Morris wrote in “The Society of the Future,” a piece reminiscent of *News*, “we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men” (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 457). Beauty thus supports the flourishing of humanity’s “animal” life, an application of biological metaphors common in turn-of-the-century social thought. Morris’s writing thus works to re-signify pleasurable sensuousness from an object of moral restraint to a general sign of liberation. Early in his travels, Guest often responds with skepticism or a commercial attitude (attempting to pay for wares, for instance) when he witnesses visual beauty. Yet after he has had time to acclimate to the future, he notices that he can have his “fill of the pleasure of the eyes without any of that sense of incongruity, that dread of approaching ruin, which had always beset me hitherto when I had been among the beautiful works of art of the past” (Morris, *News* 146). His only fear, in fact, is driven by an attachment to the future utopian aesthetic that he does not want to lose. As Guest travels with a group of young utopians up the Thames, the cognitive dissonance between his previous aesthetic assumptions and those common to utopia fades away. His story is a narrative of increasingly sensuous aesthetic encounters.

At points in *News*, the nascent eroticism of the quotations above becomes more explicit, yet therein the individual pleasure of aesthetic experience acts as the “carriage” of utopian desire for the public good (Marsh 22). Sensual attachment and “sexual arousal” represent, for Morris, not merely sublimated social desire; they are the embodied “root” of the “aesthetic pleasure of beauty” (qtd. in Allison 196). Erotic, romantic, and platonic unions play a central role as the social glue in Morris’s exploration of utopian communal experience. Though blood-related families are often alluded to, most of the bonds that the novel portrays in detail are friendships, courtships, and relations of happenstance on Guest’s casual

journey. This journey itself is precipitated by a couple who are recently reunited after a separation and who act, according to Guest's older host, "as if the whole world depended on their kisses (as indeed it does somewhat)" (Morris, *News* 57). Metaphorically, *News* agrees with and explores the dimensions of this conjecture. In fact, both Morris's and Bellamy's novel (like most utopian novels of this period) incorporate a love-plot between the time-traveling narrator and a female inhabitant of utopia, a sentimental trope that dramatizes simultaneously the desire for societal arrival and fulfillment in the utopian consummation of love, the synthesis of the (worldly) male and (idealized) female, and the successful identification with and communication across ideological and temporal differences. The question of whether love can triumph in the utopian novel parallels the political question of whether humans today can realize and inhabit utopian civic paradigms. In *News*, Guest's interactions with his utopian love-object of Ellen resemble his interactions with the utopia's proliferation of visual beauty. Guest is enamored of Ellen; she is, Guest says, "pleased at my pleasure," and their relationship (and Guest's dream of the future) culminate when Ellen quietly discovers that Guest must be an inhabitant of the past (204). Both aesthetic and sensuous pleasures propel the novel's story. Like the continuous reactions to the utopian aesthetic, the new utopian spirit exemplifies, in the words of one of the utopians, "delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves" (135–36). This passage asserts a public valence to individual sensuous experience of aesthetic and sensuous consumption. The simile references an amorous, personal attachment, yet such "love of the . . . surface" is also open to all.

The critique of "aesthetic democracy"

Some critics in Morris's time were averse to his concentration on aesthetic beauty and his association of pleasure and desire with the serious matters of political transformation. One commentator called his utopia a "race of fleshly perfection, worshipping phenomena, relying on appearance, arguing from sensation" (Hewlett 350). Bellamy, in his own review of *News from Nowhere*, asserted that Morris's focus on aesthetic experience revealed his reliance upon "moral excellence or good feeling," rather than the methodical organization of society, to ensure peace and cooperation (Bellamy, "News from Nowhere" 47). Similarly, Friedrich Engels referred to Morris as a "very rich art enthusiast but untalented politician," not a

“utopian socialist” in the commune-forming tradition of Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Robert Owen, but still a “sentimental socialist,” concerned with the emotional experience of, rather than the scientific implementation of, socialistic change (Ferns 144). This judgment would align with Thorstein Veblen’s take on Morris in his classic *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in which the economist argued that Morris’s elaborate and ornamented printing endeavors (one might imagine similar critiques of Morris’s ornamented utopian aesthetic theory) were a practice of “conspicuous waste,” more interested in the beauty of the textual art-object than that text’s political impact (162–63). As a whole, these critiques share a concern with the links between Morris’s utopian imagination and an aesthetic of mere consumption.

There are many contemporary scholarly appraisals of Morris’s aesthetics and politics, the critiques resembling these historical arguments. For instance, Mark Allison asserts that Morris might have very well imagined valid and useful socialist-aesthetic principles, but these were principles that in their very utopian idealism evacuated all political applicability and not just in Morris’s sense of party “politics,” which is intentionally absent in his utopia, but in the sense of a democratic project of political change. Linda Dowling, too, draws upon the classic aesthetic intervention of Terry Eagleton’s *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, wherein Eagleton argues that since its foundation, aesthetic theory has offered a theoretical terrain in which the intractable political aporias of modernity (such as the aporia between the desire for democratic governance and personal freedom, on the one hand, and the desire for consensus and solidarity, on the other) can be displaced and then solved, if only aesthetically. For Eagleton, questions of aesthetic taste stand in for discussions of moral values. Aesthetic discourse is power’s attempt to shore up its own insecurities about democracy by arguing for an innate, natural, aesthetic quality of the (otherwise undemocratically imposed) moral Law and its accordance with the beautiful, the just, and the good (Eagleton 20).

Dowling applies Eagleton’s theory to readings of John Ruskin, Pater, Morris, and Wilde, and she defines “Aesthetic Democracy” as the “utopian social transformation by which the unanimous yet uncoerced bond between the citizens and their polity approximated the relation between aesthetic perceivers and the beautiful” (50). For these Victorian writers, the utopian desire for democratic consensus corresponds to the desire for aesthetic consensus in a common perception of an ideal of beauty. In this way, Dowling argues that an “ideal of aristocratic sensibility unrecognized as

such” lies “at the heart of the vision of aesthetic democracy inspiring Ruskin and Morris” (xii). Morris’s sensualist aesthetic attempts to “vulgarize” art; that is, he tries to situate artistic experience in a common notion of sensuous appreciation, accessible to all. Yet he also seeks to retain the connection between aesthetics and an idealism of ethical values. While visual beauty abounds in *News*, scholarly bookishness (with its connotations of privileged idleness) has become a relic of the past, and Morris followed Marx and Engels in asserting that the social role of the artist was historically contingent (Marx and Engels, *Critique of Modern German Philosophy* 394). Morris once wrote in an indicative letter, “Much as I love Art and ornament, I value it chiefly as a token of the happiness of the people, and I would rather it were all swept away from the world than that the mass of the people should suffer oppression” (Dowling 63). If art is a mere token or placeholder for a more general idea of happiness—the simple historical signifier of freedom from necessity—then it offers no essential basis for political change or utopian practice. If so, Dowling contends, it cannot be from Morris’s aesthetic theory that he draws his ethics; it must attest to another (undemocratic) ethical ideal, reminiscent of Carlyle and Arnold, from which Morris would draw as if against his own democratic political will.

A reciprocal notion of aesthetic consumption and production

While these readings are valid, especially as they highlight the ideological and historical proximity between Morris’s political activities and those of the missionary aesthetes of Victorian social reform, they place more emphasis on the status of artistic consumption in Morris’s work and less emphasis on his equally prominent theory of artistic production (see Gagnier 88–9 and 132–4). In fact, Morris described the components of consumption and production as fundamentally linked, and fundamental also to art’s democratic promise. Guest’s exclamations appreciating the aesthetic ornament are spontaneous and instinctive, and Morris depicted the creation of the ornament as an almost equally instinctive activity. In one article, he speculates that

nothing which is made by man will be ugly, but will have its due form, and its due ornament, will tell the tale of its making and the tale of its use, even where it tells no other tale. And this because when people once more take pleasure in their work, when the pleasure rises to a certain point, the

expression of it will become irresistible, and that expression of pleasure is art, whatever form it may take. (*Collected* 23: 262)

In this recursive process, artists receive the pleasure that they imbue in their aesthetic productions, this pleasure then shaping the ornamental beauty of the works themselves and precipitating pleasure in the works' eventual use and consumption. That art might "tell the tale of its making"—an essential facet of this process—does not entail an auto-fictive style or substance. Instead, it draws upon a theoretical discourse (often associated with Marx, though certainly preceding him) in which culture relates deterministically or mimetically to the material conditions in which it is created. In Hegel, for instance, aesthetic forms and genres are the means through which the absolute spirit of universal history expresses itself; therefore, one can read in art the successive ages of human history (Gagnier 129–30). Less metaphysically, in the famous "The Nature of Gothic" chapter in *The Stones of Venice* (which Morris first encountered while in college at Oxford), Ruskin asserted that the beauty of Gothic architecture retains and displays the efforts and desires of individual artists and craftspeople working in relative freedom. Thus, art and culture can act as an index of historical conditions of production in the prevalence of visible aesthetic ornamentation. Like the late Victorian Grant Allen, who described the writer as an "automatic mouthpiece" of the spirit of their age (xxiii), Ruskin maintained that "the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life" (323). Therefore, a relatively free, democratic process of aesthetic production of Gothic architecture could communicate to and be appreciated by modern viewers centuries later.

When E. P. Thompson claimed that Morris "grafted Ruskin to the stem of Marx" (733), he meant that Morris maintained Ruskin's appreciation of aesthetic historical perception while also, like Marx, striving for the revolution of material circumstances that would make such free aesthetic production—once an exception—as normalized as aesthetic consumption. As Morris's fellow socialist Montagu Blatchford wrote, "The true remedy is not to copy the old work, but to reproduce the conditions that called it forth" (Waters 175). For if pleasure is both the motor and the emblem of artistic work, it can only truly thrive in a social system that makes the pleasure of labor possible. Whereas commercial production requires the alienation of the worker from both their labor and their own bodies, art entails an acute alignment with the body at work: "Art is man's embodied expression of interest in the life of man; it springs from man's

pleasure in his life” (Morris, “The Worker’s Share of Art” 18). Therefore, like the both public and private, collective and individual, connotations of the “delight in the life of the world,” artistic production in Morris is the sign of democratic freedom. Aesthetic pleasure is “at once the source of all art and the cause of all happiness”; it is both the drive to create and the appreciation of creation, the movement toward freedom and that freedom’s production of happiness as “the end of life” (Morris, *Collected* 23: 260). Morris consistently articulated the complementarity of consumption and production under the general sign of aesthetic pleasure. His often-repeated clarion call was for “art made by the people and for the people as a joy to the maker and the user” (*Collected* 22: 80).

Morris reflected this materialist and aesthetic approach through the narratives of utopian transformation in *News*. For unlike Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, which tells relatively little about the future rebuilding of societal structures apart from their theoretical justification, *News* recounts a dramatic narrative in the chapter “How the Change Came” about workers’ organizations, uprisings, and revolutions. This chapter invokes and thereby resignifies real-world events like the “Bloody Sunday” labor demonstrations of 1887 to describe how they led (speculatively) to wider and more general labor strikes, revolutionary movements, and clashes between government soldiers and popular forces. Yet the subsequent chapter, “The Beginning of the New Life,” describes the “dull level of utilitarian comfort” and subsequent “disappointment” that set in after the revolution, only to be followed by an almost equally natural production of art (Morris, *News* 137). Guest’s historian explains,

The art or work-pleasure. . . sprung up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible over-work, to do the best they could with the work in hand—to make it excellent of its kind; and when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men’s minds, and they began rudely and awkwardly to ornament the wares which they made; and when they had once set to work at that, it soon began to grow. . . Thus at last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we had our fill of it; and then all was gained, and we were happy. (138)

In *News*, the natural process of artistic production contributes to the eventual flourishing of utopia. Aesthetic production aligns with the

conscious realization of freedom. After the revolution, then, participatory artistic activity becomes the basis for every utopian action.

Even though Morris was critical of the project of civilization, *News* suggests that utopian progress, in both labor movements and artistic production, is already at hand. Indeed, Morris used much of the textual space in his journal *The Commonweal* to record and take account of the growth of socialism in England and abroad. In notes on worker organizations, socialist meeting reports, “passing events” of the progress of socialism, lecture schedules, literary notices, and more, *The Commonweal*, like *News*, spent some time on how the change would come, the rest on how such change was already present in the world, cultivated in the utopian practice of production. Morris’s visions of utopian aesthetics intended to present a model of participatory and democratic practice. As he put it as early as 1883, it was “no use looking for popular art except in . . . Utopia, or at least on the road thither,” the latter clause affirming the value of contemporary work that the former clause would deny. Therefore, Morris wrote, “[I]t might be that we were more nearly on the road to it than many people thought” (“Mr. W. Morris’ ‘Utopia’ and the Way ‘Thither’”). Likewise, *News* engages in a dual project: to map that road, and to guide the reader on it, to correlate the dual pleasures of art, and to correlate those pleasures with the possibility of political revolution and reform.

Possible communities of democratic aesthetics

In lectures and essays, Morris was adept at recounting a narrative of European civilization in classical Marxist fashion, linking the changes of political economies and modes of production to the social, artistic, and material past; it was this structure of historical development that undergirded his hope in the progress toward freedom, toward utopia. Despite this international framing, it would still be fair to say that Morris’s overall conception of aesthetic and political democracy starts from the individual—their experiences, their actions, and their pleasures—and so remains, if not theoretically blind to, at least conceptually distant from a national or supranational scheme of democratic government. This local focus was the subject of Bellamy’s own critique of *News* (which more than anything displayed the temperamental difference between the two writers), for Bellamy argued that Morris failed to describe a form of administration that could extend beyond the domain of the town, citing as justification the very unpastoral, anti-Morrisian example of the railroad system. Still, Bellamy’s broader point stands: Morris’s democratic aesthetics strives for a

more subjective and provincial conception of democracy, therefore eliding, except in the broadest descriptions, a notion of large-scale democratic organization. Likewise, the economist J. A. Hobson was concerned with the capacity for Morris's societies of *Nowhere* to produce an adequate supply of basic commodities. Morris made every effort in *News* to imagine the pleasure of labor contributing to the maintenance of society's basic needs. After the serial publication of *News*, Morris added multiple passages displaying people doing manual labor with some degree of excitement or enjoyment (Morris, *News* 49, 95, 179–83). And the whole reason for Guest's journey up the Thames is to aid in an annual hay harvest that the utopians describe as much as a summer festival as a necessary activity to maintain food supplies. But still the question remains: would the pleasure of democratic production be equal to the pleasure (or rather, the necessity) of human consumption?

Such a question might be addressed by asserting the speculative quality of *News*, and of all utopian novels to one degree or another: how the genre involves not just the rational explication of alternative societies (with which, as I noted above, uchronias of this period were especially concerned), but also the elaboration, embellishment, and decoration of such societies, what we might call the basic literary quality of literary utopias. "The only safe way of reading a utopia," Morris wrote in his review of *Looking Backward*, "is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author" ("Looking Backward" 194). Morris might not be arguing that the pleasure of production can meet all human needs and wants but instead considering what such a world might look like if it were so. Perhaps he is articulating a temperament or a desire for that very success, regardless of its probability or feasibility. Perhaps that is why he spoke *against* "elaborate utopian schemes for the future," yet in favor of "dreams for the future" that "put a man in a fit frame of mind to study the reasons for his hope" (Morris, *Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 453–54).

Yet even if we are speaking of a structure of desire, rather than the blueprint for immediate application, one can still ask questions about that desire's configuration. The coalescence of the pleasure of individual production and communal consumption proposes another potential tautology: are the individuals' needs and pleasures really the same as those of the community, the nation? Can we reasonably (and ethically) speak of collective needs and pleasures at all, as if assuming a natural uniformity and equilibrium of such a society, a conformity between a national identity and the diverse realities of its human constituents?

Disagreement and even violence are not totally absent in *News*, suggesting that Morris might have responded in the negative to a totalizing interpretation of these questions. The same love and principle of attraction that produces utopian happiness also generates disappointments, heartbreaks, and occasional love-quarrels, the tragedies in an otherwise peaceful pastoral society. Similarly, *News* includes a few characters whose temperaments and predilections toward the capitalist world of competition make them dissatisfied with the cooperative principles of utopia (though they express their disruptions in little more than grumbling) (Morris, *News* 150–58, 165–73). Yet *News* does not celebrate these disruptions; they are rather emanations of a reality-principle against which Morris’s central utopian aesthetics and politics stand at odds. Fredric Jameson’s description of the speculative end of commodity fetishism aptly describes the beautiful objects populating *News*: “the collective labour stored in a given commodity is always and everywhere visible to its consumers and users” (“Marx’s Purloined Letter”). Likewise, Morris characterized the utopian future as the “happy days when society shall be what its name means” (*The Unpublished Lectures* 216), in which, in other words, the verbal representation and the being of the community, the signifier and signified, appearance and essence, coalesce at last (see Beaumont 180–82 for this language). In Morris’s utopian imaginary, the correlation of aesthetic pleasures parallels the correlation between the individual and the collective.

In this way, the activity of utopian aesthetic production seems to take on the quality of a ritual. As Northrop Frye argues, utopian novels like Morris’s rely on a theory of rite or ritual to describe social behavior, a ritual, for Frye, being “a significant social act”: an action that *means* or *signifies* something while it also *does* something (324). In the utopian ritual—Morris’s pleasure-driven productive action—the meaning of an act aligns with its purpose and its end-result, such that the utopian ritual-act also represents a “symbol of conscious design in society” (Frye 325). To summarize this paradigm: the speculative, transformative utopian fantasy would involve the aesthetic realization of social desire, as well as the collective realization of that realization. Every act would then constitute a ritual, in which utopian individuals would unconsciously and continually signify their integration into the identity of the pre-formed utopian collective. In the proliferation of unreflective pleasurable habits, subjects would reproduce societal norms all by themselves (Hildebrand 6; Eagleton 20).

Such a conception of communal identity and communal ownership reflects a widespread interest among left-leaning historians, anthropologists,

and philosophers in Morris's day concerning what they called primitive communism. For Morris, the European Middle Ages were a time and context in which "beauty welled up unbidden from the spontaneous flow of the ideas of the time" (Morris and Hyndman, "A Summary of the Principles of Socialism"), for "art was once the common possessions of the whole people; it was the rule . . . that the produce of handicraft was beautiful" (*Collected* 23: 256–57). This idealization of medieval labor suggests that, as objects might reflect the social relations of their production, individuals might transparently signify in ritual acts the freedom they experience in society. In socialist Ernest Belfort Bax's terms, Morris's description might be said to evoke one of many "little oases in the arid desert of civilization": "the Russian Mir, the Swiss Allemen, and the Hindoo [*sic*] village community" (Bax 5), to which we could add the popular conception of "Merrie England," employed by both socialists and Tory conservatives: a bucolic, nostalgic conception of pre-industrial, pre-alienated British life as a distinct, cohesive, cultural unity (see Blatchford). For Morris, as for his socialist contemporaries, these historical forms were early moments of what might become a general non-capitalist social organization, not the mere template for contemporary reactionism (Vaninskaya 31–32). Yet evolutionary dimensions lurk not far behind these and ethnological idealizations, for it would seem as if the structural cohesiveness of a community must be assumed from the start for an individual's productive acts to signify that community's utopian identity. In contrast to the distressed diversity of contemporary civilization, alienated labor, and social exploitation, the individual would be, for Bax, "completely merged with the race" (4). Although this Marxist account of universal history sees the racial solidarity of primitive communism as a predicate for class-based antagonism and an impediment to "human solidarity," its teleology relies upon a similarly exclusive system predicated upon political evolution. As Bax wrote of the society of the future, "[t]he test will be one of principle, not of blood" (36).

So, if art is only the symbolic and ritual repetition reflecting a community's cohesive identity, then we return to that aporia or impossibility central to utopian aesthetics and democratic practice. To state it explicitly, if the peaceful, productive flourishing of individuals requires those individuals to be all of one identity, if not of one race, then of one political desire, such a vision of future "democracy" would be premised on a problem only resolvable with the most anti-democratic actions of fascism. Therein, the impossibility of utopian politics, like the impossibility of

utopian aesthetics, would not merely be historical or contingent, it would be structural. At the end of this analysis would lie the authoritarian declaration—for “democracy” to be possible, individuals must be the same; for “democracy” to be achieved, “democracy” must be denied.

Conclusion: Aesthetic rituals of democratic production

With the space remaining, I want to argue that these interpretations neither fully encapsulate Morris’s democratic aesthetic nor deplete the theoretical resources of the concept of ritual. For in the study of religion, scholars have theorized ritual as more than an act that unconsciously propagates symbols and reinforces the structural cohesion from which such symbols receive their intelligibility. Ritual can also be understood as the activity through which subjects consciously shape—by configuring themselves in relation to—social contexts and ethical norms. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of power as a strategic relation of force, productive of unique forms of discourse and desire, ritual theorist Catherine Bell describes “ritualization” as the practice by which actions become rituals through subjects’ intentional repetitive acts (140). The importance of ritual and ritualization does not, for anthropologist Saba Mahmood, “reside in the meanings they signify to their practitioners, but in work they do in constituting the individual; similarly, the body is not a medium of signification but the substance and the necessary tool through which the embodied subject is formed” (28). Therefore, ritual entails not the predetermined structural stasis of individuals in a community but the very capacity of the individual to create such a community. As a broader system of meaning-making, such a relation between collectivity/context and the individual has been defined as the “locative” and “excessive” or “utopian” visions of religion—the former as “affirming and repeating the basic order of the world,” the latter as engaging with disorder, incongruity, and critique (Roberts 111–18; Smith 88–103; Hollywood 9–17).

This theory of ritual and ritualization aligns with Morris’s broader project of socialist politics and his conception of the possible efficacy of democratic aesthetics. When Morris wrote that “[S]ocialism is an all-embracing theory of life, and that as it has an ethic and a religion of its own, so also it has an aesthetic,” he implied that socialism entailed a continual project of subjective cultivation, instituting individual agency into the political project of collective socialist change (*Collected* 23: 255). In the letter that I quote in my title, Morris wrote to his addressee, “Suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green fields, so that you

could be in the country in five minutes' walk, and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied the (difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really wanted: then I think one might hope civilization had really begun" ("Letter" 218). For Morris, though the pleasure of artistic experience is situated in the body, the goal is not to access some inborn or natural ideal. Socialism is an activity that requires self-reflection, self-cultivation, the ritualization of productive artistic activity (Yeo 18–19). Given the challenges and pressures of contemporary work and culture, Morris understood such work as a particularly modern project. He wrote that if the nineteenth century was the century of commerce, the twentieth century might be that of "Education" (*Collected* 22: 63).

As a result, Morris shared with his socialist contemporaries a commitment to transform the very bases of the politics of everyday life, of labor, and of leisure. For Morris, artistic production was both innate and in need of conscious cultivation, and he used the language of "sacrament" to signify this duality. In one lecture, he argued against the reformist dreams of lessening human wants (imagining speculative technological innovations reducing the need to eat), stating that the "daily meeting of the house-mates in rest and kindness for this function of eating, this restoration of the waste of life, ought to be looked on as a kind of sacrament, and should be adorned by art to the best of our powers" (Morris, *Collected* 22: 358). As a sacrament, rest and simple consumption become elevated to the level of a conscious activity of artistic production rooted in bodily experience and bodily practice. Indeed, *Nem's* subtitle, "an epoch of rest," suggests that productive artistic practices of the future could be synthesized with a notion of leisure. As workers in the late nineteenth century struggled to achieve legal limits to the working day, the leisure time they slowly won was a fresh terrain for burgeoning commercial and entertainment industries to create new consumer markets (see Waters 14). In response, socialists like Morris sought to resist this consumerist commodification of culture and leisure without denigrating the real political need for worker protections or their right to the capacity of pleasure.

By focusing on the productive aspects of such activities, Morris described pleasurable experiences as socialistic activities, the instantiations of an individual's free subjectivity in the community (see Chrostowska for a consideration of the use of pleasure in utopian discourses more generally). As a result, these rituals of aesthetic production do not entail *only* the signification of utopian achievement, though such signification is essential,

for the sign of productive pleasure ensures the pleasure of consumption. Throughout Morris's lectures, writings, and *News*, such rituals are processes toward the development of further production: toward the development of both utopian subjectivities and the utopian contexts in which such subjectivities can exist and flourish. Morris wrote that "imaginative work"—another term for artistic production—"would fain lead men to aspire towards perfection: each hope that it fulfils gives birth to yet another hope: it bears in its bosom the worth and the meaning of life and the counsel to strive to understand everything; to fear nothing and to hate nothing: in a word, 'tis the symbol and sacrament of the Courage of the World" (*Collected* 22: 147). Although Morris was raised as an Anglican, he left the Church by the time he completed his degree at Oxford. His invocations of the sacrament do not refer to the subject's participation in divinity, but the subject's embodiment in a collective project of the flourishing of art and desire, the general activity of the *demos*. "Popular art," Morris wrote (here following Ruskin in his idealization of the art of architecture), "is the art which is made by the co-operation of many minds and hands varying in kind and degree of talent, but all doing their part in due subordination to a great whole, without any one losing his individuality" (*Collected* 23: 149–150). Through the sacramental act of art-making, individuals participate in and create the community by fully embodying their artistic pleasure. In production, individuals create the *habitus* or context in which utopian subjectivities are formed and cultivated. The locative and utopian conceptions of religion are operative in the very same act (Hollywood 16, 230).

So, for Morris, embodiment itself is both reiterative and creative. Similar to the aesthetic pleasure of production producing aesthetic pleasure in consumption, Morris's utopians describe how, "Pleasure begets pleasure" (*News* 65), for, as Morris wrote elsewhere, "Art breeds Art, and every worthy work done and delighted in by maker and user begets a longing for more" (*Collected* 22: 148). Longing or desire is, of course, the other operative dimension of Morris's concept of aesthetic production, concomitant with pleasure. Though the impulse toward art springs naturally from the body, it is also cultivated in desire, and not as a moral understanding of "true" beauty, but as an orientation toward the individual's potential *experience* of beauty. Morris's work, therefore, constructs a productive spiral that Miguel Abensour describes when he writes of Morris: "The point is not for utopia . . . to assign 'true' or 'just' goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it" (145). Morris's utopian democratic aesthetics can

thus be conceived as an activity defined by its productive potential, by not what it merely attains, but by what it works toward, in productive activity.

Of course, this invocation of ritual and sacrament must be bound by the fact that, as terms of religious practice, they are intimately tied to one's beliefs. To put it bluntly, Morris's claiming that art is utopian does not make it so. But the larger structure of Morris's democratic aesthetics is historically (and, I would claim, theoretically and politically) important to consider, regardless of one's faith in the religion of socialism. For like the concept of ritualization, democracy is a form that individuals produce as well as a context that produces democratic individuals. Therefore, democratic practice requires its performance. It cannot be established on a mere theoretical level, and it is not a state to be achieved. Democracy, like Adorno's conception of art as the "ever broken promise of happiness" (136), is necessarily an activity (insofar as it makes that promise). It is a performance of impossibility, and forever in tension: participating in an always incomplete and dual project of signification and creation, correspondence and critique. As such, Morris's utopian conception of democratic aesthetic production reflects Jacques Derrida's response to Carl Schmitt—who asserted that the state of exception was the necessary solution to democratic instability—when Derrida argues that the inherently unstable sovereignty of democracy, as a practice, cannot be put on hold, even for the purpose of its own defense (67–77).

Harry Hall is a doctoral candidate in the Committee for the Study of Religion at Harvard University, where he studies critical theory, philosophies of religion, and British and American religion, literature, politics, and social thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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