THE STRATEGY OF UTOPIA: A STUDY OF IDEOLOGY AND CONFLICT IN WILLIAM MORRIS' *NEWS FROM NOWHERE*

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In 1890 William Morris published his utopian romance, *News from Nowhere* as a serial in the Socialist League newspaper, *Commonweal.*[1]

Recently this text has been the subject of articles by, among others, E.P. Thompson (1977), Perry Anderson (1980), John Goode (1971) and Bernard Sharratt (1980). All have attempted to understand Morris' use of the utopian text as propaganda for the socialist movement, and so to challenge views of utopianism as worthless and regressive. Both Thompson and Sharratt agree that Morris used the utopia innovatively to produce functional socialist propaganda - which Thompson (1977: 791) called, after French critic Abensour, the 'education of desire'. Although I do not agree entirely with Thompson's argument, my analysis of *News from Nowhere* as a utopian text supports the Thompson-Sharratt case - that Morris' text, and other utopian texts, can contribute effectively to the critique of capitalist society and the formation of new, revolutionary, social theory.

Morris' breakthrough with the utopian text was in his rejection of the 'blueprint' model of the utopia, the view of the utopian text which equated text and utopian figure. The utopian text had been seen literally as a plan for a future society, a kind of futuristic town-planning. In the 1880s Engels wrote a vigorous denunciation of this 'blueprint' utopian thinking, in his pamphlet *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.*[2]

This essay set up an opposition which bedevilled utopianism at least until the 1960s: for socialists 'utopian' became a dirty word, a term of abuse, as it always had been to pragmatic capitalist ideologues.[3] Morris also published an explicit rejection of the 'blueprint' utopia in the 1880s — in his book *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome,* written with Ernest Belfort Bax (Morris and Bax 1893).[4] And in a *Commonweal* article titled 'On Some "Practical" Socialists' published in 1888 he restated his objections to the blueprint model: the socialist, he argued, has 'to take care that he does not read the present into the future.' Edward Bellamy's utopia, *Looking Backward*, published in 1887, realised Morris' worst fears about the utopia. In a *Commonweal* review Morris (1889) traced in *Looking Backward* the unselfconscious reproduction of bourgeois ideas and social structures. Bellamy's utopian society, he argued, was 'Boston (U.S.A.) beautified.' Despite this, *Looking Backward* was an enormously popular book, especially among socialists.[5] When Morris wrote *News from Nowhere*, therefore, it was not only an experiment with the utopian text, an exploration of the possibilities of the genre for socialists, but also a rejection of the 'blueprint' utopia and the 'blueprint' strategy of reading the utopian text - both of which had been given expression very successfully in Bellamy's text and its popular reception.

I shall now look at the function of *News from Nowhere* as a utopian text, at Morris' use of characteristic features of the utopian text to produce a radical critique of nineteenth-century society. I shall also look at the ways bourgeois ideology has infiltrated Morris' text, and at how Morris acknowledges this and incorporates it within his critique to produce a utopian text freed from the limitations of bourgeois ideology.

The utopian figure, or utopia, is, of course, the major characteristic of the utopian text. It is the figurative negation or *other* of the author's own society: in *News from Nowhere* of late nineteenth-century bourgeois capitalist society. Late nineteenth-century bourgeois capitalist society is simultaneously the absent term around which the utopian communist society of *News from Nowhere* is referentially organised.

So the communist society of *News from Nowhere* is not a figure which lacks a referent, but one which has an absent referent. Morris' utopian figure constantly refers the reader to the reality of nineteenth-century society, a reality not expressed in the figure and assumed in the discourse only as a term of comparison, rather than as a direct referent. The communist society of *News from Nowhere,* as a figure within discourse, refers to that which is not *of* that discourse. It does not signify nineteenth-century society, but, rather, indicates it discursively.

The critical power of *News from Nowhere* derives from this process whereby the representation of nineteenth-century society is isolated

from the ideological discourse which supports and justifies it - while, at the same time, an alternative society, articulated upon the negation of nineteenth-century society (or, at least, many of its major features) is presented. In this way *News from Nowhere* illustrates many of the presuppositions fundamental to nineteenth-century society.

One particular example from *News from Nowhere* concerns the discovery by Guest, Morris' utopian traveller, that there are no prisons in the communist society, i.e. a major feature of nineteenth-century society is made conspicuous by its negation, or absence, in twenty-first-century communist society. Having isolated the notion of prisons from its nineteenth-century ideological context Morris then has Guest explore the justifications commonly given for their existence in the nineteenth-century, the presuppositions on which those justifications rest, and the kind of social consciousness they generate.

The issue first arises in Chapter 7, after Guest's flashback vision of the Trafalgar Square massacre of 1887. In response to Guest's claim that nineteenth-century society was more humane than that of the medieval period Dick Hammond, who is Guest's guide through the communist society, argues rather that the people of the nineteenth-century were:

> hypocrites and pretended to be humane, and yet went on tormenting those whom they dared treat so by shutting them up in prison, for no reason at all, except that they were what they themselves, the prison-masters, had forced them to be. (1970: 36)

Dick's reply raises a number of points about the reasons for imprisonment which are subsequently followed up in Guest's discussions with Hammond, the old historian, who is Dick's grandfather. At this point Hammond is concerned to indicate the contrasting principle on which the communist society operates - that of mutual caring, participation, community. So when Guest asks Dick whether prisons still exist, Dick heatedly points out that the - utopian - people could not all look so happy if they knew that their neighbours were languishing in prison (1970: 37) - an eloquent statement, by negation, of the uncaring, selfish individualism which motivates nineteenth-century society and allows institutions such as prisons to exist.

Later, old Hammond, the historian, explains to Guest why prisons have no place in the communist society - and, conversely, why they are necessary in the nineteenth-century. No concept of private property exists in the communist society, and this applies to personal relationships as well as to material objects. Also no particular group - or class - in communist society sets itself up to manage or control others, and

therefore to fear the rebellion of the governed. In fact, the only kind of crime which does occur is violence, usually committed in anger. When this happens, the perpetrator of the violent act is usually so horrified by her/his own act - which contradicts the basic principles of the society, communist and sharing - that s/he is prepared to make any possible atonement (1970: 67). And Morris reinforces this point later in the text with the story of just such an incident - a love triangle situation which results in the death of one young man. The other young man is so sickened by his act, committed in self-defence, that his neighbours fear he might attempt suicide (1970: 142). This kind of response is contrasted by old Hammond with the effect of imprisonment on the nineteenth-century wrong-doer:

> If in addition [to his grief and humiliation] we torture the man, we turn his grief into anger, and the humiliation he would otherwise feel for *his* wrong-doing is swallowed up by a hope of revenge for *our* wrong-doing to him. He has paid the legal penalty, and can 'go and sin again' with comfort. (1970: 70)

By a process of comparison and negation, then, Guest - representative of the nineteenth-century citizen in the utopia — learns that prisons are a direct product of the ideology of nineteenth-century society. Private ownership of property and the resulting selfish individualism are revealed as major characteristics of Morris' society, in direct contrast to the humane communalism of the utopian society. Private ownership is seen as the source of most of the crimes of the nineteenth-century — theft, either of those involved in 'big business' transactions, or the petty theft of those reduced to extreme poverty by the capitalist economic system. Associated with this is political arrest and imprisonment used by the wealthy and powerful to maintain their dominant social and political status. Violence is often associated with theft, or with what Hammond calls the 'artificial perversion of the sexual passions' and which he traces to 'the idea (a law-made idea) of the woman being the property of the man.' (1970: 68) Vice is another crime associated with property relations and, Hammond notes, women are not only its major victims, but are also especially vulnerable to prosecution under vice legislation. And, as both Guest and old Hammond point out throughout the text, the real criminals of nineteenth-century society — whom they identify as those who use their economic and political power to dispossess the poor, pay disastrously low wages, and suppress any kind of political initiative from among the working classes — are those who best cooperate with the system, and accept its immoral values as their own — the landlords, aristocrats, manufacturers, politicians. To these

'real' criminals, prisons are a tool for suppressing their economic and political opponents.

The absence of prisons is just one element in the constitution of Morris' utopian figure. 'Prison' is one term around which Morris' utopian society is referentially organised, yet it becomes the basis of a fundamental critique of the ideology of nineteenth-century British society. In accounting for this absence or negation, a representation of nineteenth-century society is produced in the text, isolated from the ideological discourse which justifies it. This ideological discourse then becomes the subject of a critical interrogation - in this instance, focussed around the idea of prisons. Morris suggests that common presuppositions about criminal activity - that it is the result of the natural greed and rapacity of human beings in general, and of the 'biological' inferiority and inherent laziness of the working classes in particular — which is the Social Darwinist explanation and justification of the behaviour of the middle classes[6] — are no more than excuses for the most blatantly unjust social and political practices. In this way *News from Nowhere* subverts the picture/representation of reality given by contemporary ideological discourse, which placed great emphasis on these 'quasi-scientific' explanations of social behaviour. Instead Morris reveals the structuring elements of the system — private property and its psycho-social manifestations, such as individual-ism, greed, envy, suppression — as the major causes of both petty criminal and big business activity. In the utopian society, of course, none of these features appear, neither private property nor prison. And when individual conflict does occur, it is resolved by those involved, by reference to the dominant social values of cooperation and sharing.

This process of absence invoking speculation, and a projection of contemporary society displaced from its ideological context, is repeated throughout the text. Money, school, marriage, divorce, criminal law, courts, police, politics, war, are all absent from the utopian society - and all, separately, become the basis of a critical interrogation/examination of nineteenth-century society and ideology.

But how removed is this criticism from the kinds of ideological practices which are its principal subject?

As Marin (1976: 71) notes in his study of utopias, the utopian critique is ideological to the degree to which its critique is presented as natural or unproblematic *qua* ideology, rather than being reflected in a discourse about its own production. It is ideological if or because it is not itself the object of a critique, if or because the discursive position necessarily implied by it, the operations it sets in motion to produce itself, and the presuppositions both theoretical and historical whic⁻ govern the latter, are not introduced into this critique.

The degree to which the critique of *News from Nowhere* is itself ideological is most evident in the terms which constitute the figure of the utopian society and its referential obverse, nineteenth-century society.

In *News from Nowhere* the dominant figure of nineteenth-century society is the City. Throughout *News from Nowhere* Morris writes of the filth and claustrophobia of the Victorian city. Once a year, for example, the utopians hold a feast to commemorate what they call the Clearing of Misery, which followed immediately on the revolution and was the destruction of the East End slums (1970: 56). In explanation, Hammond contrasts the Britain of the Middle Ages with nineteenth—century Britain:

> England was once a country of clearings among the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed, which were fortresses for the feudal army, markets for the folk, gathering places for the craftsmen. It then became a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the work-shops. (1970:61)

In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams (1975) traces this representation of the city in the work of nineteenth-century writers such as James Thomson's *The Doom of the City* (1857) and *The City of Dreadful Night* (1870-73). Williams (1975: 287) notes: the 'powerful vision [of *The City of Dreadful Night*] brings together, in an immensely influential though not often acknowledged structure, the fact of the city and of the new anguished consciousness. Struggle, indifference, loss of purpose, loss of meaning - features of nineteenth-century social experience and of a common interpretation of the new scientific world-view — have found in the City, a habitation and a name. For the city is not only, in this vision, a form of modern life; it is the physical embodiment of a decisive modern consciousness.' Williams might be echoing Hammond's description of the suffering endured by nineteenth-century socialists working for social change:

> knowledge, discontent, treachery, disappointment, ruin, misery, despair - those who worked for the change because they could see further than other people went through all these phases of suffering. (1970: 88)

The City is the locus of this suffering and as such has the nightmarish qualities of Thomson's vision. The terms which constitute Morris' figure of the city are concentration and individualism.

Morris recognised the concentration of the population in large urban centres as a characteristic feature of industrialised capitalist society. In the middle of the nineteenth-century the number of people living in cities equalled the number on the land for the first time in British history. And the growth of the urban population after that time accelerated, so that by the end of the century it was apparent that a transformation of traditional British life-styles had taken place (Williams 1975: 261). For Morris the negative aspects of this concentration of population were manifest, the sprawling slums which defaced most major cities. In *News from Nowhere* he refers particularly to the East End, Hammond placing the location of the Clearing of Misery celebrations as 'on some mound where of old time stood the wretched apology for a house, a den in which men and women lived packed amongst the filth like pilchards in a cask.' (1970: 56) Concentration, claustrophobia, dirt, disease, vice · these were the terms in which Morris described life in the poorer working-class areas of London. Hammond notes that those forced to endure such conditions were 'degraded out of all humanity.' (1970: 56)

For Morris the only positive aspect of urban concentration was a political one. Like many socialists at the time, Morris recognised a definite growth in political, and class, consciousness among working class people, as a result of this concentration. Williams describes it as 'the great civilizing response to industrial tyranny and anarchy' from which came 'the vision of mutuality as a new kind of society.' (1975: 278) In *The Society of the Future*, a lecture printed in *Commonweal* in March and April of 1889, Morris (1889b) writes of the decentralisation which will accompany the revolution:

> the aggregation of the population having served *its* purpose of giving people opportunities of inter-communication and of making the workers feel their solidarity, will also come to an end.

So, on the one hand, Morris is fully aware of the contemporary political debate about the effect of concentration on the social and political environment in Britain in the nineteenth-century. On the other hand, however, the attraction of the colour and variety of city life and the wonder at the power of modern technology which so entranced the readers of *Looking Backward* are not represented in Morris' text at all. Perhaps, as some commentators have suggested, this was the result of Morris' wealthy middle-class upbringing in then rural Walthamstow and his early inculcation of the Romantic aesthetic which saw country and city as a simple opposition · the former representing all that is good and natural, the latter the bad and artificial or manufactured. I don't

think Morris is guilty of this simplification, but it may be that his response to city life was sufficiently influenced by it to blind him to the city's positive features. It must be allowed, therefore, that Morris' use of the term 'concentration' shows the influence of conflicting discourses, both socialist and bourgeois.

The other term constituting the figure of the city is individualism. One of the most vivid images in *News from Nowhere* occurs in Chapter 9 where Hammond explains to Guest that in the utopian society 'there is no unvarying conventional set of rules by which people are judged; no bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their minds and lives.' (1970: 49) And repeatedly Morris draws readers' attention to Guest's efforts to obtain a set of clothes which matches the utopians'.[7] His different appearance worries him thoughout the first half of the narrative. These incidents express Morris' rejection of contemporary claims of the individualism of capitalist society, in contrast (supposedly) to the mindless, dehumanised conformity of socialist and communist societies. Capitalist ideologues often used this argument against socialism — that it meant reduction to the lowest common denominator and the stifling of all individualism and initiative.[8] Conversely, capitalist society was upheld as the most 'natural' social and economic system, giving expression to the individualism and natural aggression of its citizens. For Morris and many other contemporary socialists, however, the obsessive references to individualism which mark the capitalist ideological discourse reveal its internal contradication — that the ideology of individualism resulted from and in the urban concentration of the population and their regimentation within the capitalist class structure (the 'bed of Procrustes'). To Morris this individualism was a selfish, self-regarding principle which structured all social interactions as conflict and led, not to the eccentric individuality of a character like Henry Johnson, the Golden Dustman, who appears early in *News from Nowhere,* (1970: 16) but to mindless conformity to a set of social conventions designed to place the individual within a particular social class - which then determines the nature of her/his social interactions. Guest's anxiety about his clothes and his desire to dress like everyone else in the utopia is meant as symptomatic of this de-individualising force in capitalism. The individualism Morris describes as characteristic of capitalistic society is the behavioural expression of the principle of private property, which Morris considers at length in *News from Nowhere*, defining it as a structuring element of capitalist society and ideology. In this Morris echoes the views of his contemporaries who, in the words of one *Commonweal* article, regard it as 'nonsense to talk of "individualism" in the sense in which the term was used before these days of high-pressure organisation and concentrated capital.' (anon

1890) So, in using this term to constitute the figure of nineteenth-century society, Morris shows his awareness of contemporary social and political debate, and of the historical development of the concept itself.

Morris' use of the term 'community' as one of the terms constituting the utopian figure of *News from Nowhere* is another reflection of contemporary theoretical debate. As Williams (1975: 278) notes, the change in demography in the nineteenth-century was accompanied by new life-styles and social behaviour, and in visions of utopia as a community of sharing, caring individuals. Lyman Tower Sargent (1976: 278) discovered the same utopian aspirations in a survey of nineteenth-century utopian literature. Among socialists the principle of community was fundamental to a just and equal society. It represented a rejection of the competitive 'individualism' of capitalist society. But the notion of community was problematic for late nineteenth-century socialists, at least partly because of the interest in communitarian societies in the early part of the century. Utopian communities like those of Robert Owen — Harmony and New Harmony — were based on a form of economic determinism which differed little from the naive but opportunistic Social Darwinism of the capitalist middle classes (Williams 1980: 86). Morris discussed these early failed attempts at communitarianism in the chapter 'The Utopists' of *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*. Nevertheless this spectre of economic determinism continued to haunt the socialist movement in the late nineteenth-century - as a theoretical difficulty with which to deal, and, ironically enough, as a propaganda tool of the bourgeoisie.

To Morris this notion of community — of cooperation and sharing — was crucial to his utopian vision for another reason: it expressed his rejection of contemporary anarchist movements. Morris regarded the anarchist emphasis on individual choice as an artifact of capitalism, and saw anarchism as socially irresponsible. In Morris' words:

> the assertion of the advisability or possibility of an individual man doing what he pleases always and under all circumstances ... is an absolute negation of society, and makes Communism as the highest expression of society impossible. (1973: 210)

Some critics have suggested that Morris' emotional and intellectual commitment to community was based on an atavistic longing for return to a kind of idealised Middle Ages. Even if there was some truth in that judgement, it cannot be overlooked that Morris' commitment was simultaneously a self-conscious response to contemporary debate

within the socialist movement - about capitalism and about the best form of society to replace it.

'De-centralisation' is the other term which structures Morris' utopian figure. It is produced by Morris' negation of the concentration which characterises capitalist society. As discussed earlier, Morris' portrayal of cities takes no account of their colour and complexity, which were generally regarded as positive features. Morris' description of the utopian society in terms of decentralisation maintains the same perspective. Interestingly it also reflects middle-class fears of mob violence.[9] At the end of the eighteenth-century attempts were made to limit the size of London — partly because of fears of disease, but also because it was feared that rural disturbances — uprisings among rural workers and their economic consequences — might spread to London (Williams 1975: 179). Throughout the nineteenth-century these fears of working-class political action, characterised as mob violence, intensified, fanned by reports of revolution on the Continent and by increased working-class political organisation at home. These fears were sustained by the middle-class press which consistently used this image of the mob to describe working-class people, especially when engaged in any kind of collective action. The report of the Trafalgar Square massacre of 1887 in the conservative paper *The Illustrated London News*, for example, used this kind of language extensively, reinforcing it with strategically composed illustrations of the incident. This language and characterisation served the ideological purpose of justifying attacks on working-class political movements and activities — such as the socialists' street-corner propaganda. So, while for Morris decentralisation signified the destruction of the capitalist economic system and the cleansing of the cities, it simultaneously represented the middle-class fear of collective, 'mob' action — while neglecting the attraction of the greater liveliness and variety of city life. Morris' use of decentralisation may be another example of the surfacing of conflicts inherent in capitalist ideology —though, on this occasion, Morris has expressed the conflict without full realisation of its ideological significance.

The figure of the utopian society in *News from Nowhere* necessarily reflects this same conflict. In *News from Nowhere* Hammond describes England with a communist society as 'a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty.' (1970: 61) The garden, as an image of the state of the nation, has a long pedigree in English literature. Morris combines the garden as a site of natural beauty, well-attended and ordered, with the factories and workshops characteristic of a highly-technological society, to produce a new kind of environment - the garden/city. It is made possible by the

absence or negation of the forces which made the Victorian city what it was. Without a profit-motive there is no need for superfluous manufacture, for exploitation ·of workers, or for under-ventilated, ill-lit workshops. And there is no need for population to gather in one area, since manufacture has decreased and is no longer dependent on particular geographical conditions (for access to power, markets, etc). The garden/city is meant to unite natural beauty and utility. What it lacks defines Morris' idiosyncratic response to the production of the utopian figure.

To the degree that the figure of the Utopian society and of its referential obverse, the Victorian city are constituted by terms having conflicting ideological significances which are not revealed and/or explored in the text, *News from Nowhere* is an ideological critique of nineteenth-century society. Its complete/essential utopianism is compromised by the traces of nineteenth-century capitalist ideology in the text.

The theoretical reflexiveness of Morris' text, however, works to qualify the ideological nature of the critique. An example of this reflexivity occurs at a crucial point in the text · in Chapter 16, immediately prior to Hammond's description of the revolution which transforms British society. Guest, old Hammond, Dick and his lover, Clara, have met for dinner at the Hammersmith Dining Hall. Guest is intrigued by the tapestries adorning the walls, noting the predominance of mythological subjects in the art of the communist society. This provokes a debate about the nature of art — as Clara asks why art should not depict contemporary people and events. Hammond responds by recalling that mainstream art in the nineteenth-century was supposedly based on just such an idea, yet in practice this resulted —not in verisimilitude — but in disguise, exaggeration, idealisation (1970: 86). In other words, the mainstream art of the nineteenth-century, Victorian high realism, disguised and mystified its subject-matter, resolving the contradictions within that society · contradictions such as an incredibly wealthy, productive, highly technologised society unable to distribute even the minimum requirements to its citizens, and so host to thousands, if not millions, of hopeless individuals — resolving those contradictions by means of aestheticising, anaesthetising categories such as the 'nobility of the poor', the 'nobility of labour' and 'tumble-down picturesque'.[10] In Hammond's response Morris presents his critique of high realism as an ideologically conservative theory, giving aesthetic justification to the dominant structures of nineteenth-century capitalist society — in much the same way as did Social Darwinism — only changing the locus of the debate in each case.

Dick then gives the obverse of Hammond's argument. He suggests

that the main function of art should be to stimulate the imagination, and that the mythological subjects do this very effectively. In his description of the viewer/art-work interaction Dick conveys Morris' view of the relationship between imagination and desire: the desire to be 'so-and-so in such-and-such a place' can be imaginatively realised be means of the stimulus provided by the art-work. (1970: 87)

Through Hammond and Dick, Morris presents his argument about art, imagination and desire from two different perspectives. Art should *not* be a prescriptive medium, repressing imagination and desire by the presentation of problematic, ideologically conservative depictions of 'reality' — as does nineteenth-century high realist art. Rather it should challenge the imagination and intellect of the viewer/reader, by acting as a stimulus through which the desires of the viewer/reader can be imaginatively realised — usually by empathy with the principal subjects of the art-work.

Of course, imagination may also pander to another kind of desire, implicit in Hammond's argument — the desire to escape vicariously from an unbearable reality. This is the imaginative function of nineteenth-century high realist art - and of some nineteenth-century utopian texts. It also accounts, at least partly, for the empathetic appeal of *News from Nowhere* and its depiction of the utopian communist society.

Situated immediately before the crucial central chapter 'How the Change Came' in which Hammond describes the socialist revolution in Britain, this discussion serves a dual function. On the one hand, it invites readers to recreate imaginatively the events described in the narrative — to indulge their desire for the revolutionary transformation of their society. On the other hand, however, with the description of the ideological function of realist art, it alerts readers to the implications of their own willingness to participate in what may become merely an escapist exercise. It suggests that they maintain a dialectic between a surrender to the wish-fulfilling description of revolution presented in the narrative and their awareness of the injustice in their own society, revealed by the text and their own immediate responses to it — such as the desire to escape into wish-fulfillment fantasy.

In other words, Morris was aware that the (empathetic) attraction of the utopian society might cause the collapse of the process which constitutes the practice of the utopian text — that the absent referent, which is nineteenth-century capitalist society, might be actively excluded by readers anxious to find a resolution of the problems of living in that society — so that the utopian communist society might come to serve the ideological purpose Morris detected in high realist art, of deflecting attention from the contradictions which characterise

nineteenth-century society.

The discussion about art juxtaposed with the description of revolution constitutes a theoretical discourse on the operation of the utopian text -and, in this sense, *News from Nowhere* does contain the theory of its own production.

This theoretical explanation/model of the operation of the utopian text reveals Morris' awareness of the distinction between text and figure, a distinction Morris elaborates in his critique of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward.*

The essence of his criticism of *Looking Backward* is that the text supports or reinforces the existing capitalist society by reproducing its dominant structures, value systems, ideological justifications. So that, while *Looking Backward* does criticise injustices in nineteenth-century American capitalist society, it does not reveal the ideological practices which enable such injustices to continue. The reasons for these injustices are mystified in Bellamy's text as effectively as they are in contemporary capitalist ideology. (Morris 1889a)

Morris' theoretical discourse in *News from Nowhere* also recognizes the power of contemporary ideology to infiltrate and influence the most rigorous and imaginative social criticism. Hence Morris' repeated warnings to his readers about the ideological function of realist art — of art that, through familiarity, evoked an empathetic response. And that must include the continual references in the text to the reader's own nineteenth-century society, the *other* around which the utopian figure in *News from Nowhere* is referentially organised. The paradox faced by the writer of utopian texts is that the description of the utopian society has to be sufficiently attractive to keep the reader's attention, but not so attractive that attention is drawn away from the referential comparison with contemporary society. In *News from Nowhere* Morris solves this problem in an ingenious way.

Like most other nineteenth-century utopia writers, Morris included a love story in the narrative of his utopian text. In *News from Nowhere* Guest, the utopian traveller, falls in love with Ellen, a beautiful young woman he meets on the journey through communist Britain. In most nineteenth-century utopias the love story was resolved by the utopian traveller finding that he (it was almost invariably 'he') is unable to return to his own society, and so staying in the utopia with his new love. *Looking Backward* concluded this way with Julian West about to marry Edith Leete, the daughter of his utopian guide. The problem with this ending is that it directs readers' attention at the conclusion of the text to the utopian society, so that the resolution of the text is happy, positive, and totally removed from the miserable realities of nineteenth-century society.

In *News from Nowhere*, however, Guest not only returns to the nineteenth-century, but also watches as all comprehension of his existence fades from Ellen's face. Bernard Sharratt (1980: 300) analyses Morris' handling of the love story, seeing in Morris' deliberate frustration of readers' expectations about the ending an attempt to avoid the kind of closure that occurs in *Looking Backward*. When Guest returns to the nineteenth-century, he meets an old man - pinched with hunger, prematurely aged, dressed in rags, his demeanour a mixture of servility and dignity. This image contrasts starkly with those of the feasting utopians whom he has just left. By means of these juxtaposed images, Sharratt argues, Morris attempts to displace the reader's emotional investment in the love story - now frustrated - into the social critique of *News from Nowhere*. The characteristic dialectical movement of the text between utopian society (the signified) and nineteenth-century society (the absent referent) is abruptly halted - not in the utopia, as in most texts, but in Morris' own society, which accordingly becomes the focus of the reader's final response to the narrative. In this way Morris tries to prevent the text from becoming mere wish-fulfillment.

This strategy is reinforced in the final paragraphs of the text, in which Guest ponders on the events of the narrative (1970: 182). His summary of the relationship between utopian society and nineteenth-century British society recapitulates the major processes of the text: exposure of the function and practice of capitalist ideology, ironically called the "infallible maxims of your day"; of the unavoidable ideological nature of any social critique, no member of nineteenth-century society being completely free of its influence (hence the inevitable failure of the utopian vision); of the injustices of the capitalist economic system and the need to work actively for the transformation of British society; and, finally, the belief that the utopian vision may shock the reader out of the apathy or resignation produced by a social system which consistently limits and oppresses the individual — and so become a stimulus to social activism.

In summary: *News from Nowhere* is a critique of nineteenth-century capitalist ideology. This critique is a function of the production of the utopian figure, which is articulated upon the negation or absence of structural features and institutions of capitalist society. Their negation or absence marks them as undesirable — and in each case they become the occasion for a fundamental critique of the capitalist system.

News from Nowhere is an ideological critique of nineteenth-century capitalist ideology in that it carries traces of that ideology in the constitution of the utopian figure and of its obverse, nineteenth-century society. But, unlike ideological discourse, the critique of *News from Nowhere* is not presented as natural or unproblematic. Morris incor-

porates a reflexive discourse within the text which directs readers to an interrogation of both the figures produced in the text, and the terms used to constitute them. So that the critique of *News from Nowhere* ultimately becomes an analysis of the possibility of utopian discourse. The failure of the love story in the narrative of *News from Nowhere* is analogous to the inevitable failure of the utopian vision — the fact that in the society of the late nineteenth-century such a vision cannot achieve fulfillment. Yet by producing a consciousness of this fact and of the injustices in their own society — rather than contemplation of some fantasy — and investing this consciousness with a sense of injustice or frustation, Morris attempts to provoke his readers to social activism.

To Morris a utopia was dangerous and regressive if it was a dream, based on schemes which fail to challenge the fundamental structures of contemporary society. *Looking Backward* was such a text; Fabianism such a philosophy. A vision, on the other hand, involved a complete imaginative reconstruction of the capitalist state and was the most practical and constructive response to the problem of motivating those oppressed and limited by capitalist ideology (Morris 1896). In the words of *News from Nowhere*:

> Yes, Surely! and if others can see it
> as I have seen it, them it may ba called
> a vision rather than a dream. (1970: 182).

FOOTNOTES

1. *News from Nowhere* was first published as a weekly serial in the Socialist League newspaper *Commonweal* from 11 January to 4 October 1890.

2. *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* was first published in French in 1880, the English edition appearing in 1892 — though the pamphlett was based on materials dating back to the 1840s.

3. A prolonged debate about the value of the utopian dream for socialists ran through the pages of *Commonweal* during 1889 and 1890. One of the contributors, James Blackwell, begins his article: "It is well known that we Socialists are dreamers — at least we have been told so over and over again by our opponents. Our ideals are impracticable, our proposals visionary, and we ourselves are dreamy enthusiasts. If it be true, there is some satisfaction even in that. At least in our dreaming we have entered a protest against the inferno the realists seek to make us believe is unchangeable." (*Commonweal*, 15 June 1889). Almost all contributors regarded the utopian vision as an important tool for socialists — both as a means of suggesting that alternative social structures are possible (and so the contemporary social structure is not 'natural' or 'given' but

a specific historical and economic formation) and as a way of motivating and/or sustaining those already working for social change. Contributors included Morris, Bax, Paul Lafargue, George Sturt, James Blackwell.

4. This book was first published in *Commonweal* as a serial under the title *Socialism from the Root Up*. The chapter, "The Utopists: Owen, Saint Simon, and Fourier" was published on 30 October 1886.

5. Lyman Tower Sargent notes that of the approximately 320 utopias in the nineteenth century, 160 were written between 1800 and 1887, the remaining 160 between 1887 and 1895. He contributes this vast increase in utopian writing to the success of Edward Bellamy's utopian romance *Looking Backward*, a number of them being direct responses to Bellamy's text.

6. Social Darwinism and the work of T.H. Huxley were the subjects of a number of *Commonweal* articles during 1890. Raymond Williams (1980) has a very interesting essay on Social Darwinism.

7. Guest's concern about his clothes begins in Chapter 6 when he notes: "I did *not* feel it my duty to set myself up for a scarecrow amidst this beauty-loving people..."(*NFN*, p. 29). He is still concerned with the difference in dress between his time and that of the utopians in Chapter 19 (*NFN*, pp. 118-119).

8. Some of the (anti/utopian) texts written as direct responses to *Looking Backward* — to reject its socialist ideas — use this idea extensively: see, for example, J.W. Roberts, *Looking Within: The Misleading Tendencies of "Looking Backward" Made Manifest* (N.Y.: Arno Press, 1971) and A.D. Vinton, *Looking Further Backward* (N.Y.: Arno Press, 1971).

9. Williams, *The Country and the City*: "As late as the early twentieth century, one main response to the city ... identified the crowding of cities as a source of social danger: from the loss of customary human feelings to the building up of a massive, irrational, explosive force." (p. 261)

10. During an earlier discussion, in Chapter 10, Hammond makes this kind of connection between an aesthetic category and economic reality. Describing contemporary (utopian) villages to Guest, he notes: "Only note that there are no tokens of poverty about them: no tumble-down picturesque..." (*NFN*, p. 62).

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