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William Morris: Art for a Just Society

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abstract

This paper discusses William Morris's ideas about art, his involvement with socialism, and his vision of a just society. Morris believed that beauty, or in other words art, is inextricably linked with the cause of social justice. In his numerous lectures and writings Morris tells us what he means by a just society and suggests how to achieve it. Through the useful and beautiful merchandise produced by his company as well as his writings, he shows what such a world might look like. Above all, though, the very life Morris led embodied these ideas about art and society perhaps better than anything else. Indeed, Morris's concerns about the deterioration of our quality of life and the wanton destruction of the environment brought on by the industrial revolution and his vision of a desired just society enlivened with a meaningful role for art such as he showed us in *News from Nowhere* seem especially pertinent today in the early 21st century.

“A man must have time for serious thought, for imagination, for dreaming even, or the race of men will inevitably worsen.”¹

1 Introduction

This short paper discusses William Morris's ideas about art, his involvement with socialism, and his vision of a just society. This subject was inspired by a book by Elaine Scarry, a philosopher of aesthetics at Harvard University, entitled *On Beauty and Being Just* that calls upon us to bring art back into the conversation about creating a better world. Colin McGinn, in his review for the *Wall Street Journal*, writes: “Scarry has two main theses: that there is a close connection between responsiveness to beauty and love of truth; and that beauty, far from hindering the cause of social justice, impels us toward this goal.”²

William Morris, with his beautiful design, his prolific writing, his political activism, and especially with the very life he led, embodied these ideas about art and society perhaps better than anyone else. Authors of this article demonstrate not only how Morris's ideas about the relationship of art and social justice are as applicable today as they were one hundred and twenty years ago, but also illuminate the causes of deterioration, which Morris had already discerned, of mankind's daily life and the natural environment that is becoming even more rampant around the world today. By citing Morris's own words from various relevant writings from the period he converted to socialism, this paper presents William Morris's prescience of the problems we face today. Then we will re-examine how his political vision is integrated into his later novel, *News from Nowhere*, focusing on the essential role of art in achieving a just society.

2 William Morris: Success and Frustration in 1883 and 1884

William Morris (1834-1896) is a great Victorian whose reach extends far beyond his own age. Reading the quotation below from *News from Nowhere*, we get the impression that it is written by someone who has just analyzed the serious social problems we face today.

To this “cheapening of production”, as it was called, everything was sacrificed: the happiness of the workman at his work, nay, his most elementary comfort and bare health, his food, his clothes, his dwelling, his leisure, his amusement, his education—his life, in short—did not weigh a grain of sand in the balance against this dire necessity of “cheap production” of things,

▶1 William Morris, “Art and Socialism,” a lecture at the Leicester Secular Society on 23 January 1884. First published as a pamphlet at Leek, 1884; reprinted in various places, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/as/as.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009); also Paul Thompson, *The Works of William Morris* (Oxford University Press, 1993), ix.

▶2 From the back cover of Scarry's book. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

a great part of which were not worth producing at all.

William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Chapter XV, 124

Here, the key words “cheap production” are linked to other critical concepts—overwork for the production of unnecessary goods, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, ever-expanding urbanization with its near-sighted “development” accompanied by the wanton destruction of the environment. All stem from a profit-oriented social system that adheres to the motto “the more and the faster, the better.” And today our environmental problems are reaching the point of no return: the dire lack of safe water, relentless ravishing of the rain forests and river basins, increasing pollution of our oceans, extensive fisheries depletion, rising oceans and the reality of global warming. The list goes on. We have no choice but to reexamine the course of our civilization.

Morris's design career begins with his demand for quality in everyday household furnishings that are both useful and beautiful. Morris believed such products would bring joy to their users as well as to their makers. This idea, strongly influenced by John Ruskin, drove Morris to establish an interior decorating company. A more direct reason is that he could not find anything he really wanted to buy in the market. He could not stand the poor quality of mass-produced merchandise. The rationale of the new company was to produce useful and beautiful merchandise at affordable prices for working families. Though unfortunately often unachieved, this objective remained throughout his career as an entrepreneur. His love for beautiful things that were made honestly and happily by traditional methods with natural materials gradually carried him much beyond his work as a most talented designer. His zeal and vision extended to his concern for the quality of life of workers and their families. This emphasis on art and beauty would remain a constant in Morris's humanistic philosophy and would pave the way to his revolutionary socialism.

Morris's career as textile designer and entrepreneur reached its zenith in the early 1880s. Most of his designs for block-print cotton fabrics were registered one after another during this period. Moreover, the Merton Abbey workshop complex that Morris established in 1881 was especially meaningful because at last he could oversee all the various production processes in one place and ensure better quality control. He tried to turn the complex into an ideal work place by providing spacious ateliers, natural light and clean air, by planting trees, vegetables and flowers, which provide natural dyes for his textiles, and by preparing living quarters for young workers.³ In addition, he introduced training programs for apprentices to acquire traditional weaving techniques. Morris also fought to protect the abundant fresh water of the Wandle River, which was indispensable for producing his beautiful hand-dyed textiles. Indeed, in 1884 Morris created two masterpieces, two monuments in textile history: *Cray*, a most exquisite cotton fabric that was hand printed using 34 blocks, and *Granada*, a most refined and gorgeous silk velvet that was woven on a special loom and can be compared to the most beautiful historical vel-

► 3 William Morris, “A Factory as it might be,” a series of articles contributed to *Justice* in May and June 1884; also see *William Morris, Political Writings*, ed. N. Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), 32-35, 39-46.

vets ever made in Italy and Spain.

Yet, Morris was very much cognizant of contradictions with his goal of providing the highest quality goods for the least expense so that working class families could enjoy them. Such beautiful works as *Cray* and *Granada*, the most expensive textiles ever made by Morris & Company, only the wealthy could afford. Much to his chagrin, as a purveyor of such expensive handmade items Morris ended up serving mainly the wealthy, the “class of men privileged.” Although Morris's dream of providing an ideal environment to manufacture useful and beautiful quality merchandise seemed to have been in good part realized, in a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones dated 1 June 1884 he expresses his frustration with trying to adhere to his socialist ideals while fairly compensating his employees with profit sharing in a strictly for-profit economic environment.⁴

This most fruitful period for Morris as a designer overlaps the years when he became fully active in the socialist movement. Indeed, Morris had started reading *Das Kapital* (Vol. I, 1867) by Karl Marx, as his college friend Cormel Price recorded in his unpublished diary for 23 April 1883: “Topsy was full of Karl Marx, whom he had begun to read in translation.”⁵ Although Morris's political thinking was strongly colored by Marxist economics and historical consciousness, the socialism Morris struggled for was a personal socialism that endeavored to satisfy spiritual needs and aesthetic desires. That is to say, his socialism was deeply rooted in his holistic, poetic and artistic vision, certainly influenced by Ruskin, which he had conceived before he started reading Marx. Morris's socialist lectures about work, health, education, housing, the environment nearly always include a discussion of the important role of art. But why art would be essential for the achievement of Morris's just, socialist society and socialism may not be at first so obvious. In order to comprehend Morris's aesthetic socialism we first have to understand his broad definition of art.

▶4 Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris Vol. II, 1881-1884* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), Letter No. 974, 283-287.

▶5 *The William Morris Internet Archive: Chronology*; <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/chrono.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

3 | Morris Defines Art

Morris discussed his broad understanding of the meaning of “art” in “Art Under Plutocracy,” a lecture he gave on 7 November 1883 at the Russell Club at University College Hall, Oxford:

... And first I must ask you to extend the word art beyond those matters which are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting and sculpture, and architecture, but the shapes and colours of all household goods, nay, even the arrangement of the fields for tillage and pasture, the management of towns and of our highways of all kinds; in a word, to extend it to the aspect of the externals of our life. ... How does it fare therefore with our external surroundings in these days? What kind of an account shall we be able to give to those who come after us of our dealings with the earth, which our forefa-

►6 William Morris, “Art Under Plutocracy,” <http://boston.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1883/plutocracy.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009). Also see *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 108-127.

►7 William Morris, “Art and Labour,” 1st delivery of speech 1 April 1884, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/art-lab.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

thers handed down to us still beautiful, in spite of all the thousands of years of strife and carelessness and selfishness? ⁶

Here, Morris extends the meaning of the word “art” to all the externals of our life and the surroundings in which we live, including pasture, fields, and even the management of towns and highways. Certainly this definition of art underlies the beautiful just society depicted in *News from Nowhere*. Time and again Morris discusses how the beauty or ugliness of our surroundings directly affects us, and how the “makers” of daily-use items either take pleasure in their creations or are tormented by their shabby quality. Following “Art Under Plutocracy,” Morris delivered a series of lectures in 1883 and 1884 illustrating how art, the living environment, and ecology comprise essential components of his socialism: “Useful Work versus Useless Toil” delivered on 21 January 1884 at the Hampstead Liberal Club, Hampstead, “Art and Socialism” delivered two days later on 23 January 1884 in Manchester, and “Art and Labour” delivered on 1 April 1884 before the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society at the Philosophical Hall, Leeds.

In the following quote from “Art and Labour,” Morris further expands his view that art is the expression of the very “interest man takes in his life upon the earth,” in the “human pleasure of life.”

Well you must understand that ...as I understand the word [art] a great deal more; beauty produced by the labour of man both mental and bodily, the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man upon the earth with all its surroundings, in other words the human pleasure of life is what I mean by art.⁷

Morris also mentions his gratitude to our forefathers who handed down the natural environment to us in still beautiful condition. Who besides Morris defined and discussed art in the context of quality of life, socialism AND the ecology of the earth? Morris clearly believed a society that nurtures the arts is a society that cares both for the earth and for our children. His love of nature always played a central role in his life, in his art, in his writing, and in his socialism.

4 | Useless Toil Versus Joy of Labor

Morris, as an artist and designer, looked around and saw an abundance of shabby everyday goods that he believed not only reflected a decline in art, but also were the result of a social system seeking profit based on “cheap mass production.” Cheapened production wastes human lives and natural resources, not to mention contributing to the destruction of the environment and the ecosystem. Due to unsatisfying labor and the waste of time spent for production of unnecessary goods, obviously the worker, instead of taking pleasure in his labor, was enduring “useless

toil.” “Useless, unnecessary merchandise” was mass-produced simply to sell, with little consideration of its use. In his lecture entitled “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil” delivered on 16 Jan. 1884 before the Hampstead Liberal Club, Morris presented his vision of how a society can counter this unhappy situation with three hopes: hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself.⁸ This and the themes of Morris's other various lectures run through the core of his socialism and would later to be integrated into his “utopian romance” *News from Nowhere*, to be discussed below.

It is clear that underlying his view on the toil of useless labor and the quality of goods was the concept of the “joy of labor” introduced by John Ruskin (1819-1900). Ruskin believed that art was the key to workers achieving a better life. In “Revival of Architecture” (1888), Morris wrote, “Ruskin taught us, that the art of any epoch must of necessity be the expression of its social life.”⁹ Morris also wrote in his 1892 preface to Ruskin's “The Nature of the Gothic,” a chapter from *The Stones of Venice*, as follows:

For the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for, strange as it may seem to us to-day, there have been times when he did rejoice in it; and lastly, that unless man's work once again becomes a pleasure to him, the token of which change will be that beauty is once again a natural and necessary accompaniment of productive labour, all but the worthless must toil in pain, and therefore live in pain.¹⁰

Along with the deterioration of the quality of products, Morris lamented the decline of what he called the “instinct for ornament” that he saw in the mass-produced goods of his day, frequently contrasting these with the arts and handicrafts of the Gothic Age.¹¹ He repeatedly spoke about ornament in architecture and daily-use goods as the happy reflection of their makers. For Morris, the presence of beautiful ornament demonstrated that popular art, or art for people, was alive. As art was a thoroughgoing manifestation of the conditions of its society, Morris believed that under such dreary social conditions as he saw around him, authentic art was impossible. As he repeatedly said, “those who are to make beautiful things must live in beautiful places.”¹²

As indicated above, Morris shared a great deal with Ruskin in regard to the role of art in society. For a healthy, happy life Morris required beauty. And beauty was the outcome of pleasurable labor. This was Morris's own experience. He enjoyed his work; it was like “play” to him and out of this artistic creativity came his blue-dyed hands, as well as his textile and wallpaper designs filled with beautiful red, blue and yellow flowers bursting with life. As an artist and a craftsman, Morris wanted such joyful work not for a few but for all. At the core of Morris's hopes for a just society, then, lay “beauty,” as he repeated in his favorite lecture entitled “Beauty of Life” in 1879-80.

▶8 William Morris, “Useless work versus useless toil,” a lecture delivered on 16 Jan. 1884 before the Hampstead Liberal Club, Hampstead, in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 128-143.

▶9 William Morris, “The Revival of Architecture,” *Fortnightly Review*, May 1888; see *William Morris on Architecture*, ed. Chris Miele (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 126-139, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/revival.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

▶10 William Morris, Preface to “The Nature of Gothic,” by John Ruskin, Kelmscott Press, 1892; in William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 365-370.

▶11 William Morris, “Of the Origins of Ornamental Art,” a lecture delivered at Kelmscott House on 27 September 1886, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1883/ornament.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

▶12 William Morris, “Art and the Beauty of the Earth,” a lecture delivered before the Wedgewood Institute on 13 October 1881, in *William Morris on Art and Socialism*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999), 80-94.

►13 William Morris, “The Beauty of Life,” 1880, in *Hopes and Fear for Art*, Chapter 3, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter3.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

►14 William Morris, “How I became a Socialist,” *Justice*, June 16th, 1894, www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1894/hibs/index.htm (accessed 6 April 2009).

►15 William Morris, “How We Live and How We Might Live,” lecture delivered to the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist Democratic Federation at Kelmescott House, on 30 November 1884. It was first printed in *Commonweal*, 1887, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/hwl/hwl.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

►16 See note 3.

Beauty, which is what is meant by art, using the word in its widest sense, is, I contend, no mere accident to human life, which people can take or leave as they choose, but a positive necessity of life.¹³

In other words, Morris advocated a socialism that went beyond economics and material gains. He aimed to achieve a higher quality of life, a “decent livelihood” for all. Indeed, Morris elaborated on the central role that art should play in the education of socialists towards this goal:

It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him [i.e. the worker], a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary to man as his daily bread, and that no man, and no set of men, can be deprived of this except by mere opposition, which should be resisted to the utmost.¹⁴

5 | Four Claims for a “Full and Reasonable Life”

In yet another lecture from 1884 entitled “How We Live and How We Might Live,” Morris presented his vision of a just society, enumerating four claims for a “full and reasonable life”: good health, a liberal education, due work, and a pleasant environment.¹⁵

The first claim for “good health” means the enjoyment of one’s body and its appetites; he also notes that a healthy person radiates beauty. Moreover Morris’s holistic view of health takes into consideration social and environmental impacts such as poverty, hunger, overwork, air and water pollution, poor housing. The recognition of such social and environmental impacts lies at the foundation of the ever-increasing role of social medicine in shedding light on troublesome problems in modern healthcare.

The second claim for “liberal education” brings with it sympathy for the past, present, and future, and is complemented by acquiring skill of the hand and training in the arts; education is to be enjoyed, not forced. Life-long learning is to be the norm. Morris believed abundant leisure is the key to education of the mind and the hand—providing such as the opportunity for training in the crafts, the creation of art, and travel.

The third claim for “due work” is for an occupation fit for a healthy body and active mind; dreary, rough work should be helped by labour-saving machinery; the work place, whether factory or field, should be healthy and pleasant thereby helping workers to find joy in their labour. Work done in joy has a playful aspect that leads to the creation of items of great appeal and beauty. At the same time, Morris paid great attention to working conditions.¹⁶ Indeed, those employed at his Merton Abbey workshops seldom wanted to work anywhere else.

And, for the fourth claim for a “pleasant environment,” Morris demanded that the surroundings of life should be “pleasant, generous, and beautiful.” Morris railed against cities becoming unbearably crowded, with whole districts being wrapped in sulphurous clouds of smoke and people being crowded into cramped housing with neither gardens nor open spaces. He agonized over society's hunting for profit that turned beautiful rivers into filthy sewers, his beloved forests into wastelands, and the countryside into a despoiled landscape from which wildlife has vanished. He could not understand why people should bear such crass stupidity. Morris, unable to just stand by and watch this happen, took action “against his age”¹⁷ in the struggle for a beautiful world to live in.

As Morris's four claims enumerated above clearly indicate, the living environment, natural and built, is as important for our well-being as health, education, appropriate work and working conditions.

6 | Struggle for a New Society

Morris invested his whole being in the struggle for a new society. In the late 19th century, the social and environmental wretchedness brought about by the industrial revolution was everywhere plain to see. Various groups advocated for the need to improve their society and provide people with better lives. Morris, hence, sought out like-minded people, especially those in the political sphere, but also those concerned with architectural preservation and nature conservation, to fight these insults to his age.

How could a wealthy successful entrepreneur like Morris stand on street corners and speak for the abolition of the class system from which he so benefited? Moreover, why should the workers to whom he spoke take him seriously? An incomplete answer would be that Morris was a man without pretense who worked with his hands like them, and who appreciated and needed good fellowship. And his audiences harbored no doubts about whether or not he was with them. When Morris crossed what he called the “river of fire” to take up the socialist cause, he was clearly aware of stepping outside of his class. Indeed, many of his friends and acquaintances were appalled at his socialist leanings and even sought to diminish this side of him after his death, as did, for example, J. W. Mackail in his 1899 biography *The Life of William Morris*. Only in 1955, with the publication of E. P. Thompson's biography *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*¹⁸ was the full picture of Morris's commitment to socialism finally made clear. The ideal pastoral society Morris conceived is beautifully described in *News from Nowhere*. His socialist activities and the themes of his various lectures have been incorporated into a novel with appeal that has lasted over generations. Here we also find a summation of Morris's careers, aesthetics, and views on the interrelationship of art, society, and nature. For

►17 This apt expression is used in the title of Peter Faullkner's book *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (London: Gorge Allen & Unwin, 1980).

►18 E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955, revised ed. 1976; reissued by Stanford University Press, 1988).

Morris socialism was not a mere theory but a vivid, almost tangible picture of well-being. The visual quality of the detailed description of *Nowhere* is deliberate and essential. In the following section, let's summarize Morris's rallying cry to his society and to our own as well.

7 | *News from Nowhere: A Message for Our Day*

In his most popular novel, *News from Nowhere*, Morris gives us a complete picture of a future post-revolution communist society based on individual equality of position, common ownership and thoroughgoing democratic decision making.¹⁹ The narrative of this novel lies in an intriguing balance between what Morris personally experienced through his involvement in the socialist movement and his personal vision of a just society. Morris wrote this in response to Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*, which depicted a future society with an authoritarian socialism that Morris completely rejected.²⁰ Morris undoubtedly chose the form of a novel set in the future with the deliberate intention of reaching a wider audience and sending a clear message to his fellow socialists and to future generations. The novel proceeds through a long conversation in a question and answer format between William Guest (a 19th century Morris persona) and Old Hammond (Morris of the future society). The questions raised are those of Morris himself, readers of his day, and readers of the 21st century as well.

The narrator Guest falls asleep after returning from a meeting of the Socialist League and awakens to disconcertedly find himself in a future society some hundred years after a socialist revolution. Though now in the 21st century, the London and vicinity setting is still recognizable to Guest, though very different from Victorian times. Morris's two homes, Kelmscott House and Kelmscott Manor, play starring roles, as does his beloved Thames River that connects them. When Guest awakens in this new world, he soon encounters guide Robert Hammond, historian Old Hammond, traveling companions Dick and his partner Clara, the intelligent and vivacious Ellen. Guest is very impressed by this post-revolution society where free and equal citizens get along fine and do not give out orders and demand strict obedience. The hierarchical social order and class-consciousness so abhorred by Morris have been vanquished; men and women accept one another on free and equal terms. Victorian inhibitions and embarrassment about physicality have disappeared. Here Guest discovers not a dog-eat-dog competitive society, with rich against poor, haves against have-nots; instead he sees a cooperative society where people are eminently satisfied with their lives. This is less the "survival of the fittest" society of social Darwinism than the "mutual aid" society of Peter Kropotkin.²¹

► 19 *News from Nowhere*, was first serialized in the Socialist League's *Commonweal* magazine from January to October 1890, and published as a separate book in 1892; a Kelmscott Press edition was issued in 1893. All references to *News from Nowhere* are from the Penguin Classics edition: William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

► 20 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Boston: Ticknor, 1888; Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1889).

► 21 Prince Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) a leading Russia's anarchist and one of the first advocates of an anarchist communist society based on mutual aid and cooperation, while free from central government. His two best known books. *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (London: Hutchinson, 1899) and *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Heinemann, 1902) may still have something to tell us today.

Houses and Gardens

As he begins his visit to Nowhere, Guest is pleasantly surprised by how beautiful the landscape with its attractive buildings and gardens has become. So different from his own time, parts of London have become orchards; Hammersmith now has meadows and extensive garden agriculture. Guest observes:

There are houses about, some on the road, some amongst the fields with pleasant lanes leading down to them, and each surrounded by a teeming garden. They were all pretty in design, and as solid as might be, but countrified in appearance, like yeoman's dwellings; some of them red brick, like those by the river, but more of timber and plaster, which were by necessity of their construction so like medieval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century. (Chapter IV, 61)

Morris believed a house to be the base for human life. Therefore, as Guest noted, a house should be comfortable, “alive and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them.” (Chapter II, 48).

Guest finds that the cities have become countrified and emptied out; townspeople have fled and learned to live in the country. The slums are gone. Large industrial towns outside of London have disappeared, leaving only smaller human scale villages whose buildings seem to have grown out of the landscape. The Nowhereian attitude toward the environment is echoed in Ellen's refrain at the “many-gabled old house built by simple country-folk of long-past times:” “The earth and the growth of it and the life of it! If I could but say or show how I love it!” (Chapter XXXI, 221) Morris certainly had a strong attachment to old stone houses of vernacular style with the sharp gables in the small villages of the Cotswolds, including his beloved Kelmscott Manor. Oxford is still very beautiful with its “pre-commercial buildings,” that is its large stock of medieval buildings. Surely Morris's love of old buildings and his efforts to preserve them for future generations through the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) that he was instrumental in establishing and that is still active today is one reason that Guest can enjoy them in this future society.

The Natural Environment

Morris's concern for ecosystems, essential for quality of life and symbiosis of all creatures on the earth, is presented in several chapters through Guest's observation of the future society. For example, Guest relates, with happy surprise, that the banks of the Thames River have been restored to their pre-nineteenth century beauty; the water is once again home to salmon and perch; magpies, pigeon hawks —birds of all kinds can now be seen everywhere. That the Thames would figure so prominently in this story is of no surprise. Morris loved this river, traveled on it and fished in it, fought to protect its beauty, featured its tributaries in a series of some of his best known designs. Yet, beyond his personal attachment and concern for the

river, it was the rivers and their ecosystems that suffered most under the “development” that rapidly industrializing societies promoted. Folks of Nowhere treat the natural environment with care; the air is clean, the rivers pristine, the forests protected, untamed nature preserved, wild life flourishes. Tilling the soil, planting crops and harvesting, the people Guest encounters thrive on closeness to the land and appreciate the bounty it provides. They delight in the seasonal changes. To Guest the contrast with Victorian attitudes toward nature could not have been stronger. Although in speaking about workers whom she (as well as Morris) refers to as slaves being forced to work with machinery under a for-profit system, Clara gives us an insightful comment as to why Victorians treated their natural environment so poorly and caused so much ruin.

Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? — a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate — “nature,” as people used to call it — as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make “nature” their slave, since they thought “nature” was something outside them. (Chapter XXVII, 200)

Morris demonstrates a profound prescience here. The case can be made that it is exactly this same attitude that has led to the acute environmental catastrophes our world faces today. Clara's insightful comment is completely in tune with the thinking of certain adherents of today's deep ecology movement.²² Certainly, any remedy to modern man's abuse of nature would require a change in consciousness and recognition that man is part of nature, not above her. Morris understood that such a realization and appreciation of nature play a key role in a healthy society and a healthy life.

Government

Before discussing the legal system in Nowhere, the conversation between Guest and old Hammond moved on to parliamentary government, which Morris was always skeptical about. Guest became curious about how such a cooperative society comprised of free individuals living in this pastoral setting is governed. In his discussions with Old Hammond, Guest soon learns that the parliamentary government, the “machinery of tyranny,” of his Victorian England is gone. Old Hammond explains, “We no longer have anything which you... would call government.” (Chapter XI, 107) In its place, the “whole people is now our parliament.” Everyone contributes to administrating things. The local community (“a commune, or a ward, or a parish”) is the basic unit of administration. Small groups enable a greater number of people to easily participate. When an issue that needs attention arises, a general meeting of the community is held and decisions are made by consensus— with all agreeing to accept the result or, less satisfactorily, agreement is attained by majority vote. Guest reacts by saying that it sounds a lot like “democracy,” which he thought had become a “moribund condition” many years ago.

►22 For example, Gary Snyder comes to mind. He contributed several articles to George Sessions's anthology *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1995).

Economy and Work

Following the conversation about government, Morris illustrates a society where money is a thing of the past; rather folks of Nowhere make direct exchanges of items in a moneyless society. The exploitive, class-based Victorian for-profit economy that the parliamentary system had supported is gone. Morris must have been aware of trickery of money that changes the true value of a thing or service into mere numbers. Manipulation of money, which is after all typically a piece of paper in our society, can make a country rich or poor in an instant. This is one of the serious problems in the globalized market of the 21st century. In the markets of Nowhere, people exchange a tangible thing for a tangible thing or service; thus, the true value of each item becomes more visible and clear.

The conversation between Guest and Old Hammond addresses the core of Morris's socialism: the quality of goods linked to the quality of labor. The capitalistic world-market with its attendant imperialism and characterized by its “cheapening of production,” coercive buying and selling, and sacrifice of worker happiness for shabby, surplus goods has been replaced with human-scale communities that provide the basic needs of their residents, principally by production for local use, while conserving natural resources. One no longer finds poorly made goods produced for an artificially created world-market economy. The people of Nowhere work for their own needs and the needs of others, not to earn a living. As Old Hammond says, “...happiness without happy daily work is impossible.”

Of course, this implies that “work” no longer implies suffering and that workers enjoy their labor. We should note the future society may still use the same words as in the Victorian era but their meaning has evolved. Guest is constantly reminded of this during his short sojourn in Nowhere. Old Hammond speaks to Guest of the transformation of work:

All work is now pleasurable: either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else it has grown into pleasurable *habit*, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists. (Chapter XV, 122-123)²³

This is reflected in, for example, the fact that Nowhereians are all well dressed in beautiful and refined clothes that are tailored by joyful hands in a society where all share an “equity of condition.”²⁴

Details of Life

Guest also finds that the people of Nowhere appreciate the quality of such finely artist-made everyday items, surely a reflection of their attention to the “details

- ▶23 Of course, Morris always paid careful attention to language and words; for example, he replaced the heretofore unhappily nuanced term “work” with the word “work-pleasure” or even better with the word “art.” (Chapter XVIII, 160)
- ▶24 An expression we find in, for example, “How we live and how we might live.” See note 15.

►25 Morris believed the key to accomplishing this lay in attention to the “details of life,” something he repeatedly spoke of in his socialist lectures: “The true secret of happiness lies in the taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life, in elevating them by art instead of handling the performance of them to unregarded drudges, and ignoring them.”

William Morris, “Aims of Art,” London: Office of *The Commonwealth*, 1887, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/signs/chapters/chapter5.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

►26 William Morris quoted in J. Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921), 146.

►27 Cf. Paul Thompson, *The Works of William Morris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 264-267; also Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, first published in 1971 (London and New York: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 2002).

of life.”²⁵ The cheap, mass-produced poor quality manufactures that Guest (and Morris) so hated in his Victorian world are simply not to be found here because they would not be accepted. Work is something people enjoy; the goods they make are done with care because someone needs them. There are no shabby goods for anonymous buyers. Guest is delighted by the high quality of the items for everyday use. One example is a pipe given to Guest. It was well made and exquisitely ornamented. Here Morris states that such “art” as a carefully made pipe and attractively designed clothes play a crucial role in the quality to our everyday lives.

Morris reflects on his philosophy about life and beauty through the unaffected life style of the Nowhereians. A telling example is the scene of a simple, delicious luncheon Guest enjoyed. (Chapter XVI, 129-132) Morris carefully described of the details of the dining room and the everyday-use items, their utility and beauty. Morris once put it this way: “Simplicity of life, even the barest, is not a misery, but the very foundation of refinement.”²⁶

Education

Morris's concern with the importance of education in achieving a new society is reflected in Guest's strong interest. Morris's own thoughts on education are concisely stated by Guest in his discussion with Old Hammond: “...you let children run wild and didn't teach them anything; and in short, that you have so refined your education, that now you have none.” (Chapter X, 97)

Hence, in Nowhere education is voluntary, curiosity driven, and life long. Learning is free and experiential and develops with the interests of the learner. Education does not go on in institutions; there are neither schools as such nor classrooms for indoctrination. Students proceed at their own pace and study their own interests, without regimentation, without competitive exams. Promoting the importance of acquiring practical skills and knowledge through experiential learning complements intellectual learning from books. Children are not forced to learn, but are provided the space for their own self-development. The arts of life are not forced upon them before they are hungry for them. Their natural child-like curiosity is not dampened down; their “spirit of rebellion” is not crushed. As Old Hammond states, “It is the child-like part of us that produces works of the imagination.” (Chapter XVI, 132) Fostering creativity lies at the heart of Nowhereian education. Here we see Morris's ideas anticipating later progressive education movements that periodically occurred, including the de-schooling ideas of the mid twentieth century.²⁷

The open, positive spirit of such children characterizes the nature of the society they will grow into—a pleasant, generally satisfied people who get along cooperatively and who enjoy living and take an interest in “all the little details of life.” Individual rights are taken for granted. Old Hammond explains that this provides an affirmative environment for the “rebirth of art,” which could only occur among people who consider the beautiful attributes of everyday life to be essential for their desire for living. In other words, work that is pleasant becomes play and results in

beautifully made items that reflect the well-being of the people who make them. The child-like spirit and curiosity remain alive in these adults. While it is true that a pleasant environment is necessary for people to create beautiful things, so too is a living art absolutely essential for the realization of a humane and just world. For Morris such a world is not for the privileged only, but, like art, such a world should be available for everyone. "I do not want art for the few, any more than I want education for the few, or freedom for the few."²⁸

News from Nowhere ends with Guest's final thoughts, and Morris's great hope:

I lay in my bed in my house at dingy Hammersmith thinking about it all; and trying to consider if I was overwhelmed with despair at finding I had been dreaming a dream; and strange to say, I found that I was not so despairing.

Or indeed *was* it a dream? If so, why was I so conscious all along that I was really seeing all that new life from the outside, still wrapped up in the prejudices, the anxieties, the distrust of this time of doubt and struggle? ...as Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say, "... Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness."

Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream. (Chapter XXXII, 228)

▶28 William Morris. "The Lesser Arts," a lecture delivered before the Trades Guild of Learning on 4 December 1877, in William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, Chapter 1, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/chapters/chapter1.htm> (accessed 6 April 2009).

8 Conclusion: A Hope, a Dream, and a Vision

What are we to make of Morris's hope, or should we say dream or better still vision, for a better world? Why should we still read William Morris? After all, we have witnessed both the rise and the fall of the so-called socialist experiment of the U.S.S.R. On the other hand, we are now living through a period when free-market capitalism appears to have reached critical limits. Perhaps Morris does have something to say to us today.

Many have criticized *News from Nowhere* and its author as backward looking, as wanting to go back to a romantic pastoral society with agricultural toil and handicrafts where everyone is smiling. These critics pointed out that population growth is not considered; the central government is seen as shrinking away; technological developments and scientific advances are indicated but with little sense of the kind of facilities needed for support. If not completely ignoring it, Marxists and others dismiss Morris's vision as muddle-headed utopian socialism. Be that as it

may, few other socialists of his day have even tried to present an explicit portrayal of their desired future society. What would Morris think, though, of later socialists compromising their goals and concentrating on incremental social improvements within the capitalist economic order? Morris was not one to believe in half-way measures. And as we now know these compromises have not worked.

Let us consider what W. B. Yeats, who knew and admired Morris, wrote in “The Happiest of the Poets” about the value of Morris's vision of a society of equals in which every man and woman finds proper fulfillment:

His vision is true because it is poetical, because we are a little happier when we are looking at it; and he knew as Shelly knew by an act of faith that economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like that, from the vision of the world made perfect that is buried under all minds.²⁹

Yeats's insightful observation about the truth of Morris's vision stemming from his poetical insight, and not from the measurements of economists, helps explain why so many continue to discover relevancies that apply to our own day. Morris introduced us to his poetic ideas of what a just society would require; he discussed how we might attain such a society and he worked on the streets and in gathering halls toward achieving it. He gave us his dreams of how life in such a society might be, hoping that these images would resonate with enough people to become a vision. Morris, though, left us with more than his dreams and his hopeful vision. He continues to show us what such a new world might look like with his still extant houses and gardens, his interiors, his art and design, his beautifully crafted books. The example of Morris himself in the flesh and blood further continues to serve as a example of how a man might live with his art in such a new world. This was the core of his fight for a better world, a more just society.

Morris struggled all his life to improve people's lives. Today Morris remains a hero to socialists, communists and even anarchists who continue to strive for a new society. Morris's efforts to conserve the natural environment and to protect our architectural heritage are being carried on by people who are members of the same groups he helped to found and supported. Morris's contention that art and creativity are essential contributors to well-being and that beautiful surroundings are essential for a healthy, happy and productive life, resonates today with those involved with the arts in education and arts in healthcare movements. We read Morris's writings today because we still hold out hope for a better world. After all Morris's vision for a just society where art plays a central role has not yet been seriously tried. And although we have not yet achieved Morris's post-capitalist, ecologically healthy and economically sustainable humane society with its lively arts, his battles of over one hundred years ago have become our battles today.

►29 W. B. Yeats, “The Happiest of the Poets,” in *Essays and Introductions* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1961), 53-64, esp. 63.

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Internet Resources

The William Morris Internet Archive

www.Marxists.org/archive/morris/

The Victorian Web

www.victorianweb.org

The William Morris Society

www.morrissociety.org

The William Morris Gallery

www.wathamforest.gov.uk/wmg/home.htm

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