Twentieth-Century Critical Readings of Morris's Utopianism

My recovery of the interventionist, political character of Morris's utopianism departs from previous accounts, particularly those originating from within traditions of communist historical writing and Marxist cultural criticism in which Morris has occupied an important place, and where one might have expected to find such an emphasis. The reception and critical discussion of Morris's utopianism is traceable through the work of Robin Page Arnot, Arthur Leslie Morton, Miguel Abensour, Paul Meier, Edward Palmer Thompson, Raymond Williams and Perry Anderson, in which a division of labour emerges between Morris's utopian and political writings. The defences of Morris offered by Arnot, Morton and Thompson all originated within the ambience of the Communist Party of Great Britain—although Thompson is a special case—whereas Williams's and Anderson's more qualified critical judgements did not. Arnot's *William Morris: A Vindication* (1934) is structured around the refutation of two myths about Morris, namely, the 'bourgeois myth', which ignored Morris's politics altogether, and the 'Menshevik myth', which denied his specific political commitment to revolutionary socialism.[1] Arnot's reclamation of Morris for Marxism, however, paved the way for the construction of a different myth, which was propagated by his Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) colleague, A. L. Morton, who claimed that Morris's utopia is 'comparable to the vast schemes for electrification […] proceeding in the U.S.S.R'.[2] Morton's claim falls prey to the kind of apologetics that led Thompson, who broke from the CPGB in 1956, to be suspicious of any 'political' reading of Morris's utopianism. Arnot's

and Morton's reconstructions of Morris were ultimately beholden to the political determinations of their own historical moment, defined by a largely uncritical identification with Stalinism—later described by Thompson as the 'sieve of […] orthodoxy'.[3] Thompson's own account of Morris's utopianism continues to have more resonance in contemporary critical discussion.

Thompson's biography offers an invaluable basis for evaluating the heterodox nature of Morris's commitment to a version of communism, but he devoted relatively little attention to the content and the specificities of Morris's literary work. As Ruth Levitas comments, 'Thompson was not concerned primarily with the interpretation of *News from Nowhere*'.[4] In a similar vein, Raymond Williams went as far as to suggest that he would 'willingly lose *The Dream of John Ball* [sic] and the romantic socialist songs and even *News from Nowhere* […] if to do so were the price of retaining and getting people to read' the political lectures.[5] Williams praised Morris as a 'fine political writer', but preemptively excluded his utopian writings from this assessment.[6] Miguel Abensour similarly acknowledged an implied division of labour between the utopian and the political. However, Abensour took precisely the opposite stance to Williams, arguing that when 'faced with the duality of the Morrisian corpus (the socialist lectures and the utopian texts), it is appropriate to favour the properly utopian texts, to give them priority over the theoretical essays', as well as the propagandistic political journalism.[7] Thompson made a similar distinction when commenting, in a 1959 lecture delivered to the William Morris Society, that Morris 'sought to body forth a vision of the actual social and personal relations, the values and attitudes consonant with a Society of Equals' in both his 'imaginative and […] day-to-day polemical writing alike'.[8] Thompson accepted a distinction here between Morris's 'imaginative' and 'polemical' writing, implying a difference in kind, at the same time as he disavowed any functional divergence by suggesting that *both* kinds of writing ultimately share the same prefigurative utopian impulse in offering a vision of what achieved communism might be like in term of its experiential texture and system of values.[9] Morris's 'day-to-day polemical writing', in Thompson's view, was important because it offered a 'vision' of a possible future and, as such, had less significance as a propagandistic engagement with other ideological currents belonging to Morris's more immediately situated historical and political context in the fin de siècle.

Thompson returned to the problem of how to navigate Morris's corpus in the 1976 Postscript to his biography, pointing to the futility of Williams's hypothetical scenario by posing a rhetorical question: 'why should the utopian and the "political" works be set off against each other, when so obviously they must be taken together?'.[10] What Thompson seems to mean here, as implied in the conclusion to his 1959 lecture, and as suggested in his use of quotation marks suspiciously to demarcate the 'political', is that a secret affinity exists between Morris's utopian and political writing which consists in a shared *utopian* orientation. Thus, for Thompson, the manner in which the utopian and the political should be 'taken together' is to assert the utopianism of Morris's political lectures, including those that are named by Williams such as 'How We Live and How We Might Live' (1885) and 'Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil' (1884), which sketch out the lineaments of a desirable future in a way which make them comparable to the more ostensibly utopian narrative figured forth in *Nowhere*. Thompson was wary of Williams's judgement because it 'might easily reduce the utopian to the political', but, in delineating his own position in response, he lurched too far in the opposite direction, collapsing what Abensour referred to as the 'duality of the Morrisian corpus' by conflating the political with the utopian. This manoeuvre is harder to accomplish if *Nowhere* is read alongside Morris's journalism, where the politics of the now-here is so much more clearly in evidence. Thompson, however, proceeded to assert that Morris's utopianism is characterised by 'its innocence of system and its refusal to be cashed in the same medium of exchange as "concept", "mind", "knowledge" or political text [without quotation marks]'.[11] Thompson's choice of metaphor was a deliberate indicator of his distaste for the categories to which he deemed Morris's utopianism to be absolutely opposed. It is part of my contention that Morris's utopianism *can* be cashed in such a medium of exchange, or, to switch metaphors, that there is no Chinese wall between utopia and politics.

Both Abensour's and Thompson's accounts of Morris's utopianism involve an implicit claim about the utopian function of estrangement. Abensour, like Thompson, accentuated the function of estrangement, situating Morris's utopian romance alongside his later fantasy narratives, which, Abensour suggests, belong to the same 'matrix […] outside familiar space and time'.[12] As Abensour put it elsewhere, the utopian voyage of Morris's narrator, William Guest, involves an experience of

'strangeness [that] gradually heightens a sense of disquiet as the sign of the coming new and different history'.[13] According to Abensour, the sense of cognitive disorientation that such a narrative might provoke in the reader would lead such readers to think more critically and creatively about the possibilities latent within the familiar, present world. Thompson elaborated this argument, which he had encountered in Abensour's unpublished 1973 doctoral thesis 'Les Formes de L'Utopie Socialiste-Communiste', by adding that Guest's 'adventure' makes 'two things happen':

> our habitual values (the 'commonsense' of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire.* This is not the same as 'a moral education' towards a given end: it is, rather, to open a way to aspiration, to 'teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way' […].[14]

The education of desire, in Thompson's formulation, is comparable to Tom Moylan's account of the way in which 'utopia opposes the affirmative culture maintained by the dominant ideology', in which 'dominant ideology' occupies the same place as does bourgeois commonsense for Thompson.[15] In each case, utopian writing functions to estrange readers from the dominant ideology, which closes down the horizon of futurity by binding the imagination to an endlessly reduplicated version of the status quo. Acknowledging the present-oriented and socially critical aspects of utopian writing, Moylan contends that:

> utopia and science fiction are most concerned with the current moment of history, but they represent that moment in an estranged manner. They restructure and distance the present not to a misty past nor to an exotic place but rather to that one place where some hope for a better life for all humanity still lingers: the future.[16]

Moylan distinguishes this description of utopian estrangement from those simplistic readings of the utopian genre which limit its function to '"predicting" or "planning" the future as though [it] were the narrative [tool] of some futurological technocrat', echoing Abensour's distinction between prescriptive, systemic utopianism, which deals in blue-prints, and heuristic utopianism, which defamiliarises the present by making it strange.[17] Such interpretations remain compelling as a means

of conceptualising the critical nature of Morris's utopianism, but it is also productive to think about the present-oriented scope of Morris's utopian engagement with the now-here at the more mundane level of goal-oriented political instrumentality, necessitating partial revision of Abensour's and Thompson's readings.

The shifts in Moylan's argument are instructive in this regard: utopia's engagement with the present is explicitly couched in terms of estrangement before it is again displaced into its narrative mediation in the future, attesting to the powerful capacity of utopian writing to resist the ideological closure of the present. No sooner does the now-here appear, however, than it is immediately lost again in the distant image of no-where—not a misty past, but a misty future. To persist, as is my intention, with a thoroughgoing exegesis of the present-oriented moments of *Nowhere* (and related works) points to a different reading experience, identifiable with the initial, situated phase of the text's reception, which must have resembled something like a kaleidoscopic interpenetration of the speculative and the concrete, the future and the present, the open-ended and the resolutely propagandistic, or, in short, the utopian *and* the political. By contrast, Abensour's and Thompson's one-sided emphasis on the defamiliarising agency of Morris's utopianism overlooks the fact that certain communities of fin-de-siècle readers were *already* estranged from the 'commonsense' of Victorian society. Such readers were to be found amongst the political communities of first-wave feminism, back-to-the-land anarchism as well as the embattled internationalist voices that differently opposed the ideological hegemony of British imperialism. If one acknowledges that Morris's utopian writing addressed these readers, as well as the typological mystified reader gulled by the dominant ideology, then it becomes necessary to qualify critical accounts of the *function* of Morris's utopian writing which focus solely on defamiliarisation and estrangement.

There is undoubtedly an element of truth to the claim about estrangement: Morris deployed estrangement devices, such as the conceit of an alien visitor to planet Earth, in both his political journalism (J, 427, 593, 631) and in *Nowhere* (CW, 16:54, 90, 135), lending weight to Thompson's argument about the utopian dimension of Morris's political writings. However, this view overlooks the political content of Morris's utopian writings, which also addressed contemporaneous rivals and fellow travellers with at least half an eye on the task of persuasion in the here-and-now about contemporary political issues. Amongst the

scattered diaspora of Victorian radicals, there were currents of opinion that shared Morris's generalised discontent without necessarily agreeing on the important strategic question: what is to be done? In addressing such readers, then, Morris's utopian writing also functioned as an ideological intervention—a political text, to bestow upon it the term refused by Thompson—concerned less with heuristic openness, and more with the kinds of closure that might result from winning (or losing) a polemical argument about immediate strategic dilemmas. This reintroduces the problem of ideological closure and the instrumental pursuit of concrete goals that Thompson and Abensour strenuously avoided when discussing Morris's utopianism by invoking and celebrating a vocabulary of play, openness and exploration.

For Abensour, the heuristic aspect of utopia means that, in Morris's case, '[w]ritten utopia is no longer a closed totality that one must take or leave, but is instead a sort of lateral play in relation to classical political activity that by and through the intervals it opens, draws more and more players into active participation'.[18] Moreover, the 'rupture with utopian model-building implies a radically antipedagogical effect'.[19] This, in turn, informs Abensour's view that 'one cannot extract from *News from Nowhere* any doctrine or any specific socialist system'.[20] Despite Abensour's misgivings, some critics have set out to extract systematising possibilities from Morris's utopian romance, treating it as a viable and practicable social model. Ruth Kinna, for example, asserts that William Guest returns to nineteenth-century London hoping to 'make Nowhere Somewhere', and that 'Morris's vision was a literal description of a possible future and not, as Thompson suggested, the embodiment of a vague exercise in desiring'.[21] Krishan Kumar similarly suggests that 'there seems no reason to doubt that *News from Nowhere* is a vision of a future that Morris both hoped and expected to come into being'.[22] This reading is at odds with Morris's warning that '[t]he only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author' (PW, 420). It threatens to take Ernestina D'Errico's wilful mistranslation of *News from Nowhere* in earnest.[23] Such literalism invites other critics to employ a counter-hermeneutic of suspicion that seeks to uncover the submerged *dystopian* content of Morris's ostensibly tolerant utopia, pursuing a kind of negative exegesis.[24] My own approach recognises the possibility that there was a moment when the text could have fulfilled the differing functions suggested by Kinna or Thompson—in or around 1890—but argues that moment has now passed. Thus, rather

than asserting the continuing capacity of the text to play such a role in the present, in the hope of belatedly redeeming the promise of its as-yet unrealised vision, it may well be more useful to specify the terms of its failure by situating it quite concertedly in the historical moment of its production and reception. To suggest that the value of *Nowhere* is timeless, or that it might still offer 'a vision for our time', risks fetishising it, thereby overlooking the fact that it was an ephemeral and temporally situated intervention, not a form of socialist scripture. It is not necessarily the case that *Nowhere* still offers 'a literal description of a possible future', even if it once did, and nor is it the case that its function of estrangement, asserted by Abensour and Thompson, is historically durable as an effective (or affective) quality of the text. The work of estrangement and defamiliarisation will be undertaken anew in every generation.

Thompson and Abensour imply two kinds of reader for Morris's utopian romance: their emphasis on estrangement assumes an unconverted reader, mystified by the dominant ideology, and thus in need of utopian resubjectivisation through a defamiliarising encounter with the other world of Nowhere. Somewhat contradictorily, Abensour also acknowledged that Morris's 'first and most important milieu to be addressed is the extremely limited circle of radical readers of a theoretically and politically engaged journal', referring to the group of Socialist League militants already won to the socialist cause for whom *Nowhere* might 'open a forum for […] negative and positive reaction' as part of 'a necessarily partial and provisional moment of revolutionary practice within a specific group'.[25] Abensour identified this 'dialogical' principle of exchange 'between producer and recipient' with the 'open quality' of Morris's utopianism, implying it to be non-didactic and 'unpedagogic'.[26] This implies a readership *already* in agreement on fundamental values, hence Abensour's refusal to specify what concretely might arise, in terms of goals and strategic priorities, from such a process of 'dialogical' exchange. There is, in short, a lacuna concerning politics in Abensour's reading. Morris, however, was not only preaching to the converted and the unconverted, but also to the differently converted, seeking to win them to a particular and limited interpretation, albeit mutable within certain parameters, of the political conjuncture that he inhabited. After all, Morris's fierce disputes with the Socialist League's parliamentary and anarchist factions eventually led to its implosion. Morris's utopianism, then, was not quite as 'open' as Thompson and Abensour claim, and could be reconceived as a tactical complement, rather than lateral play, in relation to the classical political activity in which Morris was so evidently engaged.

David Harvey's remarks on utopia are especially apposite in helping to elaborate the implications of this argument. Harvey points out that 'the materialisation of anything [including utopia] requires, at least for a time, closure around a particular set of institutional arrangements', and, moreover, that 'the act of closure is in itself a material statement that carries its own authority in human affairs'.[27] Thompson, following Abensour, celebrates the 'open, exploratory character' of Morris's utopianism in order to refute the comprehensive literalism of Paul Meier, whose extensive study of the relationship of Morris's utopianism to Marxism was accused by Thompson of being 'an exercise in closure, confining the utopian imagination within textually-approved limits'.[28] In pointing to the propagandistic aspects of Morris's utopianism, I am not attempting to reprise Meier's method, characterised by Thompson as a process of 'double textual verification', using 'theoretical texts' as a 'master-key to de-code the utopian work'.[29] Meier's method resembled a kind of scriptural exegesis, making Morris's utopianism into a vehicle for the illustration of theoretical conclusions that had been elaborated elsewhere, thus depriving it of any dynamic or functional independence. Nevertheless, Thompson's objection to such a process of textual comparison is misplaced to the extent that such comparisons can help to clarify the status of Morris's utopianism. Thompson's criticisms of Meier are well-founded, but they do not negate the fact that Morris's utopianism strained towards different kinds of political and theoretical closure, not in terms of its relationship to Marxism, but on its own terms, and as part of its own internal coherence as a passage of political argument.

The task of materialising utopia, as Harvey suggests, is primarily political, rather than speculative. It will involve the kind of 'hard and applied mundane political agitation' that Thompson recognised as a crucial element of Morris's socialism, but which he inexplicably separated from Morris's utopianism by denying his utopian writing the status of 'political text'.[30] As I show in Part II of this book, there are ways in which Morris's utopian writing does function straightforwardly as a political text in its elaboration of polemical arguments current within the fin-de-siècle socialist movement, and in its responsiveness to rival groupings and factions. Moylan sees utopian writing as a 'manifesto of otherness', but Morris's utopian writing also resembled (and directly echoed) the more traditional kind of political manifesto, such as those produced and distributed by the Socialist League (J, 3–8).[31] In foregrounding the propagandistic character of Morris's utopian writing, I seek to expand our

understanding of its function, which goes beyond that of estrangement to include a properly political attempt to carve out a position of ideological hegemony within fin-de-siècle radical culture.

In this, my reading of Morris recalls the argument of Perry Anderson, who took issue with Thompson's emphasis on Morris's moral realism, and pointed instead to 'another Morris', overlooked by Thompson, 'to whom we owe no less homage, who was concerned not only with moralities but *strategies*'.[32] Morris's consistent polemics against reformism, and his prescient critique of the limits of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, were, for Anderson, points at which his political writings extended the Marxist tradition *beyond* the work of Marx and Engels. Despite the fact that Thompson's biography of Morris 'contains the materials for a portrait of Morris as a revolutionary thinker of astonishing lucidity and originality in the field of socialist strategy', Thompson ultimately failed to offer such a portrait in Anderson's view.[33] Anderson explained this failure with reference to the restrictive influence that the CPGB's transitory strategic priorities, as outlined in *The British Road to Socialism* (1951), had upon Thompson's thinking. Thompson found it politically expedient, Anderson suggested, not to give too much weight to those parts of Morris's oeuvre which contradicted the CPGB's programme as it then existed, which was culpable of a considerable drift towards 'reformism' and parliamentary democratic means.[34] Thompson's work on Morris, like Arnot's and Morton's, belongs to a mid-twentieth-century current of communist historical scholarship, based on detailed archival research, which set out to revise the historical record from a politically committed standpoint. Anderson's response to Thompson, in turn, historicised the scholarship that he was able to undertake by offering an assessment of its own political coordinates. Like Thompson, however, Anderson paid little attention to the detail of Morris's utopian texts, dismissing *Nowhere* as little more than 'a craftsman's paradise' before launching into a literalist and negative exegesis of *Nowhere*'s failings as a viable social model.[35] In making broadly the same gesture as had Williams in *Culture and Society*, Anderson thus missed the possibility that part of what constituted Morris's 'lucidity and originality' as a strategic thinker consisted specifically in the political character of his utopianism. I elucidate this specificity by offering a sustained close reading of Morris's utopianism with reference to contemporaneous debates within the socialist movement and the wider fin-de-siècle radical culture about the 'woman question', practices of back-to-the-land pastoral retreat and imperialism. What emerges from this discussion is that, for Morris, utopia existed *as* strategy, as well as speculation.

The utopian content of Morris's vision, which Anderson criticised, consists in its presentation of a harmonious, non-alienated future—a vision of what the struggle is *for*, which Morris differentiated from Edward Bellamy's technocratic vision in *Looking Backward* (1888). To focus on this aspect of Morris's utopianism, as many critics do, is to overlook the way in which it also constituted a qualitatively unique and propagandistic intervention into the present struggle. The task of propaganda is to concretise the political priorities arising from the contradictions of a particular, contingent and historically determined conjuncture. By definition, it is a transient, rather than permanent kind of writing. The critical emphasis on reconstructing *Nowhere*'s presentation of an alternative vision, heuristic or literal, dwelling on abstract values or concrete details, has served to obscure that aspect of the text which was now-here. On this reading, Morris's utopianism was part of what Frank Kitz described as the socialist movement's key task, namely: 'preaching the mundane gospel of making this world a brighter and happier one'.[36] Mundanity (from the Latin word 'mundus', meaning 'world') has a twofold meaning in this context, connoting both the dullness of the routine of political agitation—the 'weary struggle' (AWS, 2:420), as Morris called it—as well as the non-transcendent worldliness of Morris's utopianism, which can be set against Abensour's contestation that Nowhere is 'situated elsewhere, on another terrain', missing the force of the title's double meaning.[37] Abensour identified *Nowhere* with the 'utopian marvellous' at the expense of recognising its coterminous imbrication with the mundane and the now-here.[38]

For Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, this aspect of spatial and temporal simultaneity offers an important qualification to the classical Marxist distinction between utopian and scientific forms of socialism. With reference to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), they write that:

> *Erewhon*, the word used by Samuel Butler, refers not only to no-where but also to now-here. What matters is not the supposed distinction between utopian and scientific socialism but the different types of utopia, one of them being revolution. In utopia (as in philosophy) there is always the risk of a restoration, and sometimes a proud affirmation, of transcendence, so that we need to distinguish between authoritarian utopias, or utopias of transcendence, and immanent, revolutionary, libertarian utopias.[39]

Deleuze and Guattari do not comment on the deeply satirical content of Butler's text, and one cannot help but wonder whether they were, in fact, thinking of Morris, given that the mention of 'immanent, revolutionary, libertarian utopias' sounds uncannily like a reference to *News from Nowhere*, rather than *Erewhon*. Their distinction between immanent and transcendent utopias echoes both Ernst Bloch's differentiation between utopias of freedom and order in the second volume of *The Principle of Hope*, and Abensour's distinction between the classical, systemic utopia and the heuristic utopia, which rejects model building and blueprints, as did Morris. Abensour's work is significant in this regard insofar as it allows for specification and differentiation within the utopian genre, as opposed to the doctrinal antinomy between 'scientific' and 'utopian' varieties of socialism identified and elaborated by Engels.

The double meaning of Erewhon, or Nowhere, makes more sense when thinking about Morris, not least because of the *Commonweal* serialisation of Morris's text. The immanent politics of the now-here begins to shine through when one reads the text against the background of *Commonweal*'s journalistic polemics and propaganda for social revolution. As Deleuze and Guattari elaborate, to conceptualise revolution itself as a variety of immanent utopianism 'is to posit revolution as plane of immanence, infinite movement and absolute survey, but to the extent that these features connect up with what is real here and now in the struggle against capitalism, relaunching new struggles whenever the earlier one is betrayed'.[40] Reading Morris's utopianism with reference to its immanent concern with the now-here is a way of foregrounding his commitment to the primacy of the political: he was more concerned with thinking about revolutionary strategy in the context of a propagandistic political organisation than he was with imagining transcendent alternatives. This also helps to explain Morris's reluctance to practise utopian schemes of exodus and alternative community building (such as back-to-the-land anarchism, as I discuss in Chap. 4). He acknowledges this at various points in his lectures and other writings, but crucially—as I argue throughout this book—he also used *Nowhere* to make this argument as well, thereby turning the genre of utopian romance against certain kinds of utopian practice.

Morris does not explicitly allude to the double meaning in the title of *Nowhere*, so the issue of 'authorial intention' remains beyond the realm of critical reconstruction. Then again, one might speculate as to whether Morris may have encountered R. Heber Newton's explicit invocation

of this double meaning in his article on 'Communism' in *To-day*. Bax, Morris's friend and comrade, edited *To-day*, so Morris may have read Newton's article when *Nowhere* was still gestating in his mind. Newton, an American Episcopalian priest, traces the origins of the ideal of communism to Plato's *Republic*, before adding that '[t]his same dream has cheered the souls of earth's noblest thinkers through all the dark days since the great Greek, when, turning away from the shadows lying heavily upon the world, they have caught sight of the City of God coming down from heaven,—Utopia, *Nowhere* yet on earth in outward form, but in spirit so long seen and striven for that a rearrangement of the old elements may make it *Now-here*'.[41] Newton envisages communism as a transcendent, transhistorical ideal that might one day be actualised in the present, offering what Deleuze and Guattari might describe as a 'proud affirmation of transcendence' bound up with a religious eschatology. Morris, by contrast, did not turn away from 'the shadows lying heavily upon the world' to an abstract, consolatory ideal. Rather, no-where and the now-here exist in constant tension in his utopianism. Morris repeatedly contrasts the historical actuality of real struggles against capital and oppression with the utopian 'other world' of an imagined communist future, the juxtaposition serving to sharpen, intensify and clarify the stakes of those struggles at the same time as the present-oriented aspects of his utopianism functioned as an intervention into those struggles.

The final pertinent issue that remains to be addressed in this chapter concerns the status of politics in *Nowhere* itself. William Guest learns in Nowhere that the concept of 'politics' has ceased to exist. Chapter 13, 'Concerning Politics', is the book's shortest chapter in which Old Hammond professes to be the 'only man in England who would know what [the word means]', because, 'after the model old Horrebow's snakes in Iceland' (CW, 16:85), there is no politics in the fictional world of Nowhere. The skin-shedding changeability of the snake makes it an apt figure for the ephemeral, slippery nature of politics. Hammond's statement also bears out Jameson's hypothesis that 'utopia emerges at the moment of the suspension of the political'.[42] However, as Morris's 1891 revisions to *Nowhere* attest, the text itself was no less 'slippery' and ephemeral, a fact partly arising from its propagandistic function and political instrumentality.[43] In another sense, there clearly is a form of politics practised in Nowhere, insofar as collective deliberation takes place on various issues at the local level, for which the '[unit] of management' is 'a commune, or a ward, or a parish' (CW, 16:88). Various examples

of such decentralised decision-making are set forth in Chapter 14, 'How Matters are Managed', in which Old Hammond describes how Morris's utopians engage in collective and democratic deliberation in the building of a new town hall, the 'clearance of inconvenient houses' to make way for more beautiful ones or the substitution of 'a stone bridge [...] for some ugly old iron one' (CW, 16:88).

Michael Holzman has shown how Hammond's elaboration of the principle of decentralised, direct democracy by majority voting closely mirrored discussions that had taken place in *Commonweal* during the summer months of 1889 in which several anarchists, including James Blackwell and H. Davis, attacked Morris on the issue of authority in decision-making, and suggested alternative processes of collective deliberation.[44] The anarchists argued against the 'principle of authority' (and, by extension, majority voting), advocating a horizontalist, consensual model, without inhibitive 'statutes or rules of conduct', referring to a resolution 'adopted unanimously' at a recent anarchist Congress in Valencia.[45] Morris made clear in his responses, published on 18 May and 17 August, that he saw this as a means for a disgruntled minority undemocratically to assert itself against the will of the majority (PW, 414–418, 445–449). His disagreement hinged on the important question of prefiguration, with Morris asserting that 'you could not live Communistically unt[i]ll the present society of capitalism is at an end' (PW, 446). Morris's caustic wit was on full display when he suggested that 'our Anarchist-Communist friends [...] are somewhat authoritative on the matter of authority' (PW, 415). Holzman comments that Hammond's discussion of this issue in several instalments of *Nowhere* 'must have appeared to contemporary readers to have been, minimally, a vehicle for the presentation of Morris's own views about Socialism and the current intra-party struggles'.[46] He adds that, given the fractious climate in the Socialist League during the late 1880s, 'such attacks on Anarchism [...] must be taken seriously as [...] part of the motivation of the book'.[47] Holzman's approach valuably recognises the present-oriented, political optic of Morris's utopianism that he discusses with reference to Morris's critique of anarchism. The ensuing chapters of my book extend this approach by reconstructing Morris's utopian intervention into discussions of first-wave feminism, back-to-the-land communitarianism and fin-de-siècle imperialism.

Holzman has shown how the ideological force of Hammond's present-oriented intervention on this point concerned the form of the

decision-making process, rather than the content of any given decision per se. Nonetheless, it is notable that the three examples of democratic deliberation discussed by Hammond are administrative issues related to construction and the built environment, rather than subjects of properly ideological antagonism. Hammond's examples thus recall the utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon's maxim that, in socialist society, the government of people would be replaced by the administration of things, a maxim that is echoed by Morris in the transition between Chapter 13, 'Concerning Politics', and Chapter 14, 'How Matters are Managed'.[48] By 1879, one commentator suggested that '[t]he theories of Saint-Simon and his school [i.e. Saint-Amand Bazard and Barthélemy-Prosper Enfantin] are nearly forgotten now, but their effects have survived, and some of them have proved beneficial indirectly'.[49] Twenty-first-century readers might be more inclined to identify Saint-Simon's ideal of post-political managerialism with the prevailing dispensation of neoliberal technocracy, and the associated hollowing out of possibilities for democratic control over the economy, rather than a communist withering of the state apparatus. The latter reading, however, was a key feature of Engels's interpretation of Saint-Simon. Engels elaborated this idea in *Socialisme Utopique et Socialisme Scientifique* (1880), suggesting that Saint-Simon's 1816 declaration that 'politics is the science of production […] foretells the complete absorption of politics by economics'.[50] Engels commended Saint-Simon because he 'very plainly expressed […] the idea of the future conversion of political rule over men into an administration of things and a direction of processes of production—that is to say, the "abolition of the state"'.[51] Saint-Simon thus stands at the head of a tradition of Marxist thinking about the state in opposition to, or as a parasitical excrescence upon, civil society.

Hammond's account of 'How Matters are Managed' offers a partial elaboration of the Saint-Simonian concern with the supersession of political governance, in favour of direct democratic administration, or self-management. As Morris put it in 'What Socialists Want' (1888): '[i]n the Society which we Socialists wish to see realized […] [t]here will be no political parties squabbling incessantly as to who shall govern the country and doing nothing else; for the country will govern itself, and the village, municipal, and county councils will send delegates to meetings for dealing with matters common to all' (UL, 231). Elsewhere, in a letter to Edward Carpenter concerning Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Morris echoed Engels's Saint-Simonian formulation but warned against

elevating things over people. He commented that: 'I know from experience what a comfortable life one might lead if one could be careful not to concern oneself with *persons* but with *things*; or persons in the light of things. But nature won't allow it […]' (CL, 2:430). Morris's letter to Carpenter hints at the way in which the Saint-Simonian maxim would be likely to run up against the all-too-human capacity for interference, which would be likely to disrupt the smooth functioning of any technocratic (or Bellamyite) administrative apparatus. There is a contradiction between Morris's anti-political desire to supersede the limited horizon of ideological division concretised in competing bourgeois political parties, as he discussed in 'What Socialists Want', set against the projected continuation of some sort of representative function that would surely be likely to spill over into politics of a kind. The juxtaposition of Chapter 13 and Chapter 14 of *Nowhere*, read alongside these comments, point to the ostensibly paradoxical formulation of a politics without politics.

It is possible to explicate the apparent contradiction relatively quickly: Morris's engagement with politics took an ostensibly anti-political (or 'purist') character because he aimed at an eventual liquidation of the form of politics that has been overdetermined by the historical conditions of bourgeois society. Old Hammond comprehends this kind of 'politics' only insofar as he is 'tied to the past, [*his*] past' (CW, 16:55). The projected supersession of politics in Nowhere adumbrates Morris's aim to 'transform […] civilization into something else: into a new social life' (CW, 23:63), bearing witness to a dissolution of the boundary between the abstract political state and civil society. Morris's anti-political stance specifically derided that specialisation of politics characteristic of bourgeois society. With reference to Marx's critique of Hegel's writings on the state, Kristin Ross has commented that '[i]f the separation between state and civil society does not exist, then politics becomes just another branch of social production. Political emancipation means emancipation from politics as a specialised activity.'[52] If, as Hammond implies, the concept of the 'political' has been largely forgotten by his fellow utopians, then politics must have seeped into the social life of Nowhere, permeating it to such an extent that 'politics' is no longer visible in-and-of-itself as a 'specialised activity'. Rather, it simply exists as part of everyday life and the mundane, necessary and necessarily collective routines of decision-making about the placing of a house or the building of a bridge. The 'commonsense' of bourgeois society, by contrast, leads people to identify Parliament as the pre-eminent place where politics occurs, even

if parliamentary representatives are, by and large, viewed with suspicion. Only rarely, however, is such popular discontent articulated in the form of a coherent critique of bourgeois representative 'democracy' as a fundamentally limited and stifling conceptualisation of politics.

Morris articulated such a critique in his lectures, including 'Whigs, Democrats and Socialists' (1886) and 'The Policy of Abstention' (1887), as well as in his political journalism.[53] In *Nowhere*, by contrast, Morris's derision for the specialised, bourgeois form of politics is manifest in the recurring joke about the Houses of Parliament having been transformed into a storage-place for manure (CW, 16:41, 75, 115). The joke does not imply that the creation of a dung-house next to Westminster Bridge constituted a literal goal on Morris's part, even if some of his comrades took it to mean such.[54] Rather, the joke, which adds an edge of scatologically Swiftean political satire to Morris's utopian narrative, is that the Houses of Parliament are *already* full of excrement, if only one could alter one's perception of present political arrangements to the minimal degree that would be necessary to make this supposition universally evident. The joke is only legible if emphasis is placed on Nowhere as now-here, rather than no-where: its legibility *as* a joke, moreover, presupposes the fact that such a perception is already partially evident, in a limited, pre-political and unconscious way. To explain a joke is to deny it the chance of achieving its intended effect, but the wider import of this explication is to reveal one way in which Morris's utopianism functioned as a complement to his more 'direct' political writings, offering an integrated polemical attack on what George Watson once described as the 'English ideology' of bourgeois parliamentary democracy.[55] At the heuristic level, the joke may cause readers to think differently about the limits of parliamentary 'democracy' in capitalist society. At the more mundane level, it may also inspire readers to *act* differently, which is not an anti-political gesture, but, rather, one that reconceives politics outside the stifling logic of bourgeois 'commonsense'. In the second of his two essays in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), Ruskin wrote that 'the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act'.[56] Morris utilised the hybrid genre of utopian romance as a narrative vehicle, not for the satisfaction of morbid fascinations, but, rather, to present scenes in which his readers, or at least some of them, would be called upon to act.

Notes

1. R. Page Arnot, *William Morris: A Vindication* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1934).
2. A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, 2nd edn (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), p. 217.
3. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, rev. edn (London: Merlin Press, 1977), p. 787.
4. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), p. 132.
5. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, 2nd edn, reprinted with a postscript (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 159.
6. Ibid.
7. Miguel Abensour, 'William Morris: The Politics of Romance', in *Revolutionary Romanticism*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), pp. 125–161 (156).
8. E.P. Thompson, 'William Morris', in *Persons and Polemics: Historical Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1994), pp. 66–76 (76).
9. For a useful discussion of utopia that distinguishes between function, form and content in relation to Thompson's discussion of Morris, see Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, pp. 143–146.
10. Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 794.
11. Ibid., p. 799.
12. Abensour, 'William Morris', p. 133.
13. Miguel Abensour, 'Utopia: Future and/or Alterity?', in *The Politics of the (Im)possible: Utopia and Dystopia Reconsidered*, ed. Barnita Bagchi (London: Sage, 2012), pp. 23–46 (44).
14. Thompson, *William Morris*, pp. 790–791. Thompson is quoting Abensour. Max Blechman renders Abensour's prose in full: 'The education of desire is the "organizing function" of Morrisian utopia. This formula may cause some confusion: the point is not for utopia (unlike the tradition that calls for the "moral education of humanity") to assign "true" or "just" goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it—not to assign it a goal but to open a path for it […]. Desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire otherwise […].' Abensour, 'William Morris', pp. 145–146.
15. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 1. For Antonio Gramsci's elaboration of the concept of 'commonsense', see Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 323–333.

16. Moylan, pp. 35–36.
17. Ibid., p. 35. As reported by Thompson, Abensour locates his account of the utopian genre's historical modulation, and particularly the differentiation between systemic and heuristic utopianism, in or around 1850. Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 789. For further discussion of this dichotomy, see Raymond Williams, 'Utopia and Science Fiction', in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 196-212 (202-204).
18. Abensour, 'William Morris', p. 129.
19. Ibid., p. 131.
20. Ibid.
21. Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 216.
22. Krishan Kumar, '*News from Nowhere*: The Renewal of Utopia', *History of Political Thought* 14:1 (Spring 1993), 133–143 (139–140). This literalism can also be compared with Bradley J. MacDonald's argument that *Nowhere* 'attempts to engender the lived experience of a socialist world', and 'exhibits not only the role that aesthetic beauty will play in engendering glimpses of a better world, but also the way that beauty is to be lived by the inhabitants of this socialist life-world'. MacDonald reiterates the emphasis on *Nowhere* as no-where, underplaying its propagandistic function in the now-here of the fin-de-siècle socialist life-world by concentrating on its speculative attempt ontologically to prefigure a future socialist society. Bradley J. Macdonald, *William Morris and the Aesthetic Constitution of Politics* (Lanham: Lexington, 1999), pp. 150, 143.
23. D'Errico's Italian translation of *Nowhere* appeared in 1895 with the title *La Terra Promessa* [*The Promised Land*], suggesting a potential scriptural, or quasi-messianic, approach to Morris's utopianism. William Morris, *La Terra Promessa: Romanzo Utopistico di William Morris*, trans. Ernestina D'Errico (Milano: Max Kantorowicz, 1895).
24. See, for example, Lionel Trilling, 'Aggression and Utopia: A Note on William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 42:2 (1973), 214–225.
25. Abensour, 'William Morris', pp. 128–129.
26. Ibid., pp. 130–131.
27. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 188.
28. Thompson, *William Morris*, pp. 798, 789. See also Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, trans. Frank Gubb, 2 vols (Brighton: Harvester, 1978).
29. Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 789.
30. Ibid., pp. 806, 799.

31. Moylan, p. 37.
32. Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), p. 176.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 186.
35. Ibid, p. 169.
36. Frank Kitz, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal* 6:236 (19 July 1890), 228–229 (229).
37. Abensour, p. 131.
38. Ibid., p. 132.
39. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London: Verso, 1994), p. 100.
40. Ibid.
41. R. Heber Newton, 'Communism', *To-day: Monthly Magazine of Scientific Socialism* 3:16 (April 1885), 161–168 (166).
42. Fredric Jameson, 'The Politics of Utopia', *New Left Review* 25 (2004), 35–54 (43).
43. The most comprehensive account of Morris's revision of *Nowhere* is given in Michael Liberman, 'Major Textual Changes in William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41:3 (December 1986), 349–356.
44. See James Blackwell, 'Correspondence', *Commonweal* 5:170 (13 April 1889), 117; John Armsden, 'Looking Forward: A Reply to William Morris', *Commonweal* 5:177 (1 June 1889), 173; H. Davis, 'Anarchy and Communism: An Answer to William Morris', *Commonweal* 5:180 (22 June 1889), 197; Anarchist, 'Correspondence', *Commonweal* 5:180 (22 June 1889), 197; James Blackwell, 'Anarchy and Communism', *Commonweal* 5:182 (6 July 1889), 211.
45. Blackwell, 'Correspondence', 117.
46. Michael Holzman, 'Anarchism and Utopia: William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *ELH: English Literary History* 51:3 (Autumn 1984), 589–603 (591, 596).
47. Ibid., p. 596.
48. For Saint-Simon's precise formulation of this idea, see *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon*, ed. Ghiţa Ionescu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 41–42.
49. Moritz Kaufman, *Utopias; Or, Schemes of Social Improvement: From Sir Thomas More to Karl Marx* (London: C. Kegan Paul, 1879), pp. 49–66 (64).
50. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward B. Aveling (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892), p. 15.
51. Ibid., p. 16.

52. Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2008), p. 24.
53. For an assessment of Morris's effectiveness in accomplishing this task, see Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism,* pp. 177–185.
54. Charles Mowbray took Morris's joke in earnest, noting that 'the House [of Commons] […] as we read in "News from Nowhere" will one day, appropriately enough, be made a Dung Market'. Charles Mowbray, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal* 6:217 (8 March 1890), 73.
55. George Watson, *The English Ideology: Studies in the Language of Victorian Politics* (London: Allen Lane, 1973).
56. *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds, E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–1912), 18:129.