Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin on Art, Work, and Utopia

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Contents

Abstract

Oscar Wilde's essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) rarely features on university syllabi concerned with the study of political ideologies and the history of political thought. It should. This point is perhaps best illustrated when Wilde's work is juxtaposed with more widely acknowledged political masterpieces authored by his nineteenth-century socialist contemporaries Karl Marx and William Morris. Such was the project I undertook in my first academic journal article, "Morris, Wilde, and Marx on the Social Preconditions of Individual Development", published in *Political Studies* in 1996. Looking back on the piece now, some fourteen years later, I am struck by how well Wilde's essay stands the test of such a rigorous comparison.

Over the years I have continued to grapple with many of the questions raised in that early publication. I have also come to re-think some of its conclusions in the light of subsequent reading and reflection. This process of extended critical engagement recently culminated in the publication of the article reprinted in full here, "Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin on Art, Work, and Utopia". Like the earlier piece, this one begins with a comparative analysis of the political thought of Wilde and Morris. However, rather than give the last word to Marx, it considers instead the anarchist and ambiguously utopian literary political vision of our own inimitable contemporary Ursula K. Le Guin. Considering this article alongside the earlier one, it is interesting to note that in spite of their different aims, terms of comparison, and ultimate conclusions, Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism* emerges from both as an undisputed modern political masterpiece.[1]

Introduction

The anarchist scholar of utopia Marie Louise Berneri nicely suggests some of the distinctive features of the libertarian utopian tradition in the concluding lines of her book Journey through Utopia:

> The authoritarian utopias of the nineteenth century are chiefly responsible for the anti-utopian attitude prevalent among intellectuals to-day. But utopias have not always described regimented societies, centralised states and nations of robots. Diderot's Tahiti or Morris's Nowhere gave us utopias where men were free from both physical and moral compulsion, where they worked not out of necessity or a sense of duty but because they found work a pleasurable activity, where love knew no laws and where every man was an artist. (317)

In this article, I focus on one relatively neglected but, I believe, highly significant aspect of the libertarian utopian tradition highlighted in the final part of the Berneri quotation: namely, the ideal of "every man... an artist," or as I would re-formulate the idea to take account of both halves of the human race, everyone an artist. I intend to do so by considering it in relation to another idea in the above quotation, that of pleasurable labour. My primary aim in undertaking these

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conceptual tasks is to draw out what I take to be one of the most compelling and vibrant political functions of the libertarian utopian tradition in the modern world. I refer, more specifically, to the ways in which it may function as a counter-cultural challenge to the currently dominant, capitalist form of archist ideology and practice by opposing to it an anarchist or libertarian socialist utopian alternative distinguished by the qualities of self-direction, free expression, and creativity associated with artistic, non zero-sum, and nature-friendly labour.

I develop this analysis by means of a quite focused consideration of relevant politically-oriented fiction and essays by three anarchist or libertarian socialist[1] artists who attempted to formulate self-consciously utopian visions of a world in which the arts might flourish: William Morris (1834–1896), Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), and Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-). Foremost among the many reasons why I have chosen to focus on these particular utopian writers is that, in spite of differences in genre and historical circumstances, all of them engage intelligently and imaginatively with a common set of socially highly significant questions about the role and status of art in relation to labour. As I will demonstrate by means of detailed textual analysis, all three strove to imagine post-capitalist, non-coercive societies in which artistic creation would replace profit-driven economy as the fundamental aim of social life, yet they did so from revealingly different perspectives about the nature and social functions of art. A careful comparative analysis of these different perspectives may, I suggest, help to illuminate the genealogies of—and hence potential alternatives to—some particularly dogmatic and destructive ongoing ideological debates in the areas of cultural politics, ecology and the politics of work and technology, and anarchist and utopian studies. More to the point politically, it is intended as a contribution to the revolutionary project of constructing a sustainable libertarian utopian counter-cultural challenge to the capitalist form of domination that has so disfigured our world and the lives of all those who inhabit it.

The plan for the article is as follows. First, I will systematically reconstruct, analyse, and contrast the utopian visions of artistic community animating the work of Morris and Wilde. I will then conclude by arguing that Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* draws what are opposing positions in the work of Morris and Wilde into creative dialogue, and in so doing redeems the promise of anarcho-socialist revolution held out by her nineteenth-century utopian predecessors. More

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[1] The latter term (defined here, following the examples of E.P. Thompson and Noam Chomsky, simply in terms of an association with the anti-authoritarian wing of socialism) applies uncontroversially to Morris, while the former (defined here, following Marshall, as one who rejects all forms of external government and believes that society and individuals would function well without them) applies relatively uncontroversially to Wilde and Le Guin, both of whom have explicitly associated themselves with anarchism. Wilde, for example, once remarked, "I think I am rather more than a Socialist. I am something of an Anarchist, I believe; but, of course, the dynamite policy is very absurd indeed" (qtd. in Beckson 168). And while Le Guin has recently observed that she feels "unworthy" of adopting the label given her far greater interest in writing than in political activism (though of course much of her writing is eminently political, and thus may itself be understood as a form of generously open-ended artistic political activism), she also notes that in its "pacifist, not violent" form anarchism is "the only mode of political thinking" that she "feels at home with" ("Ursula Le Guin on Anarchism, Writing"). She has also repeatedly referred to *The Dispossessed* as her anarchist novel, most recently in Davis and Stillman 308. Ultimately, however, debates about political labels are not central (though they may be germane) to the argument of this article because I do not wish to "claim" the utopian writers discussed for a particular ideological tradition or traditions. My aim is much less ideologically contentious. I simply intend to consider the relevance of the work of Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin in a quite specific intellectual context (namely, the conceptual space in which art, labour and utopia intersect) in which it has hitherto been largely neglected. My primary focus, in short, is on political ideas—especially those that spill across ideological borders—rather than on the political labels that are meant to neatly encapsulate and contain them.

broadly, I argue that the comparative analysis of selected works by Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin demonstrates the desirability and theoretical plausibility of an anarchist or libertarian socialist alternative to capitalism in which artistic freedom and creativity infuses everyday labour, and by extension social life as a whole.

The Craft Utopia of William Morris

William Morris's most original and lasting contributions to political thought were his critique of useless toil under capitalism and his utopian vision of a world in which all forms of labour, even the commonest, might be made attractive. These contributions are inextricably linked insofar as Morris believed that only with the historical evolution of specifically capitalist institutions was a wedge driven between art and work.[2] As capitalism has grown the wedge has deepened, with the result that most people are now surrounded by ugliness and work and live in pain. The situation will be reversed, he claimed, only when artificial obstacles to pleasurable labour distinctive to market-engulfed capitalist societies are removed, and all have the opportunity to make their innate senses of beauty an integral part of their lives.

Morris developed his vision of a society in which work and art—and nature—blend harmoniously in a range of utopian writings, the best known of which is his socialist romance *News from Nowhere* (1891). A moneyless and stateless craft utopia, perhaps the most radically utopian feature of Nowhere is that all the work done in it is pleasurable, either because of the hope of social honour with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement even when the work itself is not pleasant; or because it has grown into a pleasurable habit, as in the case of mechanical work; or, most important of all, because everybody is an artist insofar as each is able to take some conscious, sensuous pleasure in the work itself.

We first encounter this aspect of the tale in Chapter Two, when a casual remark by an inhabitant of future London alerts the reader to a recurring feature of the romance: namely, detailed descriptions of physical objects that suggest the loving artistic care lavished on them by the multi-skilled craftspeople who populate Nowhere. Considered as a whole, these details depict an alluring and compelling vision of a society infused with art. It is not "art" as we know it, however—the prerogative of isolated and mysteriously inspired beings detached from the workaday world of ordinary people—but the living popular art produced by those able to take pleasure in their daily work.

Following his Oxford mentor John Ruskin, Morris conceived art in very broad terms as "man's expression of his joy in labour" ("Art under Plutocracy," Morton 67).[3] Understood in this way, art extended well beyond "those matters which are consciously works of art," to encompass 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… the aspect of all the externals of our life" (Morton 58).

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[2] In this article I follow Morris's example of using the terms work and labour interchangeably. Like him as well, and in contrast to much modern usage, I do not a-historically assume that all forms of work are necessarily alienating. I prefer instead to use the word "toil" to describe such labour.

[3] Morris consistently tends to conceive socialist creativity and aesthetic expression as manly self-realisation through communal labour. To this extent, his socialist aesthetic seems to imply a sharply gender-coded, exclusively masculine model of individuation, and ought to be criticised accordingly. On the gender coding of Morris's utopian writing, see Lesjak 173–174; Livesey 601–616; Marsh 107–125; and Levitas 81–99.

Artists, in turn, were simply those who were committed to standards of excellence in their daily work: "what is an artist but a workman who is determined that, whatever else happens, his work shall be excellent?" ("The Lesser Arts," Morton 51). In short, Morris understood art as a form of craftsmanship: as the desire to do a job well for its own sake.

Such definitional claims of course beg the question of why Morris's vision of art could not easily be realised in late Victorian England, or indeed in our own contemporary world. If standards of workmanship are the key to artistic production, then why can't such standards be encouraged within the framework of existing industrial capitalist societies? In fact, this same question bedevilled Morris at a quite personal level for many years. In the early 1860s, he and some friends established a business that proposed to undertake quality handiwork in various forms of decoration. By the 1870s, the firm had grown considerably and was generally regarded as a success, not only in purely commercial terms but as a trend setter among the so-called "cultivated" (i.e., wealthy) elite. However, Morris himself was dissatisfied. He explained the reasons for this dissatisfaction in a letter written in 1883 to his socialist friend Andreas Scheu:

> In spite of all the success I have had, I have not failed to be conscious that the art I have been helping to produce would fall with the death of a few of us who really care about it, that a reform in art which is founded on individualism must perish with the individuals who have set it going. Both my historical studies and my practical conflict with the philistinism of modern society have forced on me the conviction that art cannot have a real life and growth under the present system of commercialism and profit-mongering. (qtd. in Thompson 98)

Deeply egalitarian by temperament, and painfully aware of the depths into which art had fallen since commercial society divorced it from authentic popular tradition, Morris could not be content with art for a few. He demanded instead an "art which is to be made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user" ("The Art of the People," Cole 535), and it was his passionate desire for the satisfaction of this egalitarian artistic and altruistic craving that ultimately propelled him across "the river of fire" to become a revolutionary socialist.[4]

In order to appreciate the revolutionary dimension of Morris's mature conception of artistic labour, it may be helpful to situate his ideas in broad historical context. Fortunately, Morris himself made an important contribution to precisely this task in a brilliant academic lecture entitled "Art under Plutocracy."[5] The occasion for the talk was an invitation to speak at University College, Oxford, in November 1883. What made the event unusual for Morris was the prospect of addressing an audience largely composed of academics on the subject of socialist politics. He knew that he would have to take special care in what he said and how he said it. The result from Morris's point of view is a piece of work "too careful—I fear mealy-mouthed" (Kelvin 243). From the point of view of posterity, however, it is invaluable precisely because of its intellectual scrupulousness and rich historical content.

About half way through the lecture Morris summons "the witness of history." He does so to support his case that the link between labour and pleasure rests on a foundation more solid than

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[4] See Thompson, Ch.7.

[5] In this analysis of the lecture "Art under Plutocracy," I draw on original research that I published over a decade ago in my first academic journal article (Davis, "Morris, Wilde, and Marx"). Many of the questions raised in that piece have continued to engage me over the years, and while I stand by the article as a whole, it is perhaps worth noting

speculation. According to Morris, who was a recognised authority on the subject, "what is left of the art of all kinds produced in all periods and countries where hope of progress was alive before the development of the commercial system shows plainly enough to those who have eyes and understanding that pleasure did always in some degree accompany its production" (Morton 68). The guild labour of the Middle Ages, for example, developed the workman's whole intelligence. Because they were not subject to the pressures of a competitive market, Morris claimed, guild members could work leisurely, thoughtfully, and creatively. They all contributed in one way or another to the task of producing for domestic consumption, and for a time tolerated no distinction in status among their ranks except for the merit-based division between master and apprentice. During the Middle Ages, in short, in spite of its grievous material oppression and rigid social hierarchies, a craftsman worked as a person rather than as a machine.

All this began to change, Morris suggests, with the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Within a remarkably short period of time the rise of competitive markets rendered the craft-system of labour obsolete. In its place it left the workshop-system, an arrangement for organising production characterised by division of labour to the highest degree. According to Morris, the resulting dehumanisation of work inevitably took its toll on the arts. Among the more "intellectual" arts affected were architecture, sculpture, and painting. Among the "decorative" arts degraded were house building, joinery and carpentry, smithy work, pottery and glass making, and weaving. Like those who laboured on them, the various arts were fractured into intellectual and manual categories, and subjected to the time constraints of competitive market demand.

Morris's tale of decline extends into the eighteenth century. As the workshop-system continued to fill the demands of ever-widening markets, so the argument goes, two competing manufacturing ideologies developed in tandem with it. The first was the older idea that the main aim of manufacture is the production of quality goods. The second was the newer notion that it be carried on for the sake of a profit. For a time, neither ideology predominated over the other. The consequence was that some interest continued to be taken in the making of wares. According to Morris, the condition of art and labour had deteriorated considerably since the Middle Ages, but had not yet reached the depths of the machine era.

As controversial as Morris's reading of art history may be to those educated on the simplistic and reductive "medieval bad/modern good" model, his account of the invention and use of machinery in the nineteenth century is even more so. Perhaps that is why the prevailing popular image of Morris is of a quaint wallpaper maker completely out of touch with the technological developments of his time. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Consider by way of explanation of this point the following important insight from his lecture "The Aims of Art" (1887). Why, asks Morris, does a reasonable man use a machine in the production of things in which artistic form of some sort is possible? He uses it surely to save his labour. In some cases this results in an unmixed gain. No art is lost, and leisure or time for more pleasurable work is gained. As Morris acknowledges, there are some things which a machine can do as well as a man's tool-assisted hand can do them. He need not, for example, grind his corn in a hand-quern. A trickle of water, a wheel, and a few simple contrivances will do it all perfectly well. In other cases, by contrast, the use of a machine results in loss as well as gain. Some art is lost, but enough free time is gained to make the compromise worthwhile. A man who has to weave plain cloth but finds the job tedious, for example, might reasonably use a power-loom that will weave the

that I have revised a number of its judgements in the light of subsequent reading and reflection.

cloth nearly as well as a hand-loom. In doing so, he forgoes the small advantage of the little extra art in the cloth, but gains leisure or time for more pleasurable work. What both cases have in common is their reasonableness.[6] They are instances of how a reasonable man would behave if he were free from compulsion. Not being free, men act very differently. They use machines to produce knick-knacks even when doing so costs them dearly in time, energy, happiness, and even humanity.

The institutional causes of such irrational behaviour become clear in the light of Morris's analysis of the nineteenth century in his lecture "Art under Plutocracy." According to Morris, the invention of machinery created tremendous opportunities for minimising unpleasant and painful labour: "though I have said that the labour of which art can form a part should be accompanied by pleasure, no one could deny that there is some necessary labour even which is not pleasant in itself, and plenty of unnecessary labour which is merely painful. If machinery had been used for minimizing such labour, the utmost ingenuity would scarcely have been wasted on it" (Morton 73). Why, then, did manufacturers not invest the resources necessary to develop such machines? Why did they instead support the development of machines designed to expropriate the skills of workers?[7] And why did they frequently abstain from using already available machines to relieve the worker from the roughest and most repulsive work? Morris's answer to these questions demonstrates why he, not any of the major manufacturers of his day, ought to be considered a champion of the humane use of machinery:

> The phrase labour-saving machinery is elliptical, and means machinery which saves the cost of labour, not the labour itself, which will be expended when saved on tending other machines. For a doctrine which… began to be accepted under the workshop-system, is now universally received, even though we are yet short of the complete development of the system of the Factory. (Morton 73)

The doctrine Morris is referring to is the gospel of profit, according to which the essential aim of manufacture is the profit of the capitalist: "Briefly, the doctrine is this, that the essential aim of manufacture is making a profit… its corollary is, that labour is necessarily unlimited, and that to attempt to limit it is not so much foolish as wicked, whatever misery may be caused to the community by the manufacture and sale of the wares made" (Morton 73–74).

In these short passages from "Art under Plutocracy," Morris gestures to an exceedingly important insight deliberately suppressed or conveniently overlooked by those unsympathetic to his

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[6] No doubt contributing to the impression that Morris was a Luddite is his failure to allow that machines might make works of art. Be this as it may, he did envisage an important labour-saving role for machinery in his craft utopia. As Old Hammond remarks in chapter fifteen of *News from Nowhere*, "All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without" (Cole 91). What he objected to strenuously was not technology per se, but the great intangible machine of commercial tyranny. Thus in his utopian vision people would be the masters of their machines, and not slaves to them, as they were in Morris's time and still are today.

[7] Taking up this same point in *Capital*, Karl Marx writes, "It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt." As evidence for this claim, he quotes relevant testimony from several industrialists, one of whom triumphantly remarks that the self-acting mule is "a creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes… when capital enlists science into her service, the refractory hand of labour will always be taught docility" (qtd. in Lummis 82). Subsequent scholarship has amply confirmed Marx's argument. While the relevant literature on the subject is vast, Harry Braverman's classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) is probably still unsurpassed.

anti-capitalist politics. The invention of machinery in the nineteenth century opened up tremendous new opportunities for relieving people from pain and drudgery in labour. At the very least, these technological advances should have made available to worker-citizens an unprecedented freedom to weigh the relative advantages and disadvantages of output expansion and improved working conditions. In fact, the reduction of the working day since the early Victorian period has been minuscule by comparison with the volume of output expansion. How and why this seemingly irrational state of affairs came to be may be explained not by the exercise of free, democratic choice (as some of Morris's critics would have it), but by the un-checked, momentum-gathering, and all-consuming advance over three centuries of profit markets. In the early capitalist period, before the formation of labour markets completed the subordination of production to exchange, it might have been reasonable to claim that the relative disparity between output expansion and toil reduction was due to consumer demand for what could then be produced. In Morris's time, and in our own, such a claim no longer makes sense because the economic structures of advanced capitalism deny to all but a self-interested few the power to decide what, how much, and under what circumstances to produce. Economic power in advanced capitalism is concentrated in enterprises so situated that they have a compelling reason to assess productive activity solely in terms of its value in increasing growth and profit. Treatment of the energy and time of labourers as other than a factor of production is simply not a realistic option in a fiercely competitive market system where the penalty for sustained profit losses is the possibility of insolvency.

The above historical analysis goes some way to explaining why Morris advocated a revolutionary libertarian socialist alternative to capitalism. From his perspective, piecemeal reforms of capitalism divorced from a larger revolutionary strategy to overthrow it altogether would be ineffectual and even counterproductive, insofar as the imperative of the quest for ever-greater profit is one of its constitutive defining features. And while it is quite true that his conception of revolutionary strategy evolved in response to changing historical circumstances, he never wavered in his studied conviction that the system of organising labour for individual profit is unsustainable, and that as he once put it "the whole people have now got to choose" between "the confusion resulting from the break up of that system" and the determination to organise labour instead for "the livelihood of the community" ("How We Live and How We Might Live," Morton 157). In either case the transition to a post-capitalist world would be fraught with difficulties, the former associated with social breakdown and ecological collapse, and the latter with the violent resistance likely to be mounted by those with a strong vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Only the second choice, however, offered a plausible hope of a sustainable alternative way of life based on co-operation rather than perpetual war.

Morris's utopian speculations on post-capitalist forms of artistic labour may be understood within this context as a means of stimulating an urgently necessary democratic dialogue about the relationship between art, work, nature, and society. Unlike so many other utopian writers, Morris did not attempt to prescribe in law-like detail how people ought to live their lives. Rather, he developed a new, chastened and anti-perfectionist style of utopian writing that was neither prescriptive nor prophetic but heuristic. It was a style, in other words, meant to help awaken ordinary people's latent hopes and desires for a radically egalitarian, co-operative, and creative form of life; provoke them to reflect on, and discuss and debate collectively, the rationality of such hopes and desires; and give them the courage and confidence necessary to strive for the studied convictions that emerged from this process of constructive imagination, reflection, and democratic dialogue. As Morris himself put the point, "Education towards Revolution seems to

me to express in three words what our policy should be; towards that New Birth of Society which we know must come, and which, therefore, we must strive to help forward so that it may come with as little confusion and suffering as may be" (Salmon 126). Towards this end, he not only contributed hundreds of intelligent and accessible articles to a journal (the Commonweal) whose primary audience was the British working classes. He also (as Salmon observes) between 1883 and 1890 addressed more than 1,000 political and artistic gatherings, and was heard in person by as many as 250,000 people.[8]

In those of his publications that explore the possible forms of art and work in the new society, Morris articulates a number of imaginative "hints" as to how they might be reconnected and thus transformed such that all working people would be artists and creators able to take an intelligent interest in their labour. In *News from Nowhere*, for example, he depicts a society organised around artisan production, with its emphasis on individual initiative, responsibility, and self-imposed time-scales and rhythms set in an environment of spontaneous co-operation. In this profoundly democratic society, people are free to decide for themselves what they need and want, balancing those desires against how much work they want to do.[9] In stark contrast to our own world, where most of the work done is useless toil in the service of commerce or social control, in Nowhere everyone takes tremendous pleasure in creating things that are both beautiful and useful to others. Refined machine tools are used to relieve people of irksome labour, but otherwise are done without. As a result, technology has lost its destructive dynamism, and humanity neither conquers nature nor is conquered by it. The denizens of Nowhere have recovered a strong sense of place rooted in the land, and their community life is bound together by the natural order of work rather than the coercive powers of the state.

Morris's critics have replied dismissively that this utopian vision is sheer romanticism, an anachronistic throwback to the pre-industrial era and the non-market economies of "primitive" societies. And even otherwise far more sympathetic fellow socialists have responded with scepticism to the notion that it is possible to have both the abundance of material goods made available by the ruthless productive methods of the global market economy, and the transformation in the nature of work facilitated by its abolition. My own considered view is that Morris may have the proverbial last laugh, if one can speak of laughter when considering the revolutionary political implications of the current global ecological crisis.

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[8] Dialogic in its dynamic and popular mode of delivery and publication, Morris's utopianism is also dialogic in its pluralistic and inclusive approach to alternative radical visions. The open, constructive, and dialogic cast of Morris's mind is particularly evident on the few occasions when he reflects about the nature and purposes of utopia. Consider, for example, his remarks in a June 1889 *Commonweal* review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. According to Morris, "the only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author" (Salmon 420). Those who read them as "conclusive statements of facts and rules of action" ignore their necessary partiality. Utopias, he explains further in this review and elsewhere, are necessarily partial for at least two reasons. First, individual tempers differ, and what is a dream to one person may be a nightmare to another. Second, the dreams of any utopian author are conditioned by, and responsive to, the historical circumstances in which he or she lives. As Morris and Bax put the matter in their jointly authored *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, "no man can really think himself out of his own days… his palace of days to come can [therefore] only be constructed by the aspirations forced on him by his present surroundings, and from his dreams of the life of the past, which themselves cannot fail to be more or less unsubstantial imaginings" (Morris and Bax 17–18). As these remarks make abundantly clear, Morris was well aware of the limitations of the perfectionist utopian tradition. Crucially, however, rather than abandon utopianism altogether, he embraces it in a chastened and anti-perfectionist but paradoxically more revolutionary form.

[9] See Lummis, Ch. 3.

In the first place, while it is true that Morris's largely craft utopian vision of creative and artistic work would entail a significant slowing of the present dynamism of technical advance, it does not necessarily follow that this vision is thus (as H.G. Wells and George Orwell, amongst others, believed) doomed to remain an unrealised dream. C. Douglas Lummis's comments in this regard are apt:

> Some may object that it is futile at this late date to lament the passing of the pre-industrial craft worker. Industrialism is here, and 'You can't turn back the clock.' What a poor analogy this old saw is: in fact, you can turn back clocks: they have handles for doing just that. What you cannot do is make the past itself happen again: the events cannot be repeated, and the people are gone. But the things known by the people in the past can be known by us as well. As if I couldn't break a walnut with a hammer, wear cloth of woven wool, or drink water from a clay cup because these are neolithic technologies! (Lummis 103)

Second, as Ruth Kinna has pointed out, Morris freely acknowledged that material goods would not be produced in any great abundance in a society infused with art. Because such goods would be individually crafted and vested with meaning, they would only be available in limited quantities. However, Morris believed that this fall in supply would be more than offset by the skill and thoughtful attention lavished on available wares, as well as by the resulting improvements in their durability. Moreover, as artists rather than mere consumers people would develop a love for well-crafted products, and would be less likely to become bored with their possessions (Kinna 51–52). As Old Hammond explains in *News from Nowhere*, "The wares which we make are made because they are needed... So that whatever is made is good, and thoroughly fit for its purpose" (Cole 90).

Third, Morris's revolutionary romantic response to industrialism is not only compatible with, but is both validated by and has been a direct and important influence on, the rapidly growing radical ecological movements and counter-cultural communal experiments found in even the most industrialised nations.[10] The similarities are striking, among them the shared commitment to a decentralised, low-growth, and ecologically sustainable economy; the considered belief that such an economy would provide more profound forms of fulfilment (in terms of sociality, mutuality, rewarding work, cleaner air and water, greater self-reliance, harmony with nature, social peace, etc.) than its consumerist counterpart; the distinction made between needs and wants in persuading people of the value of fundamental social change; a thorough re-rethinking of the nature and value of work; ambivalence about modern technology; and a recognition of the importance of culture in radical political strategies for eco-friendly social reconstruction. To be sure, there are differences as well, most notably the wealth of rigorous scientific evidence now available to support the sort of post-industrial ecological ideas which Morris articulated over a century ago in more poetic fashion. Nevertheless, Morris remains an abiding influence on contemporary ecologism, both in its strictly eco-socialist variants and otherwise.[11]

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[10] For more on the revolutionary romantic tradition, see Max Blechman's excellent collection of essays, *Revolutionary Romanticism*. On the subject of Morris and the revolutionary romantic tradition in England, see also Pierson and Thompson.

[11] See, for example, Macdonald 287–304; O'Sullivan 169–181; Dobson 187–188; de Geus, Ch. 6; and Bookchin 9, 75, 431.

Among recent ecological works that both draw upon and creatively develop Morris's ideas in a way that turns the tables on his unlimited economic growth oriented critics, Keekok Lee's *Social Philosophy and Ecological Scarcity* is one of the most notable. According to Lee, a civilisation based on the promise of an inexhaustible supply of material goods—and one that consequently urges as the criteria of the "good society" and the "good life" ever expanding economic growth, ever increasing possession and consumption of external material things—is both unsustainable and morally bankrupt. In opposition to the blind alley of the consumerist society and its associated morality of consumption, Lee proposes as an alternative what she refers to as an "artistic morality" based on an "artistic mode of production." Like Morris, she understands the terms "art" and "the artist" in a very broad sense. Like Morris as well, she links art and labour in such a way that both concepts are radically transformed. Rejecting what she refers to as the "cornucopic" version of socialism propounded by Marx on the grounds that it is incompatible with thermodynamic and ecological reality, she turns instead to Fourier and Morris in order to develop an "ascetic or frugal" model of socialism that unambiguously rejects both the instrumental view of work as a curse and the ruthless exploitation of nature to meet ever increasing needs. Morris is so important, she suggests, primarily because with him the artistic mode of production acquires an aesthetic dimension (Lee 274–275).

However, unlike him she explicitly draws a distinction between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of artistic labour even as she recognises their interconnection. For Lee, the defining characteristics of the artistic mode of production are both aesthetic and ethical. They are aesthetic insofar as: first, there are no external ends to which the activity is subordinated, such as reward, fame, honour, and so on; second, the artist strives to create an object which is dictated by the laws of art peculiar to the object; and third, artist and material are part of a single process of production so that interaction between the two is not a means to an externally imposed end, but is simply a part of the activity which is the artist's end. They are ethical and social as well insofar as "qua artist" she or he need not look upon others as hostile rivals and competitors but as mutually inspiring; and the activity performed enables the individual to dedicate her or himself to something larger than purely private ends, "to an ideal or movement which one is helping to sustain and enrich." In this way, Lee concludes, "conflict between individual and social demands may become muted and less polarised" (223–224).

This point is important because it highlights a feature of Morris's craft utopian vision that in my opinion ought to be more carefully and critically scrutinised. As the commentary from Lee's work just quoted makes clear, she imagines that the transition to an artistic mode of production would reduce the conflict between individual and social demands. She does not suppose that it would eliminate entirely all lasting public disagreement about fundamental matters of principle. Morris, by contrast, supposes precisely this. Consider, for example, the following passage from a book he authored jointly with the socialist philosopher E. Belfort Bax:

> As regards the future form of the moral consciousness, we may safely predict that
> it will be in a sense a return on a higher level to the ethics of the older world, with
> the difference that the limitation of scope to the kinship group in its narrower sense,
> which was one of the causes of the dissolution of ancient society, will disappear, and
> the identification with social interests will be so complete that any divorce between
> the two will be inconceivable to the average man. (Morris and Bax 298)

The ethics of the older world to which Morris and Bax refer are the ethics of the tribal societies that predated the development of ancient Greek civilisation. Unlike them, the ethics of a future communist society would be both conscious and universal, with a socialist love of humanity dialectically subsuming both kinship ethics and the world's major religions:

> When this beggarly period has been supplanted by one in which Socialism is realized, will not the system of morality, the theory of life, be all-embracing, and can it be other than the Socialistic theory?… No separate system of ethics will then be needed; there will be no protest needed against the theory of life which will then be commonly held, we shall only have to guard the freedom which we have won. (Morris, William Morris 302)

In short, Morris appears to believe that the individual and the social will cease to conflict in any enduring and fundamental way in communist society because the individual will realise her or himself in social perfection.[12]

This perfectionist conception of social ethics—an anomaly, it should be said, in Morris's otherwise remarkably anti-perfectionist utopian output—in turn influences his aesthetic ideas.[13] Art may be for Morris man's expression of pleasure in his labour, but only when that pleasure is derived from serving what one takes to be the needs of others. Only when art is "social" and "organic"; only when the individual subordinates his freedom of hand and mind to the "co-operative harmony" of the community; only when the artist produces goods for "use," subject to the "demands of the public," rather than succumbing to the "affectation and effeminacy" of "the production of beauty for beauty's sake"; only then according to Morris will art take up where it left off with the decline of the Middle Ages (Zabel 120, 145, 110, 132). Only when people work and live for others, in other words, will art flourish once again.

The difficulty with this line of reasoning has been nicely articulated by even so convinced an advocate of a new ethic of work as David Meakin. If, as Meakin remarks, a balanced view of the ideal relationship between work and art entails on the one hand freeing work as far as possible from the rule of mechanical efficiency whilst on the other hand seeing art in its potential relationship with purposive social activity, then we must acknowledge that this is a delicate balance indeed. As he goes on to observe, no one could deny the impoverishment that would result from restricting art to the decorative arts and crafts, or from applying too rigorously or unimaginatively the criterion of social usefulness (Meakin 139–40).

Is this criticism applicable to Morris's utopian writing? Judging by the passages just quoted from his writings on art and society, I believe that to a certain extent it is. Consider as additional evidence the depiction of literature and book learning in *News from Nowhere*. To cite but one relevant example, in chapter twenty-two we encounter the "grumbler," a socially maladjusted elderly man who persistently laments the loss of the "splendid works of imagination and intellect"

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[12] In Morris's utopian imagination the denizens of a fully realised socialist society may differ in their opinions about public policy issues, and indeed differ to such an extent that a democratic vote is necessary to settle the dispute, but their disagreements will not and could not possibly concern fundamental matters of value. As Hammond explains to Guest in *News from Nowhere*, "Amongst us, our differences concern matters of business, and passing events as to them, and could not divide men permanently. As a rule, the immediate outcome shows which opinion on a given subject is the right one; it is a matter of fact, not of speculation" (Cole 81).

[13] See my article "Isaiah Berlin, William Morris, and the Politics of Utopia" (Davis 56–86) for a more extended consideration of Morris's ethical perfectionism.

produced in past times. In response his granddaughter Clara exclaims exasperatedly, "Books, books! Always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much?" (Cole 140). The reason for this exasperation soon becomes clear. Clara is reacting vehemently against what we are encouraged to regard as the class-deformed expressions of a malignant culture that is deeply alienated from nature and the body and cut off from everyday life.

Understandable as Clara's reaction may be, it does not follow that all the artistic products of that culture ought to be tarred with the same brush, or that even the most socially insensitive of them might not have other redeeming qualities. Nor does it follow that what is now unfortunately commonly referred to as "high art" (literature, music, dance, theatre, painting, sculpture, etc.) ought to be consigned in a more egalitarian and democratic future to a subordinate status comparable to that now reserved for the decorative arts. Yet that is precisely what occurs in fictional form in Morris's *News from Nowhere*, which at times reads like a kind of tolerant and good-humoured "revenge" against the injustices and inequalities of nineteenth-century Britain (Cole 19).[14] To be sure, there are no formal controls on aesthetic expression such as may be found in Plato's *Republic* and so many subsequent archist utopias. Nevertheless, introspective, visionary, avant-garde, or critical aesthetes and intellectuals are a rarity in Morris's craft utopia, a breed apart tolerated rather than encouraged in a thoroughly socialised world in which artistic activity is judged primarily by the gender-coded "manly" criterion of social usefulness.

The Artist's Utopia of Oscar Wilde

By way of a corrective to this perhaps too pronounced functionalist tendency in Morris's writing, it may be helpful to turn briefly to the writing of another artist who imagined an anarchist or libertarian socialist utopia in exactly the same year (1891) that *News from Nowhere* was published in book form. In many ways, the utopian vision of a society infused with art that is articulated in Oscar Wilde's classic essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is strikingly similar to Morris's.[15] Like Morris, Wilde conceives his utopian vision in quite radical terms as an expression of a root and branch repudiation of capitalist society. He suggests that charity and other palliative measures do more harm than good by preventing people from realising the full horrors of the system of private property, and advocates the reconstruction of society on such a basis that poverty would be impossible. He does so, moreover, from a distinctively socialist perspective insofar as he believes that private property and the wage-based society must be abolished in order to make way for a community in which all will share in the general prosperity and happiness. Like Morris as well, he unambiguously rejects authoritarian socialism in favour of a libertarian variant. He emphasises the values of freedom from any form of government and from compulsion in work, and links these notions to an ideal of universal individual self-realisation associated with the diffusion of art into all aspects of life.

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[14] Though architecture is prized because it is a co-operative and socially "useful" art. See the relevant comments by Morris quoted in Egbert 450.

[15] I do not have sufficient space in this article to fit the writers discussed into a more historical frame. It is nevertheless worth noting that although the existing evidence is inconclusive, Wilde very likely read Morris's *News from Nowhere* when it appeared serially in *The Commonweal* magazine between January and October 1890, and thus was well aware of its contents as he composed his own utopian essay. Like Morris, he was also influenced by the work of John Ruskin.

Where Morris and Wilde differ most clearly is the latter's much more emphatically individu-alistic conception of art. This point is apparent from the very first page of Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, which opens with a perspective on altruism diametrically opposed to the one implicit in Morris's work: "The chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Social-ism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody" (Wilde 1). For both Morris and Wilde, one of the reasons why capitalism ought to be opposed is because it stifles the artistic impulses latent in all human beings. Each means something very different from the other, however, when he uses the term "artistic." For Morris, the paradigm of an artistic community is the medieval guild. He admires in particular the paternalistic moral force that the guild ideally exercised over its members—its power in fairly apportioning the work at hand, in distributing the rewards of labour, in checking competition, in ensuring production for use and not profit, and in maintaining a standard of value. For Wilde, by contrast, the exer-cise of paternalistic moral force in the realm of artistic production would be a prime example of that "sordid necessity of living for others" which has spoiled so many lives. The artistic impulse is not something that responds to the "clamorous claims of others," and has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Rather, it emerges naturally from a mature and self-expressive personality. In the present stunted and stifling condition of society, he believes, the expression of artistic personality is confined to the work of a few highly gifted and materially privileged individuals who succeed in isolating themselves from the demands of the public. In a libertarian socialist or anarchist society in which the ordinary daily work of the world is done by machines, wealth is distributed equitably, and people have developed an unselfish respect for the individual autonomy and creativity of others, everybody would have the opportunity to express himself or herself in an artistic manner.

Unlike Morris, Wilde is in his discussion of art particularly sensitive to the danger of what John Stuart Mill famously referred to in his essay *On Liberty* as a "tyranny of the majority." According to Mill, those who wish to protect individual liberty must be vigilant against more than just the tyranny of the magistrate. They must guard as well against "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own" (Mill 171). Wilde articulates a similar point in The Soul of Man, though of course in his own inimitably epigrammatic way, and with particular reference to the sphere of art. Specifically, he suggests that while tremendous progress has been made over time in limiting social interference with the individualism of speculative forms of thought such as science and philosophy, the attempt to interfere with the individualism of imaginative art persists in quite an aggressive and brutalising way. As evidence for this proposition, he cites the damage done to the English novel and the dramatic arts by the exercise of popular authority. More specifically, he observes that any attempt to extend the subject-matter of art has provoked a fearful reaction on the part of the public, who regard such artistic innovation as a disturbing form of individualism. And they are right to do so, for "art is the most intense mode of Individualism that the world has known" (Wilde 17). "Art is Individualism," in fact, and "therein lies its immense value. For what it seeks to disturb is monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine" (19). In other words, far more so than Morris, Wilde acknowledges a positive role for

the socially disruptive individualistic dimension of art. If for Morris this anarchic aspect of art is nothing more than a symptom of its degeneration under capitalism that will disappear with the re-unification of art and labour under socialism, for Wilde it is a sign of social vitality and an essential safeguard against the ever-present threat of social conformity and stagnation posed by popular authority masquerading as guardian of the peace.

Critics of Wilde's conception of art in *The Soul of Man* have labeled it "elitist" or "aristocratic," and there is some truth in this charge though not to the extent and in the way that most of them assume. For example, it is frequently claimed that his utopian vision of a society composed of artistic individuals engaged in "cultivated leisure" reflects his own belief in a slothful or hedonistic mode of life based primarily on self-development through commodity consumption. However, the evidence of the text suggests otherwise. While Wilde does indeed speculate at one point in the essay that "cultivated leisure... and not labour, is the aim of man" (16), the passage in question ought to be interpreted in context, for Wilde makes it very clear only a few sentences earlier that by "labour" he means in this particular instance "all unintellectual labour, all monotonous, dull labour, all labour that deals with dreadful things, and involves unpleasant conditions" (15). In addition, in the remainder of the sentence quoted above, he imagines a wide variety of non-consumerist ways in which individuals emancipated from the tyranny of want might make use of their new-found freedom: "while Humanity will be amusing itself, or enjoying cultivated leisure—which, and not labour, is the aim of man—or making beautiful things, or reading beautiful things, or simply contemplating the world with admiration and delight, machinery will be doing all the necessary and unpleasant work" (16). In short, like Morris, Wilde envisages in *The Soul of Man* an exceptionally creative, imaginative, beautiful, and joyful way of life very different from what passes for "the good life" in contemporary consumerist societies.

It is also frequently claimed that Wilde's conception of artistic individualism in the essay is elitist insofar as it can only possibly be realised by a few. However, Wilde himself does not draw such a conclusion. To the contrary, he refers to "the great actual Individualism latent and potential in mankind generally" (7), an individualism that has been corrupted by political and economic power in hitherto existing societies, but which in a truly non-authoritarian society would blossom naturally and simply as a flower. And when it does, he speculates, it will be infinitely varied, because "there are as many perfections as there are imperfect men" (12).

In what sense, then, may Wilde's utopian vision be characterised as elitist? In order to answer this question in a fair and balanced fashion, it may be helpful to recall briefly why and in what ways Morris believed that art ought to be democratised. For Morris, one of the most distressing features of modern life was the wedge driven between art and labour by the historical triumph of capitalism. He demanded a revolutionary change in the basis of society that would lead to a world in which work and art—and nature—blend harmoniously. This harmony is made possible by the fact that work is no longer a curse entailing the ruthless exploitation of nature to meet ever-increasing human needs. Instead it has become a source of joy, an infinitely rewarding co-operative endeavour in which all contribute voluntarily and usefully to the support of the community as a whole. It is also a well-spring of living popular art insofar as people no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible overwork are apt to crave beauty in their lives, and to begin to learn once again how to ornament their creations by emulating the products of nature.

For Wilde, by contrast, artistic beauty and socially useful labour must be firmly separated. The former is the purely individualistic product of a unique temperament. The latter is the responsibility of the state, which in Wilde's utopia is to be constituted as a non-governing voluntary

association that organises labour and manufactures and distributes necessary commodities. Any attempt to bridge this divide between individualistic art and social labour will surely lead to the loss of both: "Now, I have said that the community by means of organisation of machinery will supply the useful things, and that the beautiful things will be made by the individual. This is not merely necessary, but it is the only possible way by which we can get either the one or the other" (16). The reason why this is so, according to Wilde, is that an individual who has to make things for the use of others, and with reference to their wants and wishes, does not work with interest, and consequently cannot put into his work what is best in him. Conversely, the moment an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, "he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or a dishonest tradesman" (17).

The difficulty with this line of reasoning is that it is premised on precisely those capitalist-era, class-based distinctions between intellectual and manual labour, socially respected artists and socially reviled craftsmen, that in a socialist society would presumably be obsolete. It is difficult to conceive how a socialist society could maintain such hierarchical, status-oriented distinctions and still be recognisably socialist. One possible reply to this conundrum might be that while the distinctions themselves would linger on they would cease to have any practical meaning because machines would do all the utilitarian work necessary to sustain civilisation. But this reply in turn raises more questions than it answers. Specifically, it elides all of the profoundly challenging questions hinted at or implied by Morris about the wisdom of embracing a machine-based civilisation. For example, who will design, control, and operate the machines in Wilde's technocratic utopia? Would members of the general population be expected to volunteer to undertake such tasks on a temporary basis? If so, why would they do so, knowing that not only would no social honour accrue to their altruistic behaviour, but also that they would, on the contrary, be regarded derisively as dull or amusing craftsmen? And if, as might be expected in such circumstances, the necessary volunteers did not come forward, would "the state" in Wilde's utopia be composed of a permanent sub-class of non-artists whose aim in life was to secure the material pre-conditions for the free individual development of others? Finally, even granting the very remote possibility that technology might be developed by self-regarding, scientifically-oriented individuals to such an extent and in such a way that it was entirely non-exploitative and largely self-operating, what impact would this elaborate technology have on the environment, and on humanity's relationship with nature? Would nature continue to be regarded, as it is now, merely as a disposable resource for human consumption?

Such difficulties and lacunae notwithstanding, Wilde's exceptionally intelligent and engaging essay raises some profoundly challenging questions of its own about the (historically variable) nature and social functions of art. For example, is art social primarily because it stands opposed to society as an autonomous entity unconstrained by conventional social norms? Or is it social in the radically democratic, popular, and labour-oriented sense suggested by Morris? Can it be both, and if so, to what extent are these ideas necessarily in tension with one another?

The heart of the matter, I contend, is that Morris and Wilde each glimpse a fragment of a larger truth about the relationship between art and society. As John Stuart Mill observed in his essay *On Liberty*, truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is primarily a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites. Truth in this sense is not the unitary phenomenon so many monistic thinkers have supposed it to be, but a multifaceted affair that eludes easy classification by those who view only one side of it. In what follows I will argue that both Morris and Wilde are right in part, and that what is now needed in the way of a sustainable counter-cultural challenge to

capitalism is an anarchist utopian cultural politics that balances individual and society in a way that simultaneously protects the autonomy of art and firmly rejects the assumption that it must be something precious and elitist maintained by the joyless labour of an enslaved majority. I intend to make this argument not abstractly, but in the context of a close textual reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*.

Art and Anarchy in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*

In many ways, the utopian societies depicted in Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* are strikingly similar.[16] Both are based on a profoundly ecological understanding of the world not as some sort of machine, but as a vast and complexly interdependent organism. Both have abolished the profit-oriented institutions of their ruthlessly competitive and violent capitalist forebears, and organised social life instead according to the principle of from each according to his or her initiative and ability, to each according to his or her needs. Both have opted for a pace of technological growth much slower than that of profit-driven societies, but without regressing to pre-technological tribalism. Both wholeheartedly respect the values of free individual choice and personal responsibility, and are committed to the idea that people flourish best without imposed authority and external coercion. Both are decentralised, composed of small, dispersed communities that are self-regulating and self-governing. Both make space for misfits. Both are deeply committed to the ideals of equality and mutual aid, and strive for a condition in which human beings are at peace with themselves and their environment. Both originate in revolution, and acknowledge the enduring reality of human suffering.

Both are also premised on the belief that people free to choose what work they wish to do when they wish to do it will engage in creative pursuits that contribute to social and individual well being. In *The Dispossessed*, this philosophy is encapsulated in the words of Laia Odo, the revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist thinker whose writings inspired the anarchist utopian settlement on Anarres:

> A child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skillful maker, of anyone doing needed work and doing it well—this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection, and of sociality as a whole. (Le Guin 247)

In keeping with Odo's teachings about the natural and durable joy of doing needed work and doing it well, Pravic, the language of Anarres, employs the same word for both work and play (a different word is used to express the idea of drudgery). Those of Le Guin's readers acculturated in modern capitalist societies may, of course, be somewhat sceptical about such a conflation of

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[16] For a rare comparison of the two utopias, see Tod. Interestingly, Le Guin had read Morris before she began writing *The Dispossessed* (see Le Guin, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown" 25), but was much more strongly influenced by Morris's anarchist contemporary Peter Kropotkin and her own anarchist contemporary Paul Goodman. Like Wilde, she was also very much influenced by the writings of Lao Tzu. For more on these and other intellectual influences see Philip E. Smith's essay "Unbuilding Walls," and Le Guin's introduction to her short story "The Day Before the Revolution."

terms. In our world, work and play are generally regarded as antonyms. The former is associated with the economic compulsion to "earn a living," and the latter with simple idleness or "leisure pursuits" (pithily defined by Bob Black as "nonwork for the sake of work," and more wittily as "time spent recovering from work and in the frenzied but hopeless attempt to forget about work").[17] In Anarresti society, by contrast, there is no economic compulsion to work because everybody simply takes what material goods they need from the communal stores. An entirely voluntary activity free of coercively imposed external restriction, work is no longer a curse but, instead, a form of play integrally associated with sociability, festivity, and joyful artistic creation.

Like Morris, Le Guin does not simply tell her readers that this is the case. Rather, she conveys in imaginative and persuasive detail the quotidian drama of people in such a society going about their ordinary business. In Chapter Four, for example, we accompany Shevek, the novel's main character, as he explores for the very first time the town of Abbenay in which he will subsequently complete the bulk of his groundbreaking life's work in temporal physics. With him we marvel at its deep green fields and wide clean streets fronted almost exclusively by low rise buildings (the only exceptions being the "strong, spare towers" of the wind turbines). We experience its hustle and bustle, with people everywhere engaged in activity of some kind or another, and pass through the open squares that constitute its working heart. As we do so, several features of working life on Anarres stand out immediately by virtue of their stark contrast with what one might find in our own towns and cities.

First and perhaps most startlingly, all the varied work being done is out in the open and plainly visible. Whereas in modern capitalist societies productive activity is generally hidden away behind walls (as it is in the novel in the archist capitalist state of A-Io), and "salespeople" in a bewildering array of glass-fronted shops have no relation to the items they are selling but that of possession, on Anarres all working life is open to the eye and to the hand. Workshops and factories front on squares or open yards, and their doors are left open. As a result, when Shevek passes a glassworks he notices a workman "dipping up a great molten blob as casually as a cook serves soup" (99). Proceeding past a busy yard where foamstone is cast for construction, he observes the gang foreman, "a big woman in a smock white with dust… supervising the pouring of a cast with a loud and splendid flow of language" (99); shortly thereafter, he is overwhelmed by the blast of steam and conversation emanating from the wide-open doors of a laundry.

Second, having eliminated all the unproductive work that in capitalist societies serves no other purpose than commerce or social control, the typical Anarresti working day is much shorter than our own. In chapter four we know this to be the case when Shevek's mother indignantly remarks of a shockingly understaffed medical clinic, "some of these aides and doctors are working eight hours a day!" (121). The point is confirmed in Chapter Six when we learn that most Anarresti work five to seven hours a day, with two to four days off every ten days.

Third, everybody shares in the necessary drudgery work. Typically, such work is organised by means of a rotational system in which people are expected to volunteer every ten days or so for communal tasks. Nobody is compelled to do so, but in practice few fail to make themselves available. In part this is because the process has become a social routine. In part as well it is due to the deeply ingrained spirit of mutual aid that so noticeably distinguishes Anarresti society from its capitalist counterpart on the neighbouring world of Urras. No doubt some of Le Guin's more capitalist-minded readers will find this aspect of the narrative unpersuasive. Perhaps anticipating

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[17] See Black, "The Abolition of Work," in Ehrlich 237.

precisely such a reaction, Le Guin plots a scene in which in the course of a private dinner at the home of one of his Urrasti hosts Shevek is asked why his fellow anarchists do communal dirty work at all if it is organised on an entirely voluntary basis. His answer suggests a wide range of plausible motivations: the fact that the work is done together; the desire for a challenge or for variety of labour; the opportunity it presents to show off; the need to gain the respect of one's fellows; and, perhaps most importantly of all, the recognition of the lasting pleasure that comes from doing needed work and doing it well. Having thus satisfied his host's curiosity, Shevek proceeds quite innocently to ask him who does the dirty work on Urras, "I never see it being done. It's strange. Who does it?... Are they paid more?" The deeply unsettling implications of the reply—"For dangerous work, sometimes. For merely menial tasks, no. Less."—are made plainly and devastatingly apparent in the poignant exchange that follows:

> 'Why do they do them, then?' 'Because low pay is better than no pay,' Oiie said, and the bitterness in his voice was quite clear. His wife began speaking nervously to change the subject, but he went on, 'My grandfather was a janitor. Scrubbed floors and changed dirty sheets in a hotel for fifty years. Ten hours a day, six days a week. He did it so that he and his family could eat.' (151)

Fourth, as in *News from Nowhere*, craftspeople express pride and joy in their labour by means of the decorative arts. In the textile district briefly described in chapter four, for example, the centre of each square is planted with poles strung from top to bottom with banners and pennants "proudly proclaiming" the local dyer's art in all its varied colours. Further on, Shevek notices a wiremaker's shopfront "cheerfully and ornately" decorated with patterns of vines worked in painted wire (99). In fact, as we discover later on in the novel, these expressions of craft pleasure are in part the product of an educational system that trains all Anarresti in the practice of the arts from a very young age. Because no distinction is drawn on Anarres between the arts and the crafts—and everyone receives as a matter of course practical training in singing, metrics, dance, the use of brush, chisel, knife, lathe, and so on—art is generally regarded "not as having a place in life, but as being a basic technique of life, like speech" (156).[18] In short, art suffuses Anarresti society, and everyone is a creative artist in the practical and popular sense of the term suggested by Morris.

At a much deeper philosophical and cultural level, Anarresti society is also an artistic community insofar as individual autonomy and wilfulness are generally expressed not in the form of domination and control, but as creativity conceived as the expression of artistic beauty. As a result, the destructive conflict between individual and society endemic to capitalist societies has been significantly diminished. People generally assume that others will be helpful and so tend to trust them. Such trust is not absolute or unconditional, and hence may be withdrawn if abused. Nevertheless, the anarchist inhabitants of Anarres tend by and large to recognise that their unique society, and the individual flourishing it makes possible, are dependent on a high degree of voluntary co-operation ultimately rooted in enlightened self-interest.[19]

Yet for all their accomplishments the Anarresti have not succeeded in eliminating entirely the conflict between individual and society. Moreover, Le Guin suggests paradoxically, this apparent

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[18] The school curriculum also typically includes farming, carpentry, sewage reclamation, printing, plumbing, roadmending, playwriting, and "all the other occupations" of the adult community (148).

[19] See Sabia, "Individual and Community in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*," in Davis and Stillman 111–128.

failing is also a blessing, insofar as the realisation of the perfectionist ideal of complete harmony between the two would entail the death of individual liberty and the diversity, novelty, creativity, and vibrant life it makes possible. Like Wilde in this respect, and unlike Morris, Le Guin acknowledges a prominent and enduring place in her utopian vision for a socially disruptive form of individual assertiveness. In fact, it is fair to say that her representation of this disruptive assertiveness in the narrative of Shevek's progressive rebellion against the creeping conformity and stagnation of Anarresti society constitutes the main dramatic action of the novel.

In order to understand the nature of Shevek's rebellion, and so appreciate its significance for the simultaneously communistic and individualistic counter-cultural politics of the novel, it is necessary first to identify clearly and precisely what it is he is rebelling against. Why, in other words, does he become a rebel in utopia? Consider by way of an answer to this question the character of Tirin.

A relatively minor character in terms of the direct attention devoted to him in the novel, we first encounter Tirin as a young boy. The opening scene in which he appears, involving a cruel game played by a group of eleven-year-old Anarresti boys perversely fascinated by the archist concept of a "prison," makes it clear that he has an unusually well-developed imagination and a pointedly satirical, play-acting streak in his personality. The next scene in which he features prominently suggests that he is endowed with a critical, questioning mind as well. In conversation with three other boys, one of whom is Shevek and another their mutual friend Bedap, Tirin raises some rather sharp questions about a school-sanctioned propaganda film depicting the evils of life on Urras. Interestingly in light of subsequent events in the novel, Tirin and Shevek find themselves on opposite sides of the ensuing debate, with Tirin imagining the liberatory impact on his world of a journey to Urras undertaken by an Anarresti and Shevek stubbornly resisting the idea. Shevek's protestations notwithstanding, Tirin's critical arrow finds its mark deep in his psyche, prompting the novel's omniscient narrator to make the following telling observation: "But at this point the pleasure of the argument ceased for Shevek... He was disturbed" (44).

Tirin proves to be a disturbing influence yet again years later, when in the course of a heated conversation with Bedap Shevek learns that their mutual friend had been admitted to an asylum in a remote part of Anarres. According to Bedap, the admission was one of a series of "punishments" inflicted on Tirin for the "crime" of composing and performing a play that his compatriots interpreted as a threat to the reigning social orthodoxies. Shevek, for his part, once again initially resists the implication that his society has fallen short of its anarchist utopian ideal. However, he soon finds himself questioning this interpretation of events when he meets an artist friend of Bedap, a composer named Salas. Like Tirin, Salas suffers as a result of his artistic unorthodoxy. Specifically, because the pieces he writes are regarded as insufficiently "harmonious" by the members of the Music Syndicate, he sees no alternative but to opt instead for a series of postings in unskilled labour. One of these postings is to a canal-digging crew, prompting Bedap to remark sarcastically to Shevek that "Canal digging is important, you know; music's mere decoration. The circle has come right back around to the most vile kind of profiteering utilitarianism. The complexity, the vitality, the freedom of invention and initiative that was the center of the Odonian ideal, we've thrown it all away" (175–176).[20]

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[20] As in Morris's *Nowhere*, Anarresti painting and sculpture serve largely as elements of architecture and town planning. Poetry and storytelling tend to be ephemeral, and are generally linked with song and dancing. Of all the arts of words, only the theatre is ever thought of as a thing complete in itself. But as Tirin's experience demonstrates, it is accorded this privileged status only so long as it conforms to prevailing social norms.

Ultimately, Shevek too comes to adopt a more critical perspective on his home world. But he does not condemn it absolutely. Rather, in contrast to Bedap, he comes to the conclusion that for all its manifest failures to live up to its high Odonian ideals, Anarres still holds out a promise of something very good and noble that might yet be redeemed by constructive revolutionary action. Pursuing this line of thought in conversation with Takver in Chapter Ten of the novel, Shevek articulates a balanced position on the proper relationship between individual and society that combines some of the most important insights of both Morris and Wilde. On the one hand, like Morris he emphasises the value of mutuality and community in facing necessity. More specifically, he embraces the Odonian ideal of an organic community in which all share equally the inescapable burdens of life. On the other hand, like Wilde he is alert to the dangers of a tyranny of the majority, and hence also to the value of protecting individual autonomy even and perhaps especially when it conflicts with prevailing social norms. Indeed, his thoughts in this regard are occasioned by his recollection of the example of Tirin, whom he refers to approvingly as "a born artist. Not a craftsman—a creator. An inventor-destroyer, the kind who's got to turn everything upside down and inside out. A satirist, a man who praises through rage" (328). Like Wilde in this respect, and unlike most of his fellow Anarresti, Shevek distinguishes between artists and craftspeople. Moreover, he does so to emphasise the positive individualistic and anarchic function of art as a means of disrupting slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, hypocritical moralism, fear of social ostracism, fear of being different, fear in short of being free. However, unlike in Wilde's essay *The Soul of Man*, the distinctions Shevek draws in *The Dispossessed* between art and craft and artist and community have no elitist connotations, inasmuch as they are conceived within the context of an emphatically co-operative utopian vision in which individual and society are inextricably linked. As Shevek muses to himself at a pivotal point in the novel, "With the myth of the State out of the way, the real mutuality and reciprocity of society and individual became clear. Sacrifice might be demanded of the individual, but never compromise: for though only the society could give security and stability, only the individual, the person, had the power of moral choice—the power of change, the essential function of life" (333).[21]

Taking this philosophy to heart, Shevek makes a brave decision. He resolves to fulfil his proper function in the social organism by becoming an anarchist revolutionary in an anarchist utopian society conceived as a permanent revolution. In so doing, he takes the first tentative step towards an increasingly public and political life that culminates in his groundbreaking journey to Urras and his momentous scientific breakthrough. He also begins a distinctive revolutionary journey that illuminates a road not yet taken in the continuing struggle on our own world to create a decent and sustainable alternative to capitalism.

In sum, true to both her novelistic craft and her anarchist political convictions, Le Guin succeeds in embodying in *The Dispossessed* an extraordinarily imaginative and sophisticated utopian vision that draws the two apparently opposing perspectives articulated in the work of Morris and Wilde into creative dialogue. Just as Shevek persistently strives "not to deny one reality at the expense of the other, but to include and connect," so too Le Guin strives in her writing to balance individual and society in a way that both protects the autonomy of art and reminds us that it needn't be something precious and elitist maintained by the joyless labour of an enslaved majority. And just as Shevek ultimately succeeds in renewing the revolutionary promise of the utopian

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[21] Shevek is presumably referring to "compromise" of an individual's personal integrity or fundamental humanity.

vision articulated in his world's past by Laia Odo, so too with *The Dispossessed* Le Guin succeeds in renewing the revolutionary promise of the utopian visions articulated in her world's past by Morris and Wilde.

She does so in at least two respects. First, she dramatises everyday life in an anarchist communist society in such a way as to render believable and appealing the revolutionary romantic ideal of everyone an artist. Second, she links this utopian vision to a simultaneously individualistic and communistic model of revolutionary change memorably encapsulated in the words of Odo, "The Revolution is in the individual spirit, or it is nowhere. It is for all, or it is nothing. If it is seen as having any end, it will never truly begin" (359). In both respects, Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* continues to speak powerfully and directly to those of us unwilling to acquiesce to the prevailing consensus that capitalism is the terminus of history and art and labour must be forever rigidly divided.

Conclusion

From the perspective of those who inhabit market-engulfed capitalist societies, the revolutionary romantic aspiration to transform social life in such a way that everyone would be an artist may well appear to be an impossible dream. Yet it is a dream that inspired the artistic and political imaginations of some of the most brilliant utopian writers of the past two centuries, among them William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Each in his or her own way, Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin strove to imagine post-capitalist, non-coercive societies in which artistic creation would replace profit-driven economy as the fundamental aim of social life, yet they did so from revealingly different perspectives about the nature and social functions of art.

Morris the socialist craftsman believed that art should be radically democratised, and that it ought to serve the social function of making common labour a source of pleasure and joy. Wilde the dramatic artist and art critic believed on the contrary that art should be insulated from democracy, free to grow autonomously in a highly individualistic society characterised by a far greater degree of material equality and respect for individual difference than our own. In *The Dispossessed*, Le Guin the Daoist literary artist illuminates a compelling and persuasive third perspective somewhere between the two, one that acknowledges that art is inextricably bound up with social activity (especially labour) and ought to be democratised to a far greater degree than it is today, yet also remains acutely aware of the dangers of reducing art to its social function and hence neglecting the individual springs of both artistic and social vitality.

In this article, I have undertaken the first sustained, critical comparison of the work of these three utopian writers in pursuit of an answer to a question that has engaged and stymied some of the greatest artistic and political minds of the post-medieval world: namely, how to make quotidian human labour more art-like without sacrificing the positive elements associated with modern ideas of artistic autonomy. Far from being purely an academic question, I have claimed, this is one on which the fate of contemporary civilisation may depend, insofar as the ever-widening chasm between art and labour impoverishes both and has spawned a slave society in which the vast majority of humanity labours under unrelieved toil. The argument of this article suggests one possible exit route from this real-world dystopia. Its critical contribution to what is ultimately a collective political project is thus to affirm the desirability and theoretical plausibility of an

anarchist or libertarian socialist alternative to capitalism in which artistic freedom and creativity infuses everyday labour, and by extension social life as a whole.

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[22] Morris consistently tends to conceive socialist creativity and aesthetic expression as manly self-realisation through communal labour. To this extent, his socialist aesthetic seems to imply a sharply gender-coded, exclusively masculine model of individuation, and ought to be criticised accordingly. On the gender coding of Morris's utopian writing, see Lesjak 173–174; Livesey 601–616; Marsh 107–125; and Levitas 81–99.

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