

Teaching William Morris

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Chapter Eleven

Teaching Morris the Utopian

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Literary utopias are boring. They are notoriously prosy and descriptive, stuffed with arcane topical political references and containing little character development and even less plot. Their dreariness, of course, makes perfect sense. Once you have set up your ideal society in a way that is rational, just, and self-sustaining, then you have guaranteed that nothing much will happen there; narrative interest requires conflict, strife, or tragic flaw. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890; 1891) is, unfortunately, no exception to this rule (at least according to my undergraduates). And yet reading and teaching utopian thought—both political theory and literary texts—seems more important than ever in the current political moment, as the urgency of imagining alternative modes of social organization becomes increasingly apparent.

Teaching *News from Nowhere* in the context of a class on utopian and dystopian literature can bring out the fascinating contradictions, ambivalences, and visionary insights of this otherwise difficult text. The task of the instructor when teaching this novel is thus twofold: 1. to illuminate the great (if not immediately obvious) interest of the novel by drawing out its significance in the history of utopian thought; and 2. to encourage students to consider why the novel seems boring to begin with by reflecting on the literary elements “missing” from the text. The latter method may be used to model a formalist or even narratological reading practice, while the former can be used to teach more historicist methodologies.

There are obviously a myriad of ways to approach *News from Nowhere* in the undergraduate classroom, depending on course context, preparation level of the students, class size, and instructor predilection; in this essay I will discuss strategies for teaching the novel in a discussion-oriented course for English majors. My experience with teaching the novel is in an upper-level

specialty-topics seminar on Victorian British utopias where we dedicated two weeks (or six hours of class time) to Morris. However, the techniques I discuss here could easily be used, with some tweaking, in a larger, second-year course or first-year seminar, or a more broadly conceived course or survey that includes a unit on utopian fiction. Ideally the students will have some familiarity with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). I asked my upper-level seminarians to familiarize themselves with it before class began, but the instructor may decide instead to assign some passages from More's text at the beginning of the course or unit in order to give students a sense of its mode of address, emphasis on description, contemporary political commentary, and relative plotlessness as a way into understanding its influence on later utopianists, and thus on Morris's own aesthetic choices.

It is helpful to at least include—perhaps through excerpting if the novel is taught in a shorter section on nineteenth-century utopianism—the two most important utopian source texts to which Morris was directly responding: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) and Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885).¹ Bellamy's novel describes an industrial socialist utopia where problems of production and distribution have been solved through technological means, while Jefferies's dystopian text describes a post-apocalyptic England that has returned to a feudalist, agrarian state. Students can readily see how Morris is responding to both works in *News from Nowhere* in his depiction of a quasi-Medieval economic organization as the solution to the contradictions of capitalism.

If the instructor has the luxury of an entire course on British utopianism, then the syllabus will include a wider selection of the literally hundreds of utopian and dystopian novels published in the nineteenth century; obviously anyone teaching such a class will already have decided opinions about which texts to teach, but my own course included Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), James DeMille's *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) in addition to *News from Nowhere* and *After London*. This essay proceeds with the assumption that the instructor has included *News from Nowhere* as one among several utopian texts, and is teaching it in that context.

My seminar on Victorian utopias began with two weeks dedicated solely to theoretical reading before we turned to the literary utopias, which we read in roughly chronological order (we read *News from Nowhere* before *After London*, since I wanted to establish the parameters of the utopian novel before introducing dystopias). As we read each literary text our discussion reflected back on both the elements of the theoretical readings that we saw reflected or challenged in that novel, and on the intertextual conversation between that novel and the ones that had come before. *News from Nowhere* came after *Erewhon*, and before *Strange Manuscript*, *After London*, *The Coming Race*,

and *The Time Machine*. The discussion that follows is constructed differently than the order in which we discussed the texts since I will, naturally, be drawing together the various threads of the class that were dedicated to *News from Nowhere*. I will begin with an overview of our theoretical reading, jumping back and forth between these texts and their subsequent reappearances in our later discussion of Morris, then turn to more detailed suggestions for class discussion of *News from Nowhere* in the context of broader utopian thought.

MORRIS AND UTOPIAN POLITICAL THEORY

The decision of whether or not to include primary theoretical readings will depend on the course context and preparation level of the students, but it would seem remiss not to address the rich theoretical history of utopianism in some fashion, particularly since Morris's political predilections were so closely tied to his literary production. One of the most compelling reasons to teach *News from Nowhere* in the broader context of utopian political theory is that it stages so clearly the tensions in the history of that theory. Morris's text is a perfect way into a broader discussion of the differences (and similarities) among literary utopias, concrete utopian experiments such as intentional communities, the "utopian strain" in political thought, and Marxist and socialist theory. In order to frame these distinctions and to draw out the unique place of *News from Nowhere* in the utopian tradition, it is necessary to assign a fair amount of background material as part of the course or unit.

Before diving into the course material itself, I began with an overview of the different manifestations of "utopia": literary genre, intentional community, strain of political thought, psychological impulse. Of course one of the greatest challenges of utopian theory has been to assay the relationship among these various versions of utopia. Presenting this challenge to students up front can help to focus subsequent discussion of the relationship between the theoretical and literary texts they will read. I made available as an optional reading the first two chapters of Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future*, and summarized parts of the first chapter in my introductory lecture.² The book can be tough going for undergraduates (even for professors), but I like to give curious students at least a taste of recent theoretical work, and Jameson's first chapter is short and relatively accessible.

We started off our reading with two introductory essays—"The Concept of Utopia," by Fátima Vieira, in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, and Jorge Bastos da Silva's introduction to his edited volume *The Epistemology of Utopia*—and then moved on to primary theoretical readings.³ We relied heavily on Ruth Levitas's excellent and accessible volume *The Concept of Utopia* as a guide through this material, moving back and

forth between Levitas's explanatory overviews—which are also polemical in their own right—and excerpts from Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *Grundrisse*; Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England*; Bloch's *Principle of Hope*; and Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.⁴

Levitas organizes her discussion of Marx and Engels around the foundational split between utopian socialism and classical Marxism, and how the epithet “utopian” came to denote, for the latter, impracticality and woolly-headed idealism. For most Marxist theorists, the construction of detailed blueprints for a specific future society has been seen as at best a distraction from the immediate and pressing tasks of social change and at worst an ideological, compensatory sop akin to religion. Levitas notes, however, that the “real dispute between Marx and Engels and the utopian socialists is not about the merit of goals or of images of the future but about the process of transformation”⁵—whether the workers' paradise will be brought about through revolution or through “an appeal to all classes on the basis of reason and justice.”⁶ Marxists claim that utopian socialism “entails an idealist model of social change, suggesting that the mere propagation of such [utopian] schemes will have a transformative effect.”⁷ In other words, the two central differences between Marxism and utopian socialism are: 1. whether the ideal society will be brought about through revolution or through persuasive tactics, including already-existing political processes; and 2. whether depictions of utopia can form a kind of counter-ideological force or are themselves always and inherently ideological.

Levitas stages an intervention into this long-standing debate by arguing that the differences between the two systems of thought are not as stark as they have been portrayed. As she points out, Marxism also indulges in blueprint-making, since “an outline of the principal features of communist society can be pieced together from the writings of Marx and Engels.”⁸ A productive classroom discussion can be built around the role of such blueprints in progressive social movements. Is the “utopian impulse” a necessary part of political action? Is it an inherent function of the human psyche, or is it historically contingent (or both)? What happens to the utopian impulse after utopia is achieved? (Is the lack of utopian desire the reason why utopias themselves seem boring?) It can be fruitful to ask students to think through these ideas at an early stage of the course, as they are central to the differences between psychoanalytic and classical Marxist takes on utopia that Bloch and Marcuse explore. (As a springboard for this discussion, I asked students on the first day of class to write a description of what their ideal society would look like, and then to imagine how it might be brought about.)

Levitas's chapter describes in detail the critique of utopian socialism by Marx and Engels, including their admiration of the work of Owen and Fourier and their split with those writing and organizing in their wake. However the

instructor may decide to use this material—in full or excerpted form or as the basis for background lecture—it forms an excellent way into the sections from *News from Nowhere* that describe the revolution and how the new social organization came about (chapters 17–18). It can be helpful to ask students to reflect on where Morris seems to fit in the debate between Marxist and utopian-socialist theories of transformation, using the Levitas discussion as a guide, since both gradualist/persuasive (the importance of newspapers, the formation of unions) and violent/revolutionary (the massacre in Trafalgar Square) elements are present in his account of “how the change came.”

After Marx and Engels, our theory unit turned to Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose work was enormously influential on later utopian theorists. Again we relied on Ruth Levitas’s discussion as a guide alongside excerpts from Bloch’s magnum opus *The Principle of Hope* (1954–1959). The central issue we focused on here is Bloch’s notion of the “utopian impulse,” and how it manifests itself as either concrete or abstract wishes. The former, which he also calls “anticipatory,” refers to reality-directed schemas of social reform such as intentional communities and revolutionary praxis. The latter refers to compensatory wishes and daydreams and can be found in an array of cultural formations such as music, architecture, popular culture, myths, daydreams, and medicine. The former are social and the latter are selfish; the former are (or can be) properly Marxist while the latter are essentially ideological.

Yet Bloch is careful not to draw artificial or untenable distinctions. As Levitas points out, for Bloch the distinction between concrete and abstract utopia is one of function rather than form; both kinds of impulse can be found in different kinds of cultural production. When discussing this distinction with my students, I asked them to generate some examples of each kind of impulse; one of my favorite suggestions for an instance of abstract utopia was a bored office worker daydreaming about a tropical vacation, which another student countered with an example of concrete utopian impulse as the same worker circulating a petition for more vacation time for everyone.

This structuring distinction became very useful in our discussion of the end of *News from Nowhere*, when William Guest reflects on the meaning and purpose of the experience he has just had:

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

Or indeed *was* it a dream? If so, why was I so conscious all along that I was really seeing all that new life from the outside, still wrapped up in the prejudices, the anxieties, the distrust of this time of doubt and struggle? . . .

Ellen’s last mournful look seemed to say, “. . . Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while

you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness:"

Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.⁹

"Hope" is a central term for Bloch, and discussion can be built around asking students to compare Ellen's (imagined) description of Guest's vision as adding hope to the struggle with Bloch's usage of the term. We supplemented our discussion of the ending with an analysis of the other parts of the novel where the concept of hope is invoked. In chapter 18, Old Hammond explains that hope is what enabled people to persevere during the chaos that immediately followed the revolution: "In the times which you are thinking of, and of which you seem to know so much, there was no hope; nothing but the dull jog of the mill-horse under the compulsion of collar and whip; but in that fighting-time that followed, all was hope."¹⁰ It is instructive to compare this passage with the ending of chapter 21, when Guest claims that he did in fact indulge utopianist hope in the "time before," hope that he sees realized in Nowhere: "how often had I longed to see the hayfields peopled with men and women worthy of the sweet abundance of midsummer, of its endless wealth of beautiful sights, and delicious sounds and scents. And how, the world had grown old and wiser, and I was to see my hope realised at last!"¹¹

In my class we also used our analysis of hope in the novel to discuss more fully the function of literary utopia as distinct from utopian impulse. What does Morris seem to suggest about the utopian possibilities (in the Blochian sense) of utopian literature? Literature more generally? What elements of the description of Nowhere would Bloch see as concrete versus abstract? How does the ending of the novel comment, ironically or otherwise, on this distinction? What is the difference between a "vision" and a "dream"? For Bloch, dreams are instances of anticipatory consciousness; is that the way the dream seems to function for Morris? As part of this discussion I read students a passage from Levitas's chapter on Morris: "The ambivalence between the need for a vision to inspire and mobilise, not simply to articulate desire but to express and create hope, and the danger that such a vision may mislead and disable by expressing the wish without the will and power to effect change, lies at the heart of the Marxist response to utopia."¹² The ending of *News from Nowhere*, with its oscillation between "vision" and "dream," is a perfect encapsulation of this tension.

The last major theoretical text we discussed in the introductory section was Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955). I included Marcuse because I wanted to give students a sense of the potential power of a psychoanalytic-Marxist analysis of utopia, particularly as a way beyond the impasse between liberatory and ideological views of utopian impulse. We read two chapters

of *Eros and Civilization*, "The Origin of Repressive Civilization" (chapter 3) and "Phantasy and Utopia" (chapter 7); I supplemented these readings with an overview (in lecture) of Freud's description of the reality principle and its source in the resolution of the Oedipus complex.¹³ We also read the Levitas chapter on Marcuse alongside the selections from his work.

For Marcuse, the reality principle contains first a necessary element—the control of anarchic selfishness in the process of socialization—and second a "surplus" element, whose function is to ensure dominance and hierarchy. As Levitas explains, different modes of production are associated with different modes of domination; for Marcuse, the version of the reality principle associated with advanced industrial capitalism, the "performance principle," has several salient features: 1. it "keeps people working longer and harder than is reasonably necessary given the forces of production"; 2. it involves the repression of sexuality; 3. it penetrates the psyche through the creation of false needs; 4. it ultimately entails the "progressive destruction of the human subject."¹⁴

In our discussion of *News from Nowhere*, we found Marcuse's idea of surplus repression and the distinction between real and false needs particularly useful. For Morris, the contradictions of surplus repression are resolved by the transformation of labor into pleasure. Marcuse discusses the fact that it is very difficult for subjects of modern capitalism to imagine "the liberation of Eros" that creates "new and durable work relations."¹⁵ In the last pages of "Phantasy and Utopia," Marcuse works through the implications of an imagined—indeed, utopian—"non-repressive reality principle."¹⁶ In my seminar we spent quite a bit of time discussing the ways in which Marcuse's discussion was anticipated by, and diverged from, the labor system described in Morris's novel. (If everyone in *Nowhere* loves working so much, why is the novel subtitled "An Epoch of Rest"?) Since many students seem to find the description of pleasurable work and the elimination of wages the most unbelievable part of *News from Nowhere*, Marcuse's analysis helps them at the very least to interrogate their resistance to this idea. In general, the psychoanalytic framework of Marcuse's analysis gave students another group of tools with which to think through the function of pleasure and desire in depictions of utopia.

DISCUSSING NEWS FROM NOWHERE

It may seem paradoxical, since I have already confessed that I find *News from Nowhere* and most other utopian novels to be generally clumsy in execution, but an excellent way into the novel on the first day of discussion is to begin with its formal properties. Who is the narrator of the novel? A deceptively easy question that often takes some time for students to fully unpack. I begin

by asking students whose voice is speaking the opening words "Up at the League." It's a bit of a trick question, since there are three different personas at play in the first chapter: 1. "a friend," who reports the action of the chapter; 2. one of the other persons present at the Socialist League meeting (humorously referred to as a "section" in reference to his embodying one of the six different currents of opinion present), who will morph into the first-person narrator of the rest of the novel beginning with the second chapter, and will later be referred to as William Guest; 3. and, finally, the first-person narrator of the opening chapter, floating above the action and passing on the friend's report, who disappears thereafter. While a footnote in the Penguin edition dismisses this framing device as clumsy and "quickly dropped," I think it's worthy of class discussion; some focused questioning about the "friend" can yield interesting results relevant to the novel as a whole.

Why does the friend not participate in the meeting? ("For the rest," he reports, "there were six persons present, and consequently six sections of the party were represented."¹⁷) How does he have access to the events that take place immediately after the meeting, including the movements of the "section" (or Guest) and, most importantly, his thoughts, moods, and even memories? Why is the mysterious first-person narrator so insistent on reminding us that this private information about Guest is being reported by the friend—repeating the phrase "says our friend" four times in just a few paragraphs?¹⁸

And finally, what do we make of the odd transition at the very end of the chapter, when Guest takes over the narration? After Guest has gone to bed he lies awake for hours, thinking over the events of the meeting:

He heard one o'clock strike, then two and then three; after which he fell asleep again. Our friend says that from that sleep he awoke once more, and afterwards went through such surprising adventures that he thinks that they should be told to our comrades, and indeed the public in general, and therefore proposes to tell them now. But, says he, I think it would be better if I told them in the first person, as if it were myself who had gone through them; which, indeed, will be the easier and more natural to me, since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than any one else in the world does.¹⁹

The winking suggestion seems to be that the friend and Guest might be the same person—a reading supported by the non-participation of the friend in the meeting—which parallels the extradiegetic identification of Guest with Morris himself. What, then, is the purpose of this three- (or even four-) degree distancing strategy? In what ways does it call into question the reliability of the information being reported to the intradiegetic listener (who is apparently acquainted with both the narrator and "our friend")?

In my experience, undergraduates discussing narratorial techniques like these will tend either to over-read—ascribing such moments to a deliberate authorial attempt to “build suspense,” “call reality into question,” or “keep the reader interested”—or under-read—dismissing them as accidental or bad writing. In other words, they will give either too much or too little weight to authorial intention. Spending some initial class time on these questions raised in the first chapter of *News from Nowhere* can thus help the instructor to set the tone for subsequent discussion. I recommend asking students who dismiss the narratorial framing device as clumsy to reflect on their expectations and terms of judgment, which can then lead into a productive discussion of the properties of utopian literature as a genre. (The instructor will want to keep this conversation focused by leading it back to specific examples in the Morris novel or other utopias they have read.) For students who insist on reading these moments as part of an authorial attempt to make the novel “interesting” (surely the least interesting thing one could ever say about a literary text), I suggest connecting these infelicities in the first chapter to moments later in the novel where the role and function of literature in utopian society are described.

The first such moment occurs in chapter 3, with the introduction of the character of Boffin. The narrator Guest notes the allusion to Dickens in his name, and upon asking about the elegantly dressed gentleman is told that the nickname is partly due to his being a dustman, partly due to his showy way of dress, and partly due to his “weakness” of “writing reactionary novels.”²⁰ Boffin doubtless wants to talk further with Guest, according to his guide Dick: “as he thinks you come from some forgotten corner of the earth, where people are always unhappy, and consequently, interesting to a story-teller, he thinks he might get some information out of you.”²¹ This moment is instructive for two main reasons: 1. here Morris seems to suggest that happy people are *not* “interesting to a story-teller,” which can lead to a productive discussion about the generic expectations of literary utopias; 2. it introduces an idea developed throughout the rest of the novel: that literature in general is unnecessary for a happy people, and will wither away as society progresses in economic and social justice.

An important passage to examine for this idea is the debate between Ellen and her grandfather in chapter 22 over the usefulness of literature; the instructor might ask the students to discuss this debate and the merits of each side as presented by the two characters. It is not as simple a question as it might appear! Certainly Ellen’s view that books “were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, . . . [but] in spite of all their cleverness and vigour, and capacity for story-telling, there is something loathsome about them”²² seems the prevailing view of No-whereans, whom Guest (and Morris) find thoroughly admirable and sensible

in every other way. Given that students will know that *News from Nowhere* is written as an expression of Morris's hopes for an actually existing future society, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he is throwing literary production under the bus, as it were.²³ Can this rejection of the frivolousness of literature be read as an explanation (or excuse) for the plotlessness of the novel in which it appears?

The discussion of the function of literature can lead into the larger question of the role of art in the novel: what is the utopian function of artistic production for Morris, and how does it compare to the theories of utopia discussed earlier? As Old Hammond opines in chapter 16:

In the nineteenth century, when there was so little art and so much talk about it, there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so; for, if there was any pretence of it, the author always took care (as Clara hinted just now) to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealise, and in some way or another make it strange; so that, for all the verisimilitude there was, he might just as well have dealt with the times of the Pharaohs.²⁴

Several important questions are raised by this passage. Morris seems to suggest here that escapist literature is no longer necessary in the perfect society; can we connect this claim back to the insistence on verisimilitude that seems to be borne out by the framing device of the novel? What does the novel's attitude toward realism seem to be? Where does *News from Nowhere*, as a novel, seem to fit in the taxonomy of art that Old Hammond sketches here?

Another crucial aspect of Morris's utopian vision is the role and status of women. Students will notice that Nowhere is not an egalitarian society by contemporary standards; Old Hammond attempts to defend the very traditional gendered division of labor by insisting that housekeeping has been given the respect it is due, without challenging the naturalization of that gendering: "it is a great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skillfully."²⁵ The instructor will want to spend some time on the historical context of the late Victorian period in order to illuminate Morris's *relative* progressivism. (One of my students insisted that *News from Nowhere* is actually a dystopia for women!)

A fruitful classroom conversation of this question would consider the overall sex/gender system of Nowhere, and how Morris reinscribes sexuality and desire as property relations: "Many violent acts came from the artificial perversion of the sexual passions, which caused overweening jealousy and the like miseries. Now, when you look carefully into these, you will find that what lay at the bottom of them was mostly the idea (a law-made idea) of the woman being the property of the man. . . . That idea has of course vanished with private property."²⁶ What elements of human desire might Morris's

analysis be obscuring in this rather simplistic account? (Note that the idea did not vanish with the eclipse of the outmoded idea that women are property, but rather with private property itself!) We later learn that the major (if not sole) source of crime in Nowhere is sexual jealousy when Dick's friend Walter Allen recounts the story of the young man who accidentally kills a romantic rival with an axe after the latter attacked him in a jealous rage. A consideration of these two passages together can open into an examination of the role of sexual desire and its potential to constitute a type of utopian impulse in the novel; a return to Marcuse can help guide this discussion.

If Nowhere is dependent upon the maintenance of gendered labor, what other invisible structures does it rely upon for its economic maintenance? There is an implied colonial "elsewhere" in the novel that is depicted as a necessary prop to the seemingly self-contained and self-perpetuating economic system of Nowhere:

Those lands which were once the colonies of Great Britain, for instance, and especially America—that part of it, above all, which was once the United States—are now and will be for a long while a great resource to us. For these lands . . . suffered so terribly from the last days of civilisation, and became such horrible places to live in, that they are now very backward in all that makes life pleasant. Indeed, one may say that for nearly a hundred years the people of the northern parts of America have been engaged in gradually making a dwelling-place out of a stinking dust-heap; and there is still a great deal to do, especially as the country is so big.²⁷

Nowhereans have made labor so pleasant that there is now a shortage of work to do, and competition over it. The ironic (or perhaps not) reversal here is that the colonies have become a dumping-ground not for surplus British commodities, but for surplus British labor. Furthermore, Nowhereans have not abandoned the colonizing impulse of their nineteenth-century forbears: "Of course, also, we have helped to populate other countries—where we were wanted and called for."²⁸ What does it mean for Morris's utopian vision that it is still dependent upon a version of the kind of imperial exploitation that was the driving engine of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism?

As we worked our way through the novel, the discussion in my seminar built toward a broader conversation about how we might characterize the "thesis" of *News from Nowhere*, and how that thesis fits with broader utopianist thought. Why is there no more history in Nowhere? (Only Old Hammond retains a detailed knowledge of the past, and he is regarded as something of a crank.) Is the novel suggesting that the only reason we need knowledge production is alienation? *News from Nowhere* sets about breaking down familiar boundaries/hierarchies—which ones does it leave intact?

(“Natural”/human-made; inside/outside; human/animal; etc.) What is the function of *trust* in the novel—to what underlying process or force do No-whereans seem to be trusting to maintain their social organization? Human nature? The natural world? Is it the case that in utopia there is no longer any utopian impulse? Is it even possible any longer? What would it be like to live in a world without utopian desire?

One way of broadening the classroom conversation is to assign and discuss some more recent theoretical writings on utopia. In his influential recent work of “social science fiction” *Four Futures: Visions of the World After Capitalism* (2016), Peter Frase posits four outcomes of human civilization in the wake of climate change and mass automation: two possible utopias and two possible dystopias.²⁹ The two variables determining which future lies ahead—he takes as givens climate change and automation—are the discovery of an abundant source of clean energy and the development of egalitarian social structures. Interestingly, the factor separating the utopias of communism and socialism from the dystopias of rentism and exterminism is not energy but distribution. It is in our power as a species to create either heaven or hell on earth, and that power is political. As Morris himself understood, in order to work toward a utopian future we must be able to imagine it. At our particular historical moment, when increasing economic inequality, political instability, and scarcity of resources mean that we truly stand at a crossroads of utopia and dystopia, we need more than ever Morris’s hopeful “vision rather than a dream.”³⁰ What better time to reintroduce a generation of students to the hopeful possible future of an epoch of rest?

NOTES

1. “I remember [Morris] arriving from the train with Jefferies’s book *After London* in his hands—which had just come out. The book delighted him with its prophecy of an utterly ruined and deserted London, gone down in swamps and malaria, with brambles and weeds spreading through slum streets and fashionable squares, and pet dogs reverting to wolfish and carrion-hunting lives. And he read page after page of it to us with glee that evening as we sat round the fire.” Edward Carpenter, *My Days and Dreams* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1916), 217.

2. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005).

3. Fátima Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3–17. Jorge Bastos da Silva, “Introduction: Revis(it)ing the Rationales of Utopianism,” in *The Epistemology of Utopia: Rhetoric, Theory, and Imagination* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 1–6.

4. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011). Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1986). Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

5. Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 41.

6. *Ibid.*, 60.

7. *Ibid.*, 66.

8. *Ibid.*, 46.

9. William Morris, *News from Nowhere: Or, an Epoch of Rest*, ed. David Leopold (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003).

10. *Ibid.*, 113.

11. *Ibid.*, 124.

12. Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 146. I did not assign Levitas's chapter on Morris to my undergraduates, since it was quite dense and contained a great deal more detailed discussion of mid-twentieth-century criticism than I felt they needed. I do recommend, however, that the instructor read it and perhaps make it available to particularly motivated students as an optional supplemental reading.

13. A discussion of teaching psychoanalysis to undergraduates—how, when, and why—would require another entire essay. I've found it helpful to take a few minutes the first day to discuss the historical and theoretical relevance of psychoanalysis. I address questions that invariably arise about Freud's misogyny and racism by explaining that many psychoanalytic critics, including feminist and critical race scholars, have found Freud's account of childhood psychosexual development a useful heuristic. I explain that the Oedipus complex can be read metaphorically rather than literally—as a narrative of the individual's accession to society and the workings of the reality principle—and as descriptive, rather than prescriptive. (As Marcuse himself writes, "We use Freud's anthropological speculation only in this sense: in its *symbolic* value." Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 60.) I note that Freudian theory has been enormously influential, and that entire schools of feminist and postcolonial theory are indebted to psychoanalysis: at the very least, I point out, it is important to understand Freudian theory in order to be able to critique it.

14. Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 157–9.

15. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 155.

16. *Ibid.*, 155.

17. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 3.

18. *Ibid.*, 4.

19. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

20. *Ibid.*, 19.

21. *Ibid.*, 19.

22. *Ibid.*, 130.

23. I have not included here much discussion of contextualizing *News from Nowhere* with other writings by Morris, since this topic will be thoroughly addressed by other essays in this volume. But the instructor teaching the novel in the context of utopian literature and thought might want to include Morris's essay "How We Live and How We Might Live" (1887).

24. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 88.
25. *Ibid.*, 52.
26. *Ibid.*, 70.
27. *Ibid.*, 84–85.
28. *Ibid.*, 63.
29. Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Visions of the World After Capitalism* (Verso, 2016).
30. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 182.

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