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Article

REINVENTING SOCIALIST EDUCATION: WILLIAM MORRIS'S KELMSCOTT PRESS

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Abstract

In 1889, following ideological tussles with his Anarchist comrades, William Morris was stripped of his role as editor of Commonweal, the Socialist League's propagandist paper. In 1891, having withdrawn from the League, he immersed himself in the production of decorative books at his newly formed workshop, the Kelmscott Press. This turn from "official" activism to intensive aesthetic activity has fascinated countless scholars, in particular those who have viewed Morris as a revolutionary socialist. To them, the Kelmscott venture has seemed inscrutable. How could his apparently aestheticist post-"militant" phase crown his years of unflagging activism?

In addressing this question, I read the Kelmscott project dialectically: both as Morris's rejection of Socialist-League-style propaganda and as the creative offspring of his intensifying discontent with the League's fractiousness. Discernible in this accruing disenchantment is Morris's source material for consummating a radically new form of socialist education, concretized in the praxis of the Kelmscott Press.

Some forty years have elapsed since E. P. Thompson published his second edition to *William Morris*: *Romantic to Revolutionary*. With its powerful 1976 post-script, the magisterial work unfurled a richly documented biography and, through it, a critical portrait of Morris's gestating political radicalism. More than a telling of history, this weighty tome was governed by Thompson's desire to transcend a rift at the heart of Morris's contested legacy: a breach fostered by rivalling admirers – those who stressed the primacy of Morris's aesthetic oeuvre, with its pastoral motifs and utopian impulse, and those who, under the aegis of an Engelsian orthodoxy, underlined the pre-eminence of Morris's Marxist politics. In seeking to fuse these torn halves, Thompson narrated Morris's life saga as an arc: from the artist steeped in the choler of romantic rebellion to the energized revolutionary of the 1880s, immersed in militant activism. On this biographical ground, Thompson advanced his core thesis: that Morris's unorthodox socialism sprang from a dialectical coalescence of English romanticism and materialist

(Marxist) thought. In a field of debates severed by separatist thinking, this theoretical intervention marked a significant advance in restoring wholeness to Morris's otherwise frayed legacy (Thompson 1976, 763-816). And yet, for all its novelty and breadth, Thompson's paradigm stopped short of embracing Morris's post-'militant' (1890s) phase: the establishment of the Kelmscott Press.[1]

In 1889, following ideological tussles with his Anarchist comrades, Morris was stripped of his editorship of *Commonweal*, the propagandist paper of the Socialist League (1885-1890). In 1891, having left the League, he immersed himself in the production of decorative books at his newly formed typographical workshop. Though small in scale, the Kelmscott Press became highly influential in Victorian print culture (Peterson 1991). But with its ties to antiquarian bookmaking (Peter Harrington 2016), the artistic venture would fit uneasily in Thompson's concept of revolutionary action (Thompson 1976, 583). To be sure, for those who construed Morris's militant years (1883-90) as a flirtation with revolutionary socialism, the Kelmscott episode confirmed their view that Morris was quintessentially an artist, and his period of activism a sheer aberration (Peterson 1991, 65). But for those who viewed Morris pre-eminently as a revolutionary socialist, the Kelmscott venture was inscrutable. How could this apparently aestheticist post-'militant' phase crown his unflagging activism? And if it was not the culmination of his intense socialist praxis, what exactly was it?

Thompson addressed the question biographically: the Kelmscott episode was Morris's surrender to the ravages of old age, and "a [compensatory] source of delight and relaxation," detached from any politics of social reform (Thompson 1976, 582-3). Others, with different emphases, have since construed this phase as a moment of protean activity: i.e., Morris's attempt to revolutionize Victorian typography (Peterson 1991), his artisanal critique of industrialization (DeSpain 2004), his subversion of utilitarian reading habits, effected through a materialist hermeneutic of the "beautiful book" (Skoblow 2002), and his indictment of capitalist waste (Miller 2011), *inter alia*. Each of these readings, while suggestively political, has underscored the Kelmscott years as Morris's immersion in the book arts (Peterson 1991). None, however, has perceived them as an *extension* of his 1880s activist efforts to make socialists, as an *outgrowth* and *conversion* of Socialist League propaganda into a medium of *unprecedented* education, aimed not only at creating a socialist humanity, but at redefining the methods of that transformative process. Such is my central argument and I shall cast it as a four-part analytical narrative of Kelmscott's

[1] Many examples of pages from Kelmscott Press books can be found on Google Images by searching under "Kelmscott Press" and then clicking on "William Morris Books." Several of the Kelmscott Press editions of Morris's own books can be found online at the William Morris Archive (http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/) – see for example: http://www.archive.org/stream/storyofglitterin00morr#page/n15/mode/2up.

genesis and culminating achievement: a gesture to revolutionize propaganda, as we know it.

Before embarking on this narrative, a lexical clarification is in order. For to treat the Kelmscott Press enterprise as a new model of socialist education entails relinquishing standard definitions of 19th-century and 20th-century propaganda (i.e., political discourse disseminated through newspapers, pamphlets, broadsheets, polemics, and heated public speeches). Morris's concept of socialist education, seen through the Kelmscott Press, will not be readily discerned in the conventional modalities of propaganda, those typical of *Commonweal* (i.e., journalistic prose, editorial commentaries, weekly news stories, and militant exhortations at open-air pitches). The Kelmscott Press was an attempt to concretize a utopian vision of social revolution *in the making*, but not in the standard idiom of radical political teachings. While its propagandist character may seem imperceptible, it was recognizably a medium of disseminating Morrisian values steeped in socialist knowledge. A site of creative textual production, it not only shared illuminating material for public consumption, it converted the power structures of conventional education into cooperative and co-productive social relations, these being the hallmarks of a Morrisian Communism.

As a utopian model of socialist education, the Kelmscott Press retained the instructive function of propaganda, but few of its surface trappings. It was an embodied extension of Morris's *News from Nowhere*, literally, a nameless and indeterminate form of socialist news. In both Morris's fiction and typographical workshop, socialist propaganda was reconstituted as an aesthetic (pastoral or decorative) idiom, estranged from its journalistic origins (i.e., *Commonweal*). Newspapers are thus nowhere in Nowhere as they are absent in the Kelmscott Press; in both cases, Morris rendered the established practice of propaganda obsolete, and turned socialist education into a somatic sampling, rather than a didactic exposition, of his projected commonweal.

My argument unfolds in four stages. I first identify the cornerstones of Morris's theory of communism, stressing in particular his principle of social cooperation; second, I establish the tension between Morris's efforts to apply this principle and the League's crucible of combative relations; third, I trace Kelmscott's gestation *within*, and against, *Commonweal*'s discursive content, highlighting Morris's resistance to the League's conventional journalism and the crystallization in his serialized fictions of an egalitarian rhetoric; and fourthly, I bring to a culminating pitch my core thesis: that the Kelmscott episode represented a radically new departure in socialist education.

1 Ideal Socialism: Equality, Variety of Life, and Cooperation

Building on the premise that man is a social being with material needs, Morris averred that ideal socialism is "an all-embracing theory of life" (Morris 1894, 167). It

harbours an ethic and a religion of its own, but also a materialist aesthetic (Weinroth 2008), a governing philosophy of creative praxis (i.e., the expression of joy in labour) buttressed by the following imperatives: 1) the gratifying practice and consumption of art by all members of society; 2) the creation of quality works based on cooperative and reciprocal social relations serving society's best interests; and 3) a ruling ethic of reciprocity, defined as a social awareness that society is comprised of equals, "of men who […] expect to be made use of by others, but only so far as the services they give are pleasing to themselves, […] necessary to their own well-being and happiness" (Morris 1891). These constitutive tenets underpin Morris's ontology of humanly satisfying creative activity, and they are intimately tied to a category of fellowship. For creative praxis (i.e., non-alienated labour), being both individual and collective, is contingent on "fraternal cooperation" and an inherent "resistance to absolutism" (Morris to Thomson in Kelvin 1987, 2. 369). Readily discernible in his correspondence and sundry negotiations with fellow activists, these mark the cornerstones of Morris's theory of Communism.

And yet, the application of these tenets was no simple matter. Morris's effort to sustain cooperative relations with his peers was complicated by the Socialist League's internal conflicts, disputes between anarchist and electoral-socialist factions. Against these tensions, he preserved amicable ties with comrades. Even when discouraged by the rougher-edged politics of the anarchist Leaguers, he felt compassion for those among them who suffered from squalor and deprivation (Morris to Joynes, Kelvin 1987, 2. 385). And while he assumed an executive task in the League – as editor and secretary treasurer of *Commonweal* –, he sought to serve, rather than dominate, the organization (Morris to *Daily News* in Kelvin 1987, 2. 382). A reluctant leader (Morris to Joynes, Kelvin 1987, 2. 385), he decried the abuse of political power and the rampant class contempt evident within the social-democratic intelligentsia (e.g., Shaw, the Fabians, and the arrogant leader of the Social Democratic Federation, H. M. Hyndman). By Victorian standards, then, Morris was exceptional; he advocated a political education in which "democratic self-emancipation by the workers for themselves […] was the only guarantee of a non-authoritarian outcome from a socialist revolution" (Coleman 1994, 50). Believing that "the mass of the people were indeed educable" (Coleman 1994, 53), he openly contested the class superiority exhibited by his Victorian peers, whether of socialist or non-socialist bent. By 1887, in a lecture titled "The Policy of Abstention," he not only encouraged working-class self-reliance, he exhorted his working-class public to develop its self-governance by refusing the parliamentary road to socialism (Morris to Glasse in Kelvin 1987, 2.693). Workers would not become "Socialist *men*" if they depended on the theoretical precepts of an elite vanguard of intellectuals and leaders, or relied on the institutions of parliament (Thompson 1976, 458-59). In 1881, well before he took to street politics, he advocated respect for the working class. "Never speak down to your audience, speak up to the dignity of your subject – that is the rule," he wrote to Thomas Coglan

Horsfall (Kelvin 1987, 2A. 37).

2 *Commonweal*: Fractures in Political Cooperation

If the principle of equality buttressed his view of practical politics so, too, did that of collaborative work: "the attempt to substitute arbitrary rule […] for fraternal cooperation" was anathema to socialism, he argued in 1885 (Kelvin 1987, 2. 366). It was a conviction to which he held steadfastly during his activist years. Caught between two wings of the Socialist League, he advocated on one side for extra-parliamentary politics in lieu of the ballot box, and thus resisted the strategy of his reformist (electoral-socialist) comrades; on the other side, he adamantly rejected the extreme militancy of the anarchists (their promotion of street confrontation and sanctification of individualist freedom) but, for reasons of principle, endorsed their anti-statism. In contending with the recalcitrance of the League's opposing wings – "parliamentarians" and anarchists – he advanced a position that superseded the sectarian character of both groups, but often at the cost of being misunderstood and enduring his fellow leaguers' scathing rebukes. Yet, throughout, cooperation was his guiding ethos. He remained composed, calmly deflecting their confrontational allegations.

On February 18, 1888, Morris explained his rejection of parliamentary socialism in a *Commonweal* article entitled "Practical Socialists." Challenging the utilitarianism of electoral socialists, their short-sightedness and absorption in merely tinkering with the economic system, he warned that an excessive preoccupation with such a myopic and narrowly economistic approach risked forestalling a wholesale transformation of society – the aim of which would be to eradicate slavery (i.e., the capital-labour relation), not make it more tolerable. No sooner was it published than the article was harshly rebuffed by Thomas Binning, an electoral socialist who resorted to stating his "views […] in the form of a counterblast rather than of a criticism." With caustic remarks, he caricatured Morris as a proponent of Micawber socialism – a socialism of inaction and endless deferral (Binning 1888, 61). Astonished, and stung as he might have been by this attack, Morris calmly defused a public altercation. "Comrade Binning having found some fault with my article, I asked him as Editor to put his animadversions in writing: I must say there is very little in his letter which I should quarrel with" (Morris 1888a, 61).

The Parliamentary faction of the League was suspended in 1888. Binning resigned. The electoral socialists were eventually eclipsed from Morris's foremost preoccupations. But he was soon faced with further opposition, this time from his anarchist comrades. In April 1889, he engaged in a debate with James Blackwell on the matter of Communist Anarchy. His statement "Socialism and Anarchism" (Morris 1889a) elicited the ripostes of several hard-hitting anarchists, reactions he was compelled to publish. Again, he was publicly targeted by his fellow-Leaguers, and still he remained

level-headed, clarifying his communism with care, if only to avert misapprehension and underscore the integrity of his intention: "I do so in no polemical spirit, but simply giving my own thoughts and hopes for the future for what they may be worth." Still, if this first clarification of May 1889 fell on deaf ears, Morris reaffirmed his position some weeks later, arguing that much of the debate revolved around misnomers and misunderstanding the label "communist": "I can only say that whatever will give us equality, with whatever drawbacks, will content me, […] this is the ideal of all Socialists […] the fewer party-names and distinctions we can have the better, leaving plenty of scope for the inevitable differences between persons of different temperaments, so that various opinions may not make serious quarrels" (Morris 1889, 261). Eager to cooperate, and this despite intensifying disputes, Morris addressed his comrades firmly but respectfully. Still, the League's internal rifts grew deeper. Throughout, he adhered to his convictions, but crafted his language prudently to disengage from the ensnaring tangles of polemic.

Given the Socialist League's internal divisions, it follows that its newspaper would be equally splintered. *Commonweal*'s mandate to proclaim the message of revolution in one voice faltered as diverging rhetorical strains competed within its pages – from the misogynistic Belfort Bax to the feminist Eleanor Marx, from the ballot-box-touting socialists to the "ranting" anarchists. The conflicts that ensued from these agonistic interventions rankled with Morris's inherent dislike of confrontation. In 1884, he had expressed the fear to Andreas Scheu that if he were to become too involved in "'politics', i.e., intrigue, he would be no use to the cause as a writer" (Thompson 1976, 512). By the summer of 1887, he confessed: "I am trying to get the League to make peace with each other and hold together for another year. It is a tough job; something like the worst kind of pig-driving I should think" (Mackail 1901, 1. 194-5).

Still, if *Commonweal* harboured a chorus of dissonant but equally polarized contributors, it was punctuated sporadically by its official narrative, a familiar trilogy of socialist protest: the story of tragic proletarian suffering; the cry against injustice; and the redemption of the beleaguered underclass by a projected socialist epic, the ultimate supersession of capitalism. Such a narrative, inclined to exude a triumphalist note, would most likely have served as the formula for speeches delivered at outdoor rallies, at London parks and Trafalgar Square, where rousing the crowd with fiery orations served to win applause and ideological adhesion. But it was not a tale, nor a style, to which Morris subscribed readily. For embedded in this epic narrative was an oracular voice of authority that conflicted with his egalitarian sensibility. The exalted stature of charismatic orators (masters of speechifying), contrasted with an enthralled (if not smitten) audience, conjured up a social hierarchy at odds with his educative ethos of dialogical exchange. Against *Commonweal*'s optimistic message, Morris introduced a subversive voice of disquiet and uncertainty. In the muted irony and troubling insinuations of his introspective literary and editorial discourse, he was effectively defining an alternative educative role, closing the gap between ideologues and their following, and levelling the

power relations that underpin triumphalist or declamatory discourse. His egalitarian impulse can be discerned in key patterns within his serialized fictions, which portend the collaborative spirit of the Kelmscott project. It is to these textual auguries that I now turn.

3 The Shift in Political Discourse: from Journalism to Fiction

Despite its eclectic array of contributions, *Commonweal* conveyed its central indictment of capitalism in a substantially confident tone, most strikingly between 1885 and 1886: e.g., in the League's Manifesto, and in a variety of compelling pieces by Belfort Bax, Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx, G.B. Shaw, and Paul Lafargue, to name a few (Thompson 1976, 383). Morris compiled the paper's first issues with zeal. But beneath *Commonweal*'s public voice of optimism, his serialized 13-part poem *Pilgrims of Hope* (1885) discloses the strain of political proselytizing. With its fusion of wistful romantic pastoralism and grim realism, its narrative reflects the strenuous and often disheartening travails of socialist activists. *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-7) and *News from Nowhere* (1890) follow in this vein, each conveying the gargantuan effort required to mobilize support for the cause. The laborious attempt to make socialists is recounted with self-conscious musings, uplifted intermittently by glimpses of hope. Morris's lyrical and political romances are thus composed in the minor key, and as such they temper the confidence of *Commonweal*'s official voice, resisting the conventions of rhetorical bravado in which the zealous drive to conquer hearts and minds obscures an unpredictable and perilous reality ahead.

In sensibility, Morris was a realist. He shared his qualified political views more as confessionals than as bold, assertive claims germane to rousing propaganda. *Pilgrims of Hope* is tantamount to a long soliloquy, an unorthodox epic about the Paris Commune, delivered ponderously and without tragic panache. Contrary to iconic evocations of working-class martyrdom, *Pilgrims* is suffused with perspicacious lyricism, a dark interiority that is politically incisive. Unrequited love, candidly divulged hopes and fears about class warfare, and not least, the discouraging setbacks of activism quell the heightened speech that typically idealizes Communard martyrdom. The poetic speaker is a sensitive and self-consciously partial witness. Close to the events of the Commune, he nonetheless retains sufficient distance to offer an unsettling and probing perspective, absent from the canvas of history's public narratives. The introductory poem, *The Message of the March Wind*, announces hope, as all propaganda must, but the chill of winter's last storms is yet in the air. *Pilgrims*' lesson remains equivocal, subduing the forced optimism of *Commonweal*'s official propagandist appeals.

With its atypical socialist rhetoric, Morris's proletarian poem opens the way to a discourse of egalitarian exchange, the kind made explicit in his romance, *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-7). Set at the time of the Peasants' Revolt (1381), this medievalist dream vision

focuses unexpectedly on dialogue rather than on the bloodied drama of class conflict (Eisenman 2005, 92). Here, Morris underscores the mental agony required to grapple with the uncertainties and paradoxes of social change. Rather than portraying gory warfare, he elaborates on how distinct epistemic perspectives can meet. The dialogue is thus an interface of two spectres: a Victorian dreamer and a 14th-century hedge-priest converge in a fusion of retrospective and prospective visions, an oneiric communion governed by a shared desire for genuine liberty, equality, and Communist brotherhood. Embedded in this rhetoric of fellowship is a medievalist submission to the *unknown*, an acceptance of the *indefinite,* epitomized by the pilgrim who wanders darkly through life, resigned to the indecipherability of history. A dose of stoicism, combined with political insight and persistent hope, is the Victorian dreamer's lesson to John Ball; and it serves as a fictive version of Morris's lesson to his fellow socialists. Fully cognizant of the unforeseeable consequences of political agency and historical happenings, he gives warning while offering encouragement. He insists on reasoned hope, neither blind submission to overweening optimism, nor complacency in the face of injustice. Morris's persuasive strategy, be it in fiction or in League activism, resists dogma and prophecy; for him, historical progress is neither straightforward nor guaranteed to proffer redemption. The trajectory is recursive, reminiscent of the interlacing lines of Romanesque design, that so-called 'ribbon' ornament, which has "no beginning, no end, and above all no centre," and constitutes a seemingly impossible combination of *acentricity* and *cohesion* (Vinaver 1971, 77).

This acentric aesthetic recalls not only Morris's sense of history, but his Gothic-inspired para-textual work: e.g., the elaborate borders of the Kelmscott book, the ornate décor of his illuminated *Aeneid*, or the acanthus leaves that pervade his 1870s pattern designs. These forms are the decorative equivalents of a theory of complex temporal unfolding, suggestive of Morris's view of circuitous historical progress. But they are also aesthetic correlatives of an absent *central* or absolutist voice, typical of Morris's emergent political language. *News from Nowhere* provides a good illustration of this. In this celebrated utopian romance, where a 19th-century visitor, William Guest, is hosted in a new (Communist) world by a set of voluble 22nd-century 'Nowherians,' the portrayal of multiple characters, none of whom stand out to excess, offers a model that supersedes the figure and ground aesthetic of the Victorian novel (i.e., the protagonist against a subordinate backdrop), or the top-down rhetorical address that undergirds mainstream propaganda. Despite the constancy of a central protagonist (William Guest), there is no central mouthpiece in the work's fictive conversations.

News from Nowhere's polysemic character is arguably a sign of Morris's reluctance to deliver a predictive blueprint for a future Communist society. It is equally a sign of the work's embodiment of transition and, indeed, of transience. Being some chapters in an epoch of rest (or mental cogitation), the utopian romance constitutes a way station. There

is no veritable beginning or end to the story. As a continuous conversation that exceeds the plot's boundaries on two fronts, the work finds its prehistory in the fraught pages of *Commonweal,* in controversies between Morris and his anarchist peers. Indeed, a tail end of that exchange spills into the opening pages of the serialized story. For the very arguments of freedom and authority raised in *Commonweal* in 1889 are recycled and threaded into the utopian fiction, reconstituted over the course of the narrative into a new style of political exchange – free of vituperation and hostility, and converted into a salutary dialogue between Guest and the array of Nowherian hosts. Debate surfaces on the other side of the utopian romance in a new incarnation, losing its original character as either pontification or journalistic polemic, and crystallizing ever more emphatically in the narrator's refurbished persuasion: a political appeal couched in the poetics of a dream vision.

Purging his text of the verbiage of mainstream political speech, with its tangled web of semantics and slogans, the recounting of revolution in *News from Nowhere* ("How the Change Came") relies on invented and coded names. Historical references that might ensnare it in contestation are erased. The language of journalism and of "political science" (e.g., system, state, poverty, parliament) is muted and the narrative finds its most subversive political meaning in the idiom of *pastoral*. In his celebration of rural landscapes, Morris's picture writing resists the tensions of writhing political actors; in this, it anticipates the consuming pleasure and social harmony simulated by the ornamental aesthetics of Kelmscott books. The latter's floral motifs, acanthus leaves and grape vine tendrils, are already in germ in descriptions of Nowhere's country-city fusion, where the decorative landscape and the polity are essentially one. If Nowhere is a civil society founded on cooperation and shared joy in creative labour, it is precisely because it has fused the otherwise polarized categories of utility (necessary work) and beauty (aesthetic expression) into a dialectical whole. The Kelmscott Press takes this very coalescence of opposites (useful beauty) and brings it to a higher level, transforming the two-dimensionality of a purely textual narrative (the unadorned version of *News from Nowhere* serialized in *Commonweal*) into the three-dimensionality of the beautiful book. Not only does this new creation achieve physical volume, it also promises to embody social cohesion, the culmination of co-production.

This glimpse of *desirable and desire-driven discourse* must be grasped as Morris's polite but firm critique of the anarchist Leaguers who had stripped him of his editorship of *Commonweal* in 1889. The language of fellow feeling deployed in Nowhere is thus a model (albeit utopian) of ethical education, an instructive instance of how we might speak, educate, and cooperate with one another, even under duress. Morris's conduct in 1890 is thus a case in point. For, in paying *Commonweal*'s bills, and this after his expulsion from "office," he continued to publish the occasional article and serialize his utopian fiction in the weekly issues of 1890. In those last months, his interventions veered

away from polemical exchange. He had renounced fighting his anarchist peers in journalistic prose and turned to the language of fiction where his space for self-expression would be shielded from their barbs. The opening passages of *News from Nowhere* (being autobiographical) disclose his break with the other Leaguers' combative politics. Morris was not one to enjoy vituperative banter, nor would he suffer sordid political manoeuvres. Throughout his activist years, he was not only hankering after a socialist future, but seeking to forge a community of activists, who would work in concert against the formidable tide of commercial war (i.e., capitalism). His fictively projected visions of enhanced life were not solely glimpses into a Communist future; they were exhortations addressed to socialist actors, urging them to behave cooperatively in the present, to sacrifice their vanity for the larger cause (Morris 1890, 361-2). Morris's creative contributions to *Commonweal* (most notably *News from Nowhere*) would thus generate aesthetic spaces for deepening political thought, for making socialists self-critical and capable of sober exchange. These spheres of fictional creativity were the grounds on which Morris pursued an aesthetic education of humanity, one that would culminate in the socialist praxis of his "typographical adventure" (Kelvin 3. 252).

4.1 The Kelmscott Press Takes Shape

If the emergence of Morris's private press was the culmination of his two-pronged reaction to the collapse of the Socialist League (a discontent with *Commonweal*'s combative outcome and his dream of an alternative educative praxis), it was also the product of his longstanding interest in illuminated manuscripts, pattern designing, and early print culture (Peterson 1991). A celebrated magic-lantern slide show, delivered in 1888 by a Socialist League comrade, Emery Walker, spoke powerfully to Morris's printing interests. As the real fractures in the Socialist League became manifest that year, Morris found himself spurred on to new creativity by Walker's technological insights. The experience re-fuelled his life-long passion for the book arts, as well as his erudite critique of modern typography. As societies within the Arts and Crafts movement, notably the Art Workers Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, solicited his guidance in the late 1880s, welcoming him into their fold, the embryonic conception of the Kelmscott Press took shape in the cooperative spirit of the early 14th-century Guild tradition, before the latter yielded to class stratification.[2] Largely comprised of skilled artists (printers, book binders, typographers, artists, etc.), these organizations were engaged in a protest against the oligarchy of the fine art academy. In this, they echoed the 1880s groundswell of popular discontent, and organized opposition to monopoly capital. Protest against the "masters" – be they artists or capitalists – was thus occurring on two fronts in "an attempt […] to change the direction of English society, to redesign it in all its aspects" (Stansky

[2] On the aborted nature of this cooperative ethos within the 14th-century guilds, see Cowan, 80-82.

1985, 148). But if the artisans' effort to gain recognition within the academy appeared to be exclusively a matter of status, and if "practical socialism" (i.e., reformism) was strictly about fighting for better wages and work, Morris conceived the apparent separateness of these struggles as one. Questions of economy and aesthetics were not polarized, but intertwined. For him, art, in its optimum state, rested on a principle of fair distribution of economic wealth and leisure, just as a socialist economy rested on the universal access to art, understood in its broadest and ontological sense as non-alienated labour. This Communist ideal of socio-economic equality depended on the "worker's fair share of art" (i.e., equal access to fulfilled existence) – and it was a concept that he introduced in his first contribution to *Commonweal* (Morris 1885). From the 1870s, throughout his Socialist League days, and beyond, Morris spread the word in multiple venues. Art, as non-alienated work, was intimately bound up with the economy of a society of equality and variety of life, he argued, and it embodied a dialectic of beauty and utility, evident as much in the micro-sphere of printing as in the macro-sphere of society as a whole. For on the scale of the page, Morris prescribed a coordinated layout of ornamental and epical (i.e., discursive) elements (Morris 1892) that was effectively analogous to the dialectical coordination of art and labour he proposed for a Communist political economy. Signs of this coalescence of beauty and utility are already evident in his attempts to combine in *Commonweal* an array of literary, lyrical and graphic material with news and editorial commentaries. Against an exclusively information-based approach to propaganda, Morris was underscoring the legitimacy and political *necessity* of creative expression, the kind that would crystallize ever more intensively at the Kelmscott Press.

Today, as then, this emphasis on the "ornamental" dimension of political discourse, as concretized in decorative books, is typically misapprehended, seen as the extravagant production of luxury items divorced from the struggles of Victorian socialists. Such a perspective eclipses the larger historical canvas, for the workshop was not an isolationist micro-enterprise, but an enclave of local artisanal activity intimately tied to Morris's extra-parliamentary politics of socialist education. The artists and artisans who contributed to the Press were veterans of socialist activism. Several of these were Morris's comrades from Socialist League days: Walter Crane, Emery Walker, Philip Webb, and (even) Thomas Binning. H. Hooper, the Kelmscott Press's engraver, and bookbinder T. J. Cobden-Sanderson were members of the close-knit circle of Hammersmith socialists of the 1890s. A few of these figures were the movers and shakers of the Arts and Crafts movement, where the merits of the lesser arts (as Morris articulated them in his 1870s lectures)[3] were deemed inspirational principles. These same men were political actors, involved in disseminating the values of a socialist humanity.

Admittedly, the Kelmscott Press was not a site of "agitation," but a hub of collaborative print production, governed by Morris's educative goals. It was situated at

[3] On the merits of Morris's lectures on the "lesser arts," see Nicholas Frankel's article in this issue.

the heart of a socialist subculture, and framed by his ongoing persuasive interventions: public talks, press interviews, periodical publications and cheaply available pamphlets. Indeed his voluminous output, even during his ailing years, 1890-96 (Lemire 1969), can be understood, in its overall panoply, as the explanatory "annotations" to the less transparent Kelmscott books. These writings and public addresses formed a discursive framework through which the "typographical adventure" could be better understood, grasped as a novel approach to socialist education that rested as much on creative experimentation – in living out socialist ideals – as on theoretical representation. For beyond its creation of ornate books, the Kelmscott Press was also a pioneering enterprise in collaborative relations of production, a community effort between editor, engraver, compositor, and binder. By resurrecting an (albeit idealised) 14th-century cooperative ethic and by facilitating a co-production of quality wrought books (Peterson 1991) modelled on an artisanal tradition, Morris's typographical project stood as a double condemnation of capitalist modernity. It was at once a protest against industrialization's deleterious legacy of mass produced cheap print and an unmitigated critique of class division – the hydra of exploitative toil and privileged art (Morris 1887, 291).

Like *News from Nowhere*, the Kelmscott project was double-edged. Not merely an indictment of the corrosive capitalist system, it proposed a redemptive vision: that universal creative praxis become the inspiration and foundation of a new social world. In effect, the Kelmscott Press community, which "had its own life, with internal celebrations and outings" (MacCarthy 1994, 622), sought to exhibit this ideal, not only in works of bookish beauty, but equally through association and genuine fellowship. And if this was not the actualization of Communism *per se*, it was nonetheless a microcosm of aesthetic creativity and social interaction where the conditions of fulfilled human existence *could* be both imagined and figuratively sampled. Since the material circumstances most suited to overthrowing capitalism were not immediately present to accommodate wholesale change in 1890, the task of revolutionizing social relations would have to be broached within the interstices of capitalism itself, even if only partially and inadequately. As Morris, himself, noted: "one must use the best one can get: but one thing I won't do, wait forever till perfect means are made for very imperfect me to work with" (Mackail 1901, 2. 151). And since the most complex of achievements – the conversion of a social ethic of competition into one of cooperation and reciprocity – would not spontaneously occur on the morrow of a new world, it would require conscious and persistent efforts to *practice* the art of this ethical conduct well in advance of that future. The Kelmscott adventure would mark one moment in that long, incremental, and decidedly non-reformist revolution. The ornate page and its collective making would showcase figuratively what this wholesale change entailed.

4.2 Kelmscott and the Politics of Ornament

For all its aestheticist appearance as purely decorative printed matter, Kelmscott typography was governed by a socialist impulse, even as it relinquished purely didactic or expository information, offering the public an array of ornate books, ostensibly remote from everyday politics. But unlike *Commonweal*, the educative aim of the Kelmscott Press was less about making socialist activists and forging paths of popular resistance to monopoly capital than about teaching ways of non-competitive coexistence, and this by exhibiting miniature models of societal cohesion. These ameliorative models of enhanced human relations may be deemed idealist and utopian, unfeasible in the present, yet they were implicated in the actuality of Morris's socialist pedagogy, teachings relevant to his own peers and embedded in the sphere of typographical design. Comprising three intersecting axes, these models revolved around the question of (collective) creative labour: 1. equality and reciprocity in relations of production; 2. reciprocity in the creative design (aesthetics) and reception (hermeneutics) of the decorated page; and 3. equal distribution of ornamental and epical material in page layout.

Clearly, for Morris, the task of making socialists – of renewing humanity – involved transforming the perception and status of art under capitalist society, since the basis of this transformation of art was at once ethical and economic. (Paradoxically, what appears as an aesthetic turn away from economics is in fact a return to it.) To this end, Morris stressed the imperatives of visual enlightenment as a site of refurbished thinking and knowing. The estranged and arresting look of the Kelmscott works is a case in point. These tomes impose a hermeneutic at once disorientating and enriching. Through optical illusions, the viewer-reader is induced to think and see on multiple levels, to convert the flat surface of the page into the spatial depths of a literary chamber, into its receding interiors and layered backdrops. Not only does such an immersive experience sharpen the reader's critical faculties, it discloses the book's material three-dimensionality. With its illuminated initials and embossed linen paper, the textured text assumes the spatial depth of a veritable edifice, crafted in myriad ways as a beautiful house might be architecturally conceived and built. In this, the book bears witness to its "book masons" and their labour, builders of magnificent miniatures. Insofar as Morris conceives of architecture as the epitome of an ideal art (Peterson 1991, 45), as a "union of the arts, mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated one to another" (Morris 1881, 119), the Kelmscott books' "architectural" aspect becomes the graphic symbol of that very cooperative praxis: artists, engravers, editors, and authors engaged in coordinated and convivial production. His concept of attractive labour, the lynchpin of a Communist political economy, surfaces in

this artisanal act of working in concert with others, a 14th-century ethic of communal labour[4], seized and re-appropriated for modernity's salvation.

The second axis concerns the dimension of reciprocal and mutually intertwined satisfaction experienced by society's producers and consumers. This reciprocity is figured symbolically in the production and reception of the beautiful book where graphic details excite the viewer's delight in discerning signs of the creator's joyous passion. Conversely, the work's glorious form reflects the maker's desire to foster aesthetic enjoyment in the viewer's gaze. Both parties in this mutual relation are thus equally sated, conscious that no exploitation or deprivation is experienced on either side of the exchange (Weinroth 2008). Here, the production and consumption of beauty avoids the extremes of luxury and slavery, heralding instead, on a microcosmic scale, the paradigm of fairly distributed and salutary wealth: i.e., wholesome and honourable human existence, rich in quality, yet free of riches (Morris 1883).

The third axis pertains to Morris's prescriptions for ideal page layouts, his insistence that each page balance the distribution of its ornamental and epical (narrative) components. Such emphasis on the proportionate relation of art to the discursive material appears purely technical, a matter exclusive to graphic design. In fact, the rule for organizing the page's two-dimensional plane mirrors Morris's conviction that art must play a central (rather than marginal) role in constituting a genuinely socialist economy; it is, as he puts it, a "Serious Thing" (Lemire 1969, 39-41), deserving equal legitimacy and weight in matters of public affairs. The Kelmscott Press thus represents a further vindication of the largely neglected aesthetic dimension of socialist education; yet it is a vindication often misapprehended by critics who deem the press output exorbitant and incompatible with Morris's mission to make socialists. This widely held view rests on three fallacies: 1. that genuine socialist education must address the working class exclusively, preach the strategies of class war, and proffer cheaply available printed matter on the political economy; 2. that, conversely, expensive decorated books are incapable of producing revolutionary knowledge; and 3. that if the Kelmscott Press cannot embody an unadulterated Communistic economic system within the global sphere of capitalism, it reflects Morris's political inconsistency, or worse still, his hypocrisy. I turn now to confronting these obdurate assumptions.

4.3 Audiences

Morris's most "militant" period occurred throughout his Socialist League years, and while it involved reaching out to the working class, it also entailed delivering the socialist gospel to other social groups. In 1883, in his Oxford talk "Art under Plutocracy," he clearly appealed to his middle-class audience, hoping to win them over to the cause of

[4] See footnote 2.

revolution.

"It is in the belief that this hope [for social change] is spreading to the middle classes that I stand before you now, pleading for its acceptance by you, in the certainty that in its fulfillment alone lies the other hope for the new birth of Art and the attainment by the middle classes of true refinement, the lack of which at present is so grievously betokened by the sordidness and baseness of all the external surroundings of our lives, even those of us who are rich."

In 1884, one of his central revolutionary lectures, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," was addressed to the Liberal Club of Hampstead. His writings in the press (e.g., *Daily Chronicle* and *Pall Mall Gazette*) and in periodicals (e.g., *Fortnightly Review*) were pitched at an intellectual and decidedly non-working-class readership, just as his first forays into public talks – the politics of the lesser arts (1870s) – were delivered to skilled workers outside of trade unions at the Trades' Guild of Learning (McCann 2009, 34-40). These early interventions, addressed to a rainbow of publics, were powerful, but reasonably stated, exhortations for societal change, in no sense quietist perorations. Conversely, his 1887 diary jottings suggest that his socialist League preaching to the workingman was not only arduous, but frequently unsuccessful. The adverse conditions of these beleaguered men did not imply their automatic readiness to mobilize and enter actively into class struggle. Morris's strategy was to harvest widely. He spread the word at the open-air pitches where the rallying cry to the worker was most uplifting and energizing, but also beyond proletarian circles. Such a practice coincides with the view he propounded in *News from Nowhere*: that the aim of his socialist education was to secure the widest consent within Victorian society, hoping that if and when violent confrontation were unleashed by counter-revolutionary forces, it would be swift and not catastrophic, and that members of privileged society would defect from their ruling class and join forces with the revolutionary side. Kelmscott Press would thus fit into his program of educating society, enlarging the adherents to revolution, through a multitude of venues and educative practices. As if a Gramscian *avant la lettre*, Morris planted his roots in different soils, across the vast national landscape.

4.4 The Kelmscott Press: "Educating the Educators"

The Kelmscott Press resulted in the creation of beautiful books intended as gifts, products set against the competitive strains of the market. The silent eloquence of the gift, free of discursive impediments, was most suited to Morris, who had just disengaged from the tangled web of Socialist League polemics. The beautiful book offered him a new tongue, cleansed of political wilfulness and vanity, yet eliciting immediate recognition.

Straddling two spheres of discourse – how we speak and how we *might* speak – Morris's unique idiom introduced a counter-intuitive logic, a linguistic register estranged from everyday communication, barter, and exchange value. It was thus a utopian entity – since it required a new hermeneutic for decoding it and a proscription against realizing it within the matrix of capitalism. In sharing beautiful artefacts as gifts, Morris heralded his works as emblems of superior material quality against a Victorian economy awash in shoddy wares. Such a defiance of commercial war would have to eliminate price, and radically disengage from the sphere of profit and monetary exchange. At least for a time, the priceless Morrisian gift was an illumination of a moneyless world, free of capitalism's twin evils: luxury and dearth.

As they awakened the public's interest, however, Kelmscott books quickly became exclusive commodities, sold to affluent collectors. With this turn of events, posterity has judged Morris as politically inconsistent. And yet, the claim that the pricey Kelmscott publications served the exclusive pleasure of genteel antiquarians is neither completely accurate (others benefited from these tomes), nor a contradiction in Morris's socialist politics. The high cost of the books was not proof of Morris's hypocrisy or compromised radicalism, as has been argued by his contemporaries (Vaninskaya 2010, 46-47). Rather, it reflected the constraints imposed by a capitalist economy of which Morris was ruefully aware. In an ironic twist, it is the extravagant price of the Kelmscott books that marks their revolutionary message; for just as these works epitomize Morris's socialist ideals, so they also embody the impossible actualization of these ideals under capitalism – the impossibility of realizing quality-based, non-exploitative, and universally shareable beauty under a system of plutocracy. If Kelmscott books, with their material, aesthetic and ethical superiority, had been available to all Victorians at little or no cost, the revolutionary import of the typographical project would have been annulled, rendered moot. Their unaffordability is precisely the sign of their anomalous status within capitalism. Their failure to be concretized here and now underscores their potency and far-reaching radicalism. As Fredric Jameson notes, "the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (2005, xiii). If judged by capitalist criteria, the Kelmscott Press may qualify as just that, a failure. But as a utopian model that prefigures what *could* be secured under propitious conditions – equality, cooperation, and universally gratifying creative praxis – the project also implicitly calls for such conditions of possibility *to be* realized: i.e., it is a tacit but insistent rhetorical appeal to posterity to abolish plutocracy and give rise to genuine socialism.

Much less a solipsistic and aestheticist protest against the historical conditions that incarcerated it in a cage of bookish glory, the Kelmscott project constitutes a speechless, but eloquent dialectic; for just as it proffers us a vision of socialist values in the form of the ornate volume, so it also claws back this typographical entity from our immediate use. Imposing a prohibition against easy appropriation, the ornate book's unaffordability (its virtual self-exclusion from the market) ensures that the distinction

between capitalist plutocracy and true communism is maintained, that the exemplary and illuminating function of the typographical enterprise is not obscured in the morass of capitalist simulacra – shoddy counterfeits of societal well-being.

But if the press's extravagant price range appears as a flagrant contradiction, it is also the source of deepened political knowledge, and notably for socialist educators themselves. It "can serve the negative purpose of making [socialists] more aware of [their] mental and ideological (and I would add *economic*) imprisonment" (Jameson 2005, xiii); in this it urges greater political striving and a consciousness more attuned to the tensions of dialectical thought. For like all utopian models, the Kelmscott Press demands a twofold reception of contrary yet simultaneous impulses. It insists that socialists acknowledge the merits of its surface appearance – its innovative experiment in typography, but that they also see beyond its immediacy, and capture its more far-reaching function as a catalyst of political enlightenment. They are invited to reap the physical and cognitive pleasure of its sensuous qualities, while seeing through their phenomenal aspect. More than revolutionizing Victorian typography, the Kelmscott Press confronts the residues of individualism within socialist praxis, reconceives political education, paces the practice of agitation, and attends to the most delicate and elusive question of propaganda: the interpersonal skill of co-production and co-operation.

To treat the typographical adventure as Morris's withdrawal into aestheticism is thus to overlook the socialist actors involved in the Kelmscott Press. Here, Morris's longstanding belief in rendering the art-labour relationship an integral part of revolutionary consciousness assumed a concrete form, albeit on a small but exemplary scale: fellow artisans engaged in communal work tested out an ethic of collaboration by practicing, negotiating and perfecting socialist ideals through the book arts. These men, who had belonged to the Socialist League's intellectual vanguard, were, in their new phase of activism, exhibiting to the public the central principles of a socialist future in beautiful guise. More significantly, they were involved in educating each other, rendering the idea of cooperation an ingrained habit – the governing "social conscience" (Morris 1889, 157) of sustainable and salutary social life. Throughout his Socialist League years, Morris sought to introduce collaborative conduct into his movement, but only in the Kelmscott workshop could he begin to find its veritable crystallization, even if only on a micro-scale. While he knew all too well that such an exemplary, though circumscribed, experiment could not be universalized in his Victorian present, he nonetheless believed in exercising within it the appropriate skills that would serve to cultivate a new humanity, however partially. In this respect alone, Kelmscott was a social and physical site of speculative "play," not, to be sure, of frivolous fancy, but of *thinking* and *acting* outside the strictures of agonistic commercial relations. Here was an aesthetic space that would serve to inspire activists – the educators themselves – to see beyond the dark walls of capitalist plutocracy and soar, between arduous acts of proselytizing, into realms of consciousness where

fantasy breeds critical insight and strengthens conviction in the seemingly impossible. As Marx said in his famous letter to Arnold Ruge in 1843: "The world has long dreamed of something of which it needs only to become conscious for it to possess it in reality" (Marx 1843).

To be sure, Morris did not effect a genuine revolution through the Kelmscott Press; but with its collectivist and egalitarian principles, the workshop generated a "revolutionary dream machine" that would convert political desire into an "all-embracing and aesthetically governed *theory* of life" (Morris 1894, 167), made visible, tangible, and graspable through the book arts. For Morris, such a materialist production of knowledge would be a significant advance in the making of genuine socialists, more illuminating (however slow) and more promising (however small) than his League experience, where economistic and militant ideologues had lost their bearings in the turgid chaos of political discord.

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