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Comment

MORRISIAN SPECTRES OF WORKING AND LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF "THE NEW DIVISION OF LABOUR"

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Abstract

This essay considers conceptions of humanities and arts education as implicitly or explicitly articulated in the creative and expository prose of William Morris, in relation to Victorian conceptions of education, and as a means of gaining critical perspective upon recent instrumentalized and labour-oriented arguments about education in the 21st century. In particular it examines Morris's argument about learning and the development of "the field of culture" and his conception of "pleasure in labour" in relation to arguments of education-oriented predictive labour models such as that articulated recently by Frank Levy and Richard Murane in *The New Division of Labour*.

One of the many powerful arguments forwarded in Michelle Weinroth and Paul Leduc Browne's new collection of essays (2015) on the critical and aesthetic legacy of William Morris asserts that Morris's legacy persists as a powerfully disruptive spectre within our present structures of being and thinking. As Weinroth writes: "A revenant repeatedly returning to confront us, to unsettle the tranquility of home and the comfort zones of habit and routine, its value [the value of Morris's legacy] resides in its disruptive role, in skewing our quotidian perceptions, but also in deepening our self-knowledge and strengthening our moral responsibility" (Weinroth 2015, 6). I concur with their book's overarching thesis that one can fruitfully extract from Morris's sometimes obscured and certainly variegated legacy "the constitutive components of a theory of radicalism" (9) and, in this short essay, I will pursue an exercise in such expository extraction as it relates to Morris's conception of "education" and how it fits in with his better known positions on work, pleasure and society. What can Morris's dream of learning as an integral facet of individuated work-pleasure offer to contemporary debates about the relevance of arts and humanities education in the 21st century?

"Education" is one of those terms that is not familiarly understood in the fictional dreamworld of Morris's Nowhere. As Dick (one host and tour-guide of Morris's socialist utopia) responds to the first use of the word by his Victorian visitor, William Guest: "Education?" said he, meditatively, "I know enough Latin to know that the word must

come from *educere*, to lead out; and I have heard it used; but I have never met anybody who could give me a clear explanation of what it means" (Morris, 1890, 28). As the discussion continues, Dick presents the picture of a natural process of learning among the inhabitants of Nowhere, each learning and developing knowledge according to his or her ability and individual interests. Learning results from the unforced pursuit of individual tastes and inclinations. It is largely developed through imitative mentorship, and, in the context of Nowhere, is mostly physical rather than "bookish" in orientation (although there is room for any kind of work one is inclined to pursue). Not quite a Rousseauian vision, but more of a spectral socialist naturalization of the institutionalized vision of Arts education as articulated by John Ruskin in *The Political Economy of Art*, the meaning of education in *News From Nowhere* (or, rather, its un-meaning) stands in contrast, by its reticence, to other well known models and ideas of education from the Victorian period, especially for its removal of learning from formal institutional structures, and for its assertion of an organic continuum of value and pleasure between manual and intellectual labour.

My contribution to this symposium will consider Morris's illustrations of learning and labour in relation to a few other Victorian models of education, with the ultimate aim of bringing them to bear upon recent discourses of pedagogy and labour that have come to inform debates about the future of our present institutions of higher education. For example, in recent lectures and articles on learning in the context of higher education, Randy Bass, the founding director of Georgetown's Centre for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship has raised a series of questions about "the future(s) of the university" (Bass 2012 and 2015). Bass prefaces his ideas about what the future of learning will look like with speculative observations about what the human labour market will consist of in the remaining chunk of the 21st century (Bass 2015). Drawing upon recent works by Frank Levy and Richard Murnane such as *The New Division of Labour: How Computers are Creating the Next Job Market* and *Dancing With Robots: Human Skills for Computerized Work*, Bass builds his idea of the New University around the assumption that the range of relevant work for humans will continue to shrink drastically and will ultimately be centred upon three kinds of activities: 1. Solving unstructured problems; 2. Working with new information (including engaging in complex communication) and, 3. Carrying out non-routine manual tasks (Bass 2015). As if fulfilling Oscar Wilde's idea that undignified and joyless forms of labour – like the relentless sweeping of a slushy sidewalk[1] – could be eliminated from a future under socialism through the use of

[1] As the quote goes, from Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," :
The State is to be a voluntary association that will organise labour, and be the manufacturer and distributor of necessary commodities. The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful. And as I have mentioned the word labour, I cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour. There is nothing necessarily dignified about manual labour at all, and most of it is absolutely degrading. It is mentally and morally injurious to

machinery, Levy and Murnane's model assigns routine cognitive and manual tasks to computers and robots.

Insofar as this take on "the new division of labour" identifies the human with asymmetrical capacities of analytical, creative and physical work, it seems to fit (minus the pleasure, perhaps) into William Morris's own definition of what is constitutive of the human. As Weinroth remarks, "Morris prompts us to see reality in dialectical terms and to treat contradiction and asymmetry as the enriching facets of our human ontology" (Weinroth 2015, 9). My essay will explore the limits of this analogy with the ultimate aim of showing how Morris, as compared to other Victorians, can offer a uniquely disruptive intervention in contemporary debates about our present ideas of the future university. Where do we situate Morris within other Victorian discourses on education? I'll focus on one main example.

John Henry Newman's writings on education, including *The Idea of a University*, *The Office and Work of Universities*, and the many ongoing revisions of these texts published throughout his life, are the best known Victorian works that address the question of what a University should be. These works articulate a powerful argument for a Liberal education, defined as an education offering a broad array of subjects that deliver universal truths according to their own methods of seeking and demonstrating knowledge. Newman's first answer to the question "What is a University?" replies that it is a "School of Universal Learning"; "a school of knowledge of every kind, consisting of teachers and learners from every quarter"; a University that is in "essence, a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse" (Newman 1894, 6). He points out that the university "is but one specimen in a particular medium, out of many which might be adduced" in the delivery of education (Newman 1894, 6). And he alludes to the other information *media* available:

> [B]ooks, I need scarcely say, that is, the litera scripta, are one special instrument. It is true; and emphatically so in this age. Considering the prodigious powers of the press, and how they are developed at this time in the never - intermitting issue of periodicals, tracts, pamphlets, works in series, and light literature, we must allow there never was a time which promised fairer for dispensing with every other means of information and instruction. What can we want more, you will say, for the intellectual education of the whole man, and for every man, than so exuberant and

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man to do anything in which he does not find pleasure, and many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities, and should be regarded as such. To sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours, on a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation. To sweep it with mental, moral, or physical dignity seems to me to be impossible. To sweep it with joy would be appalling. Man is made for something better than disturbing dirt. All work of that kind should be done by a machine (Wilde 2001, 139-140).

> diversified and persistent a promulgation of all kinds of knowledge? Why, you will ask, need we go up to knowledge, when knowledge comes down to us? …
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> I allow all this, and much more; such certainly is our popular education, and its effects are remarkable. Nevertheless, after all, even in this age, whenever men are really serious about getting what, in the language of trade, is called "a good article," when they aim at something precise, something refined, something really luminous, something really large, something choice, they go to another market; they avail themselves, in some shape or other, of the rival method, the ancient method, of oral instruction, of present communication between man and man, of teachers instead of learning, of the personal influence of a master, and the humble initiation of a disciple, and, in consequence, of great centres of pilgrimage and throng, which such a method of education necessarily involves. This, I think, will be found to hold good in all those departments or aspects of society, which possess an interest sufficient to bind men together, or to constitute what is called "a world." It holds in the political world, and in the high world, and in the religious world; and it holds also in the literary and scientific world. (Newman 1894, 7-8)

Newman, in 1852, is asking why one should bother attending a university any longer, what with the recent, significant proliferation of information in a great variety of convenient and affordable print forms. "Why need we go up to knowledge, when knowledge comes down to us?" (Why get a degree when there are MOOCS, so to speak?) It's a good question, and he feels he has a good answer: massive piles of information published in a variety of newfangled print formats are fine, but these piles of periodicals and pamphlets are not the same as teaching and learning. Teaching and learning happens with the communication and circulation of thought through personal encounter; it comes from the power of oral instruction, present communication between individuals, human teachers, personal influence, mentorship, discipleship. Newman's university, conceptualized in part as an anti-media theory of learning, represents a haven from the instrumentalized demands of the market. While not strictly positioned against a utilitarian ethos, it leaves room for the pursuit of truth as developed by a great variety of disciplines, and includes an understanding of the intrinsic value of aesthetic models. As we move further into the Victorian period, arguments for the need to resist and critique the forces of utilitarianism and an exclusively market-driven understanding of labour and value grow more aggressive, by necessity.

For example, Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, while certainly a caricature of Benthamite utilitarianism in its most extreme form, ultimately plays out as an allegory

about the severe violence to the individual that will come from an insistence upon the supremacy of facts over experience, and, more metaphorically, of mechanized labour over humanity. It is a familiar Victorian allegory, one that is repeated in John Stuart Mill's account of his own education in his remarkable *Autobiography* (1873) that tells the account of his rescue from a utilitarian education by the affective power of Marmontel, Wordsworth, and Harriet Taylor (Mill 1960, 99, 103-4, 129-133). Gradgrindian hyper-facticity, Benthamite over-analysis; such Victorian examples can be read as warnings against the dangers of incomplete learning that, if pursued without the tincture of less logical, symmetrical experiences, without "fancy," "poetry," "art," "friendship" and "love," will lead to intellectual and emotional deformity, and an unproductive and unhappy life. Where does Morris fit into this quick survey of largely Liberal Victorian treatments of education?

Morris made few formal statements about education, as such. While not quite as alienated from the concept as Dick in *News From Nowhere*, Morris's many expository contributions expend energy on illustrating the need for a significant transformation of the world, not the restructuring of an existing school system, as was Ruskin's inclination. In the few works Morris wrote that deal explicitly with schools, the concern is usually the status of the school buildings themselves, and not the curriculum delivered therein. So his 1881 letter to the Editor of the *Athenaeum* about the High Wycombe Grammar school is about preventing further destruction to the Norman hall around which the Grammar School was built (Morris 1987, 86-87); his 1883 letter to the *Daily News* about the sale of Blundell's School (Tiverton) is a call to preserve the old building as a fine example of a grammar school of the early 17th Century, for the future (Morris 1987, 158-159); and his contributions in 1885 (*Daily News*) and 1890 (*Speaker*) on Oxford University call upon "the duty of the Universities" to appoint a commission "in order to put a stop to the orgy of destruction in which they have been indulging" (Morris 1996, 158). The "vulgarisation of Oxford" as manifest in the destruction of its "few specimens of ancient town architecture" is identified by Morris with the "present theory of the use to which Oxford should be put," namely, "that it should be used as a huge upper public school for fitting lads of the upper and middle class for their laborious future of living on other people's labour" (Morris 1987b, 493). Education in the manner it was being delivered was of less interest to Morris than the buildings that could function as historical illustration for a future in which structured educational institutions of this kind would have no place.

As can be expected, when Morris *did* address the question of what an institution of education should be, it was done with a larger socio-historical context in mind. So, in his "Address Delivered at the Distribution of Prizes to Students of the Birmingham Municipal School of Art on Feb. 21, 1894," he states: "I can only say, first, that, in order to have a living school of art the public in general must be interested in Art; it must be a part of their lives; something which they can no more do without than water" (Morris 2012,

421). A true school of art, a "living" one, in Morris's terms, cannot exist unless it emerges from within a society that supports and understands its purpose, intrinsically. Such a society did not exist in 1894, when Morris distributed these art prizes. It existed in his arguments and as an idea to be realized in his own art practice, in his efforts to make his definition of art understood "by the public in general." "That thing which I understand by real art," as Morris put it in his lecture "The Art of the People" that he delivered to the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design (1879), "is the expression by man of his pleasure in labour. I do not believe he can be happy in his labour without expressing that happiness; and especially is this so when he is at work at anything in which he specially excels" (Morris 1882, 58). Other, longer versions of this, in which Morris identifies the division of labour and competitive commerce as dominant forces destructive to "the field of human culture," are familiar to us.[2]

I would like to close, anachronistically, with a few words about Levy and Murane's "New Division of Labor" theory in relation contemporary pedagogy theory, and speculate upon where Morris might, possibly, fit into this mix. Labour theory of this kind hypothesizes about how computer technology has and will continue to influence the kinds of work (and accompanying wages) that will be available. Statistical analysis of the workforce read as representative of the demands of the labour market leads them to conclude that there will be growing demand for certain kinds of skills and aptitudes by employers, such as the ability to engage in "complex communication," which basically means the ability to address and respond to asymmetrical problems that cannot be dealt with by algorithm (Levy and Murane 2004, 76-81). Then, pedagogy experts like Randy Bass take this shrunken range of labour activities that will be relevant for future employment (solving unstructured problems, working with complex information and communication, and doing non-routine manual tasks), and work on developing new methods of pedagogical design that will deliver high impact learning practices to prepare students for this uniquely human niche of asymmetrical activities within the labour market. Changes in curriculum and teaching methods ensue.

The application of this framework for thinking about the future of education may

[2] In case it is not, here is an example of one such passage, from his 1879 lecture "Making the Best of It":

> The division of labour, which has played so great a part in furthering competitive commerce, till it has become a machine with powers both reproductive and destructive, which few dare to resist, and none can control or foresee the result of, has pressed specially hard on that part of the field of human culture in which I was born to labour. That field of the arts, whose harvest should be the chief part of human joy, hope, and consolation, has been, I say, dealt hardly with by the division of labour, once the servant, and now the master of competitive commerce, itself once the servant, and now the master of civilisation; nay, so searching has been this tyranny, that it has not passed by my own insignificant corner of labour, but as it has thwarted me in many ways, so chiefly perhaps in this, that it has so stood in the way of my getting the help from others which my art forces me to crave, that I have been compelled to learn many crafts, and belike, according to the proverb, forbidden to master any, so that I fear my lecture will seem to you both to run over too many things and not to go deep enough into any (Morris 1882, 116).

represent a fundamental transformation (and instrumentalization) of something we once knew as humanities education into something we will come to know as "*human* education." An application of Levy and Murnane's model of the new division of labour as the set of predictive conditions for imagining the idea of education for the future works to remove conceptions of intrinsic value, or what we refer to, colloquially, as our *values*, from the equation, and to focus all attention on the market value of human labour as compared to the work machines can do.

To state the obvious, the very principle informing this approach is antithetical to Morris's aesthetic philosophy, and, insofar as it can be gleaned from across his writings, from his pedagogical philosophy, as well, mainly because it is designed to serve the capitalist market. Education, in Morris, exists in two forms. Either it exists in the present (non-socialist) late Victorian reality, or it is imagined, and largely imagined out of existence as a concern, in the dream of a socialist future. I agree with Michelle's Weinroth's understanding of Morris's romances as having functioned on a continuum with his other political lectures and his articles published in *Comonweal*. All of Morris's productions –material, graphic, fictional, expository – can be understood as manifestations of propaganda in a diversity of generic and media forms. For Morris, in his time (before a true socialist society would be realized) argument and especially art would serve as a tangible illustration of social organicism. Art would incite the desire for beauty, and consequently for social change. Morris rejected the realist novel for the prose romance because the former – which focused on the unhappiness of bourgeois characters, what Ellen from Nowhere calls "sham troubles" (Morris 2003, 193) – lacked the kind of illustrative, aesthetic power to imagine change that romance had. Insofar as Art for Morris existed as Illustration (as opposed to what it would hopefully become, Work-Pleasure), it functioned as a mediated form of aesthetic pedagogy. Where Newman wished to separate the experience of education from the material manifestations of print developed in the nineteenth-century in order to formulate his idea of a university, Morris's equally media-aware idea of learning denies the possibility of such separation.

At the risk of sounding naively propagandistic (but, if not in a special issue on Morris in the journal of *Socialist Studies*, then where?), there may be no better time – at this moment when pedagogical curricula are being calibrated to match the niche that remains for humans on the labour market; at this moment when prospects for employability have been pinned in great part on our ability to process "complex communication" (Levy and Murnane 2004, 76-81) – there may be no better time to bring a work of art, a romance by William Morris, into the centre of the curriculum.

The student will find no straightforward message there. She will find, in the words of Michelle Weinroth, just the right "modicum of opacity and vagueness" upon which to sharpen her for the workplace, perhaps, but also, one might imagine, in confronting a late Victorian socialist romance she will learn "to read texts (political discourse) and contexts

(history) beyond the letter" (Weinroth 2015b, 193) – that is to say, to piece together a glimpse, a sense of the inherent pleasure of work that comes with building a "shadowy isle." I suppose this version of Morris as the source for a glimpse of the boundary between an ideal of aesthetic knowledge (without education, per se) and the social relations informed by advanced capitalism is akin to aligning Morris's art with the enchantment that Theodor Adorno identifies as one persistent aspect of the aesthetic. As Adorno writes:

> Art is motivated by a conflict: Its enchantment, a vestige of its magical phase, is constantly repudiated as unmediated sensual immediacy by the progressive disenchantment of the world, yet without its ever being possible finally to obliterate this magical element. Only in it is art's mimetic character preserved, and its truth is the critique that, by sheer existence, it levels at a rationality that has become absolute (Adorno 2013, 79).

The magic of *News From Nowhere* as a work of art, and as a lesson, a form of aesthetic propaganda for the present, lies in its combination of apparitional fantasy and prevalent, subdued sensuality. In writing an anti-novel that captures the sensual immediacy of an aesthetic existence, Morris has levelled a critique against the rationalization of labour, and against the ideas of education that seem best suited to it. The conflict between such a vision of sensual immediacy and the disenchantment of the world can only be effective if such conflict continues to be recognized as such and is not absorbed into the dark-tinged rational absolute that Adorno wrote and thought against. So long as dis-identification remains possible, a conceptual glimpse of the "shadowy isle of bliss" remains in view and in memory, however faintly. At the end of the romance, when Guest finds the world of Nowhere fading around him, the last moment of recognition between *that* world and his own occurs when he tries to catch Ellen's eye: "I turned to Ellen and she *did* seem to recognize me for an instant; but her bright face turned sad directly, and she shook her head with a mournful look, and the next moment all consciousness of my presence had faded from her face" (Morris 1890, 209). Morris's art has been strong enough to remain relevant in relation to new structures and theories of labour and the instrumentalized models of learning that accompany them in great part because he understood that the vision presented in pre-socialist art had to incite a visceral desire to be seen and recognized by our idealized figures. We might be recognized with expressions of joy, perplexity, or even sadness, so long as we were recognized. When Guest's presence fades from Ellen's consciousness, then all that remains is the vision of a lost, affective and sensual encounter with the ideal. The romance provides an immersive experience of the dialectic, and while only a vision, a spectre, the entire exercise of imagining, conversing with and desiring our imagined embodiments of pleasure in labour maintains a sense of

possibility and hope for the future.

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