

# **Between Utopia and Tradition: William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, and the Problem of Utopian Unity**

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## **Abstract**

William Morris, author of the famous nineteenth-century utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, thought it both possible and desirable to develop a utopian vision that could be affirmed by many individuals. However, Morris also recognised that achieving such utopian unity was not easy. There is, at least potentially, something personal about utopian visions; they are shaped by idiosyncratic desires that cannot be shared. Through a new reading of Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*, I argue that Morris offers a temporal solution to the problem of utopian unity. The central characters in the text, medieval priest John Ball and a nineteenth century socialist agitator, come to recognise their shared adherence to the same image of a new society. This is achieved through the mediation of tradition: Ball and the agitator overcome their differences by committing themselves to disappointed hopes elaborated in past struggles that have been handed down to the present. Morris's articulation of utopia and tradition – the sense that visions of the future can be made shareable through reference to the past – offers the possibility of a transtemporal solidarity of utopians and the bringing together of the dreams of a plurality of individuals.

## **Keywords**

Ideological unity, tradition, untimeliness, utopia, William Morris

## **Bickering About the Future: William Morris and the Problem of Utopian Unity**

William Morris's great utopian novel *News from Nowhere* begins with a row. We will, of course, eventually be presented with a rich and sumptuous portrait of a remade England in the twenty-second century in which "complete communism" has been achieved.<sup>1</sup> But before we are allowed to glimpse the fruits of Morris's overactive utopian mind, it is first necessary to sit through something rather more mundane: a meeting of a small political group, which appears to be modelled on Morris's own organisation, the Socialist League. We are not informed by Morris of the advertised title of the meeting but we can surmise it concerns the shape of the future socialist society. The meeting has not proved especially popular, with only a handful people present. What it lacked in numbers, however, it made up for in the strength, and variety, of the opinions expressed. The participants, the narrator William Guest reports, each offer "vigorous" statements on what "the fully-developed new society" will look like.<sup>2</sup> Guest recounts that there were "six persons" present at the meeting and, consequently, the "six sections of the party were represented" including four "strong but divergent Anarchist opinions."<sup>3</sup> In other words, there are six people and six different visions of the socialist society to come. The lack of unity in the room clearly disturbs Guest, who leaves the meeting "roaring out very loud, and damning the rest for fools."<sup>4</sup>

It is tempting to see the opening of *News from Nowhere* as simply a wry reflection by Morris on the ideological divisions, petty disagreements and personal rivalries that defined his time in the Socialist League, perhaps acerbically aimed at some of his more rigorous critics within the organisation. Yet, the fact that Morris framed his utopia with an image of the dysfunctional everyday life of a political organisation is worth dwelling on. It reflects an anxiety on the part of Morris concerning the problem of ideological unity (and disunity) and its relationship with the activity of utopianising.

On the one hand, Morris contended that socialist struggle could only be advanced through the formation of what Mark Allison, in his recent commentary on Morris's utopianism, calls a Party of Utopia, or a group of individuals brought together by their shared adherence to a particular vision of the new society.<sup>5</sup> Morris's desire for utopian unity is expressed most clearly in the final lines of *News from Nowhere*. The narrator, returning to the nineteenth century after exiting Nowhere, suggests that "if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream."<sup>6</sup> There is, in this way, a wish on Morris's part for his vision of a new society to be shared; it has a prescriptive quality insofar that it was designed to be adopted by others as their own vision of the future.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Morris recognised the difficulty in forming such utopian unity. The drive to unity is checked by a counter-drive to fragmentation. As the opening of *News from Nowhere* suggests, everyone has their own idea of utopia and, in expressing it, they simply incite others to raise their own image of a new society. Morris famously, and almost ruefully, remarked that the "only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of the author."<sup>8</sup> There is thus something private about utopian visions; they are, apparently inevitably and seemingly indelibly, marked by the quirks, idiosyncrasies and whims of their authors.

Morris, in this way, confronted a theoretical question that has troubled thinkers of utopia for many years: the sense *both* that shared and common utopias have the capacity to play a critical role in collective movements for social change *and* that there is something fundamentally personal about utopian endeavours which necessarily remains singular to the individual author. A number of major theorists of utopia in the European tradition have touched on this problem. For example, one of the primary concerns of the Marxian critique of utopia was that the "personal inventive action" of the single utopian thinker would illegitimately usurp the creative capacity of the working class.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Karl Mannheim

famously saw utopianism as an essentially social practice, associating it with mass movements mobilising thousands of people.<sup>10</sup> Ernst Bloch mediates between these two positions, with “abstract” utopias referring to uninhibited imaginative dreams lacking connection with real tendencies and “concrete” utopias working with the grain of social processes.<sup>11</sup> Finally, more recent scholars, namely David Harvey and Ruth Levitas, have voiced concern that the increasing focus on pluralism, provisionality and reflexivity in utopian studies is blunting the political power of utopia; there is a need, it is suggested, for some ideological closure if utopias are to be shared and thus facilitate social change.<sup>12</sup>

Morris’s work does not, however, only pose this tension. It also, as is demonstrated here, offers a possible response to the problem of sharing utopias. I contend that Morris’s text *A Dream of John Ball* (henceforth: *A Dream*), in staging a dialogue between a nineteenth century socialist agitator and John Ball (a radical priest leading the peasants’ revolt of 1381), addresses the question of whether it is possible to affirm a common utopian vision across historical difference. I argue this by tracing *A Dream*’s dialectic of hope and disappointment. Ball’s initial hopefulness regarding the peasants’ revolt turns to disappointment in his dialogue with the socialist agitator of the nineteenth century. However, as I go onto elaborate, the disappointment of Ball’s utopian hope, the fact that it fails to come to pass, has an important effect. For Morris, a new form of hope can be derived from the fact that unfulfilled utopian dreams left over from past moments of popular revolt are taken up in the struggles of today. This new form of untimely hope helps to form a connection between the figure of Ball and that of the agitator. Morris proposes that the relationship between the two figures is predicated on their shared belonging to a utopian tradition, or the communication of the same vision of a new world across different historical moments. This unstable notion of utopian tradition – which brings together the new and the old, the future and the past, hope and

disappointment – works to mediate between individual utopians, bringing their visions together around a common set of inter-temporally articulated principles.

Before moving to this argument, two preliminary points should be made. First, my concern in this paper is not primarily with the contents of Morris's utopian vision (his proposals regarding government, work, gender relations and so on). Instead, following Miguel Abensour (one of Morris's most attentive philosophical readers), I contend that Morris's "theoretical, political, and even utopian texts contain a preliminary theorizing on utopia."<sup>13</sup> That is to say, Morris's work suggests an original and interesting way to think about utopia itself, which deserves attention in its own right. I am interested in Morris insofar that he says something about the activity of formulating and communicating utopian visions. By approaching Morris in this way, it is possible to bring his work into dialogue with other theorists of utopia (including Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Gustav Landauer and Emmanuel Levinas) not as an example to explain or interpret but as an equal participant in the task of understanding the nature of utopianism.

Second, it is worth briefly considering why *A Dream* is of significance in this context. At first glance, this focus appears strange. This text, which was first published in the Socialist League's newspaper *Commonweal* in serialised form between November 1886 and January 1887, is usually read in terms of its relationship to the Marxist theory of history and has not, to my knowledge, been read in an extended fashion in terms of its relationship to Morris's utopianism.<sup>14</sup> Since the dialogue between the agitator and Ball is largely concerned with the relationship between the event of the peasants' revolt and the hidden tendency towards capitalism in feudal society, it is easy to see why this historical reading has dominated. Unlike *News from Nowhere*, which offers a detailed description of an idealised society, *A Dream* is not a straightforwardly utopian text. Despite this, however, *A Dream* does contain an important utopian *moment*. At the end of Chapter IV, Ball outlines his vision of a future

society predicated on fellowship. Ball's utopian vision, though brief, has a pivotal role in the structure of the story of *A Dream* as a whole. It is the status of this vision that is implicitly at stake in the dialogue between Ball and the agitator and, as this dialogue progresses, the meaning of Ball's utopian vision changes. In this way, *A Dream* offers an extended, albeit tacit, commentary on Morris's theory of utopia.

### **John Ball's Utopia: The Peasants' Revolt between Hope and Disappointment**

The unnamed narrator of *A Dream*, whom I shall call the socialist agitator, reports that he is sometimes "rewarded for fretting myself so much about present matters by a quite unasked-for pleasant dream."<sup>15</sup> And, what could be more pleasant for the agitator, who sometimes has nightmares of being embarrassed by hostile crowds "clearly preparing terrible anti-Socialist posers", than a dream of a moment of great social tumult: the peasants' revolt of 1381?<sup>16</sup> The pleasantness of this dream is not, however, immediately apparent to the narrator. When the agitator first enters medieval England, a great gulf between him and the medieval peasants is apparent. In the dreamer's meeting with Will Green, his first guide to England in the fourteenth century, he is asked "whose man art thou?" to which the agitator responds "I am my own master."<sup>17</sup> We are immediately alerted to the presence of serfdom in England – a world where a person's bondage to another defines their identity – but also to its provisionality, with Green responding to the agitator's angry statement of his freedom with: "Nay, that's not the custom of England [to be one's own master], as one time belike it will be."<sup>18</sup>

Green's hint that the system of feudal bondage is on the cusp of collapse is no idle speculation or wishful thinking. The people, the agitator surmises from his short stint in medieval England, are "on the point of rising" against villeinage.<sup>19</sup> They are not only intent on ending the system of serfdom but also, perhaps more profoundly, on building a new social

system predicated on equality and fellowship. This is revealed as the peasants gather to hear the radical priest John Ball in Chapter III. As the crowd masses, the agitator spots a banner working its way through the peasants that carries the words “When Adam delved and Eve span / Who was then the gentleman.”<sup>20</sup> The demand arising from the midst of the rebellious peasants is one of a world in which all distinctions of class and privilege are abolished; a minimal utopianism, embryonic but real, has gripped the peasants. They are motivated to act by an image of a Golden Age standing at the base of human society. To borrow a Benjaminian phrase, the revolt has recognised that the origin is the end; the glance back to the paradise of the mythical past breaks through the fallenness of the present and opens up new vistas in the future.<sup>21</sup>

Morris’s articulation of temporality and utopia is of significance here, and I return to this below. However, for the moment, it is the voice of John Ball that should be focussed on. The eponymous Ball is a charismatic figure, who has attracted rebellious peasants from miles around to hear his impassioned call for fellowship. Not only that, he is also a skilled agitator (something Morris’s dreamer no doubt admires): he recognises the utopianism articulated by the peasants, takes it up and delivers it back to them in a more developed form. The demands of the peasants are refracted through Ball’s chiliastic theology. He proclaims that, as a “priest of God”, he is in possession of singular knowledge of the world and has the ability to “make you wise above the wisdom of the earth.”<sup>22</sup> What Ball impresses on the assembled peasants is that a heavenly state of fellowship can be realised through collective struggle on earth. Ball thus asserts that “fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell” and “earth and heaven are not two but one.”<sup>23</sup> Ball is convinced that the peasants will succeed in building a new society predicated on equality and freedom. The peasants, on Ball’s understanding, are “building a house which shall not be overthrown, and the world shall not be too great or too little to hold it: for indeed it shall be the world itself, set free from evil-doers for friends to

dwell in.”<sup>24</sup> With one eye on the grubby earth of medieval England and the other on the heavenly light of the fellowship to come, Ball exhorts the rebellious peasants to continue their struggle; their actions are a harbinger of the arrival of a new age.

The radical priest then advances his own account of the communist future that the peasants are, apparently, in the process of building. Ball’s vision, the utopian moment of the text discussed above, is worth quoting in full:

What else shall ye lack when ye lack masters? Ye shall not lack for the fields ye have tilled, nor the houses ye have built, nor the cloth ye have woven; all these shall be yours, and whatso ye will of all that the earth beareth; then shall no man mow the deep grass for another, while his own kine lack cow-meat; and he that soweth shall reap, and the reaper shall eat in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he hath won; and he that buildeth a house shall dwell in it with those that he biddeth of his freewill; and the tithe barn shall garner the wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward, and the rain-drift hideth the sheaves in August; and all shall be without money and without price.<sup>25</sup>

Later in the text, Ball summarises his utopian vision as follows: “[A]ll men shall work and none make to work, and so shall none be robbed, and at last shall all men labour and live and be happy, and have the goods of the earth without money and without price.”<sup>26</sup> Ball, in this way, articulates to the peasants what it would mean to live in a world of complete fulfilment in which exploitation has been extirpated and all the essential means of life are held in common.

At the moment when it is uttered, Ball’s vision is imbued with hopefulness. As with Green’s fecund suggestion that serfdom is dying, it appears to Ball that the age of fellowship is immanent to the present and there is the possibility of its imminent arrival in the future.



Ball's hope is strongly anticipative; the new state of fellowship is on the horizon and it can almost be touched in the present. Yet, Ball's temporal attitude at this moment, akin to Emmanuel Levinas's "present of the future" in its sense that an imagined futural state is almost fully visible in the present, is not to last.<sup>27</sup> The nineteenth century agitator knows something that Ball does not: communism is not the result of the peasants' revolt. In the dialogue between Ball and the agitator that begins in Chapter VII, the agitator stresses to Ball the fact that the consequences of the peasants' revolt corresponded with a hidden movement towards capitalism within medieval society, such that the event of the revolt was subordinated to a long, drawn-out tendency operating under the surface of the feudal order. Ball is brought into contact with a new resource for discerning the movement of history: the Marxism of the socialist agitator. It is revealed to Ball that there are certain hard historical limits to what the peasants' revolt could have achieved in 1381. As such, a gap opens between the historical materialist agitator and the chiliastic Ball.

One of the defining features of Marxism, as Morris understood it, is the idea that history is governed by necessity. Consequently, only certain things were possible, on the Marxist understanding, in the medieval period; there were definite tendencies and potentialities inherent in the medieval moment that could be helped or hindered by human action but not fundamentally altered. As Morris comments, in a text written with H.M. Hyndman, "we are only working in a great economical movement, which we can help in some degree to advance or retard, but which will proceed whatever we do to push on or to hinder."<sup>28</sup> In medieval society, this economical movement was directed towards the fall of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. As such, there were, in Morris's words, "innate seeds of change" within medieval society that steadily worked to undermine the feudal order predicated on the class relationship between noble and serf, and prepared the way for the

formation of the capitalist system based on the class relationship between bourgeois and proletarian.<sup>29</sup>

So, to return to *A Dream*, the agitator informs Ball that the revolt reinforced already existing tendencies within feudal society in two ways. First, the revolt freed the peasants from direct personal relations with the lords; the peasants were now “free men” and would not be brought “under the collar again” by the nobles.<sup>30</sup> This freeing, however, formed one step in the formation of the modern proletariat. The tenant farmers and yeomen who emerged after the revolt were free not only from their former masters but also free to enter into the new manufacturing enterprises beginning to develop in the towns. Second, the revolt made it difficult for the nobles to extract a sufficient surplus from the free peasants. The search for new sources of profit pushed the nobles towards the trading of wool on the world market, the production of “wool for chaffer”, and the consequent eviction of the peasants from the land in favour of sheep.<sup>31</sup> A new proletarian class of landless labourers, who are forced to “pawn [...] labour for leave to labour”, was thus formed.<sup>32</sup>

The agitator, with his knowledge of the future, discloses to Ball that the exertions of the peasants helped lay the groundwork for a social and economic system that, like feudalism, is predicated on class inequality and exploitation, not fellowship. In a significant moment, Ball recognises that the consequences of the revolt are entirely contrary to his communistic intentions: “[T]his time of the conquest of the earth shall not bring heaven down to the earth, as erst I deemed it would, but rather that it shall bring hell up on to the earth. Woe’s me, brother, for thy sad and weary foretelling!”<sup>33</sup> The narrator’s account of the rise of capitalism suggests to Ball that, whatever his struggles in 1381, his dream of fellowship cannot come to pass. Ball, with his utopian vision of fellowship, works against the tide of the moment and misrecognises the latent possibilities present in the time in which he existed.

The sparks of communism that accompanied the revolt were, in this way, snuffed out. To borrow Levinas's phrase, Ball's disappointment involves the movement from the sense that the future is contained immanently within the present to the sense that the "other is the future."<sup>34</sup> The future state of fellowship is placed outside and beyond the present; it is a historical impossibility. Post-disappointment, Ball's imagined future ceases to be something that he is approaching and the path traced between present and future becomes impassable. Ball became swept up in the tumultuous spirit of the times and overwhelmed by anticipation for a goal that crystallised on the horizon. This spirit, however, proved to be precisely that: an apparition that lacked actuality and disintegrated the moment Ball attempted to grasp it. The ground slips from beneath Ball's feet and he is left suspended between the dream and the reality.

### **Untimely Utopian Unity and the Renewed Hope of John Ball**

At this point in the dialogue, there is a great distance between the nineteenth century agitator and his medieval interlocutors. The agitator has, in a seemingly futile and almost cruel way, revealed not only that the peasants' revolt will fail to bring about a new age of fellowship but also there is something fundamentally amiss about Ball's chiliastic understanding of the world. This point is reinforced by a repeated, and instructive, misunderstanding regarding the origins of the strange dreamer who has turned up in medieval England on the part of the peasants. Both Green and Ball speculate that the agitator is not from earth but, instead, from heaven. For example, after the agitator declares that he has no master, Green suggests: "Methinks thou comest from heaven down."<sup>35</sup> In a similar fashion, Ball questions whether the agitator has been "sent to me by the Master of the Fellowship, and the King's Son of Heaven."<sup>36</sup> The mistake here is double. First, they erroneously identify the dreamer as divine when, in fact, he is from earth. This mirrors Ball's misunderstanding regarding the age of fellowship; this is posited as something ordained from heaven when it is

dependent on the material movement of history. Second, and more significantly, it exposes an elision between the lack of masters and a “heavenly” state of fellowship that cannot account for the figure of the proletarian labourer, who is simultaneously “free” and enslaved. The capitalist world of the agitator, as Ball eventually recognises, is a further iteration of the “hellish” lack of fellowship.

Yet, it is precisely the fact that both Ball and the agitator share the experience of lack of fellowship that helps to form a bridge over the historical and philosophical chasm separating them. By demonstrating the common ground between them, the agitator is able to rebuild Ball’s hope on a new basis. To understand how this occurs, the way in which the status of the utopia of fellowship changes over the course of the text should first be emphasised. Post-disappointment, Ball cannot claim that fellowship will be realised in the close future. However, even after his prophetic predictions have been confounded, he can speak with some authority. The utopia of fellowship still has power insofar that it makes a critical claim on medieval society. Ball, even if he cannot predict the future, still knows what is wrong with the present. His utopia offers a commentary on the condition of medieval England. The utopia of fellowship, as Robert C. Elliott argues more generally, “wears a Janus-face” insofar that, in advancing “a standard, a goal”, it works to cast “a critical light on society as presently constituted.”<sup>37</sup> While utopian visions may appear to be the epitome of an affirmative perspective, they involve an important negative element. Within the utopian “yes”, there is a “no”; the positive vision of a good place involves the negation of a particular state of affairs. As Morris suggests, “it is the desire to escape from the present failure that forces us into what are called “ideals”; in fact, they are mostly attempts by persons of strong hope to embody their discontent with the present.”<sup>38</sup> Ball’s utopia is other to the world as it exists but this otherness is a *directed* otherness. It is addressed to the conjuncture from which

it emerged and makes demands on this conjuncture: equality in the place of inequality, freedom in the place of servitude, justice in the place of exploitation and so on.

However, it is unclear how it is possible for Ball to derive any hope from this fact. The critical power of Ball's vision appears, at first glance, to be tied to the particular conditions in which it was first articulated. It might seem that utopias devised for past societies have value only for the historical moment in which they emerged. To put this claim in Gustav Landauer's terms, each *utopia*, a vision of the new, is tied to a *topia*, a contained and delimited historical context.<sup>39</sup> If Ball's vision cannot escape its feudal origins, then its critical power will be lost with the transition to capitalism. In other words, the peasants' revolt would not only spur on the end of feudalism but also the visions articulated against feudalism. Given this, the agitator, to rebuild Ball's hope and demonstrate the common ground between them, must do more than simply demonstrate the critical power of the vision of fellowship *vis-à-vis* feudal society. He must also show that Ball's vision, in some way, survives the collapse of feudalism and that the critical power of his dream has the potential to transcend the particularities of the social context to which it was first directed. The utopia of fellowship, in this way, needs to be endowed with an untimely power. For Ball's vision to become untimely (as the term is understood here), there is a necessity for the agitator to demonstrate that, *by virtue* of the fact it was articulated in a time when it could not be fulfilled, it has the capacity to remove itself from the moment in which it first emerged, negate its relationship to this original time and speak to new topias.<sup>40</sup>

The agitator works to demonstrate this untimely power of fellowship by first emphasising to Ball the continuity between capitalist society and feudal society. The commonality between capitalism and feudalism is registered most strongly in the class position of the labouring masses under each economic system. The medieval villein and the modern proletarian are, of course, not entirely alike. The serf, as the agitator states, is "a

working-beast and a part of the stock of the manor on which he liveth.”<sup>41</sup> By contrast, the proletarian is not tied to a particular master and, instead, is “free” from personal ties. Under capitalism, as the narrator informs Ball, “all men shall be free even as ye would have it.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, despite lacking *a master*, proletarians are not free of *mastership*. Although modern labourers are no longer beholden to the feudal lord, insofar that they have nothing to sell but their labour power, they are reliant on a new kind of master: the capitalist class as a whole. Given this, Ball comes to recognise the system of capitalism as the “mastership of the latter days” or the “tyranny of the latter days”.<sup>43</sup> There is, for Ball, something familiar in the new system described by the socialist agitator. Both feudalism and capitalism are class-based societies in which an exploiting class extracts a surplus from an exploited class.

The continuity between feudalism and capitalism has an important consequence for Ball’s vision of fellowship. The presence of exploitation and inequality under capitalism means his vision retains a hold in this new world. The narrator’s description of the capitalist system thus works to demonstrate the impossibility of Ball’s utopia in the medieval moment *and*, insofar that mastership continues to prevail under capitalism, the continued critical power of his call for fellowship. So, to return to the contents of Ball’s utopia, the key components of his vision of a future society remain unfulfilled under capitalism. Ball’s description of the new society works to exemplify a set of axiomatic communist principles that can be directed against both feudalism and capitalism. In the age of fellowship, people receive the full product of their labour (“Ye shall not lack for the fields ye have tilled”), all needs are met in an equitable fashion (“shall no man mow the deep grass for another, while his own kine lack cow-meat”), all are required to work for the common good (“the reaper shall eat in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he hath won”) and people can enter into free relationships with others (“he that buildeth a house shall dwell in it with those that he biddeth of his freewill”).<sup>44</sup>

Of course, the way in which these principles are exemplified by Ball is historically contingent, reflecting the idiosyncratic desires of the time and place in which they are articulated. Ball draws his examples from the rural life familiar to the peasants he is addressing. As this suggests, for Morris, utopian visions are not entirely unchanging; Morris does not aim to collapse all dreams and desires into an identity. Nevertheless, at the core of the utopia of fellowship is something that cuts across historical difference. While the way in which fellowship is exemplified may change and evolve, responding to contemporary circumstances and reflecting the desires of new collectives in new contexts, Ball's vision attains an untimely power at the level of its underlying principles. Ball's utopia, insofar that it embodies a set of principles, comes to speak not only to the feudal conditions in which it first emerged but also to the capitalist society that the peasants' revolt helped to inaugurate. By exemplifying these principles, which are directed not just at discontent in *this* time and place but at discontent in *all* its forms, Ball's utopia lays claim to situations other than that in which it was originally articulated. In this way, the affirmative utopian image functions to negate a multiplicity of intolerable situations, even if these situations were not envisaged at the moment when this image was brought into existence. So, whatever the original intentions of the utopian writer – no matter who the utopia was meant for and against what it is implicitly placed – the image of a perfected society presented can work as the figurative other to any social and economic arrangement that fails to embody it.

Consequently, Ball's disappointment is painful to him not only because his prediction was wrong but also because his vision is still unfulfilled in the new times of capitalism. His disappointment leaves a feeling of being kept in suspense and a sense of unfinished business.<sup>45</sup> Ball's utopia, even though it was formed in the past, still offers something to the contemporary period *precisely because it was disappointed* in the medieval moment. If it had been fulfilled, it would offer nothing to the capitalist present of the agitator and would be

unable to inform it. The fact that Ball's dream was disappointed means that it maintains a critical hold on the new condition of capitalism, embodies an "undischarged past" that can still be acted upon and calls to be fulfilled.<sup>46</sup> All the time that the imagined future fails to arrive, it has an unsettling presence in the present and cannot be entirely left behind.

The unfinished nature of Ball's vision means that it can be taken up in the present. In a crucial comment, the agitator is able to assure Ball that, for modern workers, the "remedy shall be the same as thine, although the days be different: for if the folk be enthralled, what remedy save that they be set free?"<sup>47</sup> Ball and the agitator affirm the same vision of fellowship, the first against feudalism and the second against capitalism. Both figures identify with Ball's vision as the negation of the historical circumstances in which they find themselves; the "remedy" of the feudal serfs and the modern workers is the "same" because, whatever their differences, they face a social and economic system defined by inequality and exploitation.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, the untimely quality of Ball's vision makes a utopian tradition possible. The fact that utopias can escape into new times and places allows for an "inter-temporal *filiation* of beliefs" to occur.<sup>49</sup> Utopians of the past hand down visions of a new world to the present and, in turn, utopians of the present take up the principles of unrealised visions of the past. Just as the peasants justify their demands by reference to an originary Golden Age, the agitator's hopes are reinforced by his relationship to Ball's disappointed utopia. For Morris, there is a moment of commonality between visions articulated in different times and *A Dream* posits the possibility of a multi-temporal solidarity of utopians. Morris thus impels us to dwell with the continuities and consistencies that cut across the all too obvious differences between utopian visions articulated in different historical moments.



On this basis, Ball is advised to keep hope in his utopian vision, not because it will succeed in the medieval moment, but because others experiencing discontent and dissatisfaction will take it up as their own in the future. As the agitator suggests to Ball:

And what shall it be, as I told thee before, save that men shall be determined to be free; yea, free as thou wouldst have them, when thine hope rises the highest, and thou art thinking not of the king's uncles, and poll-groat bailiffs, and the villeinage of Essex, but of the end of all, when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price.<sup>50</sup>

Ball's vision, despite its age, represents something to fight for in the contemporary moment. Although Ball's utopia is wrapped up in, and was incited by, the particularities of medieval society (the king's uncles, poll-groat bailiffs and villeinage), it remains the case, as the agitator informs Ball, that he 'shalt not be forgotten' all the time that fellowship remains to be realised.<sup>51</sup>

The "tradition of our hope", the continuous ideal of fellowship stretching from the past through the present into the future, allows Ball to understand his failure in a new light.<sup>52</sup> Through his struggle, he has successfully bequeathed a vision of fellowship to future mass movements and, therefore, plays a role in the tradition of utopianising. The following statement from the socialist agitator is key here: "[M]en fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."<sup>53</sup> Utopian visions, even if they fail in the moment in which they are initially articulated, offer an untimely resource that can inform further struggle in the future. A dream disappointed at one moment of history can gain renewed actuality at other moments as it is re-enlivened by new popular struggles. The experience of inequality and exploitation incites a

common reaction across the ages and, as such, struggles in different historical moments converge on similar utopian principles – namely, those that point towards a world of equality and freedom.

Ball recuperates a melancholy-tinged hope from the untimely claim his dream makes on the capitalist present, suggesting to the agitator that: “[T]hou hast been a dream to me as I to thee, and sorry and glad have we made each other, as tales of old time and the longing of times to come shall ever make men to be.”<sup>54</sup> This image of sadness and happiness coming together, of the mixing of old times and new times, draws out the nature of Ball’s hope at the end of the text. Having faced disappointment, he no longer has confidence that his utopian vision will be realised; his initial anticipatory hope has disintegrated. Ball can, however, hope that it will be renewed in times to come by unknown others who recognise in it the negation of their own suffering. In this recognition, the common ground between himself and the previously mysterious dreamer is established.

Utopias, for Morris, should represent “the end of all” in two senses.<sup>55</sup> In the most obvious sense, utopias are the “end of all” insofar that they propose changing not just one aspect of society or the partial modification of all, but the elimination of the root causes of dissatisfaction and non-fulfilment in the world as it exists. Yet, utopias are also the “end of all” insofar that they express the aim or *telos* of a unified body of individuals (whether that be the agitator and Ball, or broader collective movements). Morris’s *A Dream* suggests that the shareable quality of a utopian vision, its possibility of becoming the end of many and not just one, is grounded in the untimely quality of this vision. The utopian tradition works to guide and shape each new utopian vision elaborated, such that each vision joins, and refers back to, an archive of unfulfilled hopes advanced at moments of popular struggle in response to intolerable situations. Utopian visions can, Morris implies, unite around similar contents;

insofar that they are shaped by common discontents and informed by the same disappointed hopes, there is the possibility for sameness across difference.

### **Conclusion: The Historian and the Solidarity of Utopians**

Morris, as this article has demonstrated, proposes a temporal solution to the problem of utopian unity. The articulation of collective dreaming and tradition – the sense that visions of the future can be made shareable through reference to the past – offers the possibility of a transtemporal solidarity of utopians that brings together the dreams of a plurality. For Morris, a detour through the past unites political struggle in the contemporary moment around a substantive utopian vision of a new society. Morris's utopianism, grounded in the history of disappointed collective longing for a new world, works to unify the will of the many by focussing individual dreams on a single aim that negates the sources of dissatisfaction in the present. To bring this paper to a close, it is worth drawing out one of the implications of Morris's position. The notion of utopian tradition suggests that there is an imperative, if utopian unity is to be achieved, to produce a new form of historical knowledge in which the stability and continuity of the communist ideal is brought to the fore.

For Morris, it is possible to draw positive lessons from history, albeit of a very particular type. Morris's utopianism contains a Benjamin-like twist: defeated dreams continue to lay a claim on the contemporary moment, guiding it in certain directions and giving shape to its horizons.<sup>56</sup> One looks back to history not for successful models to imitate but rather for failed visions of the future to take up; history is thus of value for the utopian by virtue of its "bad side" – its disasters, failures and disappointments. This is because part of the power of catastrophes lies in the fact that they involve a triumph over utopian visions of a better world. In *A Dream*, the rise of capitalism is presented as catastrophic, at least in part, because people imagined alternatives. The pathos of *A Dream* emerges from the dialectic of

hope and disappointment, and not disappointment alone. The articulation of tradition and utopia does not equate with the negation of the latter's association with the radical new. Morris emphasises that the assertion of the possibility of a break with the dominant logics of the world as it exists can be maintained by looking to the past. There are lost futures in the past, or utopian visions of new worlds contained in the historical record, that are waiting to be reawakened in the present. A "temporal crossing" or mixing thus occurs: the old comes to contain moments of the new.<sup>57</sup>

The central role of the historian, *vis-à-vis* the utopian tradition, is to recover the untimely visions of new worlds that have been etched on the historical record. The past should be approached, to borrow Weeks's phrase, as an "archive of the future" in which "the dead past of the archive" and the "not yet of the future" are brought together in a "paradoxical and unstable temporality."<sup>58</sup> The historian's role, in this regard, is to cultivate a form of utopian memory, or a disposition towards the past that is oriented towards the untimely visions of defeated mass movements. Such utopian memory is distinguished by the fact that it does not look back to the past to understand what actually happened but to uncover what failed to happen. It aims to reclaim those moments when the past was not identical with itself; when it pointed to an alternative, but as yet unrealised, state of being. This form of historical knowledge holds fast to the unfulfilled visions of a new world that continue to make a claim on the world of the present. The past, once understood in terms of the utopian tradition, is transfigured. That which endures is not the victories of oppressors but the intertemporally communicated unfulfilled visions of the oppressed. The task is thus to gather up the utopian moments that accompanied past instances of popular struggle and demonstrate their continuity with contemporary struggles.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 186.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Allison, "Building a Bridge," 53. Allison borrows the term Party of Utopia from Matthew Beaumont and Fredric Jameson (Beaumont, "Party of Utopia," 163-166; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 180).

<sup>6</sup> Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 211.

<sup>7</sup> Not all Morris scholars would agree that his utopia has a prescriptive quality. Most famously, Miguel Abensour, partly via a reading of the opening of *News from Nowhere*, claims that Morris does not want his readers to adopt his utopia as their own. For Abensour, the task is to follow Morris in the activity of utopianising rather than adhering to the contents of his utopia. As such, the "story of utopia contains an invitation for readers to respectively formulate and communicate their own vision of communism" (Abensour, "William Morris," 130). Abensour's libertarian reading has been very influential, shaping the work of prominent scholars of Morris and utopia including E.P. Thompson and Ruth Levitas (Thompson, *William Morris*, 785-794; Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 140-141). However, this reading has recently been criticised. As already indicated, Allison has taken Abensour to task for his inattention to those moments of *News* that imply that Morris was aiming to develop a vision that could be widely adopted (Allison, "Building a Bridge," 47-51). More generally, Ruth Kinna argues against the idea that Morris's utopian vision should not be taken literally and Owen Holland emphasises the propagandistic function of Morris's utopianism, which is focussed on convincing others of the correctness of his position (Kinna, "Relevance of Morris's Utopia," 742-744; Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism*, 29-44). Although I cannot undertake a full critique of Abensour here, my sympathies lie with scholars who emphasise the prescriptiveness of the Morrisian utopia.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, "Looking Backward," 502.

<sup>9</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 515

<sup>10</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*.

<sup>11</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3-18.

<sup>12</sup> Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 182-189; Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 123-126.

<sup>13</sup> Abensour, "William Morris," 144.

<sup>14</sup> See Boos, "Alternative Victorian Futures"; Eisenman, "Communism in Furs"; Goode, "William Morris"; Holzman, "The Encouragement". Exceptions to this historical reading include Yuri Cowan's focus on the text's dream-vision form, Michelle Weinroth's study of the relationship between *A Dream* and socialist propaganda and Ingrid Hanson's account of sacrificial violence in *A Dream* (Cowan, "'Paradyse Erthly'"; Weinroth, "Redesigning the Language"; Hanson, "The Living Past"). These studies betoken a discontent with the narrowness of the historical reading but do not extensively address Morris's utopianism.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 215. I refer to the narrator as the socialist agitator in this paper for two reasons. First, near the beginning of the text, the narrator briefly recounts a dream in which he preaches socialism before a crowd. Second, the commonality between the narrator and Ball is partly dependent on their shared political activism. Referring to the narrator as the agitator highlights this.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 220

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- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 223.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 228.
- <sup>21</sup> Benjamin, "The Concept of History," 395.
- <sup>22</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 229-230.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 230.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 254.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 237. Although my focus here is not directly on the contents of Morris's utopia, the interdependence of equality and freedom in his thought is evident in Ball's vision (see Levitas, "Beyond Bourgeois Right," 609-614).
- <sup>26</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 270.
- <sup>27</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 76.
- <sup>28</sup> Hyndman and Morris, *A Summary*, 51.
- <sup>29</sup> Morris, *Signs of Change*, 53.
- <sup>30</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 270.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 271.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 282.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 284.
- <sup>34</sup> Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 77.
- <sup>35</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 220.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 268.
- <sup>37</sup> Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia*, 22.
- <sup>38</sup> Morris, *Lectures on Socialism*, 258.
- <sup>39</sup> Landauer, *Revolution*, 112-113. Landauer's work on utopianism has received renewed interest in recent years, particularly from realist political theorists (Geuss, "The Metaphysical Need," 155-158; Thaler, "Hope Abjuring Hope," 680-681).
- <sup>40</sup> I take my understanding of untimeliness here from Ernst Bloch's work on non-contemporaneity. In simple terms, this concept names the sense that "multiple historical temporalities can co-exist within a common present" and, perhaps more importantly, contradict this present moment (Osborne, "Out of Sync," 41). For Bloch, "[n]ot all people exist in the same Now" insofar that people carry with them hopes that were formed in past historical ages (Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 97). As Bloch suggests, "precisely because so much of the past has yet to come to an end, the latter also clatters through the early dawns of newness" (Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 144).
- <sup>41</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 279.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 272.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 278, 284.
- <sup>44</sup> All quotations from *ibid.*, 237.
- <sup>45</sup> See Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 93-96.
- <sup>46</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 308.
- <sup>47</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 276.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Shils, "Tradition," 127.
- <sup>50</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 285.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>52</sup> Morris, *Collected Letters*, 2: 364.
- <sup>53</sup> Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, 231-232.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 286.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin, “The Concept of History,” 395.

<sup>57</sup> Freeman, *Time Binds*, 70.

<sup>58</sup> Weeks, “The Vanishing *Dialectic*,” 750.

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