Dialectics between Labour and Rest in Morris's Utopia: *News from Nowhere* (1890)[1]

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I. Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) will be investigated through a comparison between two conceptual polarities, namely *rest* and *labour*, which Morris strives to reconcile in order to construct his utopian project. These two words present a conceptual affinity with the equivalent Latin words "otium" and "negotium". As a matter of fact, "otium" hides a double meaning, a positive and a negative one: it can be associated with leisure to be devoted to the cultivation of one's own speculative inclinations; or, it can be connected with inertia and laziness. In English the Latin origin has been preserved in the adjective "otiose" and in the noun "otiosity"; however, while these Latinate terms are obsolete ones, the Old English "idleness" and "rest" are currently in use. The idea of "idleness" is opposed to work, it shuns labour and is counter-posed to it, as an alternative; the idea of "rest", instead, implies a break from work and, consequently, it is strictly interrelated to it as a kind of re-creative inactivity which ensues from a productive activity. On the other hand, in the Latin language the term "negotium" is characterised by the following associations: a) work, activity, occupation; b) preoccupation; c) annoyance, difficulty, embarrassment; d) political activity, public function.

Morris regards labour as a dynamic activity and no longer as a toilsome service men must daily fulfil for their own support. His positive idea of labour, conceived as an activity which man must learn, gathers momentum through his revival of the "Arts

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and Crafts" modelled on medieval guilds of artisans. In this respect, the encounter between Henry Morsom and William Guest in *News from Nowhere* is emblematic. During the delicate transitional stage from the industrial work of the Victorian age to handicraft in 2002, Morsom has preserved ancient traditions and skills which he is now able to transmit to younger generations.

> But, what was more interesting to us, he had detailed record of the period of the change to the present state of things, and told us a great deal about it ... of those arts of life which they had each lost; which loss, as he told us, had at one time gone so far that not only was it impossible to find a carpenter or a smith in a village or small country town, but that people in such places had even forgotten how to bake bread ... On the other hand, the old men amongst the labourers managed to teach the younger ones gradually a little artisanship, such as the use of the saw and the plane, the work of the smithy, and so forth; for once more, by the time it was as much as – or rather, more than – a man could do to fix an ash pole to a rake by handiwork ... (Morris, 1890: 184-185)

A work which, thanks to the skilful use of tools, has been taken care of in each phase of its development, originates a sense of fulfilment at its completion. The creative and projective potentialities of the handicrafts are thus counterposed to the alienating work of industrial civilization. Rest is no longer excluded from work, but comprehended within it. Rest is inherent to work, it is its accomplishment, a phase of recreation in which man can revive and revitalise his energy. In contrast with this utopian concept of work, Morris highlights that the frantic rhythms of industrial production cause strain and exhaustion. In Victorian painting the theme of industrial work is extensively employed to express a critique of the utilitarian, materialistic society which exploits the labouring classes. While perusing the bustling quayside depicted in *Iron and Coal* (1855-60) (Plate 1) by William Bell Scott, the observer is attracted to

the centre of the painting, where hammers are being wielded by the strong arms of ironworkers who are forging pieces of a locomotive. The air-pump of a marine engine, an anchor, an Armstrong gun, masts, and telegraph wires visualise an industrial microcosm of smoke and heat.

>> PLATE 1 >>
William Bell Scott, *Iron and Coal* (1855-60)

Morris contends that the technological prodigies of the Industrial Revolution demand inhuman endurance, cause extreme fatigue and foster a will to oblivion. From such a condition stasis arises, which annihilates man's perceptiveness. A condition of rest where perceptive faculties are kept awake is the only one which enables man to contemplate Beauty. Time is then dilated, man is soothed after his everyday "negotium", and his desires are projected onto the garden, conceived as a place of seclusion and enchantment. The garden becomes the place where the utopian thinker gives visual form to his mental, imaginary representations, enhanced by his sensorial categories. As a secluded place, the garden has often been associated with the concept of "otium", being a place devoted to repose and meditation. Man's need to be relieved from worldly burdens has generated two different poetic traditions: the first one responds to the human desire to elude the bonds of time and space in order to reach perfection and immortality. This desire engenders the Garden of Eden. The second poetic tradition conjures up a garden where human beings live in harmony with the rhythms of the four seasons. In the Golden Age portrayed by Hesiod in *The Works and the Days* the mortals lived like gods, free from anxiety and sheltered from fatigue and misery. They lived a happy life together in a rich, fruitful land, far from all evil, and then died, as if they were sleeping.

Morris's re-elaboration of the pastoral is an outstanding example of the 19th-century metamorphosis of the genre, through which Victorian poets emphasised the dichotomy between the soothing peace of country life and the brutal exploitation of human energies in the industrial city. Morris's emphasis on human enjoyment of natural environment presupposes a complex re-shaping of the genre of pastoral. As Blue Calhoun has rightly pointed out, "Morris's aesthetic response is not escape, but a kind of writing often mistaken for escape literature – the pastoral" (Calhoun, 1975: 5). A poetic

tradition dating back to the classical age provides the ground for expressing how the cycles and rhythms of nature can neutralise the frantic, fractured time imposed by the industrial process.

> Forget six countries overhung with smoke,
> Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
> Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
> Think rather of the packhorse of the down,
> And dream of London, small and white and clean,
> The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.
> (Morris, 1868-71: 3)

In *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-1870) Morris draws inspiration from Theocritus, Homer, Hesiod, and partly from Virgil in describing Arcadian settings where man's sensual delights are nurtured by vegetation, water, shadow, breeze and bird songs.

While in *The Earthly Paradise* the a-temporal, escapist component of the rural idyll is irreconcilable with the hyper-dynamic process which rules industrial civilization, in *News from Nowhere* the contrast between the condition of dreamlike suspension and the forces of change and mutability have been reconciled in the cohesion between pleasurable work and rest within nature. Northrop Frye has observed that "to make craftsmanship the basis of industry implies an immense simplification of human wants – this is the pastoral element in Morris's vision. ... The pastoral theme of the unity of man and physical nature is very prominent" (Frye, 1970: 130). Morris's choice of craftsmanship as the ideal work clearly aims at detaching Victorian society from sophisticated consumerism, while enabling people to autonomously satisfy their own primary needs.

The tension between the representation of rest as an expression of creative energy or of pure aesthetic pleasure marks the development of Pre-Raphaelite painting from the 1850s to the end of the century. The first Pre-Raphaelite

representations of the theme of the pastoral are characterised by the predominance of allegorical mimesis. In William Holman Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851) (Plate 2) the representation of a rural scene combines hyper-realistic and allegorical modes. While Hunt adheres to the principle of "truth to nature", he conveys a clear moral warning: the shepherd's courting of the shepherdess and their neglect of sheep symbolises a kind of *otium* which engenders lust and detaches man from moral rules. Later paintings testify to a gradual change of aesthetic sensibility. Didacticism gives way to
124>125 indefinite settings, where rest gradually detaches from the ethical and historical dimension and turns into a *locus amoenus* where man can find refuge far from the troubles of the world. In Edward Burne-Jones's *The Mill* (1870) (Plate 3) rest is rendered as a *mood* of suspension and enchantment which pervades the three dancers on the grass and the musician in the foreground as well as the naked men who have enjoyed a bath in placid waters in the background. The centrality of music as the symbol of rest is evident in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Bower Meadow* (1872) (Plate 4), which highlights the fine empathy between the players and the dancers and displays the profuse beauty of the countryside with which they perfectly harmonize. In John Meluish Strudwick's *The Music of a Bygone Age* (1890) (Plate 5) rest is transposed into a golden, finely wrought interior where, again, melody is all-absorbing. Rest is ultimately sublimated into a female personification of dream and sensual appeals in Rossetti's *La Ghirlandata* (1873) (Plate 6) and *The Daydream* (1880) (Plate 7), where feminine Beauty is an object of contemplation and sublimated desire. The metamorphoses of the Pre-Raphaelite pastoral landscape are marked by the enhancement of the purely aesthetic dimension, which neutralises the flux of time.

PLATE 2
William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851)

PLATE 3
Edward Burne-Jones, *The Mill* (1870)

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PLATE 4
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Bower Meadow* (1872)

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PLATE 5
John Meluish Strudwick,
The Music of a Bygone Age (1890)

PLATE 6
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Ghirlandata* (1873)

PLATE 7
Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Daydream* (1878)

II. Morris's response to the identification of rest with aesthetic pleasure expressed by late Pre-Raphaelitism is marked by the endeavour to distinguish repose from laziness and exhaustion. In 1886 he finally succeeds in lucidly conceptualising the *mood of energy* and *the mood of idleness*. In "The Aims of Art" energy is associated with activity, while idleness is linked with remembrance, vision, dream, and meditation.

> Now, when I consider my life further, I find out, or seem to, that it is under the influence of two dominating moods, which for lack of better words I must call the mood of energy and the mood of idleness: these two moods are now one, now the other, always crying out in me to be satisfied. When the mood of energy is upon me, I must be doing something, or I become mopish and unhappy; when the mood of idleness is on me, I find it hard indeed if I cannot rest and let my mind wander over the various pictures, pleasant or terrible, which my own experience or my communing with the thoughts of other men, dead or alive, have fashioned in it; and if circumstances will not allow me to cultivate this mood of idleness, I find I must at the best pass through a period of pain till I can manage to stimulate my mood of energy to take its place and make me happy again. And if I have no means wherewith to rouse up that mood of energy to do its duty in making me happy, and I have to toil while the idle mood is upon me, then I am unhappy indeed, and almost wish myself dead, though I do not know what that means.
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> (...)
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> Well, I believe that all men's lives are compounded of these two moods in various proportions, and that this explains why they have always, with more or less of toil, cherished and practised art. (Morris, 1886: 588-589)

Through the concept of rest Morris attempts to inter-fuse two contrasting moods, because rest means not only a break from physical activity, but also re-creative inactivity, and, above all, the gratifying contemplation and enjoyment of the accomplished artistic act. According to Morris, the worst curse

is restlessness, which he defines as the feeling of frustration for not having been able to bring the creative act to completion.

News from Nowhere can be regarded as Morris's strenuous attempt to come to terms with a sense of void and inadequacy which originates from his controversial relationship with time and history. His tension between history and aesthetics, between the unceasing flowing of time and the eternal value of the work of art, can be comprehended by investigating two different trends in utopia. On the one hand, regressive utopia is based on Arcadia and centred on nature and the countryside; on the other hand, progressive utopia is characterised by progress, technological advancement and urban planning. Both trends can be explained as strategies for escaping the challenge of time, the real obsession of the utopian thinker, because at least until the 19th century the dialectics of time and history could not be reconciled. As a matter of fact, the classic utopias appear to be crystallised in a mortuary fixedness. In the regressive trend, the relationship between utopia and myth appears to be central; regressive utopias focus on a nostalgia for the past, lived or envisioned, and are moulded on the myths of the Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden, the Golden Age of antiquity and, later, of Arcadia. In such utopias, then, the active aspect does not prevail: the toil of work has been eliminated, and happy, beautiful creatures, uncontaminated by the corruption of time, thrive on the products of a prolific and abundant nature. This is the fulcrum of existence. In the progressive utopias, a rational project aims at redeeming the initial blow of the Fall through the toil of men who build a perfect and happy society on a constant day-to-day basis. The obsession with time is overcome thanks to the strict regulation of every aspect of nature and reality which could cause social chaos. This inability to accept time as change leads to the geometric desire for classification and to the censorial aspects of the utopian writer.

Such a managerial attitude becomes problematic in the 19th century, when the utopian writer has to deal with the ideas

of progress, the dialectic sense of history according to the Marxist conception. The issue of the acceptance of historic time is left unsolved, as is clearly shown by 20th-century anti-utopias. F.E. Manuel's and F.P. Manuel's definition of utopia as a hybrid plant remains valid (Manuel and Manuel, 1979). This definition considers two roots, classical, mythical thought and Christian Judaic thought, which mix and fuse in the Western utopia. The first implies a circular conception, in which the end goes back to the start in a myth of the eternal return, while the second implies an eschatological tension, in which the *telos* is projected forward.

Morris is a utopian writer who reveals a constant will to cope with the two opposite trends of regression and projectivity. In both his essays and letters to his family and friends, references are made to his peculiar oscillation between the mood of energy and the mood of idleness. While the former dominates his inexhaustible, multiple activities, both intellectual and manual, the latter is characterised by a sense of exhaustion, of utter tiredness which can be interpreted as an existential anguish for decay and death. His letters of 8 October and 25 November 1872 to Aglaia Coronio disclose a disquieting melancholic self-portrait:

> ... I have been backwards and forwards to Kelmscott a good deal this summer & autumn ... The weather has been lovely here this autumn, but doesn't seem to have suited me very well. I have been queer several times, and am not very brilliant today – As to any mental health – I have had ups and downs as you may very easily imagine: but on the whole I suppose I am getting less restless and worried, if at the same time less hopeful, still there is life in me yet I hope.
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> ... One thing wanting ought not to go for so much – nor indeed does it spoil my enjoyment of life always, as I have often told you: to have some real Friends and some sort of aim in life is so much, that I ought still to think myself lucky – and often in my better moods I wonder what it is in me that throws me into such rage and despair at other times: I suspect; do you know,

> that some such moods would have come upon me at times even without this failure of mine. However that may be though I must confess that this autumn has been a special dismal time with me. (Morris, 1872: 47-48)

> There, dear Aglaia see I am showing my pettiness! *please* don't encourage me in them; but you have always been so kind to me that they will come out. O how I long to keep the world – from narrowing in on me and to look at things bigly and kindly!
> I am going to try to get to Iceland next year, hard as it will be to drag myself away from two or three people in England; but I know there will be a kind of rest in it, let alone the help it will bring me from physical reasons; I know clearer now perhaps than then what a blessing & help last year's journey was to one; or what horrors it saved me from....
> Forgive my rambling and most egotistical letter. (*idem*, 50-51)

Morris's oscillation between self-restraint and explicit search for sympathy testifies to a multi-faceted personality characterised by contrasting attitudes, which variously intertwine in his search for a centre of gravity. The sense of loss and anguish is opposed to his efforts of will, his disillusionment and resentment are juxtaposed with his desire for peace and rest. His utopian frame of mind is characterised by the dichotomous interplay of force *vs.* frailty, time *vs.* vacuum, over-commitment *vs.* rest, concentration *vs.* distraction, activity *vs.* restraint. The ceaseless tension towards a balanced identity starts as an introverted activity and develops into a public practice as a militant socialist fourteen years later in the above mentioned lecture *The Aims of Art* (1886).

Morris endeavours to introduce a dialectic sense of History into *News from Nowhere*, while attempting to expunge the sense of the end which pervades everything human, and to remove the corruption of the body and death. As acutely observed by A. L. Morton:

> Morris's is the first Utopia which is not Utopian. In all its predecessors it is the details which catch our attention, but

> here, while we may be dubious about this detail or that, the important things are the sense of historical development and the human understanding of the quality of life in a classless society. (Morton, 1953: 164)

Morris tries to combine Marx's conception of history with a late Romantic, organicist view of the transformation of human institutions. Social structures are corruptible, and class conflict will quicken their degeneration; radical regeneration depends on class conscience, educated on socialist principles and thus able to organise a future egalitarian society.

E. P. Thompson attempts to explain how the Marxian concept of dialectics grows on a romantic tension towards the future fertilised by the legacy of the past. The image of the spiral, which Morris articulates in the *Manifesto of the Socialist League*, reveals the coexistence of the two modes of thought:

> ... every distinctive stage of progress, involves a backward as well as a forward movement; the new development returns to a point which represents the older principle elevated to a higher plane ... The progress of all life must be not on the straight line, but on the spiral.[2]

Far from functioning as a static model, history should favour the envisagement of an aesthetic ideal for 19th-century people; however, in Morris's poetics the past becomes a Golden Age rich in icons of beauty and perfection (see Spinozzi, 1998).

> Not seldom I please myself with trying to realize the face of mediæval England; the many chases and great woods, the stretches of common tillage and common pasture quite unenclosed ... the little towns, well bechurched, often walled; the villages just where they are now ..., but better and more populous; their churches, some big and handsome, some small and curious, but all crowded with altars and furniture, and gay with pictures and ornament; the many religious-houses, with their glorious architecture; the beautiful manor-

> houses, some of them castles once, and survivals from an earlier period; some new and elegant ... (Morris, 1885a: 30).

Morris's vision appears unsolved, neither entirely sustaining a revivalist attitude, nor fully revolving on Marxian dialectics. His faith in socialist dynamism is founded on a model of society shaped on aesthetic principles. The future and the past should interweave in a utopian project of reconciliation of ethics with aesthetics, and the future society ought to grow on the cultural memory of ancient England, but there Morris's desire rests fixed.

Morris's response to the problem of time decay and death is aesthetic: only art and artworks can defeat time and the corruption of the body. In Morris's *News from Nowhere* the popular art of the new socialist England is constantly compared with the art of the old capitalist society. The grumbler obstinately raises objections and interrogatives which become central for the detractors of Marxist thought: is it true that a society without competition is, in fact, less creative? Is it possible that art and creativity can develop in a society without conflict, without pain and suffering? Will the new art not be boring and less attractive because, as is well known, it is much easier to describe the abjection of Hell than the sublime perfection of Paradise? Ellen's response to this critique is categorical: life is superior to fiction. The lively debate between Ellen and her grandfather emphasises how for Morris the new utopian "art" must be endowed with a mythical quality and draw inspiration from the old popular legends and folklore (see Fortunati, 1979). Gratification ensuing from artistic activity is Morris's solution to the dialectics between stasis and energy, passivity and exhaustion. Nonetheless, Morris's utopian world does not solve the problem of expressing art through individual creativity in a socialist society.

Along with the constant appraisal of the beauty of the young, who are agile and strong, and of women, the reader shares with the character-narrator William Guest the anxious

feeling that the vision and the experience in this new, Eden-like world are fleeting (see Fortunati, 1998).

> All along, though those friends were so real to me, I had been feeling as if I had no business amongst them: as though the time would come when they would reject me, and say, as Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say, "No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you. Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that ... there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship – but not before. Go back again, then, and while you live you will see all round you people engaged in making others live lives which are not their own, while they themselves care nothing for their own real lives – men who hate life though they fear death. Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness". (Morris, 1890: 220)

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The message of hope unfolded in the last line of *News from Nowhere* is still constructed on a binary opposition: Ellen's farewell words to William Guest are characterised by a dual register, both reassuring and disquieting. Back from Nowhere to Victorian England, nothing is left to Guest but a dream which he hopes to transform into a shared vision; back from utopia to reality, Morris must painfully acknowledge that human hope for *rest and happiness* inevitably germinates from the experience of *pain and labour*. <<

NOTES

[1] While Vita Fortunati has explored *News from Nowhere* with relation to the regressive and progressive utopian trends, thus highlighting William Morris's specific contribution to the evolution of utopia as a literary genre, Paola Spinozzi has focused on the dichotomy between revivalism and Marxian historicism in Morris's utopian thought as well as on his relations with the aesthetics of Pre-Raphaelitism.

[2] William Morris, *Note C* to *The Manifesto of the Socialist League*, July 5th, 1885, in E.P. Thompson *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1976 (I ed. 1955), "Postscript", pp. 763-816, in particular 779-786. "... Morris carries directly through into his Socialist thought some of the terms of the Romantic critique of Utilitarianism, as in the opposition of the notion of community (or 'true society') to 'mechanical civilization'. ... it is difficult to see how Morris could have transformed that tradition if he had not attained to a dialectical notion (Bax's 'spiral') of the reassertion at a new level and in new forms of pre-capitalist values of community and of 'barbarism' " (783).

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