

## MORRIS, CARPENTER, WILDE, AND THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF LABOR

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IN JUNE 1885 a group of radical intellectual Londoners gathered for the evening at that hub of nineteenth-century free thought, the South Place Institute. The event was organized by the Socialist League, a revolutionary socialist organization which counted William Morris, Eleanor Marx, and Edward Aveling as its most prominent members at that point in time. But this was no ordinary meeting. There were no lectures and no debates, just popular songs and dramatic recitations that had been carefully rehearsed by the membership in order to entertain for the cause. William Morris drafted a poem for the occasion, urging these “Socialists at Play” to cast their “care aside while song and verse/Touches our hearts.” Play, however, was not to lull the audience into a “luxurious mood”:

War, labour, freedom; noble words are these;  
But must we hymn them in our hours of ease?  
We must be men (Morris 1885)

Morris’s address reminded his audience that their political beliefs permeated both work and play. The members of the Socialist League should structure their leisure like warriors awaiting the call to arms: “Amidst their ballad sings the trumpet voice;/About the sheep-cotes girt for war they go.” The revolution was so self-evidently imminent for these socialists in the fraught mid-1880s that like Morris’s imagined medieval warriors they needed to display a readiness for struggle in all aspects of their lives and let “the cause cling”:

About the book we read, the song we sing,  
Cleave to our cup and hover o’er our plate,  
And by our bed at morn and even wait. (Morris 1885)

Morris’s verse constructs a commune of militant laboring artistry from his diverse socialist audience. The invocation (or invention) of a medieval tradition transposes the eclectic crowd clad in fustian, serge suits, aesthetic drapery, and Jaeger woollens (with or without sandals) into a corps of armored yeomen, flashing steel amid the material of everyday life. In formal terms, the troubling privilege of the modern, self-centred “luxurious mood,” the inwardness and individualism of bourgeois lyric subjectivity, are averted by Morris’s

reference to the ballad: to that affirmation of poetry as engaged collective experience, signified, as Anne Janowitz indicates, in both the rhythmic structure and the titles of the “songs” and “chants” that Morris produced after his conversion to socialism in the early 1880s (199). Here, art is producing that hopeful pilgrimage towards the communal utopia, producing that desire which E. P. Thompson argues is indivisible from the necessity of class-conflict in Morris’s vision of the coming socialist revolution (641–730).

Morris’s verse attempts to overcome the boundary between aesthetics and politics, leisure and labor, interweaving political cause into the texture of everyday objects and elevating those objects (books, songs, cups, plates, beds) to the status of craft goods; the repositories of a communal aesthetic tradition. After the revolution, Morris suggests, all goods would be the outcome of such “traditions of the past” producing new works “common to the whole people” (Morris, 1891 36). In the meantime Morris inscribed aesthetics into the heart of late nineteenth-century socialism. There were to be no evenings off for these socialists. “War, labour, [and] freedom” were to be hymned through the arts, whilst the effortful struggle of virile socialists swept away the detritus that passed itself off as aesthetic in the capitalist marketplace.

The manner in which Morris sutures together artistic production and political engagement through such a use of tradition might appear rather idiosyncratic. After all, each of those craft goods of politicized communal life (cups, plates, beds) seems to evoke a product of Morris & Co.: beautiful everyday items made more useful by tapestried or engraved gothic mottos appealing outwards to the owner, demanding to be more than just passively consumed luxuries. The British socialist movement that emerged in the early 1880s was remarkably consistent, however, in interweaving aesthetics and politics in its objects. Poetry in journals such as *Commonweal* and the Fabian organ *Today*, engravings by Walter Crane, and addresses on the future of art under socialism all gesture towards the dissolution of the boundary between art and activism in socialist thought during the late nineteenth century. Stanley Pierson attributes such muddying of the waters of historical materialism to the influence of John Ruskin’s later works upon late nineteenth-century socialists (75–88). Both this intellectual origin of British socialism and the Romantic idealism that consequently inflected the movement are very much in evidence in many socialist works of the period. But whilst Pierson views Ruskinian aesthetics as an unfortunate pollutant of pure Marxism during the 1880s and 1890s, the invitation to think about nineteenth-century boundaries opens out this pluralism of socialist thought as a question in its own right.

This question of what Ruth Robbins usefully terms the both/and (rather than either/or) of aesthetics and politics in late nineteenth-century socialism was bound up with an attack upon the individualism of mainstream social and political thought in the period (98). With the revolution so clearly just around the corner for socialists in the 1880s, the search for a model of selfhood and self-expression outside capitalist individualism had an urgency it has never since regained. One reason why the subject of art and the subjectivity of the artist became important counters in the ensuing debates within socialist circles was the Romantic association of aesthetic production with intense individualism. Two questions, one aesthetic and the other political, thus become inextricably linked in late nineteenth-century socialist debate. First, can art exist without individual genius? And second, to what extent will socialism eradicate individuality in favor of the commune?

This article contrasts Morris’s response to these questions with those of another prominent member of the broad church that was socialism in the last decades of the nineteenth century,

the poet and sexual radical, Edward Carpenter. Both writers worked up against late nineteenth-century aestheticism in their belief that the increasing autonomy of art was a symptom of advanced capitalism: a condition that would be terminated by the revolution, but that in the meantime needed to be exposed as the sickness it was. Whilst both writers struggled with the aestheticism of their time they also attempted to theorize the likely form of creativity and aesthetic expression in the coming socialist era. Despite clear political differences, Morris and Carpenter shared a vision of the subject under socialism. It was a vision in which the self achieved fullest expression, clearest realization – true manhood – as Morris put it, through communal labor. For Morris and Carpenter the masculine laboring body became an aesthetic site: the origin for the rebirth of the arts after the demise of capitalism. The somatic experience of the pleasure of labor was for both writers (albeit, as we shall see, in very different ways) the source of the aesthetic. Not only did this enable Morris and Carpenter to close the seemingly vast divide between the identities of the bourgeois gentleman poet and the laboring man, but it also provided a model of aesthetic production that appeared to be rooted in communal labor rather than in individual genius.

This celebration of communal identity and anticipation of a new life of beauty formed the creed of what Stephen Yeo has termed the widespread “religion of socialism” in Britain during the 1880s and 1890s (6). The diverse intellectual origins of the socialist movement during this period – the fact that local radical groups might shape their beliefs by reading Ruskin and Emerson, Whitman and Tolstoy as much as (if not more than) Marx and Engels – fostered an audience for whom revolution had both aesthetic and political consequences. Amongst the many socialist speakers who traveled the country to address such radical organizations during the 1880s it was Carpenter and Morris who elicited the most ecstatic responses from their listeners. The poet Dollie Radford, for example, left Morris’s lecture “How we Live and How we Might Live” in 1884, ever more convinced by the “seriousness and beauty of the socialistic movement.” She added that she never gained such conviction from listening to her scientific socialist acquaintances, H. M. Hyndman and Edward Aveling, then members of the Social Democratic Federation (Radford, 30.11.1884). On hearing Edward Carpenter lecture during the 1880s, Katherine Bruce Glasier also concluded that “the earth reborn to beauty and joy” seemed just around the corner, thanks to the ever-growing socialist movement (Yeo, 1977 12). That use of the term “beauty” by both women suggests how important the aesthetic was in supplementing the materialism of scientific socialism. The prospect of a new life of beauty in the socialist Utopia fuelled the latent idealism of many seeking a new belief system in politics: the aesthetic and the political were inseparable in enthusiasm for the “religion of socialism.”

The work of Ian Britain, Chris Waters, and Carolyn Steedman has done much to enrich our knowledge of the integration of aesthetic culture within socialists’ theory and practice from the 1880s into the early twentieth century. Waters and Steedman have both concluded that a belief in the capacity of the arts and natural beauty to reform the individual underlay socialist activities as diverse as the choirs and cultural tours of the Clarion movement and Margaret Macmillan’s open-air kindergarten experiments (Waters 97–130; Steedman 84–95). During the 1880s and 1890s the self-styled scientific and gradualist socialists of the Fabian Society were notable for their explicit attempts to distance themselves from this aesthetic dimension of socialism in order to concentrate on permeating the existing political order (Mackenzie 191–224). Indeed, the prominent Fabian, George Bernard Shaw was so frustrated by listening to Edward Carpenter’s lecture to the Society in 1886 that he found a release in scribbling a

description of the fidgety audience in the margin of the minute-book, concluding that “two or more meetings like this should finish off any society” (BLPES, Fabian: C36).

Yet Ian Britain’s work presents a very different analysis of the relationship between Fabianism and culture from Shaw’s simple dismissal of Carpenter’s idealism. Not only were a large number of artists and writers members of the Fabian Society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also the *New Age*, a journal central to the dissemination of early Modernist literature, was established by the Fabian Arts Group in 1907 (Britain 169–72). Articles on guild socialism as a source for the rebirth of the arts and on art and revolution appear in the *New Age* as late as 1914 and rub up against the early works of Ezra Pound and Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto.<sup>1</sup> The politicized aesthetics of communal labor, so central to the works of Morris and Carpenter, permeated the broad spectrum of socialist thought at the turn of the century and formed part of the dialectic from which Modernist aesthetics emerged.

### I

THE LAST TWO DECADES of the nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable disregard of boundaries that over a century later seem impassable divides. The widespread desire to find a new life beyond the constraints of late nineteenth-century capitalism led to an eclectic collation of belief systems: spiritualism, Theosophy, Emersonian transcendentalism, Nietzschean notions of the will, Ruskinian medievalism, alongside the more material influences of Marx and Engels. Scanning the minute books and lecture programs of metropolitan socialist organizations during the period reveals that as both speakers and audience members, individuals who are now affixed to one particular group by the lens of carefully focused historical monographs in fact glided over the capital, surfacing wherever suitably radical fare was on offer. The desire for synthesis outweighed the inevitable scoring of lines in the sand between fracturing socialist groupings such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League. As Terry Eagleton has observed, fin-de-siècle intellectuals “blend belief systems with staggering nonchalance, blithely confident of some invisible omega point at which . . . Emerson lies down with Engels” (12). The pleasures of the archive offer up an object that correlates Eagleton’s summary in the shape of the first minute book of the Fabian Society executive. On the inner front cover is written in bold, “Society for Psychical Research: Haunted Houses Committee Notebook,” by the future Fabian secretary Edward Pease. This is then followed by the stubs of several excised pages of notes, before the book starts a new life recording socialism, rather than apparitions (BLPES, Fabian: C1). Far from a firm boundary existing between the spiritual and the material, the Utopian and the reformist, the seeming opposites are literally bound together in this past.

Reviewing *Chants of Labour* (1888), a volume of poetry edited by Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde noted these diverse ideologies and backgrounds among the contributors and concluded with satisfaction that “Socialism is not going to allow herself to be trammelled by any hard and fast creed or be stereotyped into an iron formula” (Wilde, 1889). But Wilde had his reservations regarding the aesthetic future of socialism sketched out by Carpenter, Morris, and devotees of the religion of socialism. In the review Wilde uses his habitual technique of resignification through inversion and paradox in order to dissent from the underlying aesthetic of Carpenter’s volume. The commune of diverse producers laboring manfully to initiate the new life through this “songbook of the people” is transformed by a

turn of phrase and Socialism becomes, in effect, a salon hostess: “She [Socialism] welcomes many and multiform natures. She rejects none and has room for all. She has the attraction of a wonderful personality” (Wilde 3). This transposition of the subject of socialism from masculine to feminine, from laboring producers to a singular, delightful consumer is, I want to argue, a move freighted with political significance: it is a critique of the model of manly, communal aesthetics popularized by Morris and Carpenter during the 1880s; a critique Wilde was to develop further in his 1891 article, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” as we shall see shortly.

In the same year that Carpenter published his *Chants of Labour*, William Morris’s collected lectures on art and socialism were published under the title *Signs of Change* (1888). Morris had delivered these lectures so frequently in person and in the socialist press during the 1880s that their subjects must have been familiar to a radical audience. But their cumulative publication seems to have presented a surprise to more conservative readers. With a sorrowful sigh, the *Saturday Review* mourned in a piece entitled “The Earthly Inferno,” “We wish we could introduce Mr William Morris, the poet, to Mr William Morris, the political revolutionary, between whom there has long been alienation. The one might learn a great deal from the other” (Faulkner 312). For the reviewer, Morris’s “half idyllic, half bloodthirsty” socialist lectures were a betrayal of the true “wisdom” he had displayed in his earlier poetic works: his political engagement irreconcilable with his aesthetics. Yet it was precisely this fusion of the aesthetic and the political that formed Morris’s critique of the individualism of contemporary society.

As the exercise of elite, educated taste – what Regenia Gagnier terms an aesthetics of consumption – came to dominate art and criticism at the fin-de-siècle, Morris constantly reaffirmed the democratic, productivist nature of “true” art (Gagnier, 2000 123, 167). Morris attempted to do away with the figure of the individuated, autonomous genius and overcome the increasing deracination of the aesthetic realm from everyday practice. Paradoxically Morris was, of course, deeply implicated in the development of the discourse of the aesthetes. Walter Pater, for example, first drafted the infamous conclusion to his *Renaissance* in a review of Morris’s poem *The Earthly Paradise*, and for Wilde, too, Morris was a central figure in his promotion of the aestheticization of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> That recurrent fin-de-siècle representation of the artistic soul as consumer, collector, and exhibitor of enlightened taste in the arrangement of interiors and the experience of surfaces, owes much to Morris’s promotion of design through his work for the firm, Morris & Co.

Despite this, however, it is the aesthete exercising ahistorical, individuated taste in the collection of sensuous surfaces that I think we see Morris working against in his account of his conversion to socialism. The “study of history and the love of the practice of art,” Morris writes:

forced me into a hatred of civilization which, if things were to stop as they are, would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a collection of curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present. (Morris 1894)

History and aesthetic production are threatened by a capitalist modernity that rewrites the former as fragmentary stories lacking an originary, causal logic, and the latter as arbitrary consumption, necessarily detached from the everyday. The negative attributes of civilization here can be equated with the decadent aesthete himself: think of those collectors, Dorian

Gray and Des Esseintes, gathering up the art and narratives of the past with no inherent logic but individual desire, personal, jaded tastes. “Soon there will be nothing left,” Morris argues, “but the lying dreams of history, the miserable wreckage of our aesthetic drawing rooms, unreal and foolish, fitting witness of the life of corruption that goes on there” (Morris, 1888 132).

The historical materialism that Morris gleaned from reading Marx in the early 1880s provided him with a means of explaining the individualism of the aesthete, placing him back into history whilst also figuring the hope of change. The decadence and detachment of the aesthetes was but the result of high capitalism and the necessary alienation of the worker from his task. There could be no true, manly, art under such a system, just the “sham art” that resulted from the simulation of aesthetics by “dilettanti fine gentlemen and ladies without any help from below” (Morris, 1888 135). Looking forward through his hopes of the past, Morris envisioned the rebirth of aesthetics after the overthrow of capitalism. The inevitable processes of history would sweep away the possibility of art as self-interested consumption and then, Morris argues (in a gendered manner to which I will return shortly), Nature will recover “her ancient beauty” and teach “men the old story of art” (Morris, 1888 136).

Art is indeed an “old story” for Morris, but it is a story that exists outside civilization and history in terms of its origins. The pure wellsprings of the aesthetic lie in man’s primal contest with Nature, when he learned to mimic “her” in her adornment of her work. For Morris art therefore originates in the somatic inheritance of tradition rather than the momentary inspiration of individual genius. Through copying the productions of Nature, the people would learn again to adorn their work after the revolution and hence “stamp all labour with the impress of pleasure” (1888 164). Quite at odds with the tenets of aestheticism – though of course owing much to the early inspiration of Ruskin – Morris locates aesthetics in the realm of the body via the pleasures of labor. Sweeping away the capitalist system would result in joy in the communal workshop:

our working hours would rather be merry parties of men and maids, young men and old enjoying themselves over their work, than the grumpy weariness it mostly is now. Then would come the time for the new birth of art, so much talked of, so long deferred; people could not help showing their mirth and pleasure in their work, and would be always wishing to express it in a tangible and more or less enduring form, and the workshop would once more be a school of art, whose influence no one could escape from. (1888 29)

The “definite sensuous pleasure” of the labour of the hand contains the seeds of a new art ready to blossom forth, once historical developments sweep away the burden and slavery of work under capitalism (1888 122). The embodied tradition of aesthetic pleasure is, as Morris indicates in *News from Nowhere* (1891), something that outlasts the end of history. Even though the inhabitants of Nowhere have little notion or need of history in that Utopian “epoch of rest” after historical materialism, their pleasure in nature and the architectural repositories of tradition feeds a new communal artistry.

Morris’s somatic aesthetic theory was therefore in tension with two major currents of nineteenth-century thought regarding the relationship between art and the people, aesthetics and politics. First, his insistence on communal tradition as a school of art was at odds, as we have seen, with the elite individuated aestheticism of cultivated taste during the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, for Morris true artistic individuality could only develop through working

within authentic popular tradition. In contrast, Wilde, for instance, argued that socialism would liberate the artist from a concern with popular tradition into states of intense creative individualism. Art under socialism, in Wilde's formulation, is not only an autonomous but also a self-reflexive process: "Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is"; from self outwith, rather than within, tradition (Wilde, 1988 29). At the same time as Morris rejected such ideas of the autonomy of artistic creativity, his somatic aesthetic of tradition also diverged from the dominant forms of cultural philanthropy in the late nineteenth century. By concentrating on the lesser arts in his writing, Morris refused the possibility that the ethical affect of the aesthetic – Arnold's "sweetness and light" – was a perquisite of the bourgeoisie. For Morris the tradition of the productive hand, rather than the culture of the consuming, tasteful mind was the source of aesthetic transformation: a transformation that could thus be led by popular revolution and not by doses of culture *de haute en bas*. Hope was to be found in seeking not the "dead exterior" of art itself, but the aims of art, in the production of human subjects not the consumption of aesthetic objects.

In returning the aesthetic to a logic of production as opposed to consumption, Morris attempted to reinscribe the "manliness" of art. The poet was once more a ballad-maker, a socially engaged laborer whose work spoke from the people and returned their pleasures to them.<sup>4</sup> Art was the offspring of labor in a non-alienated, pre- or post-capitalist world, and the desire for labor was, for Morris, an inherent trait of mankind: the urge "for due work to do" is, he argues, the foundation of happiness. Even rough or nasty work possesses aesthetic potential. "I should not think much of the manhood of a stout and healthy man," Morris sniffed, "who did not feel a pleasure in doing rough work" (Morris, 1888 26). The aim of art, he writes, is to give men so much "hope and bodily pleasure" in their work, that even swinging a pickaxe and road mending, as Morris suggests in *News from Nowhere*, finds its place on an aesthetic continuum (Morris, 1992 39).

It is highly probable that Wilde had read the serialization of *News from Nowhere* in *Commonweal* during 1890 and that this work was one of the many that Wilde drew upon in writing "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" that winter (Danson 163; Guy, 2003 64). Although Wilde's article barely caused a ripple in the socialist press at the time – and, as Josephine Guy suggests, should be seen as topical entertainment in response to current journalism, rather than as considered political analysis – "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" wittily debunks Morris's somatic aesthetics (Guy, 2003 67). The figure of laboring masculinity straddles the divide between aesthetics and politics for Morris because he argues that man is created as man the maker, man the laborer. Far from labor being the punitive consequence of a fall into civilization and history, for Morris joyful labor is there from the outset. The aesthetic is not spawned in a pre-lapsarian primal relationship, cradled in the bosom of Nature, but in the effortful labor needed to mimic her pleasures whilst mastering her resources. Pleasure, labor, and manliness need to be interlinked categories within this political aesthetic: categories that have been strained apart by the corruption of art, production, and the subject under capitalism, but that will return to Edenic identity after the revolution, outside history once again. Wilde, however, neatly dissects these three terms and re-inscribes the boundaries between them, by insisting that the nature of pleasure, labor (and pain) are essentially unaffected by socialism and economic revolution: art will still be the source of pleasure and labor (often) that of pain.

Although Wilde concedes, in a phrase reminiscent of Morris, that "Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval" of the value of any activity, he denies that such pleasure is

necessarily linked to labor (Wilde, 1988 64). Nonchalantly launching an attack on Morris's aesthetic socialism, he argues "I cannot help saying that a great deal of nonsense is being written and talked nowadays about the dignity of manual labour . . . many forms of labour are quite pleasureless activities and should be regarded as such" (Wilde, 1988 26). Homing in on one end of Morris's aesthetic continuum in *News from Nowhere*, Wilde concludes that "[t]o sweep a slushy crossing for eight hours a day when the east wind is blowing is a disgusting occupation" (Wilde, 1988 26). So, under the Wildean socialist scheme, machines would fulfill tasks currently allotted to manual laborers and Humanity would be free for its chief, true, aim in life: "enjoying cultivated leisure" (Wilde, 1988 27). Robbins argues that in this part of his article Wilde turns away from the critique of socialism in order to make a joke of contemporary ideals of masculine earnestness (107). Although Robbins work usefully indicates the dissemination of such ideals of manly labor beyond the socialist movement, I would suggest that Wilde's point is in fact very much a part of his argument with socialism. This deconstruction of the figure of effortful laboring manhood is directed at the politicized aesthetic of 1880s socialism and, in this respect, Wilde's argument foreshadows the increasingly rigid demarcation between art and labor in the twentieth century.

Wilde's insistence upon the boundary between leisurely art and political labor is the fruit of what Gagnier calls the aesthetic of consumption. Freed by the machinery of state socialism and automated crossing sweepers from the burden of altruism and the tradition of manual labor, the Wildean artist is able to construct himself through acts of taste, states of "admiration and delight." Morris's theory of the democratization of art under socialism through the communal experience of labor and the inheritance of tradition is simply untenable for Wilde. According to Wilde, man is made for the exercise of pleasurable taste and not the bodily effort of labor; art is the expression of individual personality, not communal tradition. Such art may in turn have a revolutionary effect in reconstructing its audience, as Gagnier suggests, but this is the paradox of a socialist state crafted by "the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known," that is, by Wildean art (Gagnier, 1986 29; Wilde, 1988 29).

We can see how Wilde develops his earlier latitudinarian fantasia of socialism as a feminized consumer with a "wonderful personality" when he returns to the subject in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." The salon hostess of Wilde's socialism draws out the individuated artistic elite into even more dazzling performances of their own personalities in her aesthetic drawing-room, having taken care of all the awkward and distracting issues of poverty and material inequality. For Morris, however, the future of socialist hope took the shape of "some noble communal hall" that spoke of the manly labour of the many by whom it would be built (Morris, 1888 32). As the salon is to the communal hall, so too is Wilde's "personality" to Morris's "manliness": the former alluding to the erotic aesthetics of delectable individualism against the mass, the latter to the impulse of self-forgetful labor that paradoxically forges subjects in the process of making objects. "A man at work," Morris declaims, "making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body." And with a final biblical cadence he concludes, "if we work thus, we shall be men, and our days happy and eventful" (Morris, 1888 144). Morris's manly subjects are making (them)selves through tradition, out of the historical conditions of their existence into a future of socialist hope.

## II

WILL, WAR, LABOR, STRUGGLE, MANLINESS, ART. At first these terms of Morris's socialist aesthetic seem to demarcate an exclusively masculine model of individuation: a world of self as creative destruction, life as will. But I want to argue that the theory of embodied production underpinning Morris's aesthetics offered unexpected avenues to his fellow socialists for re-thinking the sexed significance of individualism. The very belief in the imminence of revolution after that threshold year of 1884 turned the gaze of socialist thinkers inwards to the body and its relation to nature. The process of struggle in Morris's work was the necessary prelude to one of the many periodic transformations of society: the long labor that would bring forth the rebirth of autonomous productive subjects. Born into a new society these communist subjects could only learn of art through experiencing the body and its pleasures. Morris's belief that tradition (without linear history) nurtured the seeds of a somatic aesthetic was the basis of a Utopia of artistic democracy which blurred the boundaries between on the one hand nature, the body, and the feminine and on the other, culture, art, and the masculine.

In its very stress on return, rebirth, and the (re) production of aesthetic subjects outside capitalism, then, socialist theory in the late nineteenth century relaxed some of the sharply gendered polarities between Labor and "labor." The political aesthetics of embodied production offered an alternative to the individuated genius of the Romantic tradition and it was an alternative that women artists and writers found appealing. Rather than serving as an exclusionary tactic, Morris's rhetoric of manliness, labor, and artistry contributed to the formulation of an aesthetic of (re)production by feminists and sexual radicals at the end of the century. The socialist feminist Olive Schreiner, for example, deliberately blurred the distinction between masculine production and feminine reproduction in her essay *Woman and Labour* (1911). Schreiner's clarion call to women in that essay, "men's bodies are our woman's work of art," simultaneously biologizes and aestheticizes production (174). The somatic, democratic aesthetic of Morris's socialism opened out spaces for women activists such as Schreiner to "take all labour for [woman's] province," for if the origin of art and labor lies in bodily pleasure, struggle, and production, then, Schreiner concludes, women can claim to be the original artists and laborers (Schreiner, 1911: 167). Despite its explicit feminization, Wilde's evocation of socialist aestheticism as a consuming salon hostess was more problematic for Schreiner's theory than Morris's rhetoric of manly production. Schreiner viewed feminized consumption, or "sex parasitism," as one of the chief markers of women's oppression and Wilde's focus on this category offered little space for rethinking women as laboring producers rather than voracious consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Schreiner's closest friend within the socialist movement, Edward Carpenter, took the conflation of production and reproduction one stage further in the process of theorizing artistic creation under socialism. This former clergyman turned "noble savage," as Shaw dubbed him, was one of the most popular exponents of the "religion of socialism" in the late nineteenth century (Lawrence, 348). Carpenter's advocacy of the simple life as the path to Utopia won him hundreds of followers in the movement, many of whom made the journey to his experimental commune outside Sheffield to see his theory in practice (Rowbotham and Weeks 75–79). These followers certainly seem to have had no problem in identifying Carpenter's beliefs with socialism, but part of the pleasure of examining Carpenter's works now is the very resistance of his ideas to our neatly bound categories of idealism and materialism, evolution, and revolution. In Carpenter's socialist Utopia, diseased capitalist civilization

would be swept away and the inhabitants would concentrate upon reproducing themselves as a commune of beautiful laboring bodies. Carpenter argued that by re-educating desire away from individuated consumption and towards effortful production we could evolve ourselves into Utopians.

Morris, as we have seen, developed his somatic aesthetics of the pleasures of labor as a means both of re-signifying artists as productive laborers in the present and explaining the survival of art after the demise of capitalist individualism. Nature, the body and its pleasure in labor were, for Morris, ahistorical categories stored in somatic tradition and waiting to be liberated in the communal Utopia. Historical materialism was the engine of change that would bring about this moment of liberation. For Carpenter, however, whose socialism was even less recognizably scientific than Morris's, history, in this strong sense, barely registered. Instead the aesthetic pleasures of the body itself in the here and now became the force for the transformation of society: a revolution could start with the sandals that Carpenter and his companion George Adams made and marketed through the socialist press. "Effeminated as our feet are," Carpenter argued, there was hope that naked contact with the pleasures of the soil would restore them to freedom,

and so the little toe, like the proverbial worm, though nearly crushed, may at last turn and revenge itself on a civilisation whose oppression it has too long endured. (1887 94)

For Carpenter, even the feet and the despised sexual organs had an aesthetic force stored in the Platonic Ideal, only awaiting liberation from the disease of capitalist civilization to break through into a new world of bodily beauty in which the flesh could be art. Although one of the results of Carpenter's theory was a problematic Romantic aestheticization of the working man, which I will touch on in my conclusion, Carpenter's biological idealism radically democratized artistry. We all become artists, Carpenter suggested, through our desires.

It was Carpenter's aestheticization of a Lamarckian model of evolution that led primarily to his adulation within the "religion of socialism." Rejecting the purely material determinism of Darwinism and "modern science," Carpenter provided his own selective interpretation of Lamarck, the "true poet" of evolution, in which the desiring self took center stage in the development of the race (1889 140). By translating Lamarck's *besoin*, or need – the driving force behind species modification – as desire, Carpenter was able to sketch out a thoroughly intentionalist and idealist model of development. Change of any sort, Carpenter argued, was "not accretive, but exfoliative," beginning in the "mental region" and moving from "desire, gradually taking form in thought" passing into the "bodily region," expressing itself in action, and only then "solidifying itself in organisation and structure" (1889 138). Wanting to have a certain form, thinking the self a certain way brought that body into being. "Who shall say," Carpenter argued, that "the forms of the shark or of the gazelle are not the long-stored results of character leaning always in certain directions, as much as the forms of the miser or the libertine among men?" (1889 135).

Though never pausing to be too specific about how such acquired characteristics were transmitted from generation to generation, the earliest version of Carpenter's prose poem *Towards Democracy* hymned the dangers that lay in the descent of the bourgeoisie.

Do you talk of the Future of Society, and is it possible you are begetting children with tainted blood, and handing down to them the refuse of dinner-parties and the insides of committee rooms and hansom

cabs, and impressions of pamphlets on their retinas and stove-pipe hats on their brows, and bad teeth and foul breath? (LXIV)

The boundaries between inside and outside, the aesthetic impression and the biological effect, the individual and the species here are broken down just as the communal lyric voice of Carpenter's prose-poem refuses the conventional regulation of poetic form in impassioned flow. Yet if, as Carpenter argued, evolution was a Lamarckian ideal creation rather than a Darwinian material "Machine," the poet's vision of truth was of more importance than any mechanistic explanation of how, exactly, the impress of stove-pipe hats was passed from father to son (1904 10, 33). For creation was itself, in this scheme, "a stupendous and perpetually renewed work of Art," unfolding from dim feelings within an individual to structured, visible form in the world (1904 33). Evolution was art, the body was an aesthetic object and the desiring self was the artist.

Carpenter's intense philosophical idealism (which was, in the context of vitalist thought of the 1880s, rather less eccentric than it may appear to us now) enabled him to resolve some of the tensions between social change and aesthetic regeneration that were more intractable in Morris's materialist analysis.<sup>6</sup> By casting evolution as the force of social change and equating art with that force, Carpenter elevated the aesthetic to a point at which it transcended the human and the world. Individuals and communities might tap into this force by forming their ideas into art, but the aesthetic remained in the realm of the Ideal, obscured from humanity by the murk of modern civilization. The simple life of manual labor, close to the soil, Carpenter argued, renewed the primal navel cord between the realms of art and of mankind through nature itself. Identification with the most menial members of society brought the individual closest to the highest sphere of art and its powers of subjective transformation.

Despite the popularity of Carpenter's work among sexual radicals such as Edith Lees and Havelock Ellis, Carpenter's "Romantic anti-intellectualism," as Laura Chrisman terms it, posed a problem for feminists such as Schreiner (128). A path to future beauty through the rejection of the intellectual inheritance of "civilisation" was all very well, Schreiner chided, for one who had spent a decade at Cambridge, but quite at odds with the desires of women (and, indeed, working-class men) who had never had access to this world in the first place (Rive 147). Carpenter's exclusive emphasis upon idealist desire at the expense of the necessity of historical materialism led to his failure to address such issues of inequality in his haste to go barefoot into Utopia. As a result, his political aesthetic has a far less mediated relationship with Romantic theories of the poet as an agent of social change than is found in Morris's works. At the heart of Carpenter's work there is still, I want to suggest, a notion that the individual poet can act as a prophet by means of a privileged access to the ideal realm of art.

Carpenter's aesthetic evolution was therefore an altogether bolder claim for the immediate social effects of art than Morris's aesthetic tradition. The poet in Carpenter's Lamarckian aesthetic was nothing less than a catalyst of evolutionary change, arousing desire in his readers who modified themselves and the coming generations as a result. Poetic identity was the force of creation and progress in microcosm. But for Morris, historical materialism and revolution, rather than idealist aesthetics and evolution, were the narratives of social change. Whereas Carpenter held out hope that changing clothes and homes – that wanting it hard enough – really might hasten on a new world of aesthetic primitive communism, for Morris such gestures in art and life could only light a pale flame of hope against historical determinism.

Morris's aesthetic was rooted outside history, but was also stunted by it. The desire for beauty was curtailed by the necessity of capitalism. For all that Carpenter's aestheticization of the laboring body owed much to Neo-Classical Hellenism and the idea of *mens sana in corpore sano* that permeated cultural criticism during his years at Cambridge in the 1860s and 1870s, his theory averred that beauty had no history.

Carpenter's main practical advice to his listeners was that they eat less meat and wear fewer clothes, and this may appear rather difficult to reconcile with their own response that "the earth reborn to beauty and joy" was consequently within reach just around the corner (Yeo 12). However, Carpenter's biological idealism carefully constructed a relationship between the individual body and the communal body politic that made social transformation the necessary result of dietary and dress reform. Rejecting Marxist materialism, Carpenter argued that the desires at work in the individual could set off a change in the body that would be reciprocated in an alteration in the communal ideal of mankind itself and hence its material organization. The body social was therefore itself a neo-Lamarckian organism that could acquire radically different structures and change its appearance within a generation if communal desires and habits willed it so. For what was modern capitalism itself but the disordered appetite of man written on the communal body? "England is full of . . . undigested wealth," Carpenter asserted, "and while her upper classes are suffering a chronic indigestion from this accumulation of dead matter upon them . . . her poor are dying for mere want of nourishment" (1887 128). Property, like food, Carpenter argued, should move freely through the social body, nourishing and stimulating it. However, in the current terminally "congested" state of society no "gilded pill" could free the system up: only a truly heroic revolutionary purgative could restore the social body to health, "a drastic bolus plowing its way through the very frame of 'society', not without groans and horrible noises" (1887 141).

Carpenter's dietary advice aimed at disciplining this greed-driven body, in which effeminated organs and limbs had consumed the essential ideal core that was Man himself. Flesh eating might be tolerated in moderation, but it was an external "stimulant" that man had come to "lean on for support" rendering his own system "passive" (1887 84; 1904 247). Manly independence decayed as the individual allowed his body to be built up by such "external" forces of the "non-ego" (1904 247). The solution was to feed the body foods that could not but set the idle organs to work in effortful labor, resulting in a self no longer parasitic upon the energy-value of other beings. "Shovel in the curry and the rice," Carpenter urged, and let the body get back to work (Carpenter, 1904 247). Food with roughage, as that grotesque metaphor of eating as manual work with a shovel suggests, was a return to virile rough labor from the inside out. If enough people concentrated their desires on this end, then the effeminated, diseased, social body, constipated with property, would be purged and purified as a result.

Although Carpenter's analogy between the health of the individual body and the social body is one with a pedigree stretching back over millennia to the very first works of political theory, his program for the liberation of the desiring body marks a turn in nineteenth-century thought. Carpenter's formula is distinct, for example, from the "Muscular Christianity" preached by Charles Kingsley a few decades earlier because of the type of body and style of masculinity that he holds up as the hope for the regeneration of society. For Carpenter argues that we must school our desires towards the bodily type of working-class laborers. His advice on dress and diet suggests that the "natural" life of labor is the route towards the healthful rebirth of society. The very suppressions and repressions of instinct, the "swathing" of the

body in the “coffin” of “layers upon layers of stiff buckram-like clothing” led to the unhealthy dominance of the head alone in representing “the little finnikin, intellectual, self-conscious man” of the educated classes of nineteenth-century civilization (Carpenter, 1887 44; 1889 93). Health and beauty were to be restored to the body social by a process of unwrapping and casting off such “strait-waistcoats” of bourgeois bodily repression. Carpenter himself lovingly recalled the new possibilities of life he felt after meeting his companion the scythe and rivet-maker, Albert Fearnough, “the one ‘powerful and uneducated’ natural person I had, as yet, met” (Carpenter, 1916 103).<sup>7</sup> Life among the workers on Carpenter’s smallholding was “so native, so unrestrained,” with manual labor in “elementary” woolen clothing next to the skin and sandals on the feet allowing light and energy to the “vital organs” (Carpenter, 1916 105; 1887 36).

The potent naked body of the laboring man writ large was the very emblem of Democracy for Carpenter. This Democracy had little to do with constitutional government, but was a coming Utopia of primitive communism, foreshadowed by desire for the “thick-thighed hot coarse fleshed young bricklayer with the strap around his waist” and deified in the

Gigantic Thou, with head aureoled by the sun – wild among the  
mountains –  
Thy huge limbs naked and stalwart erected member,  
Thy lawless gait and rank untameable laughter. (1883 LIV)

These icons of priapic Labor were more than just the aestheticized visions of the honest working man, visible from Ford Madox Brown’s *Work* through to Soviet era statuary: visual hymns to the principle of production. In Carpenter’s writings the embodiment of working-class masculinity is both a productive and reproductive state. Desire for, and contact with the laboring man was another way of bringing forth the new life of beauty. As the “effeminated” little toe was to be stimulated into revolutionary action once released from shoes into naked contact with the earth, as the enervated stomach would be disciplined by shoveling through rice and curry, so too the future development of society rested “more firmly than anywhere else” on relations between those “of good position and breeding” and “rougher types, as of manual workers” (Carpenter, 1908 115). “Uranians” or the “intermediate sex” were to engender a new life for the social body through “Eros . . . the great leveller” (115). This new life, however, was to be born through production, rather than reproduction. Carpenter’s reworking of Lamarckian theory enabled him to refigure desire itself as a type of ideal labor going to work on the individual body and transforming future generations. Species change and new societies were to be born through such acts of desire within the individual, rather than through the mere physical drive to copulate, for the latter was initiated by those insurgent sexual organs that threatened to consume manhood itself.

Despite Carpenter’s emphasis on the laboring commune it is clear that his socialist Utopia was founded upon ideas of will and desire indebted to individualism. Like Morris, Carpenter could only imagine a socialist future that was characterized by an aesthetic of production that shaped new subjects. Echoing Morris again, Carpenter also associated socialism with an aesthetic democracy in which all could be artists through their labor. But unlike Morris, Carpenter used a model of intense individualism – the poet as creator *ab initio* – to explain the process of change and the art of production. Whilst the art of Morris’s socialist subjects is

the outcome of communal tradition, Carpenter's primitive communists produce art through individual desire. Men of the People are thus an aesthetic resource within Carpenter's idiosyncratic socialism, whilst as we have seen, for Morris the pleasure of manly labor is the source of the aesthetic after the revolution. Morris struggles to imagine art without individualism as a result of his engagement with Marxism. Carpenter's idealism endows each of his subjects with individual creativity as a result of liberating their desires.

### III

ALTHOUGH THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES between Morris and Carpenter might seem insurmountable now, the fact that the two were yoked together so frequently on radical lecture lists in the 1880s suggests that such disparities were not irreconcilable for radical audiences at the turn of the century. Carpenter's idealist Lamarckian aesthetic slips outside the boundaries of our current definition of socialism, but I want to argue that opposition between idealism and materialism was of less importance within the "religion of socialism" than the desire to unify art and labor. Despite their differences, Morris and Carpenter formulated an idea of the aesthetic that was both produced by and productive of subjects in community, not against it: the aims of art were, Morris argued, in this respect, the aims of life.

I want to end by looking forward to the history of socialism and aesthetics in the twentieth century with George Bernard Shaw. Shaw was also a Lamarckian socialist engaged in the effortful struggle to reshape the male body (his own, in this case). And yet as chief propagandist of the gradualist, welfarist Fabian Society, he was perhaps pre-eminently responsible for separating out this association of socialist politics and the aestheticization of manly labor that so shaped his own development in the 1880s. The working man, Shaw argued, could never act as an aesthetic source or resource because of the material constraints that shaped him. Asking the working man to "fight for the difference between the Picture Post and the Kelmscott Chaucer [William Morris's luscious hand-printed volume] is silly," Shaw argued in 1905: they prefer the Post. "'Cease to be slaves in order that you may become cranks' is not a very inspiring call to arms" he added, in a rather brutal dismissal of Morris's *Utopia* in *News from Nowhere* (xii).

All socialism could aim to do, Shaw concluded, was to end the one greatest crime, that of poverty, and leave working men to "find their own dreams." Shaw – the second-best self-publicist of the period – claimed that Wilde's "Soul of Man Under Socialism" was largely influenced by his Fabian lectures and certainly we find an echo here of Wilde's article (Danson 162). Both Wilde and Shaw insist that the prime concern of socialism can only be to reshape the material basis of society. The individual artist has a role in bringing about this change and, in turn, the communal ownership of the means of production will encourage the artist in new directions. The boundary between individual artist and communal political reorganization, however, is marked down carefully: the one may tease, delight, and educate the many, but his gift is that of the individual genius without the resources of the people. Shaw's Fabian vision that has shaped so much of twentieth-century British history on the left, then, was concerned with the production of autonomous socialist subjects, freed from material inequality to choose vulgarity if they wished, but free nevertheless.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Penty's articles "Art as a Factor in Social Reform," "Art and Revolution," and "Aestheticism and History." Penty's articles sparked off a correspondence concerning the legacy of Morris and the future of guild socialism in the letters page of the *New Age*.
2. Wilde's 1882 lecture tour of the United States consisted largely of his performance of Morris's aesthetic theories published in the latter's *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882) (Ellmann 165–200).
3. Guy suggests that despite his divergence from the aesthetes concerning the nature and function of art, Morris was connected to writers such as Pater by means of a shared strategy of using tradition to undermine "contemporary orthodoxies" (Guy, 1991 135). Despite the subtlety of this reading of Morris's contribution to the British "avant-garde," I would argue that the tradition(s) invoked by Morris and Pater (medieval craftsmanship and Hellenist elitism) were so radically opposed to each other in political effect that the differences between them remain irreducible.
4. Chapter 2 of the medieval vision, *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), contains Morris's clearest exposition of this social, productive role of the poet as ballad-maker.
5. See Gagnier (2000 84–89) for a detailed analysis of Schreiner's aesthetic economy in *Woman and Labour*.
6. See Bowler for the prevalence of Lamarckian idealism in the 1880s; Collini also unearths the widespread unthinking Idealism that underlay the popularity of such philosophers as Bernard Bosanquet and T. H. Green during the period.
7. Carpenter here slightly misquotes Walt Whitman, the writer who had the most direct influence over his social thought and poetic form. The "Preface" to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* argues "go freely with powerful uneducated people . . . and your very flesh shall be a great poem" (11).

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