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Sustainable Socialism: William Morris on Waste

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Abstract

While William Morris has long been recognized for his radical approach to the problem of labor, which built on the ideas of John Ruskin and informed his contributions to the Arts and Crafts philosophy, his ideas about waste have received much less attention. This article suggests that the Kelmscott Press, which Morris founded in 1891, was designed to embody the values of durability and sustainability in sharp contrast to the neophilia, disposability, and planned obsolescence of capitalist production. Many critics have dismissed the political value of Kelmscott Press on the basis of the handcrafted books' expense and rarity, but by considering Morris's work for Kelmscott in light of his fictional and non-fictional writings about waste around the time of the press's conception, we can see how Kelmscott laid the groundwork for a philosophy of sustainable socialism.

Keywords: William Morris, Kelmscott Press, printing, waste.

The origins of what we now call William Morris's "Arts and Crafts" philosophy of production can be traced to

the “expressive” theory of labor that he inherited from John Ruskin: the idea of labor as a form of artistic expression vital to human dignity, which leaves a trace of individual workmanship in all created goods.¹ Through Ruskin’s conceptual marriage of “art” and “work,” Morris voiced an early disgust for industrial capitalism and its eradication of creativity in labor; and an early, related rejection of the artistic and literary conventions that had flourished under capitalism. These convictions persisted from the initial years of Morris’s career in the 1850s and 1860s—which focused on the launch of the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., the revival of handcraft methods, and the writing of Pre-Raphaelite poetry—to the latter part of his career, which focused on the socialist campaign and the writing of political novels and communist poetry. If Ruskin was the leading light in Morris’s thinking from his student days at Oxford, Karl Marx was perhaps an equal influence after Morris’s conversion to socialism in the early 1880s, and yet his politics and aesthetics remained closely knit together throughout his career: “seamless,” as Peter Stansky has put it, within his evolving beliefs.²

Because of Morris’s central place in the history of early British socialism, Arts and Crafts aesthetic ideals have played a role in the broader history of the British left. As Tim Barringer notes, largely because of Morris, Ruskin’s “The Nature of Gothic” became one of “the founding texts of British socialism, enshrining at its core a linkage between aesthetics and the ethics of labour.”³ The Arts and Crafts ideal as expressed by Morris, however, offered a critique of capitalist *consumption* as well as capitalist production, which has received less

consideration, but is especially apparent in Morris’s attention to the problem of waste. Critics have sometimes viewed Morris’s late career as incongruous or hypocritical, since he continued to pioneer expensive hand production while openly denouncing luxury and economic inequality on the socialist platform. By focusing on Morris’s ideas about waste, however, we can see that his late career was in many ways prescient rather than paradoxical. Morris’s thematic and aesthetic emphasis on durability, his predilection for preservation, and his respect for materials all add up to a profoundly radical philosophy of things, the counterpart to his radical philosophy of labor. Morris’s version of the Arts and Crafts ideal not only articulated a critique of capitalist labor and production, but a corresponding critique of capitalist waste, which attempted to lay the groundwork for what we might today call a sustainable socialism.

Morris spent the 1880s deeply immersed in socialist propaganda: editing the socialist newspaper *The Commonweal*, serving as chief pamphleteer for the Socialist League, and maintaining an intensely demanding schedule of political lectures and debates. As Florence Boos notes in her introduction to Morris’s socialist diary of 1887, “Morris’s achievements routinely exhaust the enumerative abilities of his biographers.” (The diary itself, indeed, had to be given up after three months, due to Morris’s pressing public commitments as a writer and a speaker.⁴) In the 1890s, however, during the final years of his life, Morris embarked on a print venture that many have viewed as a departure from this intense political work: the Kelmscott Press, which produced the most expensive and exclusive books of its day. These lavishly decorated,

handmade editions included the Kelmscott Chaucer; the press's largest, grandest, and costliest book. When published in 1896, it sold for the steep price of £20 (£33 if bound in pigskin) and its limited edition printing of 425 copies sold out before

the work was finished (Figure 1). Thirteen additional copies printed on vellum sold for the even more exorbitant price of 120 guineas (approximately £125). The "paradox of price" has been a longstanding puzzle for critics interested in the social implications of

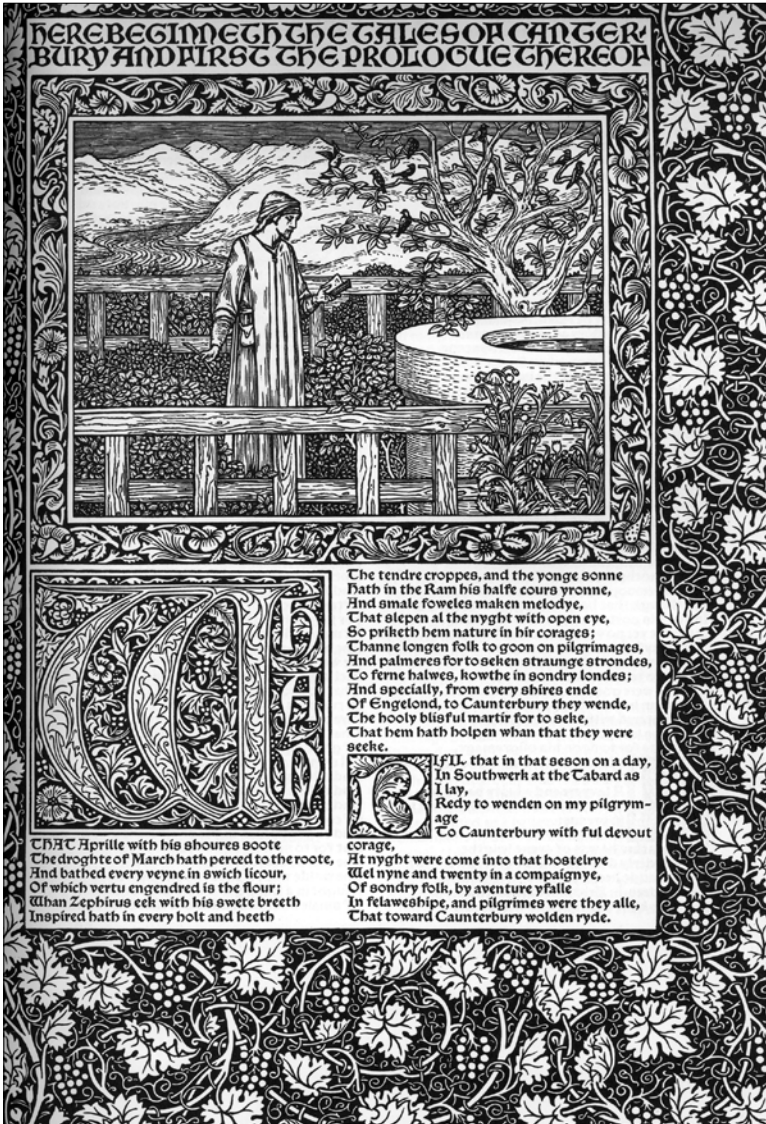


Fig 1 Kelmscott Chaucer (1896). From *Works. A Facsimile Edition of the William Morris Kelmscott Chaucer*. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1958.

Morris's design work for Morris & Co., but it is an even more pressing problem with respect to the Kelmscott Press, given Morris's active engagement in socialism by this time, and given the problematic nature of books—understood as repositories of knowledge and enlightenment—as commodities.⁵ No other Kelmscott books were as expensive as the Chaucer; but many were priced by the guinea (worth 21 shillings) rather than the pound, and while the use of this currency measurement fit with the press's neo-medieval aesthetic and sporadic use of archaic language, the guinea also evoked the class distinction between “trades” and “professions” that Arts and Crafts professed to undo by raising the status of skilled labor. Even the most evidently socialist of the Kelmscott books were priced by the guinea; the 1892 Kelmscott edition of Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* was priced at 2 guineas for its 300 paper copies and 10 guineas for its 10 vellum copies (Figure 2).

The Kelmscott Press attracted accusations of hypocrisy because of the nature of books as ostensibly utilitarian objects, capable (from a socialist perspective) of serving a liberatory purpose for the newly literate working classes. Arthur Pendenys published an open letter to Morris in 1901, stating: “If you were consistent your Printing Press would exist for the sake of spreading knowledge. As it is your publications appeal to capitalists and others of the wealthy classes.”⁶ Thorstein Veblen, the early theorist of capitalism who coined the term “conspicuous consumption,” likewise indicted the Kelmscott Press in his 1899 book *Theory of the Leisure Class*. He called the Press a prime example of the “conspicuous waste” that characterizes modern forms of consumption:

These products, since they require hand labour; are more expensive; they are also less convenient for use ... they therefore argue ability on the part of the purchaser to consume freely, as well as ability to waste time and effort ... The Kelmscott Press reduced the matter to an absurdity ... by issuing books for modern use, edited with the obsolete spelling, printed in black-letter; and bound in limp vellum fitted with thongs.

In handmade paper and hand-bound books, Veblen saw only “waste,” waste that produced nothing except “pecuniary distinction” for its consumer; and waste that exemplified the perverse “exaltation of the defective” which Morris had inherited from Ruskin.⁷ Veblen insists that his use of the term “waste” is “technical” rather than “deprecatory” (98), but the term was obviously a loaded one in the context of a nascent “throwaway ethic” or “culture of disposability” in the late nineteenth century.⁸

Like Veblen, I want to consider Morris and the Kelmscott Press in relation to the idea of waste, but from a very different perspective. In a moment of acute environmental crisis, “waste” has taken on a new resonance, one that Veblen did not predict—though Morris, I would suggest, did. Struggling with the problems of overproduction and superabundance that characterize capitalism, Morris pinpoints capitalism's ideological reliance on a faulty conception of waste, wherein material goods are imagined to be capable of disappearing without consequence. Threaded through Morris's late career, and perfectly exemplified by Kelmscott Press, is a counter emphasis on durability and

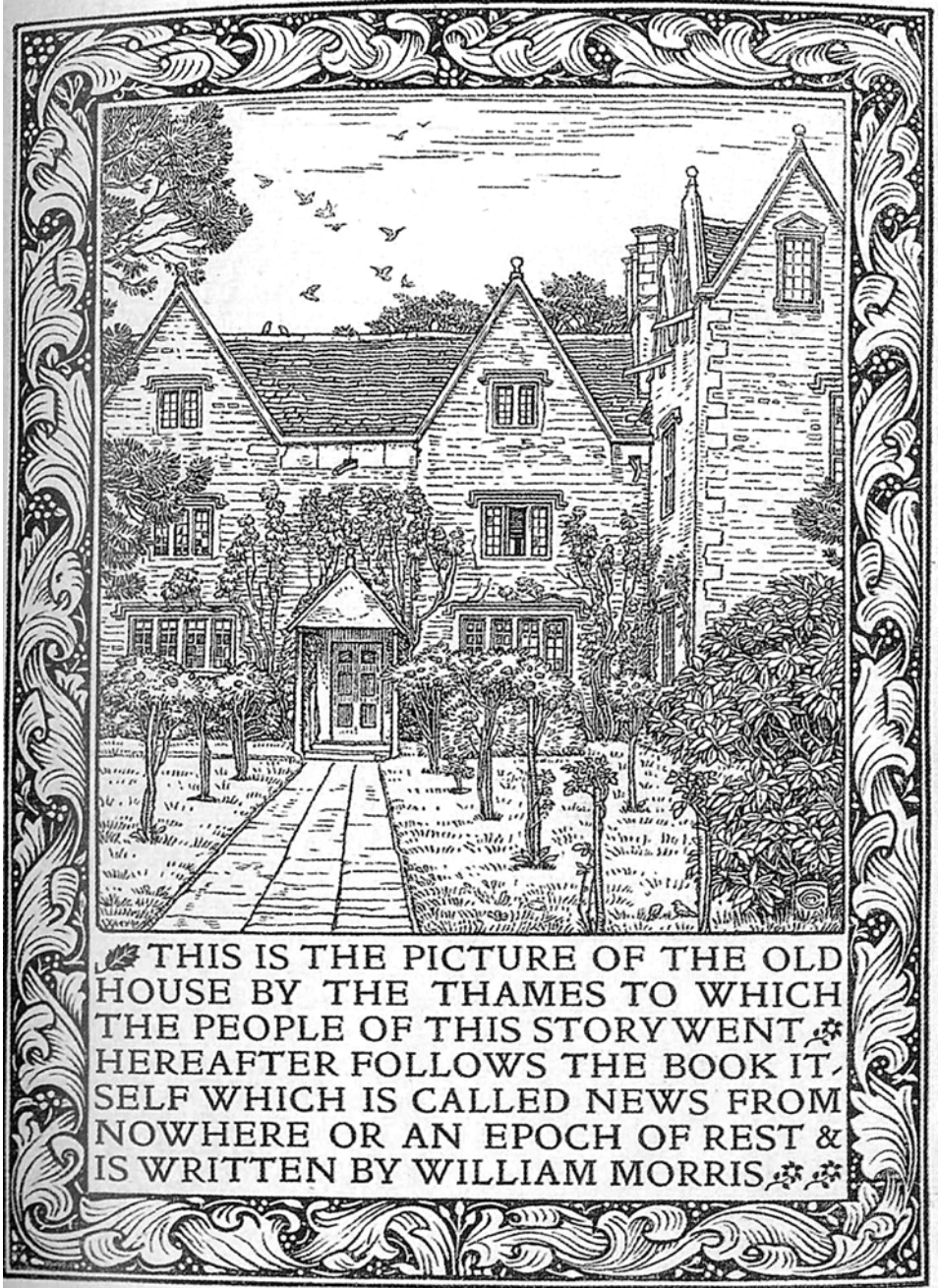


Fig 2 Frontispiece for the Kelmscott edition of Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1892). Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

preservation, challenging prevailing notions of waste and offering a distinct theory of socialist consumption.

Veblen's failure to question the capitalist model of efficient production impedes his understanding of Morris. Yet he was correct to identify waste, especially conspicuous waste, as an effect of class. Waste interacts with class not only in the direction that Veblen outlines—the more wealthy and leisured one is, the more one can afford to waste—but in the opposite direction too. As Michael Thompson has described, trash can align with economic and class characteristics such that “transient” objects are low-class while “antique” or “durable” objects are high-class.⁹ In the historical context of late-Victorian print, this dynamic translated to a dichotomy between cheaply produced books and periodicals that were priced to be accessible to all classes but were fundamentally ephemeral, and finely produced books that were less accessible but built to last. The era saw an incredibly sharp decline in the price of books and periodicals generally, due to new technologies for the mass production of paper and the mechanization of print. This made for increasingly inexpensive but also shoddy and ephemeral reading products: the “ugly” Victorian print that Morris so hated.¹⁰ The 1890s revival of print and the book arts led by Kelmscott Press thus emerged, in a sense, in reaction to the democratization of print, which is ironic given how many of the print revival's key figures were socialist or anarchist in their political views: Morris, C.R. Ashbee, T.J. Cobden-Sanderson, and Lucien Pissarro, to name a few.¹¹ None of these men were working-class, but their political affiliations suggest that their

rejection of mass print was not mere anti-democratic sentiment, but a stand against the kinds of production and consumption that were presumed to naturally accompany democracy. Political shifts that expanded the reading audience, such as the repeal of restrictive duties on paper or the establishment of universal public education, need not have correlated with a decline in print standards, yet in this context, print ephemerality figured as a supposed effect of mass reading.

At the same time, however, another dynamic is at work: as Veblen suggests, waste and transiency are also associated with the leisure classes, who can afford to consume profligately. Socialists of Morris's day sometimes described their conversion to socialism in terms of a confrontation with this kind of conspicuous waste. In an 1892 interview, for example, Robert Blatchford, editor of the *Clarion*, the most widely circulated and mass-oriented British socialist newspaper of the day, responded to the question of how he became a socialist with the following story:

I was travelling at the time. There were two men in the carriage beside me. They were talking and smoking. One of them struck a match, went on talking, and forgot to light his pipe until the match burnt away. He struck another and another, with the same result. About twenty matches were wasted. This led me to ask myself the question why we are so wasteful – for I have done the same thing myself. It was because matches were cheap. Then it is not always good to have articles cheap. It encourages waste. It set me thinking of matchmakers and – so on ... millions of

people having the same flesh and blood as you and I are starving daily, while a few are wasting enough to feed these millions ...¹²

The 1888 London Matchgirls Strike was a key event in the rising labor agitation and “New Unionism” (the organization of unskilled trades) in the late nineteenth century. For Blatchford, the light that this strike cast on the girls’ labor was part of a chain of connections that led him to reflect on the great paradox of capitalism: the persistence of want within a culture of overabundance. In this, Blatchford was not alone. Clementina Black and other advocates of Co-operativism were also making the socialist case against “cheapness.”

Blatchford’s story prefigures Morris’s own conversion story, “How I Became a Socialist,” which was printed in the Social Democratic Federation’s newspaper *Justice* in 1894. Here, Morris attempts to define what he means by the term “socialist,” and a similar sense of “waste” figures prominently in his formulation: “Well, what I mean by Socialism is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor; neither master nor master’s man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully.”¹³ In truth, Morris’s idea of socialism was much more precisely formulated than this essay implies, as was demanded by the complex internal politics of the movement; but the central point he wanted to make here is that his socialism is predicated on the idea of balance. A society with a balanced distribution of goods, he argued, will be a society without want and

without waste.¹⁴ Inequality and wastefulness go hand in hand.

This is just one example of a major preoccupation in Morris’s late career: formulating a socialist analysis and condemnation of waste. His 1884 lecture “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil” employs the word “waste” eighteen times, registering a contempt for “those articles of folly and luxury ... [that] I will for ever refuse to call wealth: they are not wealth but waste. Wealth is ... what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use.”¹⁵ In another example, doodles that are visible on the manuscript of Morris’s lecture notes for “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” a lecture he presented in 1887, reveal him to be ruminating distractedly on the word “waste”:

Spare-time gardening
Black Death – waste
Waste – waste – waste – waste
Waste
W would want
W A N

The words and lettering are surrounded by Morris’s trademark botanical imagery.¹⁶ What “spare-time gardening” and “W A N” signify is debatable, but Morris appears to be reflecting on the production of food as a leisure activity for some (“spare time gardening”), in contradistinction to the “want” and hunger faced by many others. At any rate, it is clear from these notes that “want” and “waste” are connected in Morris’s thinking. Later, in 1893 and 1894, Morris gave two lectures entitled “Waste,” indicating that the topic had remained a central preoccupation during his years at Kelmscott Press. Sadly, no text of these lectures remains,

but we can glean Morris's conception of waste from his other writings, and infer its centrality to the Kelmscott enterprise.¹⁷

Morris's ongoing thinking about waste illuminates a central tension of his late career: how to privilege the durable and the sustainable without privileging those who can afford those qualities. Many critics have reasonably argued that the Kelmscott Press failed to adequately negotiate this tension. William Peterson's history of Kelmscott says its books were "intended to symbolize a protest against the ethos of Victorian industrial capitalism [but] became themselves, in all their opulent splendour, an example of conspicuous consumption."¹⁸ E.P. Thompson's biography of Morris figures Kelmscott as a fundamentally apolitical enterprise, "founded in a different spirit from that in which the original Firm had been launched thirty years before. Morris now had no thought of reforming the world through his art ... The Press was simply a source of delight and relaxation."¹⁹ More recently, however, critics such as Jerome McGann and Jeffrey Skoblow have found in the Kelmscott Press a sensibility that is political and even revolutionary in its deliberate attention to materiality. Kelmscott's artisanal methods and handcrafted materials presented a sharp contrast with other books of the day, prompting recognition of the invisibility of labor in almost all mass-produced objects and all fields of material production. They ask us to think about the book as a manufactured object, and to reflect on the kind of labor involved in its production. The last page of each book locates the work that went into its making quite specifically. The final page of the Kelmscott Chaucer,

for example, reads: "Here ends the Book of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, edited by F.S. Ellis; ornamented with pictures designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and engraved on wood by W.H. Hooper. Printed by me William Morris at the Kelmscott Press, Upper Mall, Hammersmith, in the county of Middlesex, finished on the 8th day of May, 1896."

Of course, plenty of other workers were involved in the press beyond those acknowledged on the books' final pages. Typically, the books recognize only Morris and the book's artist and/or editor, if there is one. Engravers are not always recognized, and compositors and pressmen never are. But if the books did not openly acknowledge every hand that touched them in their making, they did exemplify in their material being a kind of production associated—through the work of Ruskin as well as Morris—with worker-friendly ideals of labor and a critique of mass production. The Kelmscott workforce itself, moreover, was unionized and paid a good wage. To head its printing operations, Morris brought in Thomas Binning, a staunch trade unionist who had also been the foreman printer of *The Commonweal*. Production proceeded in a friendly workshop manner, as John Dreyfus notes:

... industrial relations at the Kelmscott Press were normally very good. Morris enjoyed talking and listening to his compositors, and has been described by an eyewitness as 'taking in every movement of their hands, and every detail of their tools, until he knew as much as they did of spacing, justification and all the rest.' He also spent hours with his

pressmen, familiarizing himself with every peculiarity of their doings.²⁰

Of course, the press was still capitalist—Morris supplied the capital and paid others for their labor; though he also worked beside them—but it pointed the way toward another possible world of production, where the workers and the materials mattered more than profit or scale.

Morris spoke openly of the conflict Kelmscott faced between materials and production on the one hand and cost on the other. In “A Note . . . in Founding the Kelmscott Press,” he describes how the press used handmade paper, natural inks, and hand labor to make things of beauty that would be a joy for—perhaps—ever. Kelmscott’s prices were thus a necessary evil to model a form of production driven by sustainability rather than volume. As Morris said in an 1893 interview: “I wish – I wish indeed that the cost of the books was less, only that is impossible if the printing and the decoration and the paper and the binding are to be what they should be.”²¹ What they should be, for Morris, are not disposable waste products, like most books of his day, built to sell and not to last. In this sense, Kelmscott was a direct attack on print’s apparently disposable nature. Elizabeth Eisenstein has argued that the printing press had always to some extent been imbued with an ideology of disposability: “printing required the use of paper – a less durable material than parchment or vellum to begin with, and one that has become ever more perishable as the centuries have passed and rag content has diminished.” When paper reached the point where it might be “consigned to trash bins or converted into pulp,” it was “not

apt to prompt thoughts about prolonged preservation.”²² Yet “prolonged preservation” was exactly how Morris began to think of books and paper, and exactly what he began to aim at as a printer.

In his 1892 essay “Some Thoughts on the Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages,” Morris bemoaned “the present age of superabundance of books,” and “the utilitarian production of makeshifts,” which “has swept away the book producer in its current.”²³ Morris has often been accused of elitism, for being a socialist who seemingly prefers books to be rare and artistic, yet here it is not the *abundance* of books that bothers him, it is the “superabundance.” This term echoes the *Communist Manifesto*’s disgust at the absurd “epidemic of overproduction” that characterizes capitalist modernity: the waste, glut, and superfluity that coexist with want and privation.²⁴ This paradoxical connection between overabundance and want, which Marx and Engels saw as a constitutive feature of capitalism, signals that deprivation in the modern era does not result from scarcity, but from distribution. More cheap books and more cheap goods will not balance the ledger of social equality, Morris suggests; an entirely new calculus is required. This was a central concern of Morris’s work following his conversion to socialism. In his novel *A Dream of John Ball*, which was serialized in Morris’s socialist newspaper *The Commonwealth* from 1886 to 1887 and later published in a Kelmscott edition, the narrator travels back in time to the fourteenth century and tries to describe the economic conditions of late-nineteenth-century England (Figure 3). His medieval peasant listener is confused by the horrific idea that “times of plenty shall in those days

THE COMMONWEAL

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SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1886.

WEEKLY; ONE PENNY.

NOTES ON PASSING EVENTS.

THE great rally of the Caucus at Leeds was no doubt of some importance to whatever party quality may be left in the remains of Liberalism, and also it was of importance that this body, formidable enough in the welter of broken principles, halting opinions, and intrigue, should declare definitely its adhesion to Gladstonian Home Rule. But if one had any lingering hopes in the Liberal Party—as who has!—it would be discouraging to note that what really roused the enthusiasm of the audience at Leeds was not the hope of the coming change in Ireland; not the joy of England discarding some part of its long tyranny and injustice to a people whom we call our fellow-countrymen, and will not allow to be anything else; it was not really these reasonable revolutionary aspirations which moved people, but Mr. Gladstone's name as a party leader. It is only too likely that the question of justice to Ireland was looked upon by this meeting of would-be progressive leaders, great and small, and their adherents, as an adjunct of Mr. Gladstone's personality; a whim of his to be indulged, and which we, the party, can at least imagine we sympathise with, though we don't in the least sympathise with the results which are sure to follow, or indeed guess what they are.

That the assembled Liberals did not think of or wish for the results of the political freedom of Ireland is not a matter of guess, but is proved by the barrenness of the programme put forward by them—a programme about as valuable as a proposal for the re-enactment of Magna Charta, and which, it must be said, seems to have excited no more enthusiasm than that would have done.

Mr. Morley, in a sentence likely to become famous, mentioned his fears of our being in for a period of "degraded politics." This was of course meant for a hit at Mr. Chamberlain, which doubtless he deserves; but there is more in it than that, whether Mr. Morley meant it or not. This "degradation," this slough of despond of personalities, intrigues, and trickeries, is the necessary outcome of parties walking about and pretending to be alive when the brains are knocked out of them. With the single exception of the Irish question the Liberal Party is now shutting its eyes resolutely to all the real questions of the day. The last six years of "crisis" it is determined to look upon as non-existent; it has now come to recognise finality in politics with as little misgiving as the old Tories. Doubtless it thinks itself very progressive as to the matters of Ireland, but the next stage of these will find it out, and "Liberal" will have the same meaning as reactionary.

As far as mere passing party politics go, this meeting has of course a very simple meaning—no surrender to the Unionist Liberals. They are going, when Lord Hartington can make it convenient to come amongst them, to have a field-day in their turn, which will have less interest than even the Leeds meeting to those who look upon the real politics of life and not the sham politics of Parliament. As far as concerns the game played therein, the result of all this means a quiet innings for the Tory Government, which by means of a few threats of "dishing" and a sham attempt to carry them out, can always paralyse the Liberal Party, both sections or either. "These be thy gods, O Israel!" Surely as mean a set of shufflers and blinkards as ever walked the earth.

Mr. Henry George has belied the confident predictions of the bourgeois press both at home and in America by gaining a substantial vote for the mayoralty of New York. Mr. George is not a Socialist, or was not when last heard of; his programme as candidate could not be considered a Socialist one in any sense. Nevertheless the Bourgeois are determined to consider him the Socialist candidate, and a dangerous one at that, and have done their best in a treacherous manner to belittle his success. We must conclude, therefore, that the robber society of New York feels itself beaten, and is anxious and unhappy under its beating. At the least its obvious terror, reflected by our own press, at what would seem to an onlooker a small matter, is a sign of a very bad conscience. In spite of all the bluster and conventional congratulation on the stability and progress of modern civilisation, it seems easily shaken after all.

The meeting at the Mansion House about the Beaumont Hall, or People's Palace as it is pompously called, was such a queer exhibition of stupidity that Guy Fawkes day seemed an appropriate date for it.

The obstinacy of the "saints" who want to tectotal and sabbatarianise Beaumont Hall (when they get it), the nervous anxiety of the Lord Mayor to muddle up the question till the money was got, and the empty conventional resolutions passed made a pretty kettle of fish of it. As a human being one is really irritated at such simplicity of stupidity as Mr. Charrington and Mr. Wooley showed in mixing up tectotalism and sabbatarianism. Surely if ever they want a job done which none but an incompetent person can do, they need not advertise for one in the papers. Yet we owe them thanks, nevertheless, for showing us what the saints' rule upon earth would be if we suffered it; and also for punching a hole in this patronage of the working classes by the thieves who have robbed them.

All this People's Palace business means is that "the people" are perforce such strangers to orderliness, cleanliness and decency, let alone art and beauty, in their own dwellings, that the upper classes, who force them into this life of degradation, do now and then bethink them if they cannot provide them with a place where they can play at being comfortable, so long as they behave like good children, between the spells of their stupid hopeless weary work and their miserable and hideous "homes." Time enough to think about People's Palace when the workers and the people are one, and no artificial authority stands between them and their human wishes.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

A DREAM OF JOHN BALL.

SOMETIMES I am rewarded for fretting myself so much about present matters by a quite unasked for pleasant dream. I mean when I am asleep. This dream is as it were a present of an architectural peep-show. I see some beautiful and noble building new made, as it were for the occasion, as clearly as if I were awake; not vaguely or absurdly, as often happens in dreams, but with all the detail clear and reasonable. Some Elizabethan house with its scrap of earlier fourteenth century building, and its later degradations of Queen Anne and Sissy Billy and Victoria, marring but not destroying it, in an old village once a clearing amid the sandy woodlands of Sussex. Or an old and unusually curious church, much churchwardened, and beside it a fragment of fifteenth century architecture amongst the not unpicturesque lath and plaster of an Essex farm, and looking natural enough among the sleepy elms and the meditative hens scratching about in the litter of the farmyard, whose trodden yellow straw comes up to the very jambes of the richly-carved Norman doorway of the church. Or sometimes 'tis a splendid collegiate church, untouched by restoring parson and architect, standing amid an island of shapely trees and flower-beset cottages of thatched grey stone and cob, amidst the narrow stretch of bright green water-meadows that wind between the sweeping Wiltshire downs, so well beloved of William Cobbett. All these I have seen in the dreams of the night clearer than I can force myself to see them in dreams of the day. So that it was a natural thing for me to fall the other night into an architectural dream. I had begun my sojourn in the Land of Nod by a very confused attempt to conclude that it was all right for me to have an engagement to lecture at Manchester and Miteham Fair Green at half-past eleven at night on one and the same Sunday, and that I could manage pretty well. And then I had gone on to try to make the best of addressing a large open-air audience in the costume I was really then wearing—to wit, my night-shirt, reinforced for the dream occasion by a pair of braceless trousers. The consciousness of this fact so bothered me that the earnest faces of my audience—who would not notice it, but were clearly preparing terrible anti-Socialist posers for me—began to fade away and my dream grew thin, and I awoke (as I thought) to find myself lying on a strip of wayside waste by an oak copse just outside a country village.

I got up and rubbed my eyes and looked about me, and the landscape seemed unfamiliar to me, though it was, as to the lie of the land, an ordinary English low-country, swelling into rising ground here and there. The road was narrow, and I was convinced that it was a piece of Roman road from its straightness. Copse were scattered over the country, and there were signs of two or three villages and hamlets in sight besides the one near me, between which and me there was some orchard-land, where the apples were beginning to redden on the trees. Also, just on the other side of the road and the ditch which ran along it, was a small close of about a quarter of an acre, neatly hedged with quick, which was nearly full of white poppies, and, as far as I could

Fig 3 The first installment of Morris's novel *A Dream of John Ball* in *The Commonweal* (November 13, 1886). Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

be the times of famine.”²⁵ In Morris’s 1891 romance *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, which was also produced in a Kelmscott edition, the titular fantasy land is supposedly a place of superabundance, leisure, and “pleasure without cease”—not unlike the department stores that had begun to appear in late-Victorian cities—yet Morris’s narrative unmask it as a corrupt place, a “land of lies.”²⁶

Morris’s loathing of overabundance in juxtaposition with want—the same divided social condition that bred an aesthetic of montage, according to Sergei Eisenstein, in nineteenth-century novels and in early film²⁷—may have begun as an aesthetic repulsion against mass-produced objects. But in his late work, Morris was more alert to the ethics of waste under capitalism than to its aesthetic failings. He has not been alone, of course, in conceptualizing waste as an effect of capitalism: the result of overproduction, created needs, and a culture of advertising. As twentieth-century industrial designer Brooks Stevens famously argued, “planned obsolescence” is perversely good marketing: if a product is not sufficiently transient—in design, function, or performance—people will have no reason to buy another a few years down the road.²⁸ As a book designer, Morris worked along opposite lines. Many critics have noted the neo-medieval aesthetic of the Kelmscott books, but Morris’s goal was actually to “move out of the historical style, particularly the eclecticism that characterized the Victorian age, into a more ahistorical style.”²⁹ He drew on older forms in an effort to evoke a kind of temporal neutrality. The types that he designed for Kelmscott were meant to be “pure in form,” without excessive protuberances.³⁰ His goal—unmet,

perhaps—was to create a durable, timeless style.

Obsolescence in all its forms, by contrast, is key to capitalist models of consumption. Bernard London’s 1932 pamphlet *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence*, for example, promoted obsolescence as a means of artificially stimulating consumption, thereby stimulating the demand for labor.³¹ As London noted, workers appear to *need* overconsumption to protect employment, but Morris saw this as a waste of labor and a waste of material. His lecture “Art under Plutocracy” challenges the assumption that all labor is necessarily a good regardless of how its products are consumed, a theme that appears in many of his lectures and essays:

This doctrine of the sole aim of manufacture (or indeed of life) being the profit of the capitalist and the occupation of the workman, is held, I say, by almost every one; its corollary is, that labour is necessarily unlimited, and that to attempt to limit it is not so much foolish as wicked, whatever misery may be caused to the community by the manufacture and sale of the wares made.

Thus, in Morris’s words, “the very essence of competitive commerce is waste.”³² In a better world, workers’ livelihood would not depend upon overconsumption and a dearth of leisure.

But can waste ever really be overcome? Is it always an evil? Morris’s utopian novel *News from Nowhere* is his longest and most comprehensive account of the future socialist society that he believed was imminent, and the novel reminds us that waste can also have use. As literary critic William Cohen has argued of the term “filth,” it can

suggest either a “pollutant” or something “conceivably *productive*, the discarded sources where riches may lie.”³³ This is the fantasy of waste, I would argue, that underlies *News from Nowhere*: the idea that waste can be recycled, reused, and recovered, not just abandoned. Morris envisions a future socialist utopia where nothing is wasted yet nothing is wanted: a perfect material equilibrium, where production-consumption cycles are balanced as an effect of social health. Of course this is a fantasy, written in a novel; yet it reminds us that consumer capitalism depends on an opposite fantasy of waste, which de-emphasizes the longevity of objects and obscures the material problem of garbage. In Morris’s socialist utopia, by contrast, things do not simply disappear when discarded: objects endure, and people expect them to endure.

Considering that Morris wrote the novel just when he was devising his plans for Kelmscott Press, *News from Nowhere* tells us a great deal about the importance of durability and sustainability in the Kelmscott project and within Morris’s broader vision of socialism at this time.³⁴ *News* was originally published serially in *The Commonwealth* beginning with the January 11, 1890 issue (Figure 4); a Kelmscott Press edition followed in 1892. Indeed, a letter from Morris’s wife indicates that Morris planned *News from Nowhere* to be the first book published by Kelmscott, suggesting how closely the novel was tied to Morris’s idea for the press (though it ended up being the twelfth book instead of the first).³⁵ The future society of *Nowhere*, which Morris set in 2004, has fought environmental degradation and overproduction by thoroughly internalizing the values of craft, durability, and preservation—central values of the

Kelmscott Press. Achieving such a balance requires a resistance to novelty as well as a commitment to making objects that bear conserving.

In one illustrative scene, William Guest, a visitor from the nineteenth-century past and the novel’s central character, goes “shopping” for a new pipe. Morris counters the inevitable objection to “communist shopping”—that if all goods are free, people will be wasteful—by depicting the residents of *Nowhere* as frugal preservationists, who expect their commodities to be durable art rather than novel ephemera. When Guest is offered a beautiful pipe from a young shop-girl, he initially demurs, fearing the pipe is too valuable for his own use: “Dear me ... this is altogether too grand for me ... Besides, I shall lose it – I always lose my pipes.” The shop-girl responds, “What will it matter if you do? Somebody is sure to find it, and he will use it, and you can get another.”³⁶ In *Nowhere*, a pipe does not magically disappear: it is picked up by someone else who will dust it off and use it. In a society without private property, where ownership and purchasing power are not indexed to self-worth, used goods and old goods do not attract the stigma of dirtiness or defilement that they do in a capitalist society. Morris offers a vision of a future where the lines between “trash” and “treasure” have become blurred as a consequence of communal life; “waste” is not opposed to “wealth.” William Guest need not hoard his pipe, nor be a vigilant custodian of this precious object, because the desirability of goods is no longer indexed to their pristine or unused history.

Morris’s utopia is an attack on the neophilia, or love of the new, engrained in consumer capitalism. Those critics who



Fig 4 An installment of Morris's novel *News from Nowhere* in *The Commonweal*, with a Walter Crane cartoon embedded in the text (May 24, 1890). Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

fault Morris for drawing on the medieval past in creating his utopian world, rather than creating an ostensibly *new* world, are perhaps missing a key point of Morris's novel: innovation for the sake of innovation is a market culture value, and Morris's aesthetic task is to subvert, not uphold, such values. One character in the novel, indeed, articulates this purpose quite clearly in an attack on the nineteenth-century manufacturing practices of the past/present:

... the horrible burden of unnecessary production ... the ceaseless endeavour to expend the least amount of labour on any article made, and yet at the same time to make as many articles as possible. To this 'cheapening of production', as it was called, everything was sacrificed: the happiness of the workman at his work, nay, his most elementary comfort and bare health, his food, his clothes, his dwelling, his leisure, his amusement, his education – his, life, in short – did not weigh a grain of sand in the balance against this dire necessity of 'cheap production' of things, a great part of which were not worth producing at all. (138–9)

The “cheap production” that Morris's novel places at the core of nineteenth-century labor exploitation contrasts sharply with the production practices underlying Kelmscott Press, and the novel, itself published in a Kelmscott edition, demonstrates how such an apparently luxurious enterprise actually modeled what were for Morris crucial socialist ideals: durability and sustainability.

Because the residents of Nowhere do not spend all their time overproducing cheap and redundant objects, they have a great deal of leisure time, which is a key argument

of the book: superfluous production wastes not only material, but labor. Indeed, in an ironic foreshadowing of Bernard London, early champion of planned obsolescence, some residents of Nowhere worry about the possibility of a “work-famine,” in which optimum levels of production simply do not demand enough labor to give everyone as much work as he or she would like. The shortage is only a problem because the residents of Nowhere actually *enjoy* their labor, and do not seek to avoid it:

All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without ... From time to time, when we have found out that some piece of work was too disagreeable or troublesome, we have given it up and done altogether without the thing produced by it ... under these circumstances all the work that we do is an exercise of the mind and body more or less pleasant to be done: so that instead of avoiding work everybody seeks it ... (142)

The society of Nowhere manages to avoid a “work-famine” by treating all forms of labor as worthy of constant practice and perfection for their own sake. The manufacture of goods has largely been replaced by artistic craftsmanship, and all forms of production are given the time, care, and attention typically reserved for artistic creation.³⁷ Indeed, the word “art” barely exists anymore, having been replaced by the term “work pleasure.” Necessary work that cannot be turned into art—such as road-mending or harvest-reaping—is done in groups and approached as a kind of

exercise or sport.³⁸ When material creation of all kinds is treated as an art, durability and permanence become primary aims, and the waste that comes with overproduction and shoddy production is minimized.

In another discussion of *News from Nowhere*, literary critic Nataalka Freeland shows how art functions as a solution to the problem of overproduction in the novel, since “surplus productive capacity is absorbed by labor-intensive craftsmanship.”³⁹ But in focusing on waste as a historical category rather than a material and environmental one, Freeland finds principles of “disposal and innovation” in the novel rather than preservation (235). Situating *News* within a wide array of late-Victorian utopias, she claims that the genre is fixated on gutters, sewers, and improvements to waste management, which she considers the “cornerstone of their fantasies of alternate worlds” (225). And yet crucially, unlike the other novels Freeland discusses, *News from Nowhere* offers no insight into post-revolutionary toilet arrangements. Its future people apparently produce very little waste in the first place, rather than creating elaborate means of waste disposal. Consider how Morris uses digestion, for example, as a metaphor for the production-waste cycle: in describing the Nowherians’ meals, the novel’s narrator continually uses the word “dainty,” and says, “everything was cooked and served with a daintiness which showed that those who had prepared it were interested in it; but there was no excess either of quantity or of gourmandise: everything was simple, though so excellent of its kind” (146). (Note the rhetorical similarities to the slow food movement today.) Likewise, he describes *Nowhere* as “a garden, where nothing

is wasted and nothing is spoilt” (119).

In a garden, even waste can be fruitfully employed as compost, and it is this kind of circular pattern of waste redemption rather than disposal that we find in Morris’s post-lapsarian version of paradise.

The dainty digestive systems of *Nowhere*’s residents offer a metaphor for this consumption-waste cycle, for if we don’t know how they go to the toilet, we do know where they store animal manure: in the old Houses of Parliament. Ever the anti-parliamentarian, Morris is clearly being satirical here, but underlying the joke is a key point about the value of salvage. At one time, the novel tells us, the people of *Nowhere* planned to tear down the Houses of Parliament, since they no longer needed the buildings and considered them ugly, but a “queer antiquarian society” stepped in to prevent their destruction, “as it has done with many other buildings, which most people looked upon as worthless” (81). They preserved the Houses of Parliament for the storage of dung, just as they save Windsor Castle, transforming it from private to collective space: “we wouldn’t pull the buildings down, since they were there; just as with the buildings of the Dung-Market ... A great many people live there [in Windsor Castle] ... there is also a well-arranged store of antiquities of various kinds that have seemed worth keeping – a museum” (202). This is the sensibility that dominates in Morris’s socialist utopia: even with objects that appear to be waste or trash or obsolete, the instinct is to salvage. “Dung,” one character says, “is not the worst kind of corruption; fertility may come of that” (121).

This penchant for building preservation clearly echoes Morris’s own active history

with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, familiarly known as the “Anti-Scrape” Society, which he founded in 1877 and remained involved in until his death in 1896. Morris’s work in establishing this society was simultaneous with his increasing involvement in leftist politics, culminating in his conversion to socialism in the early 1880s. The concurrence was not accidental. As E.P. Thompson notes in discussing Morris’s rage at the possible destruction of a beautiful, old Berkshire barn: “It may seem an unlikely road to Communism by way of Great Coxwell Barn,” yet “Morris’s work for the Anti-Scrape contributed as much to bring him on the final stages of his journey as any other influence” because it brought him “directly into conflict with the property sanctions of capitalist society” and “deepened his insight into the destructive philistinism of capitalist society.”⁴⁰ Morris’s perseverance in preserving old buildings went hand-in-hand with his commitment to common wealth and shared public good over and above individual property. The very idea of the Anti-Scrape Society was infused with a respect for the workers that had produced the buildings in the first place, and the materials used to produce them. As one of Morris’s utopian characters says of the British Museum (another building kept standing though the people of the future find it ugly), “it is not a bad thing to have some record of what our forefathers thought a handsome building. For there is plenty of labour and material in it” (99).

Morris’s work for the Anti-Scrape Society also bespeaks his dedication to preservation as a form of historical memory, which we see in *News from Nowhere* too, despite the narrative’s “post-history” historical

standpoint. For the people of Nowhere, instead of viewing the objects they produce as potential waste, imagine past events, objects, and people as present in the materiality of the present day. They do not read or talk about the past, but it exists all around them: a carving in a dining hall that honors late-nineteenth-century socialists, a holiday practice of singing the words to Thomas Hood’s 1843 anti-sweatshop poem “Song of the Shirt.” Carolyn Steedman has identified two different cultural conceptions of the archive, which she calls “dust” and “waste”: dust is the “movement and transmutation of one thing into another”; it “is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone. Nothing *can* be destroyed,” whereas “waste” refers to the fear that things will disappear all too easily, that they *can* be destroyed.⁴¹ Steedman’s terminology provides a window into Morris’s understanding of history not as a metaphorical dustbin, but as a material recycling bin. The Nowherians’ entire worldview rests on a radically different notion of “waste” as that which cannot disappear. A similar idea is at work in *A Dream of John Ball*, which finds the presence of a fourteenth-century revolt in events of Morris’s own time. As Morris wrote in 1884: “John Ball was murdered by the fleecers of the people many hundred years ago, but indeed in a sense he lives still, though I am but a part, and not the whole of him.”⁴²

Morris’s late writings call our attention to material persistence, and to the limitations of a capitalist conception of waste as that which readily disappears. His meditations on such questions bespeak his broader engagement with the problem of waste in his work for the Kelmscott Press, which modeled

fair labor practices as well as sustainable production practices. Still, a central tension endures in Morris's work regarding the accessibility of sustainable goods, and this tension is particularly poignant in the arena of bookmaking, given the struggles of so many nineteenth-century working-class readers to get hold of the time and even the ability to read. Certainly, Morris was not able to democratize durability, but during the time he was working on the Kelmscott Press, he did continue to produce low-cost socialist literature such as the penny pamphlets published by the Hammersmith Socialist Society. Kelmscott allowed Morris to make a point, however, that could not be made by way of cheap print: that waste is a problem of production, that longevity and disposability must be taken into account at the genesis of an object's life, not just the end. In capitalism, waste disposal has traditionally been viewed as the province of the consumer rather than the producer, and environmental measures have long emphasized responsible consumption while ignoring production.⁴³ Today, "cleaner production" and "cradle-to-cradle" design are recognized as key environmental measures, but Morris's analysis of waste suggests that this kind of thinking was already germinating in his nineteenth-century critique of capitalism. Morris offers a vision of production in which an object's future life, in all its half-lives, is of more concern than scale and speed of manufacture. In this way, the Kelmscott Press articulated a central premise of Morris's socialism. It modeled a form of production grounded in beauty, materials, durability, and good labor practices, even for bookmaking, that most utilitarian of arts. It was not enough for Morris to imbue

household objects with the aura of artistic creation, as he did in his work for Morris & Co.; he brought this aura to print, too, to demonstrate that even an area of production thought to be essentially indifferent to beauty and craftsmanship could be transformed through a new approach to labor and materials.

Notes

- 1 See especially Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" from the second volume of his *Stones of Venice*. For more on the influence of Ruskin's expressive theory of labor; see Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005).
- 2 Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), reprint (Palo Alto, CA: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1996), 7.
- 3 Barringer, 255.
- 4 William Morris, *Socialist Diary*, ed. Florence Boos (Iowa City, IA: Windhover Press, 1981).
- 5 "Paradox of price" is Stansky's term (47–8). The firm was founded in 1861 and Morris's peak years of work there were in the 1870s, before his conversion to socialism, whereas the Kelmscott Press was founded in 1891.
- 6 Quoted in Colin Clair, *A History of Printing in Britain* (London: Cassell, 1965), 246.
- 7 Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979), 162–4.
- 8 For more on disposability and the "throwaway culture," see Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006).
- 9 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979).

- 10 For more on these shifts, see chapters 12–15 of Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1998). For Morris on the Victorian period's "ugly books," see for example his 1893 lecture "The Ideal Book," in *The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book*, ed. William S. Peterson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), 67.
- 11 For more on these presses, see for example Clair (note 6); Marcella D. Genz, *A History of the Eragry Press* (London: Oak Knoll, 2004); *In Fine Print: William Morris as a Book Designer* (London: London Borough of Waltham Forest, Libraries and Arts Department, 1976); or Roderick Cave, *Fine Printing and Private Presses* (London: British Library, 2001).
- 12 "Local Labour Leaders: 'Nunquam' (Mr. Robert Blatchford)," in the *Ashton under Lyme Herald* (May 28, 1892), collected in *An Introduction to Robert Blatchford and the Clarion Newspaper*, ed. Mike and Liz Sones (Harrow, Middlesex: Clarion Workshop Press, 1986), 12. Blatchford would repeat a version of this story in *Merrie England*, his widely read series of socialist letters to the fictional John Smith, originally serialized in the *Clarion* from 1892 to 1893. After the release of a penny edition in 1894, the book sold over a million copies.
- 13 William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 241.
- 14 Morris, along with a group of others, had left the Social Democratic Federation in December 1884 to form the Socialist League, largely over the question of electoral politics and running socialist candidates (which he was against); he then left the Socialist League in 1890 when it came to be dominated by anarchists; his final socialist affiliation was with the Hammersmith Socialist Society, a group that met in Kelmscott House and reflected Morris's particular blend of anti-parliamentary/revolutionary/aesthetic socialism. The Hammersmith Socialists continued the print and speaking propaganda for socialism, though not with the same degree of intensity as Morris's earlier groups.
- 15 William Morris, "Useful Work Versus Useless Toil," in *Political Writings*, 91 (see note 13).
- 16 British Library, MS Add 45331.
- 17 Morris's lectures turned to the topics of "Waste" and "Makeshift" (a term for cheap goods) in his final years, even as his speaking engagements were decreasing due to poor health. He presented, for example, two lectures in Manchester in 1894: "Waste" at the Manchester Free Trade Hall, and "Makeshift" for the Ancoats Brotherhood. Edmund and Ruth Frow, *William Morris in Manchester and Salford* (Salford: Working Class Movement Library, 1996), 22–3.
- 18 William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 275.
- 19 E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1955), 583.
- 20 John Dreyfus, "William Morris: Typographer," in *William Morris and the Art of the Book* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1976), 82.
- 21 "'Master Printer Morris': A Visit to the Kelmscott Press," in *The Daily Chronicle* (22 Feb 1893), reprinted in Morris, *The Ideal Book*, 98 (note 10).
- 22 Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 88.
- 23 William Morris, "Some Thoughts on the Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages," in Morris, *Ideal* (see note 10), 1.
- 24 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848, in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 163.
- 25 William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, in *Three Works By William Morris*, ed. A.L. Morton (New York: International Publishers, 1986), 100.
- 26 William Morris, *The Story of the Glittering Plain or the Land of Living Men*, facsimile of the 1894

- Kelmscott edition (New York: Dover, 1987), 99–100.
- 27 Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today," 1944, in Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (San Diego: Harvest, 1977), 195–255.
 - 28 For more on Brooks Stevens, see Glenn Adamson, *Industrial Strength Design: How Brooks Stevens Shaped Your World* (Boston: MIT Press, 2003).
 - 29 Stansky, *Redesigning*, 45 (see note 2).
 - 30 Dreyfus, "William Morris," 78 (see note 20).
 - 31 Slade, *Made to Break*, 75 (see note 8). Slade notes that this pamphlet was published twenty years before Brooks Stevens claimed to have invented the term "planned obsolescence."
 - 32 "Art under Plutocracy," *Collected Works of William Morris* vol. XXIII (London: Longmans, 1915), 180, 186.
 - 33 William A. Cohen, introduction to *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005), x.
 - 34 Kelmscott was founded in 1891, but Morris's idea for it probably stretches back to November 15, 1888, when he saw Emery Walker's lecture on letterpress printing at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition. Stansky, *Redesigning*, 222.
 - 35 William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, 98–9 (see note 18).
 - 36 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. Stephen Arata (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2003), 86.
 - 37 Because of their ample leisure time, many residents of Nowhere also pursue odd hobbies: one character, for example, enjoys writing archaic historical novels that nobody else reads. Glenn Adamson has argued that in its modern form, "hobby craft is the very embodiment of false consciousness," since "the hobbyist is the positive mirror image of the worker who has been made redundant at the factory," and "the successful displacement of unused time into harmless leisure activities has been vital to the project of capitalist expansion." In Morris's socialist utopia, however, hobbies persist after the revolution, as Morris's means of suggesting that all labor need not be purposeful or even communal in a socialist society. The only distinction between these hobbies and "work" proper, indeed, is that hobbies are performed for individual as opposed to collective pleasure. Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 140.
 - 38 In one scene, a group of young men mending a road are said to look like "a boating party at Oxford," and they use terms from competitive rowing to describe their work as "right down good sport" (94–5).
 - 39 Natalka Freeland, "The Dustbins of History: Waste Management in Late-Victorian Utopias," in Cohen and Johnson, *Filth*, 227 (see note 33).
 - 40 Thompson, *William Morris*, 231, 233 (see note 19).
 - 41 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002), 164.
 - 42 William Morris, *Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), 2: 326.
 - 43 Only in 1989 did the United Nations Environmental Programme launch its "Cleaner Production" initiative, in an effort to generate "a preventative approach to environmental management." United Nations Environmental Programme, Sustainable Consumption and Production Branch, "Understanding Cleaner Production," <http://www.unep.fr/scp/cp/understanding/>