CHAPTER 28

Counter-Projects: William Morris and the SF of the 1880s (1988)

0.

Historically, there is a very intimate connection between utopian fiction and other forms of what I have called SF in a larger sense, such as the extraordinary voyage, technological anticipation, dystopia, etc. I have in fact argued that – if SF is taken in that sense – then utopian fiction is not only, beyond a reasonable doubt, one of the historical roots of SF. It can also be, logically if retroactively, subsumed into SF as one of its forms – that validated by and only by sociopolitics. While I do not intend to deny the usefulness of studying texts in all possible ways, for example, utopian fiction in connection with utopian colonies, I argued that when studied as fictional literature, utopia is most usefully seen as "the sociopolitical subgenre of SF."[1]

1 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (further MOSF), 61, and cf. the whole chapter leading up to this. The present essay is based on that book and on my subsequent *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK* (further VSF). In the first, I arrive at the position that the alternate reality or possible world induced in the reader(s) by an SF text is not a prophecy nor even extrapolation but an analogy to unrealized possibilities in the addressee's or implied reader's empirical world. Therefore, however empirically unverifiable the narrative agents, objects or events of SF may be, their constellation in all significant cases shapes a parable about ourselves. It is on this position that the deep epistemological – neither simply historical nor simply technical – kinship between SF and utopian fiction can be.

Further, this historical connection of utopia and SF is surely neither accidental nor insignificant. Some lines of that argument may be condensed as follows: if SF is a fictional genre "whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment," and which is narratively dominated by a "fictional novum (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (MOSF 7–8 and 63), then its narrative in each case actualizes a different (though historical and not transcendental) world, with slightly or largely modified geography, religion, constitution, economics, warfare, etc.

I hope this introduction may at least sketchily indicate a context more significant than simple facticity or accident for a discussion of some not insignificant relationships between Morris and the SF of Victorian Britain in the decade preceding *News from Nowhere*. No doubt, this only contributes some further elements to and, in the best case, identifies some foci of the much wider and more complex theme "Morris and Intertextuality," within which *News from Nowhere* would deserve a monograph of its own. My essay will have two different but, I hope, complementary parts, both of them arising from data presented and works whose context is discussed at more length in my VSF. I shall deal first with the image of William Morris found in two brief SF "alternative histories" which postulate a bad socialist government in a near-future UK. Second, I shall discuss two works of SF, one dystopian and one expressly anti-utopian, elements from which were (certainly or probably) refunctioned in *News from Nowhere*. This may allow some more general conclusions about a two-way relationship between Morris and the paraliterary SF discourse of his time, which appears to have been more intimate than heretofore assumed.

After the present text was first given as a paper at an MLA Session on William Morris in December 1984, I have expanded and modified my theoretical position in "Locus," allowing more weight to the extra-fictional connections of utopian fiction.

1. Morris as a Narrative Agent in the 1880s' SF

1.1.

A booklet of thirty-five pages was published in London by Harrison & Sons in 1884 under the title of *The Socialist Revolution of 1888, by an Eye-Witness* (see VSF 25 and 127). Two of the main investigators of the domain identify its author as "Fairfield," no first name, without giving a reason for the attribution. In all the biographical handbooks and annual lists of Victorian professions from 1848 to 1900 inclusive (see VSF 128–35 and 165), the only Fairfield to be found is Edward Denny Fairfield, a Liberal civil servant in the Foreign Office. While some internal features of the narration would be consistent with both liberalism and civil service, I have been unable to confirm this attribution. The story itself belongs to the form or sub-genre of the *Alternative History*. I have defined it in VSF as that SF sub-genre in which an alternative locus, sharing the material and causal verisimilitude of the writer's empirical world, is used to articulate different possible solutions of such societal problems which are of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world. After 1880, with the rise of social tensions in the whole of Britain, this form became dominant within SF, at the momentary expense of the Future War and the more lasting expense of the moribund Extraordinary Voyage form. More precisely, *The Socialist Revolution of 1888* is, as its title spells out, a near-future variant of this small but recognized form of social discourse. In fact, it is the best from half a dozen short-range historical alternatives which sprang up suddenly in 1884–85, whose choice of fictional form as well as relative brevity and absence of the author's true name testifies in all cases to an urgent intervening into the suddenly sharpening British political conflicts.

The plot of the booklet is not unshrewd nor unhumorous: socialists led by Hyndman and Burne-Jones (!) revolt through mass demonstrations and seize London, the troops fraternize with them. After one week, they hold a plebiscite which votes in Socialism as against Individualism with 7.5 against 5.5 million votes. The new, clearly quite legal government repeals

private property, at which – in a transposition of the Paris Commune events – all British ships flee the country, with the rich and their possessions on board. Morris is appointed Minister for Industries in the Socialist government of 1888 as the only practical person in the whole crowd who knows how to keep the expenses of production down. This is not what one might call a "Cold Civil War" text, since it gives explicit credit to the Socialists for genuine goodwill and also implies that their mass support stems from their addressing genuine grievances. Further, it is written from the vantage point of a fictional high civil servant, who as secretary of the Cabinet sees the personal working out of political maneuvers. However, it has an anti-socialist horizon, and it depicts how societal confusion results from the loss of affluence, international financial pressures, and increase of State meddling à la Henry George. The government therefore becomes generally detested, and in particular all women turn against it. The passive resistance of the people, as well as of the army and police, forces Hyndman's government to call another plebiscite which abolishes Socialism by a vote of 9.5 million to 100 thousand (this registers ca. 3.4 million voters less than in the first plebiscite: presumably they are those who fled, rather than abstained). The new Liberal parliament eschews vengeance against the toppled regime, and in fact keeps one important measure enacted under it: the Irish Home Rule. We must today sigh enviously at the bloodless and genuinely democratic nature of all the events, shaped within a fair-minded and for this sub-genre unusually even-tempered, if somewhat ironical, liberal ideology. My initial parallel to 1871 Paris (always a presupposition in such UK Alternative Histories) must be therefore amended to the effect that this is a counter-project to the Paris Commune: the English, having a genuine parliamentary tradition, would deal with such an emergency better. This brief text implies, rather than openly states, that even within the "extravagant doctrinaires" that Socialists notoriously are, there is one queer (but very English) chap, namely Morris, who actually knows what production means. I will refrain from making possible twentieth-century parallels, and only remark that we hear nothing else of interest about Morris: one must assume he carries on in the liberal England, suitably chastened. At any rate and at a minimum, this text establishes that the theme of a possible non-violent change of regime was current in the social discourse prior to Morris's text.

1.2.

My second text is another booklet of thirty-six pages, *The Next 'Ninety Three* by W.A. Watlock, published in London by Field & Tuer in 1886. It belongs to the same sub-genre of near-future Alternative History, and the non-anonymity may be only apparent, since another fruitless search through all the Victorian biographical sources for Britain and its Empire (VSF 128–36) turned up no evidence of such a person, so that this might well be a pseudonym. Its discursive strategy can be seen from the subtitles*: or, Crown, Commune, and Colony: Told in a Citizen's Diary*. The diary of a supporter of the egalitarian regime introduced in Britain by the 1893 "Equable Distribution of Property Act" is used to present the reader with its thus doubly authenticated results: Ireland is divided into thirty-eight kingdoms, the canny Scots proceed to fuse employers and employed, but the diary focusses on the woes in England. Though divided into Communes, it is subjected to an all-meddling State, which introduces an equal four-hour work-day for all, including the intellectuals who are obliged to do manual work. It is mentioned in passing that William Morris rebels at the iniquities of State oppression and interference, and insults the powers that be (no particular consequence results from that). Finally, the ground having been prepared by universal discontent, a Colonial Legion from Australia brings about the Restitution to the old regime. This is a much less fair-minded, condemnatory rather than even-tempered companion to the previous booklet, but it will serve to indicate the second, "Conservative" rather than "Liberal," end of the anti-socialist spectrum. It is quite interesting that the Liberal took Morris's democratism for granted and focused on his competence in production, while the Conservative focused on his (obviously well-known) enmity toward centralized State authority. The strong-arm methods ascribed to all political factions are of a piece with the rhetorical expedient of a narration shaped as "double negation," in which a supporter of the faction that the author is against testifies not only to its illusions and (mis)deeds but also to the inevitable disillusionment. It is a cruder piece of work than the first booklet (possibly written by a sometime Australian?), but it is again not without a certain polemical, anti-revolutionary shrewdness.

2. Two Novels of the 1880s' SF Refunctioned in *News from Nowhere*

2.0.

It is well known that Morris wrote *News from Nowhere* among other things (to keep to the SF context only) as a counter-project to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and it has also been mentioned that he was certainly stimulated by Jefferies's *After London* and possibly by W.H. Hudson's *A Crystal* Age (MOSF 187–88). However, it seems to me that these no doubt indispensable correlations display a one-sided emphasis on "high lit." We do not have a full overview, I believe, of what Morris read, but it is quite possible that even had he usually read no semi-political or other (by Victorian bourgeois standards) "lower" fiction – a dubious assumption – the mention of his figure and behavior in these two samples of Alternative History would have been pointed out to him by political comrades or opponents. The case seems much strengthened by his possible (and in the second case highly probable) use of two "farther future" SF works by the authors Dering and Besant, the first of which is sufficiently obscure.

2.1.

That first work, *In the Light of the Twentieth Century* by Innominatus, whom I was able to identify as Edward Heneage Dering, is less interesting. Published in London by Hodges in 1886, it is a dream-vision of 155 pages, with a first-person narrator transferred to 1960. Dering himself (1827–92), though son of an Anglican parson, converted in 1865 to Catholicism with his wife, novelist Lady Georgiana Chatterton, and lived the life of a recluse in a medieval country home, reputedly dressed in seventeenth-century costumes. He wrote seven novels to further his views, also one book on Esoteric Buddhism, a pamphlet on philosophy, and a book of poems, and he translated from Italian books on philosophy

and political science.[2] His book is accordingly an eccentric ultramontane tract or anatomy very loosely allied to a novel, which fulminates against "Corporate freedom" (i.e., State control), paganism, free-love flirtation, the outlawing of charity endeavors, and other pet Catholic horrors. There is much religious discussion on a high philosophical level, and the narrative ends in uprisings of the mob.

However unlikely a companion to Morris's radically different utopia this might be, there are two elements in it which strike me as significantly similar. First, the framework: at the beginning, when the first-person narrator comes to the future, his translation is explained to him – by interlocutors who belong to those better, ergo unsatisfied, people that even in this soul-destroying future long for happiness – as due to "the force of your will against the actual state of things at the time, [which] affected your own state of being in that time" (p. 8). He had therefore "reduce[d] the action of the heart," as fakirs do, and slept his way to the future (p. 9). Further, at the end, as the narrator is being killed by the mob, he awakes: "Was it a dream? or am I delirious?," he asks (p. 151). Second, the skipping over of a generation: Dering's narrator is expressly identified as being two generations into the future by the expedient of meeting the grandson of an old friend. This has no constitutive signification in his text, whereas in Morris it is meaningfully refunctioned into an enmity – as the critic Middlebro' put it – against the generation of the fathers, and by metonymy against patriarchal authority (cf. MOSF 186). Nonetheless, the fact that Morris's main narrative agents are either old men (Old Hammond and William Guest, who is in some powerful ways identified as Hammond's alternative twin) or a range of young people, from children to rather young adults, introduces a discrepancy into the supposed realistic verisimilitude of *News from Nowhere*: it amounts to an absence of fathers, or for that matter mothers too, that is of the whole parental or adult generation. This might be partly explained by the incomplete refunctioning of Dering in Morris, no doubt due to powerful psychological pressures in the latter. A similar situation might obtain with the fuzziness of the "dream's" validation: Morris obviously

2 More elements for a characterization of E.H. Dering could be found in these books as well as in a memoir about him and another person by his wife, edited by him, all of which I confess to not having read – cf. VSF 160, 227, and 238.

would want to use neither an esoteric "force of the will" nor a fakir-type catalepsy, but he was in too much of a hurry, and probably too little interested, to supply a better motivation.

Since I am in this chapter not much interested in positivistic "sources," I cheerfully acknowledge that this last element is almost certainly overdetermined. Besides and before Bellamy, a "long sleep" was a commonplace of fantasy arrivals into the future from Washington Irving, Edmond About, and John Macnie on (cf. VSF passim). Most important, Morris's affinity for this feature was probably extra-literary, since it manifested itself from his earliest prose tales and poems on. Something similar might therefore hold also for the verbal parallels describing the narrator's puzzlement upon awakening. "Was it a dream?" is an utterance to be expected in this situation. Furthermore, the famous "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? … – do I wake or sleep?" ending from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Morris's great verse exemplar, would in itself have sufficed. Nonetheless, the exact semantic inversion of the second half of Dering's sentence, signaled by Morris's underline of was, seems more than accidental:

> Or indeed *was* it a dream? If so, why was I so conscious all along that I was really seeing all that new life from the outside …?

This take-off would fit well with the putative relation Morris-Dering, which I submit is in some ways analogous to the relation Morris-Bellamy: in linguistic terms, semantico-pragmatic opposition coupled with syntactic parallelism; in ideological terms, a counter-project based on the stimulating irritation supplied by some significant reusable formal elements.

2.2.

My most interesting exhibit is Walter Besant's novel of 198 pages *The Inner House*, published by Arrowsmith's as their 1888 Christmas Annual. The popular novelist, historian, and do-gooder Besant was a well-known Victorian figure so that I need not recount his biography, except to mention that I found him to be the clearest example within this genre – and

possibly within Victorian fiction as a whole – of social climber as pillar of Establishment, of novelist as virulently reactionary ideologist (cf. VSF 146, 401, 406, and passim). The novel begins with the discovery of immortality by the Carlylean Professor Schwarzbaum from Ganzweltweisst am Rhein in 1890. By some unexamined and perhaps burlesquely meant analogy, this discovery arrests decay in all domains, so that from the second chapter on the plot moves within an ironic "perfect Socialism" (p. 103). In it there is no property and little work, people all live and dine together and dress uniformly (the famous ant-heap of petty-bourgeois anti-socialism), births are allowed only to compensate for a mortal accident, and finally all emotions – that is, religion, art, love, suffering, and competition (!) – are suppressed, so that life carries on in calm stupor. In a narratively clumsy move (perfectly consonant with the other aspects of this clumsy book), the story is told in first person by the arch-villain, an ex-servant and – horrors! – scientific egalitarian, the mainstay of the ruling College of Physicians. Of course, this alone would not establish a sufficient parallel between Besant's and Morris's texts, since the whole tradition of future Alternative History (e.g., Bellamy and my four texts here) used a first-person narrator for the obvious reason of giving the reader an anchor of familiarity to counteract strangeness.

However, there is another element which suggests that this is the source of another refunctioning by Morris. Almost all the oldsters were liquidated in a Great Slaughter at the beginning of Besant's "socialist" epoch. One of the few oldsters left is "the Curator of the Museum" in the new capital, who lives with his granddaughter Christine. Perusing old books in the Museum, she rediscovers love, honor in battle (sic!), and the dignity of Death. With the help of a sailor "curiously unable to forget the old times" (p. 88), she revives the discontent of the quondam "gentle class" (p. 89 – it is unclear why that class survived the Great Slaughter of the propertied, but Besant is above such petty consistencies since he wants to have both a horrible warning and a happy ending). This class revolts to regain leadership, land, wealth, and for good measure arts, amusement, and love. The "Inner House" of the title is where the Secret of Life is kept; the rebels, not being able to bring the people over to their side, secede from the College of Physicians' rule. I think it is beyond doubt that Morris's Old Hammond and Clara as well as their location at the country's central Museum, the

only source of a historical memory otherwise absent from the new society, are a refunctioning of the old curator and his granddaughter. (The museum from a forgotten anterior epoch, which is the time of the story's author and original readers, and is there in order to be visited by the traveler into the future, will be taken over from Morris in Wells's *Time Machine* and thence become a staple of much modern SF.) Possibly, a few other touches in *News from Nowhere* may also be counter-projects to Besant's; for example, his emphasis on revival of love and jealousy may have suggested Morris's throwback murderer in chapter 24, as well as the backsliding due to book-reading by the grumbling *laudator temporis acti* in chapter 22, who is so eloquently put down by Clara in favor of the Book of Nature.

3. Some Concluding Indications on Morris and on Counter-Projects

I hope to have indicated the possibility, and perhaps the probability or the near-certainty, of a few matters which might fruitfully engage further attention by Morris critics. It is by now accepted that Morris used some elements from the More-to-Bellamy utopian panoramas and the Jefferies-cum-Hudson devolutionary anticipations. However, the two works discussed in Part 1 do not only allow us to glean some testimonies as to Morris's image. Beyond that, they suggest the possibility of Morris's having been alerted through them (if in no other ways) to the existence of paraliterary forms such as the Alternative History (of which alone I have found 182 new book-size titles published in the UK between 1848 and 1890 inclusive) or the SF genre as a whole. The discussion in Part 2 suggests, second, that Morris indeed knew at least the very "middlebrow" work of Besant and probably that of Dering. Further, it shows that Morris found ways to use at least Besant's "keeper of past knowledge" motif in the same way as he used the "sleeping into the future" frame of Bellamy's, and possibly also of Dering's and some other writers: in a "contrary" proceeding of subversion and inversion to which I have applied the term of

counter-project. Finally, he may also have in the same manner re-used the evacuation of the adult generation from Dering's text.

Of course, Morris not only stood the elements which he had (entirely or incompletely) refunctioned from Dering and Besant ideologically on their heads but also, and just as important, made triumphant sense of most of them. But this does not prevent us from using the insights obtained from the existence of such refunctionings for two purposes: first, to explain some minor but not uninteresting discrepancies in *News from Nowhere*; and second, to follow Morris's very process of refunctioning. That process is instructive on its own as the work of an artist who refuses the fetish of individualist originality. He proceeded, in my opinion quite rightly too, as all the great creators have done: he made lion-flesh of digested mutton. With Molière, he could have exclaimed: *Je prends mon bien où je le trouve*.

Morris's stance is also, last but not at all least, instructive as a formal procedure originating in the ethos and attitude of dialectical negation and sublation which seems common to consistent socialists, from Marx to Brecht (from whose playwriting practice I borrowed the term of counter-project), and which includes William Morris as one of its best practitioners. I would like to end this chapter – appropriately enough for one on Morris – with a colon-like pointer to possible general discussions about this procedure. A counter-project can, I think, be provisionally defined as the use of some significant elements or relationships from one universe of discourse for contrary axiological conclusions in and by means of another universe of discourse, the induced value-judgments being intended to shape the reader's pragmatic orientation. As a rule, the discursive elements will be narrative agents and/or narrative spacetime – for example, in this case, a grandfather-granddaughter pair in a future country's only museum and repository of information about the past. However, the notion of universe of discourse or (in more familiar semiotic fashion) of a Possible World, is not limited to fictional "possible worlds," but comprises also non-fictional (doxological) "possible worlds." As suggested, this will be particularly clear in the case of writers strongly committed to a salvational doctrine or belief about human relationships in everyday "reality" – for example, socialists. The counter-project is always some kind of inversion; and I would further speculate that it has an affinity with the rhetorical trope of chiasmus, for

example, Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy* as counter-project to (rebuttal of) Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty*. It must be added, nonetheless, first that we are here entering into complex philosophical debates about Possible Worlds, and second that I know of no sustained discussion of the discursive form of counter-project. These first notes of mine are thus mainly a call for such a discussion, in an informed feedback with social history. In any such discussion, the whole opus of William Morris, and in particular *News from Nowhere*, will be a fulcrum.

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