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Victorian Other Worlds



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VICTORIAN OTHER WORLDS: A VICTORIAN NETWORK CONFERENCE

Sarah Crofton, Melissa Dickson and Fariha Shaikh
(King's College London)

The first *Victorian Network* conference, held at Senate House in December 2012, took 'Other Worlds' as its theme. Across a day of rich papers and thought-provoking exchanges, delegates explored the multifaceted ways in which nineteenth-century society responded to ideas of alterity, and the new real and virtual horizons towards which the Victorian spirit of exploration turned its ever-extending reach. Our speakers responded to the call for papers on the Victorians and their 'elsewheres' with that diversity and depth of interest that makes ours so rewarding a field in which to work.

In the midst of this thematic sense of expansion and an imaginative diaspora, the conference itself was underpinned by a sense of what was held in common. 'Other Worlds' was itself a shared world, where researchers from across the Victorian period, from across a multiplicity of institutional and career experience, and from across the world came together to explore our own sense of the realm of 'Victorianism' as a communal space.

The proceedings collected in this special conference-inspired issue of *Victorian Network* represent only a partial glimpse into the event which we, as a committee, were proud to host. *Victorian Network* is dedicated to publishing and promoting the work of early-career researchers working on all facets of Victorian studies, and the papers in this issue are an eloquent testament to the diversity of such research. We are pleased to be able to present in the pages of our journal papers which provoked interest and discussion at the 'Other Worlds' conference. Yet conference proceedings are always a strange mirror of the event from which they emerge. The pages of our journal are a print world of their own; and these proceedings we might consider, in the words of Conrad's Marlow, not as the kernel of the conference, but as the glow that brings out the haze.

One of the most satisfying and striking facets of the day itself was the sense of community among those who came to speak and listen at our conference. Early-career researchers and academics more advanced in their careers or working in fields outside of the university circuit, intermingled indiscriminately to share insights, questions, advice, resources, new ideas and unexpected connections, creating bridges between their worlds in every direction. Throughout the day we were asked many times whether there were some formalised way in which one might become an official member of 'The Victorian Network'.

To the committee as a whole, 'Victorian Network' has been a descriptive, rather than proscriptive choice of moniker for our project. It began as the name of our

journal, and an apt one, to describe a pre-existing community of collaborative co-existing researchers. *Victorian Network* as a journal sought to fill a gap in recognising the valuable role of early-career research in adding to the conversation of Victorianism as a whole. Yet throughout the day at 'Other Worlds' there was a very clear sense that what Victorian Network was describing was more than that.

The written research work that we produce is our lifeblood, and the editorial board are proud and privileged to have had the chance over the past four years to publish work of the highest calibre and make it available in a peer-reviewed, publicly accessible form. In the wake of 'Other Worlds' we wish to take this further: to find a way to also use the online and offline spaces we have to foster the communal world of the early-career researcher in Victorian studies. In conjunction with the publication of this conference issue we are also rebuilding our website. The *Victorian Network* committee will use our webspace to share resources, highlight ongoing events, offer a platform for researchers wishing to reach the wider community, promote exchange of information, review new publications, and plan future collaborative events. Please keep an eye to victoriannetwork.org and the Victorian Wire over the coming months, and contact us if you wish to become involved in any of our projects.

It remains to thank those people who have formed the community which has made *Victorian Network* a success and whose work provides the impetus for our ongoing desire to expand our own horizons. We are grateful to all our contributors, our guest editors, our peer-reviewers, our copy-editors and those who helped to make the 'Other Worlds' event possible through their enthusiasm and diligent work.

INTRODUCTION: VICTORIAN OTHER WORLDS

Cora Kaplan

(Southampton University / Queen Mary, University of London)

Victorian Britain's 'other worlds', like our own, were connected to and inspired by the material world of everyday life. The nineteenth-century fascination with alterity of every kind is grounded in its industrial and imperial expansion – perhaps especially when it seeks to escape from their effects. The Victorian imagination – by no means confined to literary and visual art, but expressed there with astonishing richness and brio – was energized by the dizzying and disruptive pace of modernity. The threats and promises of political reform, from the abolition of slavery to the extension of the franchise, not to mention the changing and contested relations between men and women and the accelerated development of scientific knowledge all find their possibilities and drawbacks tried out as romance or fantasy, often juxtaposed with the detailed depiction of the grim conditions of work in Victorian Britain, as they are in Charles Kingsley's *Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (1863), but also erupting in his social novels of the late eighteen forties, *Yeast* (1848) and *Alton Locke* (1850). Mid-century adult fiction was a mixed genre in which realism and fancy were intertwined. The alternative to dystopian futures draws longingly on the past. The fondness for medieval stories and settings in Tennyson or the Pre-Raphaelites, the idealizing of feudal society in Disraeli's fiction, draw this invented past forward, appropriating conservative social imaginary in the face of radical challenges to it in the Victorian everyday. What is 'other' can be as far away as the orient, imagined in this issue through Dickens's references to its commodities in his fiction, or as socially and emotionally distant as Disraeli's brutal assessment in *Sybil* (1844) that in Britain there were 'Two Nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets'.¹ We can see these class adversaries – and the repulsion between them – depicted in any number of literary texts. For a particularly egregious example see Elizabeth Barrett Browning's detailed, repellant description of a dehumanized and vicious urban residuum in her novel-poem *Aurora Leigh* (1855) which in part addresses class division and the condition of England that preoccupied so many politicians, writers and reformers. Visitors from other planets were not typically the other half of the nation, as Disraeli had put it, but rather elevated strangers regularly conscripted by Victorian writers as astute but dispassionate figures who can observe without prejudice the radical differences between humans they encounter. Just such

¹ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, ed. by Sheila Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 65.

an alien appears in the 1840s in a popular ethnographic work by James Cowles Prichard, *The Natural History of Man* (1843), as a foil for the greater knowledge of the human scientist.

What is other need not be feared races or classes, but can also be objects of desire. Charlotte Brontë's governess, Jane Eyre, looking out from the rooftops of Thornfield over 'sequestered field and hill', wishes for a cosmopolitan rather than a provincial life; she longs for 'a power of vision' which 'might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard about but never seen'. From Jane's perspective the 'busy world' is other and unattainable but the other world of her imagination compensates with 'a tale [...] narrated continuously; quickened with all of the incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence'.² The imagination does not always conjure up benign alterity: its incident, its narratives can just as often be the stuff of nightmare. This effect is not only a matter of creation but also of interpretation. At the opening of *Jane Eyre* (1847) the child Jane, looking at the illustrations of the bleak landscapes of the frozen north in Berwick's *History of British Birds*, merges its images with the often frightening stories that the servant Bessie tells her. Locked by the servants at her Aunt Reed's command in the Red Room – the master bedroom of her dead uncle – Jane sees her own reflection in the glass as absolutely other: 'half fairy, half imp' (p. 11). In the breakdown that ensues her favorite book, *Gulliver's Travels*, becomes a compendium of terror where 'the giants were gaunt goblins, the pigmies malevolent and fearful imps, Gulliver a most desolate wanderer in most dread and dangerous regions' (p. 17). Both the child Jane's prior pleasure in the ordered agrarian landscape of Lilliput, a scaled-down model of an ideal settler society, and her post-Red Room vision of a violent and adversarial colonial setting with restive, racialised natives and frightened, isolated Europeans represents both sides of Imperial alterity, a glimpse of the abyss reinforced later in the novel when Rochester describes the horrors of his Jamaican experience.

Jane Eyre is not an exceptional text for its times in its insistent evocation of frightening others, nor are the figures of malevolent imps and pygmies exclusive to Brontë's novel. Merged representations of the non-human of British fable and story and the ethnographic depictions of distant races appear as disturbing and contaminating presences in rural rather than urban space. Little leering men up to no good in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) tempt two young sisters with exotic out of season fruit, a corrupting sign, as critics have argued, of the unnatural desires created by a global economy geared to luxury consumption. And in the early 1840's the Royal Academy painter, William Mulready, famously depicted a strange rural scene: a nervous blond boy, still in small clothes, encouraged by two women, reluctantly offers alms to two crouching, sinister looking Lascars. These quintessentially urban figures – sailors from the Indian subcontinent often stranded in

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 2nd Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987), p. 95. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

London and barred from employment in England – are, in Mulready's prize-winning painting, displaced into a timeless country setting. The lessons that readers and viewers are meant to learn from these pictorial and literary encounters with racialized and/or subhuman others are complex, but from the 1840s forward their imagined presence too often signals a contraction rather than an expansion of sympathy with human difference – narratively marked by a retreat to a 'safer' world of racial, cultural and national affiliation. The wish to withdraw from an increasingly cosmopolitan, urbanized world to an imaginary space where menacing strangers are kept at bay is one response among many to the expansion of the British Empire and the domination of its peoples.

Commerce, industry and rapidly changing technology all inspire entry to Victorian 'other worlds'. Old materials become transformed by new production processes, and these give rise to extraordinary and elaborate visions. In *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (2008) Isobel Armstrong explores the 'scopic culture' that reigned for a half century, whose material reference points were the transparent glass walls and elaborate sparkling fountain of the Crystal Palace. Yet Armstrong argues that '[t]he pellucid glass membrane ... inevitably generated double meanings – the artificial lustre of consumer experience *and* urban pastoral, the spectacle as visual pleasure *and* reified commodity, economic exploitation *and* communal regeneration'.³ Grazia Zaffuto in her essay in this issue explores the class tensions revealed in attempts to provide 'visual education' for a wider, less educated public at the Crystal Palace's post-Exhibition site at Sydenham. She observes that 'by placing the Fine Arts Courts, the Industrial Courts, and commercial stalls inside the glass building, the Crystal Palace Company created quite evidently, multiple meanings, alluding specifically to the tensions of being all and at the same time a trader, an educator and an entertainment provider' (p. 13). The 1851 Exhibition itself offered a packaged glimpse of past civilizations and present 'primitive' societies. The Fine Arts Courts, Zaffuto suggests, were supposed to evoke very different responses from its segregated audiences – the uneducated poor or the sophisticated, knowledgeable middle and upper classes. The global sources of Britain's commodity culture, and the products themselves, among them domestic items such as household objects, consumables or fabrics, provide the metonymic link to trading nations and adjust the relationship of Britain and Britons to them – the distance and intimacy that the possession of foreign things invoked. Hannah Lewis-Bill explores the leitmotif of China and Chinese commodities in Dickens, with special reference to *Dombey and Son* (1846) where, she argues, tea itself becomes the vehicle for the simultaneous naturalization and estrangement of its referent, safely surrounded in domestic settings with British things. The other world of the orient is only a teacup away; it matters that Britain can control even that imaginative distance.

³ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133.

The scopic culture that Armstrong explores continues its effects into the last decades of the nineteenth century, where social and aesthetic criticism turns towards the Utopian political imaginary as an alternative to the harsh realities of industrial and commercial culture. Owen Holland, in this issue, examines the genealogy of William Morris's use of 'visual metaphors and rhetorical devices' related to sight in his utopian writings, including his 1890 novel *News from Nowhere (or an Epoch of Rest)*, tracing them from the Romantics through Carlyle, Ruskin and Arnold. For Morris, Holland argues, the 'utopian optic' is always political. A 'slight shift' in our perspective allows us to see within the present the possibilities for thinking and living otherwise, and further to imagine how this might, practically, be brought about. Holland tracks Morris's engagement with the traditions of individual and collective modes of vision through a close examination of what is often a contradictory – but fascinating – visual rhetoric.

Morris's 'Nowhere' is a 'real' place: London subtly altered as in a dreamscape, but with geographical signifiers in place – Trafalgar Square, the Thames, the Houses of Parliament. In Elizabeth Corbett's utopian novel, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), women live in a future Ireland, depopulated by a war which leaves it open to colonisation by the excess women of England – a fantasy, one might suggest, a bit too close for comfort to the depopulation caused by the Irish famine, and in its unstated imperialism not so far away after all from the Brontë children's African juvenilia. However, Christina Lake, in this issue, argues persuasively for the radical nature of Corbett's utopia. Freed from restrictive modes of dress and what Corbett thought of as other patriarchal impositions in Victorian England, and with reproduction guided by eugenicist and Malthusian principles, they have evolved into liberated superwomen. Lake suggests that Matthew Beaumont's description of the gap in late-nineteenth-century feminist utopias 'between the fantasy of collective social harmony [...] and the lonely individual consciousness of the woman writer' does not apply in Corbett's case,⁴ since for her the like-minded community of women already existed in the reforming feminist group associated with the *Women's Penny Paper*. Corbett, a journalist and early successful author of detective stories as well as a suffrage campaigner, was a strong believer that scientific advances could benefit women. New Amazonia's athletic goddesses and celibate cadre of government leaders are proof of her faith in science coupled with 'common sense'.

Morris's narrator in *News from Nowhere* wakes up in a brave new world of our own millennium, a world where work is unalienated, unpaid and pleasurable, the Thames unpolluted by industrial waste and social relations between men and women freer and more egalitarian, if not quite a paradise for feminists. Nineteen-year-old Jane Eyre's longing for the 'busy' cosmopolitan world has been replaced by an agrarian dreamscape. In the same passage Jane demands a world which recognizes

⁴ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 90.

that

women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (p. 96)

Yet in spite of this eloquent demand, still echoing down the centuries since it was first made, Jane settles for, and finds happiness with, her blind and disabled aristocrat in a remote house in the green heart of England. What she or her half Irish creator would have made Corbett's Brobdinagian Amazons in a colonized Ireland is hard to envision. Nor are we any nearer to Morris's socialist paradise. What Charles Dickens, so keen on controlling – in his fiction at least – England's commercial and cultural relations to the orient, would make of the entrepreneurial Chinese investors in Britain is even harder to conjure up. But perhaps the mid-nineteenth century backers of the Crystal Palace would be pleased (if puzzled) to know that the Chinese investment group ZhongRong has made a serious bid, welcomed by London Mayor, Boris Johnson, to build a 'new' Crystal Palace on the site of the original in South London, providing thousands of jobs and regenerating the area. ZhongRong Group chairman Ni Zhaoxing said: 'London is renowned across the world for its history and culture and the former Crystal Palace is celebrated in China as a magnificent achievement. This project is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring its spirit back to life by recreating the Crystal Palace and restoring the park to its former glory'.⁵ Proof, if proof were needed, that the real world will almost always outstrip the past's most radical hopes and most daring flights of fancy. If we could take utopian fiction's liberty with time and space, we might say to the Victorians: be careful what you wish for.

⁵ Anon., 'Crystal Palace £500m Rebuild Plans Unveiled', *BBC News London* <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-24375547>> [accessed 16 November 2013].

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‘VISUAL EDUCATION’ AS THE ALTERNATIVE MODE OF LEARNING AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE, SYDENHAM

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Abstract

The Crystal Palace at Sydenham, erected as a permanent cultural institution following the closure of the Great Exhibition of 1851, sought to bring direction to the long-standing inadequacies of pedagogy in existing state and philanthropic schools through the establishment of its own ‘national school’. The simple teaching method chosen by the Crystal Palace was ‘visual education’, which constituted a form of moral awakening through sight rather than words. This disciplined mode of looking associated solely with the sensual was directed towards working-class visitors in need of moral advancement and was completely separate from the rational mind. ‘Visual Education’ at the Crystal Palace was centred around the Fine Arts Courts, which were a series of model architectural buildings specifically designed to transform the complex historical theory of civilizations into a coherent visual illustration of the imperial history of nations. Thus the visual lessons of the Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Alhambra, Italian, and Pompeian Courts as well as others, were charged with moral enlightenment and rules of taste. In this article I argue that the conflicting and contradictory interpretations of the Fine Arts Courts in newspapers and periodicals exposed the inadequacies of a mode of learning focusing solely on the visual and that the tension between the moral lessons and the intellectual responses to ‘visual education’ were shaped by the complexities of existing class hierarchies. Thus, by looking at commentaries in the press, I will show that the aim of educated middle and upper class visitors was not to enter the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts to acquire moral taste, but to mark their own social and intellectual advancement.

The Crystal Palace at Sydenham highlights the extent to which Victorian society was characterised by an alternative mode of learning which interconnected with the popularisation of an expanding visual culture but at the same time it also maintained its links with a form of learning that embraced the traditional classical ideal. In theory ‘visual education’ was a legitimate strategy for democratizing art, for making the manners, habits and customs of past civilizations, of other worlds, seem less strange but in practice the approach reinforced and intensified class divisions. To read the commentaries on the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts at the Crystal Palace in the Victorian press is to see that, in fact, there were two competing kinds of educational visions. Most strikingly, there is a divide between the ‘visual education’ for less educated working class visitors, who were expected to engage with the artistic beauty of the Courts to conjure sensual and moral feelings. This form of pedagogy had firm links to the issue of working-class radicalism.¹ On the other side

¹ Anon., ‘The Opening of the Crystal Palace’, *Art Journal*, 6 (1854), pp. 214-15 (p. 215); A.P. Donajgradzki, ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Croom Helm, 1977),

there was ‘visual education’ for an audience presenting themselves as art connoisseurs in the pages of the press, who engaged with the Fine Arts Courts on a different level. By drawing on academic sources, and applying their intellectual understanding of the aesthetic rules of taste, critics were able to judge the historical and artistic precision of the Courts and in so doing the press became the primary mechanism for establishing the popular view that the Fine Arts Courts were condemned to inferior status when compared with the noble qualities of original antiquities. However, in a similar way to the Great Exhibition, which initially restricted entrance for the working man through costly admission prices, the Sydenham Crystal Palace was in no way designed to encourage attendance of the working classes who were likely to be working when the Palace was open.² As *The Times* aptly put it, ‘hitherto, nearly everything designed for the benefit of the multitude has, in some way or other, had its advantages absorbed by the classes immediately above them’.³ The restrictive opening times and high admission prices became a mechanism for managing the flow of working class visitors, which in turn strongly suggests that ‘visual education’ was really intended for a middle class grouping eager to shape their own specific forms of social and cultural authority.

At the close of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in October 1851, after much deliberation and discussion, a group of entrepreneurs, some of whom had been involved in the organisation of the Great Exhibition, set up a private venture in order to save the unique iron and glass building from destruction. After securing £500,000 the Crystal Palace Company purchased the building from the contractors and set about transferring it from its temporary site in Hyde Park to the picturesque village of Sydenham in South London during the summer of 1852. The Crystal Palace at Sydenham was officially opened on 10 June 1854 in the presence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. A nationalistic agenda was devised for a permanent Crystal Palace based on three fundamental objectives – ‘amusement and recreation, instruction and commercial utility’, which together formed a co-ordinated social policy strategy.⁴ This strategy of uniting education and entertainment was carried forward from the Great Exhibition, as a means of pacifying inter-class connections and elevating the minds of the working classes.⁵ In essence this meant that the educational and recreational programmes were purposefully designed with a view to generate profits for the shareholders and of course to sustain the building on an ongoing basis. The social mission which lay at the heart of the Crystal Palace’s

p. 23.

² Paul Gurney, ‘An Appropriated Space: The Great Exhibition, the Crystal Palace and the Working Class’, in *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. by Louise Purbrick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 114-45 (p. 119).

³ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (24 July 1854), p. 9.

⁴ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (12 June 1854), p. 9.

⁵ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 62; Gurney, ‘An Appropriated Space’, p. 115.

existence was both serious and laudable, that is to teach the public the rudiments of good taste and design in order to improve the nation's commercial activities, and to ward off foreign competition in industry and commerce; and above all, to unite the British people in a programme of continuous improvement that served to elevate the character of the nation.⁶ But in a similar way to the Great Exhibition, where according to Thomas Richards, 'the era of spectacle had begun', the Crystal Palace Company turned almost every display into a spectacle or show at Sydenham to fulfil its social mission.⁷ As I will argue, rather than fusing recreation and instruction, the educational exhibits became categorised in the minds of visitors as peculiar articles of modern consumerism, a world apart from the remote cultures and craftsmanship of past civilizations they were designed to represent. This relates to the separate sphere of production and consumption, which Guy Debord referred to as a form of commodification and which he also termed 'spectacle'.⁸ Whilst the educational programme at Sydenham comprised both artistic and scientific displays, it was the former, as represented by the Fine Arts Courts, which formed the fundamental basis of the 'visual education' programme at the Crystal Palace.

Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, who produced the geological illustrations of extinct animals at the Crystal Palace, first referred to the term 'visual education' during a lecture he delivered to the Society of Arts in May 1854. Hawkins attributed this intellectual awakening through sight rather than words to the eighteenth century Swiss pedagogue, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi.⁹ This method of learning was explored by Pestalozzi through practical experiments in schools, where he concluded that the most effective method for children to acquire knowledge was through the act of engaging the senses.¹⁰ This sensory approach to learning was largely untested in Britain, but it was regarded as especially suited to the working class because it was generally believed that it was part of the working class character to seek 'happiness in sensual gratification alone'.¹¹ In his address, Hawkins was optimistic of the intended value of 'visual education'. He said:

The whole of the great scheme now working to completion, known as the Crystal Palace, might be properly described as one vast and combined experiment of visual education; and I think it would be easy to show that its

⁶ Anon., 'The New Crystal Palace', *The Times* (6 August 1852), p. 5.

⁷ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 3.

⁸ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), p. 15.

⁹ Waterhouse Hawkins, 'On Visual Education as Applied to Geology: With a Special Reference to the Geological Restorations at the Crystal Palace', *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 2 (19 May 1854), pp. 444-9.

¹⁰ Kate Silber, *Pestalozzi: The Man and His Work* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1965), p. 121.

¹¹ William Barry, *An Essay on the Most Desirable Place for Supplying and Elevating Recreation for the Working Classes* (London: published for the author, 1853), p. 6.

educational powers and design constitute its legitimate claims to the support of all civilised Europe.¹²

At the Crystal Palace the visual approach to learning took on universal significance, as Samuel Laing, Chairman of the Crystal Palace Company, announced at the planting of the first column at Sydenham in 1852, that ‘The tendency of the age was, not to appeal to the faculties by dry abstraction or words, but to appeal to the eye’.¹³ After all, the Directors of the Crystal Palace had witnessed the power of spectacle at the Great Exhibition, which had attracted an enthusiastic mass audience. Moreover, it was all too aware of the visual culture that was being embedded in society through the new pictorial magazines and newspapers such as the *Penny Magazine* (1832-45) and (though for a different readership), the *Illustrated London News* (1842-2003).¹⁴ Art spectatorship in particular, as Rachel Teukolosky argues, defined one’s appreciation of taste and culture and for this reason it became a matter of national pride and political urgency for all classes.¹⁵ Kate Flint, too, in her study of Victorian visual culture emphasises the widespread fascination with the act of seeing, reinforcing the extent to which the human eye became an object of knowledge and interest during the nineteenth century.¹⁶ As well as the focus on ‘visual education’ the Crystal Palace, itself a gigantic display case, took much pleasure in exhibiting in the Stationery Court the new technologies of vision, such as the camera and stereoscope, alongside the usual items of stationery – pens, paper, and envelopes – to reinforce the Crystal Palace’s tripartite role to provide education and entertainment as well as the much sought after shopping experience. This explicit linkage of cultural display with scientific and mechanical invention reinforces Jonathan Crary’s argument that optical devices in the nineteenth century should be regarded as ‘points of intersection where philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic discourses overlap with mechanical techniques, institutional requirements, and socioeconomic forces’.¹⁷ It is these apparatuses, he goes on to argue, that are the outcome of a complex reformulation of the observer ‘into something calculable and regularizable and of human vision into something measurable and thus exchangeable’.¹⁸ Thus at the

¹² Hawkins, ‘On Visual Education’, p. 444.

¹³ Anon., ‘The New Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (6 August 1852), p. 5.

¹⁴ The *Penny Magazine* ran weekly articles with the aim to teach art history to working class readers and also published Anna Jameson’s series of essays from 1843-45 on the biography of specific Renaissance painters and their major works.

¹⁵ Rachel Teukolosky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3, 17.

¹⁶ Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. xiv.

¹⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 8.

¹⁸ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 17.

Sydenham Crystal Palace, the optical devices on display, particularly the stereoscope, were fundamentally regarded as forms of mass entertainment but they also reminded visitors that such devices emerged from new empirical research on the physiological status of the individual, thus emphasising the dominant status of the observer in the acquisition of knowledge.

The Crystal Palace building and the glass display cases inside it can together be considered as optical devices to draw the eye to the exhibits and the articles for sale. This supports Rachel Bowlby's argument that the Crystal Palace and the Universal Exposition buildings in France closely resembled, in architecture, the more everyday 'Palaces of consumption' simply because they made use of glass and lighting to create spectacular visual effects to entice potential customers to their trade.¹⁹ Isobel Armstrong goes further in her analysis of urban glass buildings, arguing that '[t]he pellucid glass membrane [...] inevitably generated double meanings – the artificial lustre of consumer experience *and* urban pastoral, the spectacle as visual pleasure *and* reified commodity, economic exploitation *and* communal regeneration'.²⁰ Armstrong's argument is wholly applicable to the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. By placing the Fine Arts Courts, the Industrial Courts, and commercial stalls inside the glass building, the Crystal Palace Company created quite evidently, multiple meanings, alluding specifically to the tensions of being all and at the same time a trader, an educator and an entertainment provider. The *Athenaeum* in 1854 supported this mass educational mission: 'The age is growing, we hope, too wise for the tap-room, and needs a larger playground and different toys. In this great school-room we shall all be learners'.²¹ This statement promoted an educational system suited for all classes, which contrasted with the inequity and class segregation of existing educational provision.

'Visual Education' was introduced by the Crystal Palace Company as a feasible solution to the inadequacies of existing pedagogy. In taking into account the poor literacy levels amongst the lower classes and criticising the rote learning in existing state and philanthropic elementary schools, particularly the

¹⁹ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 2.

²⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133. Emphasis in original.

²¹ Anon., 'The Sydenham Palace', *Athenaeum* (3 June 1854), p. 684.

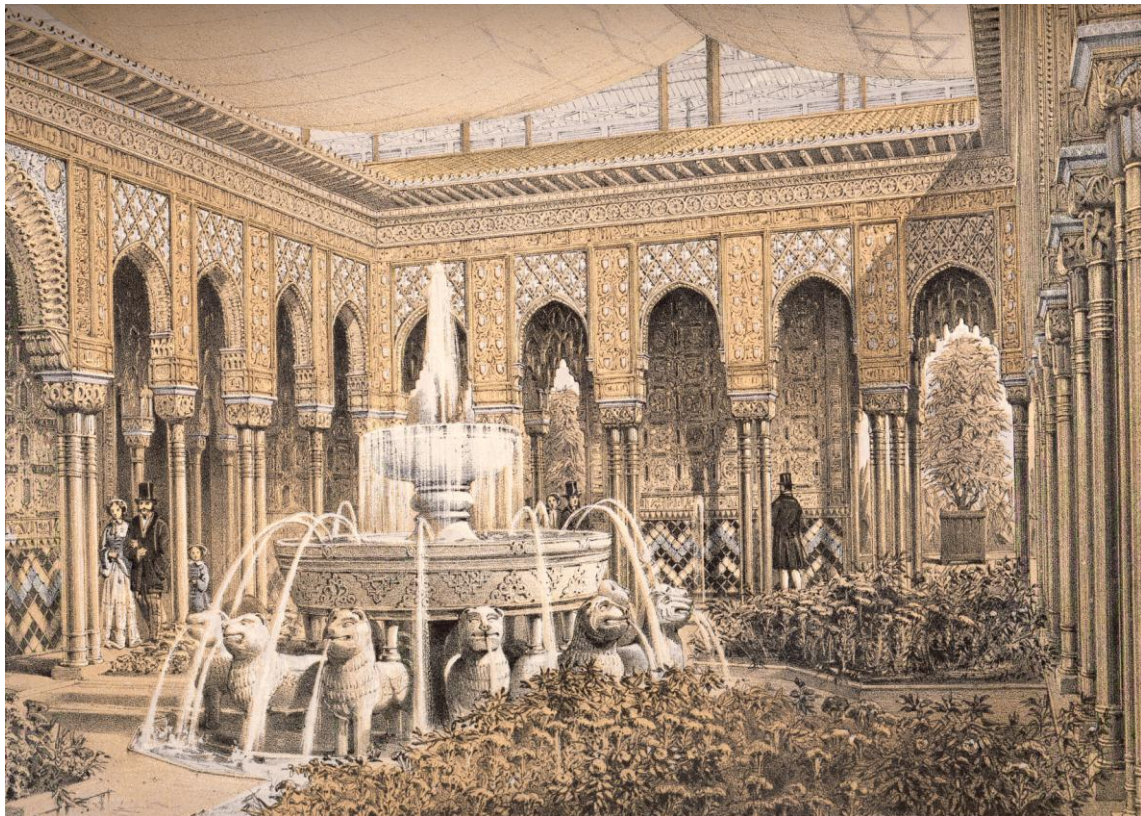


Figure 1 Court of Lions, Alhambra Court, Crystal Palace at Sydenham

Grandgrind-like lessons of facts, facts and more facts, which had dimmed the natural instinct of observation, the Crystal Palace Company was, in theory, planning to introduce a new era that would break with centuries of social segregation by proclaiming that the visual and sensual basis of its educational and recreational programmes were suited to all classes of people.²² It seemed to the *Art Journal* in 1856 that as the Fine Arts Courts were presented in a form so simple and attractive, they would bring popular appetite and elevated pleasure to all visitors who would be eager to profit from their examination.²³ The hope was that every class could be united at the Crystal Palace on equal terms through the ‘visual education’ of the Fine Arts Courts.

The primary role of ‘visual education’ was to impart high moral lessons to the masses specifically through the design and polychromatic effects of the monuments and artefacts on display. The Alhambra and the Pompeian Courts at the Crystal

²² See the literacy figures of the Registrar General in Michael Sanderson, *Education, Economic Change and Society in England 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 12; Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 166.

²³ Anon., ‘Ceramics Court at the Crystal Palace under the direction of T. Battam, Esq., F.S.A. The Opening of the Crystal Palace’, *Art Journal*, 2 (1856), p. 47.

Palace were both practical examples of the civilising influences derived from polychromy in art. The Alhambra Court was designed by the



Figure 2 Pompeian Court, Crystal Palace at Sydenham

architect and designer, Owen Jones, who visited the original Alhambra Palace in Granada in 1837 and took drawings and accurate casts of every ornament of importance. The interior of the Court of Lions, in the Alhambra Court, was literally covered from end to end with rich arabesque work, in coloured stucco, mainly in red, blue and gold. The *Spectator* in 1854 described the effects of the jewel-like colours of the Alhambra Court, as conjuring ‘a mystery full of repose for wearied eyes’ and Jones himself said that ‘[t]he eye, the intellect, and the affections are everywhere satisfied’.²⁴ The colouring of the Pompeian Court at the Crystal Palace, designed by the architect Matthew Digby Wyatt, was considered especially important for visitors’ moral instruction. The Pompeian Court was designed to the specifications of the House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii, discovered in 1824; and as the *Illustrated Crystal Palace Gazette* explained in 1853, the gradations of colours found in the Pompeian Court, with the deepest at the base of the walls and lighter towards to the

²⁴ Anon., ‘The Alhambra Court of the Crystal Palace’, *Spectator* (26 August 1854), p. 912.

upper sections, produced an 'agreeable sensation of harmony to the feelings as well as the eye'.²⁵

The colours of the Alhambra and Pompeian Courts were intended to naturally appeal to the sensibilities of visitors, to bring their manners to a state of calmness and equilibrium and convincing the mind that these were objects of a sacred or ethereal nature.

This one-to-one connection between the objects and their moral meaning however was not a matter of concern for critics and journalists. The Fine Arts Courts were largely examined in the press from an art historical perspective and the value of acquiring moral lessons through observation was considered almost second nature, as something that was inevitable by the very act of looking, as the *Builder* in 1855 put it: 'A large number of visitors look up on its contents in a moral point of view, and regard it as having some ultimate bearing upon the character of the nation'.²⁶ Ruskin, on the other hand, made an impassioned appeal to examine works of art from a moral perspective which involved the right use of the eye going beyond 'ordinary sight' and seeing 'within the temple of the heart'.²⁷ For this precise reason, Ruskin supported the educational mission of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham, where as he put it, 'contemplation maybe consistent with rest, and instruction with enjoyment'.²⁸ The type of 'visual education' that was generally adopted by journalists and critics in examining the Fine Arts Courts involved the eye making a connection between the physical form of the object and the literature associated with it. Such application of structure, rigour and logic to the visual process emphasised a rational approach to learning. Critics implied that this form of engagement should take priority over the emotional and sensory approach to 'visual education' and as such it was a mode of learning reserved for the educated upper and middle classes who considered themselves exempt from any self-reflective moral learning.

The Crystal Palace Company issued no formal instruction or guidance on how to engage with the 'visual education' of the Fine Arts Courts. Visitors were left to their own devices when it came to engaging the eye and judging the courts by their moral content. This unscripted and unaided experience left visitors with the problem of interpreting what they saw. In her examination of visual culture Kate Flint has shown that the very act of seeing gave rise to questions of reliability of the human eye, pointing specifically to the fact that each individual contributes their own meaning to an object based on the cultural conventions and values of the individual.²⁹

²⁵ Anon., 'The Pompeian House', *Illustrated Crystal Palace Gazette*, 1(1853), p. 15.

²⁶ Walter Smith, 'The Crystal Palace As An Educator', *Builder* (15 December 1855), p. 612.

²⁷ John Ruskin, 'Morning Thoughts at Geneva', in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1907), XXIX, pp. 574-7 (pp. 575-6). See also Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p. 174.

²⁸ John Ruskin, *The Opening of the Crystal Palace Considered in Some of its Relations to the Prospects of Art* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1854), pp. 1-21 (p. 4).

²⁹ Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, pp. 1-2, 25.

For this precise reason the visual interpretation of the Fine Arts Courts themselves became a problematised category and open to conflicting interpretation. Another reason for the discord of views concerning the Fine Arts Courts at the Crystal Palace is that the Courts and their contents were casts of original monuments, sculpture, artefacts and



Figure 3 Aboo Simbel statues, Crystal Palace at Sydenham



Figure 4 Facade of the Assyrian Court, Crystal Palace at Sydenham

mural decoration. The casts enabled the Directors of the Fine Arts Courts to employ very specific techniques to provoke a reaction from visitors. For instance, in the effort to popularise the ‘high art’ on display, the colours of many of the architectural and sculptural embellishment were deliberately overstated, which aroused scathing criticism in the press. In taking up this technique, many critics believed that the Directors had debased the high-minded principles of ‘visual education’. Lady Eastlake, in her role as arbiter of taste, complained that ‘under the high-sounding, but now even ridiculous name of Polychromy they have introduced an element which may be familiar to the sailor in his figure-head, to the mechanic in his tea-garden, and to the child of five years old in the picture book’.³⁰ This was especially evident in the two Egyptian seated colossi of Ramses taken from the ancient temple of Aboo Simbel in Nubia, which were reconstructed to the exact size of the originals – sixty feet high – and placed in the North Transept.

Lady Eastlake’s response to them was critical to the point of abusive: ‘that barbarity of colour has been superadded to barbarity of form’ she wrote, ‘and tanks to polychromy, what was simply grotesque is now unmitigatedly hideous’.³¹ For similar

³⁰ Elizabeth Eastlake, ‘The Crystal Palace’, *Quarterly Review*, 96 (December 1854 & March 1855), pp. 303-54 (p. 314).

³¹ Eastlake, ‘The Crystal Palace’, p. 314.

reasons, the colouring of the monuments in the Assyrian Court at the Crystal Palace received disapproval from the press. This Court was designed by the architect, James Fergusson, with the expert supervision of Austen Henry Layard whose discoveries on the banks of the Tigris in 1845 were to form the basis of the plan at Sydenham.

In comparing the original human headed winged bulls in the British Museum with the reconstructions that guard the entrance to the Assyrian Court at the Crystal Palace, there is a huge difference: there are no signs of colour on the originals whilst those at Sydenham were decorated with bodies of a brownish-red colour, beards were black, head-dresses white and their wings blue and yellow. Overall they had a theatrical look about them, arguably more fitting for a child's picture book or the stage set for a popular musical. The *Spectator* in 1854 made its views very clear: the ancient remains of Nineveh in the British Museum excited feelings of a higher order because they represented a kind of 'refinement and impassive vitality' whilst the copies at Sydenham were characterised by 'an aggressive unreprieve' which produced 'a sense of oppression and discomfort'.³² According to the critic there was no way that these specimens of antiquity could be touched up for modern requirements with any satisfactory results.³³

The Crystal Palace Company should have been more open and transparent about the purpose of the Fine Arts Courts, which were not meant to function as substitutes for the authentic objects but as methods of making other civilizations – their art, their homes, their public buildings and everyday utensils – seem less strange and remote. For this reason the Company did not consider it essential to reconstitute a past with complete rigour, and scientific truth on the basis that as long as their arrangement within the Crystal Palace exemplified a continuous story of civilization, one that hung together and unfolded, they were fulfilling the fundamental requirements of 'visual education'. The Fine Arts Courts were laid out on two sides of the Crystal Palace. On the north east side of the building visitors would commence their education with the Egyptian Court, as the story of civilization began with the art of the pyramids, temples and tombs of the great Pharaohs. From the Egyptian Court, visitors would then move on to the Greek Court, with its more natural and realistic forms of architecture, sculpture and decorated pottery. Next in the arrangement was the Roman Court where visitors were introduced to models of the Pantheon, Forum and the Coliseum as well as the triumphal columns and arches of the emperors. The story of the ancients finished with the Alhambra Court. Then on the south-west side of the Crystal Palace, directly opposite these ancient Courts, visitors would resume their 'visual education' with the Byzantine Court. According to the *Hand Book*, the Byzantine Court took up this 'peculiar position' because it represented the transition from classical to gothic, with its emphasis on traditional sacred symbols, it was

³² Anon., 'The Assyrian Court of the Crystal Palace', *Spectator* (19 August 1854), p. 887.

³³ Anon., 'The Assyrian Court of the Crystal Palace', p. 887.

logically overtaken by the gothic as represented by the Mediaeval Court, then on to the Renaissance Court and ending the entire sequence with the Italian Court.³⁴

Critics and journalists considered the advantages and disadvantages of placing the Fine Arts Courts within a specific chronological narrative, and in short this attempt to distil the history of civilization was to many critics little short of an outrage. As one contemporary critic pointed out:

Why have we no sample of Mexican art? Why none of Chinese, Hindu, or Japanese? Why no Russian modifications of Byzantine? Why no mosque or mausoleum, in addition to the Alhambra Court? More than half of mankind are unrepresented.³⁵

The space of representation at the Crystal Palace was formed in the context of disciplinary knowledge, which reflected a particular ideological view. Mexican, Chinese, Hindu and Japanese civilizations were representatives of ‘alien’ cultures that did not fit into the ‘master narrative’ of Western imperial history.³⁶ The Assyrian and Pompeian Courts, which also formed part of the Crystal Palace’s educational programme, were placed outside the sequence for a very specific reason: the Crystal Palace Directors were able to emphasise Britain’s triumphant archaeological discoveries for visual contemplation and study, without complicating the ‘master narrative’ of historical progress. In other words the past of Assyria and Pompeii did not form part of the official history of civilizations, because experts were yet to agree that their history was worthy of preservation. According to the *Sydenham Crystal Palace Expositor* in 1854 the inaccuracy of the fixed arrangement had serious consequences for visitors. As it explained:

Even the most learned among us are still disputing about ancient dynasties and ancient races; nor do they agree about the chronology of empires that have disappeared. These matters are, and will remain, mysteries to the millions; and when the first emotions of wonder are satisfied by a view of the monuments of antiquity, they will cease to be attractive, because they will not be understood.³⁷

The *Builder* in 1855 reached a similar conclusion by pointing out that, once visitors with some textual knowledge had satisfied their curiosity, there would be no

³⁴ Matthew Digby Wyatt and John Burley Waring, *A Hand Book to the Byzantine Court* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), p. 7.

³⁵ Anon., *The Crystal Palace: An Essay Descriptive and Critical* (London: Walton and Maberly, 1854), p. 58.

³⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 24.

³⁷ Anon., *Sydenham Crystal Palace Expositor* (London: James S. Virtue, 1854), p. 6.

incentive to return to the Courts for a thorough examination because ‘the courts, as a whole [...] seem to have been placed where they are by mere accident’.³⁸ This forced the critic to conclude that ‘the arrangement of so many beautiful objects is managed so as to astonish rather than educate, perplex rather than define’.³⁹

Such responses to the Fine Arts Courts in the press are a sign of the lack of faith in a solely visual method of education. Critics and journalists were not the only ones who were confused. The observation made by the *Crystal Palace Herald* in 1854 proves that general visitors were unable to make associations with the Fine Arts Courts as it wrote, ‘on every side you will hear the popular voices exclaim, “It’s all very pretty, and must have cost a sight of money, and we should like it very well if we could understand it”’.⁴⁰ The Court which really captured the popular imagination and was understood by visitors was the Pompeian Court. The reason that visitors were able to associate with this Court was not so much that it contained magnificent examples of art, but that as a whole, it represented a familiar object – a house. The plan of the Pompeian Court in George Scharf’s handbook, entitled *The Pompeian Court*, made clear to its readers that the building was laid out to give an impression of a habitation of the time. The *Illustrated London News* in 1854 commented that it was ‘so real in appearance that one might almost fancy oneself in a home of our own day’.⁴¹ Some visitors would have associated with the Pompeian Court because they were familiar with William Gell’s book *Pompeiana* (1832), which focused extensively on the House of the Tragic Poet, and visitors acquainted with Edward Bulwer Lytton’s magical novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) would also have recognised Lytton’s influence over the design of the Pompeian Court.⁴² As S.J. Hales rightly points out, these texts gave the Pompeian Court a useful contextual narrative but even if one had not made their acquaintance, visitors would have known the purpose and function of each room – atrium, peristyle, triclinium, cubicula and so forth – by the simple act of looking.⁴³ The Pompeian Court was aptly situated in the south transept, close to the Industrial Courts, where visitors could examine the style of each room and consider applying the luxurious design elements of this respectable classical dwelling to their own homes. Ready to turn the idea into a reality was the manufacturer, R. Horne, who just a stones-throw away in the Furniture Court, was

³⁸ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace as an Educator’, *Builder* (3 November 1855), p. 526.

³⁹ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace as an Educator’, p. 526.

⁴⁰ Anon., ‘The Crystal Palace’, *Crystal Palace Herald* (10 August 1854), p. 33.

⁴¹ Anon., ‘The Pompeian Court at the Crystal Palace’, *Illustrated London News* (20 January 1855), p. 62.

⁴² References to Edward Bulwer Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* and William Gell’s *Pompeiana* are made throughout the handbook to *The Pompeian Court*. See George Scharf, *The Pompeian Court* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), pp. 23-73.

⁴³ Anon., *The Ten Chief Courts of the Sydenham Palace* (London: Routledge, 1854), p. 40; S.J. Hales, ‘Recasting Antiquity: Pompeii and the Crystal Palace’, *Arion*, 14 (2006), pp. 99-133 (p. 106).

selling 'Pompeian and other panelled decorations', making consumers believe that this other world could be recreated and was in a very real sense linked with their own.⁴⁴ The Furniture and Pompeian Courts enabled visitors to unite with considerable ease, the modern pursuit of 'consumerism' with the rudiments of 'culture'. This successful union of 'commerce' and 'culture' was in effect the essence of 'visual education', where remote past civilizations could be remoulded and traditional classical learning could be reformulated to meet modern requirements.

However, such shared visual references do not detract from the general difficulty and multiple ways of interpreting art through visual methods and for this reason, the Crystal Palace at Sydenham can be regarded as 'cultural battlefield', a term coined by Jeffrey Auerbach in his study of the Great Exhibition.⁴⁵ Auerbach argues that the displays at the Great Exhibition were purposefully selected and laid out to encourage visitors to consider an industrialized market society that promulgated notions of manufacturing innovation and artistic taste, as he puts it, 'a society built on both commerce and culture'.⁴⁶ However, despite the best efforts of the organisers, it became very clear that visitors had their own agendas and that in the end, the Great Exhibition became quite simply a commercial event.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Crystal Palace Company introduced 'visual education' at the Sydenham Crystal Palace in order to encourage visitors to think actively about the union of commerce and culture; but it soon became evident that this was never going to be achieved as visitors' reactions to the novelty of the Courts did not go hand-in-hand with the serious instruction in ancient and remote civilizations through observation of original artefacts and reading of authoritative texts.

In issuing handbooks to the Courts, the Crystal Palace Company admitted that it was difficult to obtain any kind of meaningful instruction by simply looking at the objects on display. The handbooks were intended to provide the essential context that brought the Courts and their contents to life. Indeed, Samuel Laing revealed that 'visual education' was intended to be a two-stage process: firstly to draw visitors' curiosity and interest through the senses; and secondly to develop their knowledge through reading. As he explained:

the veil once raised they [the visitors] will be disposed to extend their inquiries, and enlarge their spheres of knowledge by reading and criticism; and this is one of the educational forms under which the utility of the Crystal Palace may be demonstrated; for had not these objects been palpably represented to the

⁴⁴ Samuel Philips, *Guide to the Crystal Palace and Park* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), p. 167.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 5.

⁴⁶ Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, pp. 94, 97.

⁴⁷ Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, pp. 108-9.

senses, they would have remained unknown to the millions who have neither the leisure nor the opportunity to pursue historical and scientific works, and who want a friendly guide to conduct them to the portals of the temple of knowledge.⁴⁸

The handbooks to the Crystal Palace were therefore intended to help visitors bring comprehensible order to the Courts. Whilst the authors of the handbooks – Samuel Philips, J.B Waring, Austen Henry Layard, George Scharf and others – were all dedicated and accomplished scholars in their own right, they did not fully appreciate the value of writing clearly and interestingly for a general audience. There are many examples in the handbooks and guides of passages made up of specialist language which would have failed to enlighten even the most avid reader, and Charles Dickens himself found them, as he put it, ‘a sufficiently flatulent botheration in themselves’.⁴⁹ In essence, the handbooks and guides failed to efficiently explain what to look at and how to look at it and to translate the visual into the verbal, which meant that the authors were assuming a certain amount of preconceived knowledge amongst their readers, one that prevented them from fully engaging their visual faculties.

The Fine Arts Courts failed to evoke any kind of passionate interest and their failure can, to a large extent, be attributed to the criticisms in the press. The blend of art historical accuracy and artistic fantasy disturbed many critics and consequently their reviews of the Fine Arts Courts failed to delight a public who expressed a greater desire to view original artefacts in their mutilated and ravaged state at the museums in and around London. Owen Jones in particular was utterly convinced of the value of his own artistic interpretations; this is particularly evident in his essay titled *An Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court* (1854) which was bound and sold along with the other handbooks to the Courts. In his *Apology* Jones asserted that the colouring of the Parthenon frieze in the Greek Court had resulted from his profound and extended study of respected authorities, in particular the writings of G.H. Lewes, W. Watkiss Lloyd and Professor Gottfried Semper, also taking extracts from the Elgin Marbles committee of 1836 as well as extracts from the Institute of British Architects report of 1842.⁵⁰ Jones took a traditional academic stance in order to convince his readers of the value of his own artistic interpretations and the fact that he published his paper in the form of a handbook signifies that his approach and the debate surrounding it were not simply confined to academics and connoisseurs of art. But Jones’s *Apology* did not openly urge the public to look at the reconstructed Parthenon frieze and examine all sides of the argument. One can even go so far as to

⁴⁸ Anon., *Sydenham Crystal Palace Expositor*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), VII, p. 370.

⁵⁰ Owen Jones, *Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1854), pp. 27-56.

say that Jones's *Apology* was no apology at all since he refused to acknowledge the inherent difficulties of depicting the mysteries of the ancient past. What emerges clearly from my examination of the Fine Arts Courts is that the representation of past civilizations, of other worlds, was deliberately contrived to compel visitors into a new way of seeing in order to awaken the desire for further inquiry. As Ruskin opined, 'how many intellects, once dormant, may be roused into activity [...] and how these noble results may go on multiplying and increasing and bearing fruit seventy times seven-fold, as the nation pursues its career'.⁵¹ But the handbooks and especially the countless responses to the Fine Arts Courts in the press revealed a very different approach to 'visual education', one that did not encourage the act of seeing but was instead focused for the most part on providing art historical interpretation to cultural worlds that one needed specialist knowledge to enter. For authors, journalists and critics alike, engagement with the handbooks and the objects on display were used to confirm the social class to which they belonged, or to which they strived to belong. Art criticism, as Teukolosky rightly argues, 'can be seen as both a product of and reaction against the new kinds of visual culture invented in the nineteenth century', which was, as we have seen, particularly evident at the Crystal Palace.⁵² In short, the authors of the handbooks and the art critics in the press paid no attention to teaching the public how to visually engage with the works of art on display but were instead concerned with reinforcing their own contributions to historical and contemporary debates. Thus on the one hand, 'visual education' served as a facile means of becoming acquainted with lost civilizations but on the other, the responses to the Fine Arts Courts in journals and newspapers exposed that 'visual education' at the Crystal Palace provided a false encounter with the past and this tension in itself became embedded in the wider conflict of competing class values. As a consequence of this tension, the Courts were, according to Lady Eastlake, 'simply a puzzle to the ignorant and a torture to the enlightened'.⁵³

⁵¹ John Ruskin, 'The Opening of the Crystal Palace', p. 4.

⁵² Teukolosky, *The Literate Eye*, p. 20. See Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, pp. 179-80.

⁵³ Elizabeth Eastlake, 'The Crystal Palace', p. 311.

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‘THE WORLD WAS VERY BUSY NOW, IN SOOTH, AND HAD A LOT TO SAY’: DICKENS, CHINA AND CHINESE COMMODITIES IN *DOMBEY AND SON*

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Abstract

Dickens’s interest in transnational locales is evident throughout his oeuvre. Whilst his journalism is highly critical of some of these locales, Dickens’s novels offer a more nuanced perspective. This article addresses Dickens’s representation of China and of Chinese commodities, primarily tea but also silk and chinaware. It asks how Dickens uses these commodities, as well as ideas and terms relating to commercial trade, to explore the relationship between China and Britain. Focusing in particular on *Dombey and Son*, I show that transnational value is defined for the British readership in commodity terms in the novel, and I reflect more broadly on what this commercial value offers to the social fabric of nineteenth-century Britain and contemporary understandings of Britishness.

The passage around the globe is still a fetishized idea: visiting new countries and exploring new cultures continue to hold value in terms of personal, cultural and, indeed, social growth. Throughout his novels and journalism, Dickens defines his own cultural identity – and that of his readers – by drawing on a cultural frame of reference that goes far beyond Britain in order to shape an understanding of the increasing connections that were made in trading terms between Britain and other countries. *Dombey and Son*, which appeared in nineteen serialised parts between 1 October 1846 and 1 April 1848, reveals an interest in a new form of transnationalism, which, due to advances in transport, trade and commerce contracted global distances.

Interest in China and tea is well documented throughout the nineteenth century, and China can be seen to play an increasingly important role in commodity terms in British life. Dickens’s contemporaries were keenly interested in China and Chinese trade. A search of nineteenth-century British newspapers such as the *Observer* and the *Guardian* on Proquest generates more than 17,208 articles, published between 1812 and 1870, that relate to tea and China. In 1846, when Dickens started publishing *Dombey and Son*, the *Observer* and the *Guardian* published more than 843 articles relating to Chinese tea; this was an increase of more than 113 articles over the previous two years. This is indicative of a growing interest in China and its trading output, an interest that is also present in Dickens’s oeuvre where references to both the locale and the commodities of China reveal an awareness and engagement with this nation. Dickens’s curiosity about China and Chinese commodities was probably increased by British-Chinese trading links, by Dickens’s anxiety about the ramifications of trade after the first Opium war of 1839-42, as well as by the European revolutions which occurred in 1848 when Dickens was nearing completion of his novel. In the years following the publication of *Dombey and Son*, articles were

published in Dickens's magazines *Household Words*, *Household Words Narrative* and *All the Year Round* with titles such as 'Chinese Competitive Examinations', 'Colonies and Dependencies', 'Up and Down Canton', 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', 'China with a Flaw in it' and 'New Year's Day in China' to name but a few.¹ Whilst not all of these articles were authored by Dickens, his intense editorial control of his magazines means that we can trust these articles to have been sanctioned by him for publication in his journals.² This interest in China and tea can be traced throughout the whole of Dickens's oeuvre but it is particularly conspicuous – and particularly significant for my own reading – in his novels which reveal that there was an increasing sense of unease about commodity trade with China. My article focuses on Dickens's fiction – rather than his journalism – as it is here, I argue, that Dickens's depiction of trade allows for a reading of cultural and social attitudes towards China that can be explored through the representation of commodities such as tea.

Prior to the nineteenth century China had been viewed as a highly developed country and one that was, in many ways, far more developed than European countries. As Roy Porter has noted, in the eighteenth century and 'at variance with Foucault's stress on discipline, surveillance and control, much enlightened thinking was directed towards dissent and disestablishment, was about dismantling "the thing" – or doing your own thing'.³ This liberality of thought did not continue in the nineteenth century, and this can be particularly noted with regard to China. As Susan Shoenbauer Thurin asserts: 'A dominant view of China during the second half of the nineteenth century was of a decaying culture deserving to be reconstructed with Western values'.⁴ By imaginatively 'reconstructing' China, the British were able to create a cultural picture of this other country that fulfilled a very clear social function. Dickens does not present an enlightened view of China, indeed he frequently commodifies China and uses the commodities the nation produces in order to define its culture. It is through the discussion of these commodities that Dickens pictures the

¹ Anon., 'Chinese Competitive Examinations', *All the Year Round*, 12 (17 December 1864), pp. 445-53; Anon., 'Colonies and Dependencies', *Household Narrative* (January 1850), pp. 17-19; Anon., 'Up and Down Canton', *All the Year Round*, 14 (29 July 1865), pp. 16-19; [Charles Dickens and Richard H. Horne], 'The Great Exhibition and the Little One', *Household Words*, 3 (5 July 1851), pp. 356-60; [Henry Morley], 'China with a Flaw in it', *Household Words*, 5 (3 July 1852), pp. 368-74; [Charles Dickens], 'New Year's Day in China', *Household Words*, 19 (12 February 1859), pp. 258-60.

² Important work has been undertaken on commodity culture in *Household Words*. See Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Household Words: The Social Life of Goods* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

³ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 482.

⁴ Susan Shoenbauer Thurin, *Victorian Travellers and the Opening of China, 1842-1907* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), p. 51.

threat that China allegedly posed due to its desirable commodities. By including tea in this way, Dickens raises important questions about Britain's increasing commercial dependence on China and about the influence this has on British identity. Shanyn Fiske acknowledges that 'China could neither be homogeneously absorbed into nor excluded from England's imperial identity'.⁵ This inability to be either absorbed or excluded is central to a Dickensian sense of the world beyond Britain. Britain needed China to maintain its exoticism in order for its produce to be fetishized and this could only be achieved by homogenizing the culture of this vast country. By ensuring that China was defined by a set of commodities, its broader societal importance could be limited. As Fiske continues to assert:

The study of Sino-British relations in nineteenth-century England provides a vital component in the understanding and reinvention of this relationship not only because it forces us to confront the sources of stereotypes and ineffectual categories that persist in limiting current relations but because it offers the possibility of rediscovering productive models of ideological exchange and cross-cultural dialog.⁶

Fiske's argument helps to form a cultural dialectic which acknowledges the importance of paying attention to the representation of commodities from transnational locales. For the purposes of this article Dickens is the primary focus and, whilst Fiske is speaking more broadly about nineteenth-century concepts, the theoretical framework she develops is a valuable one. Fiske recognises that through the process of reinvention one is forced to confront stereotyped cultural images. This cross-cultural dialogue provides a compelling means of engaging with Dickensian depictions of China and tea, and it prompts us to investigate how Dickens links his portrayal of foreign commodities to his exploration of both Chinese and British identity.

Geography, Transport and Time: China's Place in *Dombey and Son*

The movement of sailors and tradesmen around the world and the introduction of foreign commodities into British culture enabled commodity travel, if not physical travel, and Dickens reveals an increasing awareness of the world beyond Britain – a world that was shaped in commodity terms. As Arjun Appadurai has suggested, 'it is in the fertile ground of deterritorialization, in which money, commodities, and

⁵ Shanyn Fiske, 'Orientalism Reconsidered: China and the Chinese in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Victorian Studies', *Literature Compass*, 8 (2011), pp. 214-26 (p. 218). <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00788.x/full>>.

⁶ Fiske, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', p. 223.

persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world, that the mediascapes and ideoscapes of the modern world find their fractures and fragmented counterpart'.⁷ The imagined fragmentation of territories has the paradoxical double effect of giving rise to a sense of interconnectedness as well as disconnectedness, and both notions contribute to the culturally fabricated meanings of nationality and nationhood. Appadurai's choice of the verb 'chasing' has a somewhat predatory inflection and in fact this predatory inflection captures the nature of nineteenth-century Britain's trade abroad, which privileged the rights of the homeland Britain over the transnational 'Other' of China. *Dombey and Son* discusses British trade in these terms, but it is also possible to find in the novel what Appadurai calls 'fractured counterparts' – aspects that forge connections between the process of Othering and British identity.

Dickens's interest in transnational locales such as China, India and Africa is evident throughout his oeuvre and it is apparent that there is a fascination on both the part of the author and on the part of his readers, whose delving into Dickens's fictional worlds allowed them to travel imaginatively to foreign countries. Whilst Dickens limited his physical travels to Europe, America and North America, he sent his sons further afield: Charlie to Australia, Walter to India and Alfred to China. It is interesting to reflect on this sending away: whilst Dickens himself did not travel to these shores, members of his family did. This travelling by proxy mirrors that of the reader who, by reading Dickens's works, goes on mental journey to these lands. Dickens not only conceptualised these unknown worlds for his readership, he did so for himself. Whilst much of Dickens's journalism relating to China points to a negative portrayal of this land his novels, due in part to their length, enable a far more nuanced reading of foreign countries. As Sabine Clemm has noted with reference to Charles Dickens's and Richard Horne's article 'From the Great Exhibition to the Little One', published in *Household Words* on 5 July 1851, the Chinese were 'summarily and stereotypically ridiculed as stagnant, superstitious, pompous, ignorant, despotic, dirty, starved, pigtailed and parochial'.⁸ This highlights explicitly what I would state to be the central difference between Dickens's approach to China in his journalism and in the novels. Whilst Dickens in *Dombey and Son* and other novels includes commodity and place references to China, he rarely comments on Chinese people or their physical characteristics. In his journalism, however, he frequently references these latter aspects which clearly identifies a functional difference between his methodologies in the two modes of publication and serves to underscore the important role that commodities, such as tea, play in establishing cultural reference points and markers of Chinese influence on British culture in the

⁷ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 38.

⁸ Sabine Clemm, *Dickens, Journalism, and Nationhood: Mapping the World in Household Words* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 26.

novel.

Whilst *Dombey and Son* identifies key Chinese commodities and their infinite interest to the nineteenth-century consumer, they are used as cultural markers and, as such, they become representative – be this accurate or inaccurate – of the locale. Jeff Nunokawa considers this in terms of advertisement and suggests that

[i]n a book like *Dombey and Son*, the commodity form doesn't need the agency of advertising to make itself known; its native talents are their own publicity. According to the view of the Dickens novel, the commodity is not merely advertised or exhibited; it is itself already advertisement and exhibition.⁹

This is a highly productive way of considering the commodities produced by China in *Dombey and Son*. Whilst Nunokawa's reading of commodities in *Dombey and Son* considers these in domestic terms and in relation to personal property, my reading of the novel considers the commodities in trading terms and foregrounds the effect they have on British identity. Nunokawa's discussion of commodities in terms of 'advertisement' and 'exhibition' is fruitful for my own approach to the novel. If the commodities are able to facilitate an advertisement of the locale independently then their inclusion in the novel becomes even more highly charged. The placement of tea in the narrative can, therefore, be read as a way of shaping cultural awareness and emphasising the power and influence of foreign locales, such as China, on Britain and Britishness. This also engenders questions about the stability of British identity and the influence of other cultures that have the potential to modify traditional cultural and social mores. This highlights the potential threat that can be read into the representation of China in the novel.

Both *Dombey and Son* and Dickens's journalism are interested in the idea of discrete cultural and national identities, but they also acknowledge a sense of global interconnectedness which, due to advances in transport, brought a large world ever nearer. There is also, significantly, a recognition of the ramifications of this: Dickens explores in what ways such interconnectedness and ever-increasing dependence on foreign commodities and trading nations might present a danger to British cultural identity. Whilst Dickens recognises the advantages of these relationships – although primarily for the British public rather than for the Chinese – he also recognises the reciprocity of the relationship where, in commodity terms, these transnational locales were needed by the British consumers to fulfil their commercial desires. In this sense, the Other worlds that Dickens writes of can be perceived as being less dependent on Britain and instead as more inter-dependent. This, I would argue, reveals Dickens's anxiety about an increasing dependence on Chinese commodities – an anxiety that suggests more broadly a fear of a cultural dependence. Here, Benedict Anderson's work, most notably his study *Imagined Communities*, is helpful. Anderson thinks of

⁹ Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 47.

these ‘imagined communities’ not only in terms of a cultural community but also as ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’.¹⁰ When applying this concept to Dickens’s work, it is clear that his concern with British national identity was not simply a cultural concern but a political one too, in part due to anxieties about the Empire’s future success but, in equal measure, due to a political awareness that dependence and co-dependence came from these commodity transactions which, it was believed, could be controlled through taxation.

Elaine Freedgood identifies the ways in which the Victorian novel featured objects and things, and the significant role they played in acting as cultural signifiers:

The Victorian novel describes, catalogues, quantifies, and in general showers us with things: post chaises, handkerchiefs, moonstones, wills, riding crops, ships, instruments of all kinds, dresses of muslin, merino and silk, coffee, claret, cutlery – cavalcades of objects threaten to crowd the narrative right off the page.¹¹

Freedgood’s argument prompts us to consider how objects – such as Chinese tea in *Dombey and Son* – can become cultural signifiers and barometers.

Ideas about globalisation are also central to this analysis and as Tope Omoniyi has stated: ‘Whereas colonisation invokes a binary relationship between the colonisers and the colonised, globalization operates within a wider, more complex network of relationships of power and capital distribution; including linguistic and language power and capital’.¹² This distinction between the term coloniser and the more expansive term globalisation acknowledges the importance of the ‘network of relationships’.¹³ Whilst the nineteenth-century relationship between Britain and China was fraught, in terms of power and capital, the relationship is productive as it privileges the value of commodities in establishing a transnational consciousness. Dickens’s representation of a global network of commodities contributes to this transnational consciousness: these commodities do not form a basis of global balance or equality but instead serve to support the idea of a method of engaging with spaces in terms of their trading output which is separate from their cultural heritage. This notion is reinforced when Dickens describes the scenes by the London docks where:

Just around the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 15.

¹¹ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), p. 1.

¹² Tope Omoniyi and Mukuk Saxena, ‘Introduction’, in *Contending with Globalization in World Englishes*, ed. by Mukul Saxena and Tope Omoniyi (Buffali: Multilingual Matters, 2009), pp. 19-40 (p. 3).

¹³ Omoniyi and Saxena, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

suggestions of precious snuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. Anywhere in the immediate vicinity there might be seen pictures of ships speeding away to all parts of the world; outfitting warehouses ready to pack off anybody anywhere, fully equipped in half an hour; and little timber midshipmen in obsolete naval uniforms, eternally employed outside the shop doors of nautical instrument makers in taking observations of the hackney coaches.¹⁴

This cornucopia of objects is striking; the origin of the objects is clear – the East – but in Orientalist terms as established by Edward Said,¹⁵ it is the Otherness of peoples and objects that is being held in tension here. The fact that the East India House is ‘teeming with suggestions’ indicates that the docks are a hive of activity and trade is playing a central role – yet these are just hints and suggestions, they are not necessarily the reality. A wide range of exotic objects is referenced which conform to stereotypes about transnational locales such as India or Africa. There is a sense of a cataloguing of commodities and this cataloguing of a country’s produce syncretises with the soon-to-be-organised Great Exhibition of 1851, a mere three years after the novel’s publication. It is apparent that in commodity and trading terms, global spaces are contracting and there is an increasing engagement with the world’s commodities at the London docks. There is a great sense of potential movement created in the passage; the ‘pictures’ of the ships, described as ‘speeding’, add to the sense of a world connecting rapidly and the network of the seas is the initial focal point and yet, as they are pictorial, they are static.

The Hackney coaches passing by the river are watched by the wooden midshipmen; there is at once the sense of the eternal action of the city, and the arrival of objects reflects this, yet this rushing by seems to be problematic for Dickens. This is a world, as well as a nation, on the move. There is no sense of stasis apart from that which is artificially introduced and the ramifications of such progress are addressed by Dickens in commodity terms as a challenge to British independence. As Juliet John has stated, ‘a new structure of literary communication [...] a far more powerful structure of communication than any political movement could contemplate’ was being developed.¹⁶ It is within this structure, I would suggest, that Dickens’s literature enabled exotic locations to be conceived, conceptualised and made part of the national psyche whilst recognising the inter-dependence that was being developed between these nations and Britain. As John Plotz posits:

¹⁴ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 46. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹⁶ Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 33.

The developing logic of portability in the Victorian cultural realm, though, suggests that so long as the aesthetic objects through which identity was constituted and solidified could both represent and engender a sense of seamless identity on the move, the ‘absence of mind’ that allowed a culture to finesse or ignore its immersion into global circulation could continue.¹⁷

By importing Chinese commodities into the narrative, Dickens at once acknowledges the foreignness of the objects whilst simultaneously recognising their ability to be naturalised in the home space. In so doing, Dickens shapes a nineteenth-century consciousness of the world beyond Britain that recognises the very real threat that foreign locales and, for the purpose of this article, China especially, possessed which is what the second strand of this article addresses.

‘Mr Dombey and the World’: China, Britain and Britishness

The spaces traversed through trade are made to seem ever nearer in *Dombey and Son*’s narrative and this highlights, as Arjun Appadurai has argued, that: ‘Consumption creates time, but modern consumption seeks to replace the aesthetics of duration with the aesthetics of ephemerality’.¹⁸ Through the process of consumption an ephemeral time is formed. This is achieved by the creation of a new consumerist culture that is – even now – preoccupied with passing trends rather than traditions. Silk screens, chinaware and tea were popular foreign commodities of the moment in at the middle of the nineteenth century and in that sense they were ephemeral. These commodities were purchased because of their exoticism, or because of their initial Otherness, yet as soon as they arrived within the home space they were naturalised. This can be seen in *Dombey and Son* where foreign commodities are included but are surrounded by British objects in what can be seen as a means of developing a commodity balance. Chinese commodities such as tea hold their exoticism until they arrive in the home space: however, at the point of entry into the British home, they become naturalised. It is this process of naturalisation that Dickens’s novel acknowledges and in which Dickens recognises an inherent danger in the immediacy of the integration of the commodities into the home space; if an item which was once foreign can be naturalised so seamlessly into the home space, it raises questions about the stability or fixity of British identity and the ultimate adaptability of transnational locales. This also jeopardises nineteenth-century British identity in that it questions the absolute fixity of it. It further suggests that the cultural influence of transnational locales such as China on Britain was growing more powerful.

¹⁷ John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 21.

¹⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 85.

Dickens's fascination with the produce available to the nineteenth-century consumer can be seen within his own private letters. A rich example of this interest can be found in his description of a dinner party at Emile Girardin's mansion, where he found:

On the table are ground glass jugs of peculiar construction, laden with the finest growth of Champagne and the coolest ice. With the third course is issued Port Wine (previously unheard of in a good state on this continent), which would fetch two guineas a bottle at any sale. The dinner done, Oriental flowers in vases of golden cobweb are placed upon the board. With the ice is issued brandy; buried for 100 years. To that succeeds coffee, brought by the brother of one of the convives from the remotest East, in exchange for an equal quantity of Californian gold dust. The company being returned to the drawing-room – tables roll in by unseen agency, laden with cigarettes from the Hareem of the Sultan, and with cool drinks in which the flavour of the lemon arrived yesterday from Algeria, struggles voluptuously with the delicate Orange arrived this morning from Lisbon. That period past, and the guests reposing in divans worked with many coloured blossoms, big tables roll in, heavy with massive furniture of silver, and breathing incense in the form of a little present of Tea direct from China – table and all, I believe; but cannot swear to it.¹⁹

The variety of produce from across the globe brought together in this room for the occasion of this dinner seems to have intrigued Dickens. The finely detailed description of the Oriental flowers in 'vases of golden cobwebs' and the tea which is 'direct from China' shows that Dickens is very familiar with – and yet still in awe of – the ability to essentially construct a commodity picture of the world in one sitting. The absence of people from the countries where these commodities originate, shows that Dickens can appreciate the produce but is at present still reluctant to acknowledge the indigenous population. Such a separation between commodity and population serves to create a perceived distance that enables such objects to be at times separated from their place of origin whilst still fetishized.

The British, as Suvendrini Perera has argued, were eager to develop trade links with China that served narrowly-conceived British interests:

English foreign policy worked to ensure that more and more trade passages were 'open to the English'. The First Opium War of 1840, when Chinese ports were besieged to force the free passage of English narcotics, was the logical conclusion of an aggressive free trade policy.²⁰

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), VIII, p. 33-4.

²⁰ Suvendrini Perera, 'Wholesale, Retail and for Exportation: Empire and the Family Business in

The trade in opium as opposed to silver was hugely advantageous to the British but resulted in financial loss for the Chinese. There are, I would argue, two methods of conceiving Chinese commodities in Dickens's novels: commodities that are interpreted positively, such as tea, silk and chinaware and commodities that are cast in a negative light, such as opium (particularly in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* [1870]). The way in which Dickens holds in tension these conflicting views of Chinese commodities is highly suggestive of the reasons why he may have found China problematic. Due to the speed at which boats could traverse the waters, China was now in close trading proximity and there was an increasing British dependence on these commodities; China was no longer a threat from afar. The Limehouse settlement in London saw a huge rise in Chinese immigrants and in this sense Dickens was seeing not only a commodity presence but also a growing physical presence of the Chinese in Britain.

The trade in tea was perhaps preferable for the Chinese traders, however, the high rate of taxation at 180% meant that again the Chinese were losing out financially. As Regenia Gagnier has argued:

India and China did not enter modernity as the helpless 'lands of famine' enshrined in Western Imagination. They were made so by British policy on trade deficits and export drives, over taxation and merchant capital, foreign control of key revenues and developmental resources, imperial and civil warfare, and a gold standard favouring Britain.²¹

That Britain refigured and conceptualised China in this way shows a determination to ensure it maintained its own supremacy at any cost. This point is underscored when one considers that Britain was only subject to a 6% tax on articles imported to China. The continued interest in Chinese commodities meant that their desirability was sustained but the potential for this to impact in a financially negative manner for China cannot be underestimated. The presence of these commodities in Dickens's novels, and indeed, in his journalism, reflects a growing interest in tea, china and silk originating from China and it points to his recognition of the continued trading relationship between the two nations, but his prose does not register concerns about the exploitative aspect of trade.

In *Dombey and Son*, an interesting commodity pattern emerges when commodities enter the novel's space and are introduced in a set word order and then re-introduced later in the same passage in a slightly different order. Such subtle word juxtapositions begin to create a commodity consciousness that builds a sense of the

"Dombey and Son", *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), pp. 603-20 (p. 609).

²¹ Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 22.

world beyond Britain and engages with the notion of an increasing dependence on Chinese commodities. This layering and textual patterning of a country's commodities is inserted in the narrative before the country (China) itself is mentioned. By increasing the number of references to tea and tea drinking paraphernalia, Dickens is able to secure the place of China in the reader's psyche, encouraging them to consider the commodity and the country in tandem. This ultimately serves to reveal an increasing dependence on a nation that was frequently depicted as dependent upon Britain in nineteenth-century literature and unsettles the balance of power. This introduction of tea and China can be noticed for the first time with the appearance of tea paraphernalia: 'With that Miss Nipper untied her bonnet strings, and after looking vacantly for some moments into a little black tea-pot that was set forth with the usual homely service, on the table, shook her head and a tin canister and began unasked to make the tea' (p. 291). Initially, the tea-pot – the receptacle of the actual tea – is the focal point, but the conclusion of the sentence focuses on the tea itself. A British commodity, the 'tin-canister', frames the image of the foreign tea and naturalises the foreign object in the home environment, allowing Susan Nipper to engage with it with ease.

A little later in the novel Mrs Perch 'is in the kitchen taking tea; and has made a tour of the establishment, and priced the silks and damasks by the yard, and exhausted every interjection in the dictionary and out of it expressive of admiration and wonder' (p. 541). Again here is a character in a familiar British domestic setting and yet she is 'taking tea'. The allusions to Chinese products do not stop there however as she begins to pull out 'silks'. By layering commodities in the text in this way a sense of the global provenance can be gleaned without China being specifically mentioned; the commodities China produces are known to the readership and as a consequence this context does not need to be made explicit. The commodities appear in the narrative and act as visual markers of a land beyond Britain; the silks are admired and treated with wonder; they are fetishized as desirable commodities.

This layering of allusions to China's commodities continues and serves to emphasise the trading connections between China and Britain. Dickens next moves his readers to consider Captain Cuttle's talk with Florence:

It was not until the twilight that Captain Cuttle, fairly dropping anchor, at last, by the side of Florence, began to talk at all connectedly. But when the light of the fire was shining on the walls and ceiling of the little room, and on the tea-board and the cups and saucers that were ranged upon the table [...] the Captain broke a long silence. (p. 745)

The reference to the 'tea-board and the cups and saucers' again ensures that the commodity paraphernalia is introduced and a relationship between the commodity and its origins is established. By building up references to Chinese commodities the

reader is almost mentally ‘transmigrated’ which is how a nineteenth century American journalist described reading Dickens’s *Bleak House*.²² A similar effect can be seen in *Dombey and Son* as the objects are syncretised in a narrative sense and connections between the commodities and the country are underscored. I would suggest that through the subtle inclusion of these foreign commodities in the novel the reader is encouraged to look beyond his country of origin and called on to consider the relationship between Britain and China.

What happens next is an interesting inversion of words: Dickens states first that ‘[t]he captain hastily produced the big watch, the tea-spoons, the sugar-tongs, and the canister, and laying them on the table, swept them with his great hand into Walter’s hat’ (p. 750). Here we have images of the tea – suggested by the tea-spoons – from China and sugar from Demerara. ‘[L]aying them on the table’ creates a linear ordering which ultimately leads to a sweep of the items into Walter’s hat. This sweep acts as a metaphorical movement of the Other into an area that can be neatly encapsulated under the heading of Walter’s travels. Each place he visits has its commodity signifier. Yet a few sentences later Dickens re-introduces the objects, and reorganises the references to them. In this sense, I propose, Dickens is taking control and ordering the geographical commodity references to underscore the importance of such objects and the trade with China. The anxiety with which the Captain engages with the objects is acknowledged when Dickens states that ‘[t]he Captain could be induced by no persuasion of Walter’s to wind up the big watch, or to take back the canister, or to touch the sugar-tongs or tea-spoons’ (p. 754). What happens here is a reorganising of the order in which Walter travelled; the reader goes on a commodity journey whilst Walter himself traverses these geographical spaces. The sugar tongs and the tea spoons, all ephemeral pieces of tea-making equipment, are foregrounded and invested with meaning, and yet Captain Cuttle does not want to touch them. I suggest that this is a realisation or an acknowledgment that these commodities from transnational locations have found their way into the British home and, in the final moments of the scene, the meaning of their inclusion and the potentially negative implications of this British reliance on transnational commodities is brought to the reader’s attention.

This is not an isolated example within the novel and can, indeed, be seen within the whole of Dickens’s oeuvre. Moving momentarily beyond the representation of China in *Dombey and Son*, it can also be seen in the inverted sentence structuring that introduces the famous bottle of Madeira in the same novel: ‘Other buried wine grows older, as the old Madeira did in its time; and dust and

²² Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 12. See also Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853). *Bleak House* was initially published in 20 serialised parts between March 1852 and September 1853 and then in volume form in 1853.

cobwebs thicken on the bottle'.²³ This description is then modified a little later in the same chapter: 'Buried wine grows older, as the old Madeira did' (p. 947). Such rhetorical techniques allow transnational locales to enter the reader's consciousness. In doing so, Dickens constructs a complex view of transnational commodities, one that is applicable both to the Other and to the home space.

In a later chapter, Captain Cuttle discusses Walter's actual journey to China, and the journey within that journey:

'Aye!' nodded Captain Cuttle. 'The ship as took him up, when he was wrecked in the hurricane that had drove her clean out of her course, was a China trader, and Wal'r made the woyage, and got into favour, aboard and ashore – being as smart and good a lad as ever stepped – and so, the supercargo dying Canton, he got made (having acted as clear afore), and now he's supercargo abroad another ship, same owners. And so, you see' repeated the Captain, thoughtfully 'the pretty creature goes away upon the roaring main with Wal'r, on a woyage to China'. (p. 847)

The passage gives attention to the specific details of how Walter arrived in China and where: Canton. Canton was a key Chinese port and the site of much trade in the nineteenth century. Canton was in fact initially one of the few ports open to British trade until after the Opium War of 1839-42 and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 when further Chinese ports at Shanghai, Ningbo and Amoy were opened. This increased and improved trade links between Britain and China and resulted in an influx of Chinese commodities to British shores. That Dickens chooses to name an area of China, Canton, in this way and to send two of the central characters there, is suggestive of his awareness of the increasing significance of this locale (beyond the past negative interactions during the Opium wars of 1839-42) which, in turn, heightens the reader's awareness of China. Dickens's attention to Chinese commodities, it can be argued, encourages his readers to think further about the origins of the products they consume in their houses. However, his vision of Britain also situates the nation within an increasingly connected global world system. As Suvendrini Perera has stated:

Walter and Florence embark on a trading voyage to a China forcibly opened to England's opium trade; Dombey sends Walter aboard the prophetically named 'Son and Heir' to act as a junior clerk in his factory in Barbados and Uncle Sol uses his scientific skills to work his way as a seaman from Demerara to China in search of his missing nephew.²⁴

²³ Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, p. 942.

²⁴ Perera, 'Empire and the Family Business in "Dombey and Son"', p. 609.

What Perera addresses only implicitly is that Dickens's dispatching of his characters to various ports around the globe encouraged his nineteenth-century readership think about the world beyond Britain and the ramifications of such transnational relationships. I am not arguing that Dickens presents an enlightened world view and I would not want to denigrate the significance of Britain's offensive trade drive abroad. However, I suggest that Dickens questions Britain's relations with abroad and highlights the nation's role in transnational spaces which leads to a consideration of cultural changeability. In revealing a British dependence on commodities from China, Dickens highlights a cultural interdependence that serves to underscore the perceived threat that China posed to Britain through Britain's increasing dependence on commodities such as tea, silk and chinaware that might otherwise go unrecognised. By including multiple instances in the novel in which cultural boundaries are crossed and cultural identities re-defined, *Dombey and Son* invites the reader to question how the increasingly interdependent relationship between Britain and its foreign trading partners can be managed.

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WILLIAM MORRIS'S UTOPIAN OPTICS

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Abstract

This article studies Morris's development and cultivation of an optical rhetoric in his political lectures and journalism, as well as his utopian fiction, of the 1880s and 1890s. I begin by tracing its discursive base in the social and aesthetic criticism of Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, and by contrasting the contradictory ideological inflections of visual rhetoric in the writing of Matthew Arnold and James McNeill Whistler. Through an examination of his political journalism and lectures on art and society, I show how Morris's inheritance and secularisation of Carlyle's discourse of spiritual optics sets him apart from other figures associated with the *fin de siècle* socialist movement, at the same time as it produced important ideological contradictions in Morris's socialist writing. I conclude with an examination of the extension and differentiation of Morris's optics in his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890).

the Eye altering alters all
William Blake, 'The Mental Traveller'¹

The language of vision occupies a central place in the utopian political imaginary. Utopian society, as Thomas More's foundational text intimates, is a place of constant vigilance; following the example of the medieval monastery, all citizens in More's Utopia are said to be 'in the present sight and under the eyes of every man'.² If this visual economy of close observation and surveillance immediately raises the spectre of dystopia, it must also be recognised that, during the nineteenth century, processes of material and technological change created conditions of possibility in which such fantasies of total transparency could be played out. In her study of Victorian glass culture, Isobel Armstrong points out that 'an environment of mass transparency, never before experienced, came rapidly into being', engendering a 'new glass consciousness and a language of transparency' in nineteenth-century Britain.³

¹ *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, new and rev. edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 485.

² Thomas More, *Utopia*, in *Three Early Modern Utopias: Utopia; Atlantis; The Isle of Pines*, ed. by Susan Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 68.

³ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1. Armstrong suggests that the 'dominant period' of the new 'scopic culture' (p. 3) which she delineates fell between 1830 and 1890, roughly continuous with William Morris's dates: he was born in 1834 and died in 1896.

Jonathan Crary, meanwhile, has argued that a fundamental ‘remaking of the visual field’ took place in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, in concatenation with changing technologies of vision, giving a newfound priority to ‘models of subjective vision, in contrast to the pervasive suppression of subjectivity in vision in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought’.⁴ He points out that there is a long tradition of criticism, oriented around the discussion of Romanticism, which privileges ‘[a] certain notion of “subjective vision”’ – that which is claimed to be unique to artists and poets – over and above ‘a vision shaped by empiricist or positivist ideas or practices’.⁵ Crary’s discussion thus ranges widely across art and literature, as well as philosophical, scientific and technological discourses. Morris’s embroilment in this discourse, by contrast, was firmly embedded in the post-Romantic milieu and, as I show, was often explicitly set against empiricist or positivist practices. His inheritance of this tradition is amply borne out in E.P. Thompson’s political biography, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955, 1976), which opens by noting that the young Morris was ‘caught up in the last great eddies of that disturbance of the human spirit which [Byron, Shelley and Keats] had voiced – the Romantic Revolt’.⁶ The purpose of this article is to clarify the political and ideological stakes of Morris’s embeddedness in that tradition, particularly as it pertains to his visual rhetoric.

Visual metaphors and rhetorical devices which relate to sight are an integral aspect of Morris’s political and utopian writings: those who bring about the revolutionary change in *News from Nowhere* (1890), for example, are said to be able to ‘see further than other people’, while injunctions to ‘clear our eyes to the signs of the times’ are a staple rhetorical device in his political lectures.⁷ Morris’s optics is grafted onto a discursive base which has deep roots in nineteenth-century traditions of social criticism.⁸ One might think, for example, of Matthew Arnold’s endeavour to ‘see the object as in itself it really is’, put forward in his essay ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1865).⁹ Or one might think of Walter Pater’s remark in his unsigned review of some ‘Poems by William Morris’ (1868) that it is ‘only the roughness of the eye that makes any two things, persons, situations – seem alike’,

⁴ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 96, 9.

⁵ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 9.

⁶ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, rev. edn (London: Merlin Press, 1976), p. 1.

⁷ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1992), XVI, p. 104; XXIII, p. 25. Further references will be given, in brackets, in the body of the text in the following form: CW, 16: 104.

⁸ The most extensive recent study of Victorian visual culture is Kate Flint’s *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁹ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ [1865], in *Essays in Criticism* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1865), pp. 1–41 (p. 1).

asserting the irreducible singularity of the aesthetic object.¹⁰ Pater's teaching was a formative influence on Oscar Wilde, who explicitly repudiated Arnold's objectivist assertion that the discipline of criticism ought necessarily to be undertaken in a spirit of disinterestedness and impartiality. For Wilde, all criticism is necessarily *partial*. As Gilbert put it in 'The True Function and Value of Criticism' (1890), later re-printed as 'The Critic as Artist' in *Intentions* (1891), '[i]t is only about things that do not interest one that one can give a really unbiased opinion, which is no doubt the reason why an unbiased opinion is always absolutely valueless. The man who sees both sides of the question [...] sees absolutely nothing'.¹¹ Earlier in the dialogue, Gilbert explicitly rejected Arnold's adage 'that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is' as a 'very serious error', identifying the 'essence' of criticism as 'purely subjective'.¹² The act of looking, Gilbert avers, is constitutive of the object, making the object itself necessarily chimerical. The opposing positions taken by Arnold and Wilde re-iterate the division delineated by Jonathan Crary between the classical, camera obscura model of vision set against post-Kantian valorisations of subjective vision.¹³ The Hellenism advocated by Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which he repeatedly emphasises the ideal of seeing the rounded totality of 'things as they are' – rather than as they are constituted by the beholder – was continuous with a classical model of vision.¹⁴

¹⁰ [Walter Pater], 'Poems by William Morris', *Westminster Review*, 34 (October 1868), pp. 300-12 (p. 311). Sections of this review were re-printed in the 'Conclusion' to the first and third editions of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873, 1888). The 'Conclusion' was removed from the second edition of 1877 because of the controversy it had generated after its first appearance four years earlier.

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, 'The True Function and Value of Criticism; with Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue', *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 28 (September 1890), pp. 435-59 (p. 449). In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold had invested culture with the task of teaching perfection, to which he counterposed what he perceived as a widespread 'inaptitude for seeing more than one side of a thing'. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), p. 15.

¹² Wilde, 'The True Function and Value of Criticism', *The Nineteenth Century*, 28 (July 1890), pp. 123-47 (p. 143).

¹³ For an elaboration of Kant's "'Copernican revolution" (*Drehung*) of the spectator' see Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁴ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, pp. xlviii, 7, 19, 165, 202. Needless to say, Arnold's commitment to the values of pluralism, disinterestedness, objectivity and impartiality went hand-in-hand with a readiness to rely on the coercive authority of state power in the face of popular rebellion or working-class insurgency. He quotes one of his father's unpublished letters, 'written more than forty years ago, when the political and social state of the country was gloomy and troubled, and there were riots in many places' with liberal approbation: "'As for rioting, the old Roman way of dealing with *that* is always the right one; flog the rank and file, and fling the ringleaders from the Tarpeian Rock!" And this opinion we can never forsake, however our Liberal friends may think a little rioting, and what they call popular demonstrations, useful sometimes to their own interests' (p. 258). His father's letter was written during the period of Chartist militancy, but Arnold seems

Pater, meanwhile, had drawn heavily on the aesthetic theories of John Ruskin, whose writings, along with those of Thomas Carlyle, are key determinants of Morris's own ocular fascinations, concerned as much with precipitating the power of insight in others as with attaining truthful perception of aesthetic objects or contemporary social conditions.¹⁵ The act of looking thus became, by extension, an act of projection. Foresight, prescience, clairvoyance, prophecy, augury, insight, adumbration, vaticination and fatidical fury: such words belong to a lexicon which articulates the impossible utopian task of seeing beyond the narrow horizons of the alienated present, reading the future's runes which belong to an unknowable realm of freedom awaiting actualisation in some post-revolutionary new dawn. The outlandish penultimate and final phrases in the above list – vaticination and fatidical fury – are found in Carlyle's essay 'The Signs of the Times', which first appeared as an unsigned, untitled article in the *Edinburgh Review* in June 1829.¹⁶ The essay begins with a dismissal, claiming that '[i]t is no very good symptom of nations or individuals, that they deal much in vaticination'.¹⁷ The outlandishness of the word signals the imputed outlandishness of the practice. Although Carlyle ostensibly disavows the 'frenzies and panics' induced by pseudo-prophetic utterance, he does so in the name of 'look[ing] deeper' into the truth of the 'Mechanical Age'; having looked, he feels confident to proclaim that 'men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe, and hope, and work only in the Visible; or, to speak it in other words: This is not a Religious age'.¹⁸ Carlyle's essay heralded the later revolt against the materialism of Victorian political economy, a revolt epitomised in Ruskin's *Unto this Last* (1860) and, albeit with a different optic, in Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*.¹⁹

not to have considered the possibility that the popular demonstrations which he demurs may have been useful to the interests of those *attending* the demonstrations. Arnold was unequivocal: 'monster processions in the streets and forcible irruptions into the parks [...] ought to be unflinchingly forbidden and repressed' (p. 259).

¹⁵ John Holloway's formulation of this endeavour in his study of Victorian sage writing remains pertinent. Placing Carlyle alongside Arnold, John Henry Newman, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, Holloway wrote that 'these authors insist on how acquiring wisdom is somehow an opening of the eyes, making us see in our experience what we failed to see before. This unanimity suggests that conviction comes here essentially from modifying the reader's perceptiveness, from stimulating him to notice something to which he was previously blind. [...] It is not some quite new reality; it is seeing old things in a new way'. John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1953), p. 9.

¹⁶ [Thomas Carlyle], 'Article VII [Signs of the Times]', *Edinburgh Review*, 49 (June 1829), pp. 439-59 (p. 439).

¹⁷ [Carlyle], 'Article VII', p. 439.

¹⁸ [Carlyle], 'Article VII', pp. 440, 452-3.

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton has characterised this 'Culture and Society' tradition, which had 'constant resort to the Romantic humanist heritage', as a 'nebulous compound of Burkean conservatism and German idealism, transmitted by the later Coleridge to Carlyle, Disraeli, Arnold and Ruskin [...]'. It was a tradition which offered an idealist critique of social relations, coupled with a

Carlyle's own attempt to find a vocabulary in which to articulate his prophetic, religious vision in a secular, sceptical and scientific age, is suggested by Anthony Froude's decision to incorporate sections of his teacher's unfinished 'Autograph Manuscript of Creeds' into his biography of Carlyle, under the title 'Spiritual Optics'.²⁰ According to Murray Baumgarten, Carlyle strives in this essay 'to be the spiritual Newton and psychological Galileo of his age', transforming the metaphor of spiritual optics into an epistemological principle.²¹ Carlyle's discourse of 'spiritual optics' and the metaphor of inspired, or extra-mundane, vision are crucial elements in his polemic against nineteenth-century empiricist and utilitarian modes of thought, which he perceived to be both culturally dominant and socially deleterious. Ruskin echoes Carlyle's distinction between inward and outward kinds of vision in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), where he distinguishes between impressions made on the 'outward parts' and that which is 'taken notice of within'.²² In the third volume, published in 1856, he places a similar emphasis on the spiritual value of sight, explaining that '[t]he greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. [...] To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, – all in one'.²³ In assuming the role of the seer, Carlyle, in common with Ruskin, renounced the status of the bodily eye in favour of a more 'visionary' or prophetic kind of seeing, cultivating ways of looking which would allow the beholder to perceive the 'invisible' and 'unseen', because unseeable, aspects of human existence.

The concern with spiritual optics had been elaborated by Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* (1838), a deeply humorous text which purports to be compiled by an English editor who has set out to introduce the thought of a great German savant for the benefit of English-speaking readers. The narrative, insofar as there is one, follows the arc of a *bildungsroman*: the fictional Professor Teufelsdröckh's spiritual epiphanies culminate in his attainment of the status of a 'Seer', in chapter 8 of the third book, whereupon he 'attains to Transcendentalism' and 'looked fixedly on Existence, till one after the other, its earthly hulls and garnitures, have all melted away; and now to his rapt vision the interior, celestial Holy of Holies, lies disclosed'.²⁴ Teufelsdröckh's exclamations make frequent use of visual metaphors in

consecration of the rights of capital'. Needless to say, it was this tradition from which Morris was only ever able partially to extricate himself. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, 3rd edn (London: Verso, 1982), p. 102.

²⁰ James Anthony Froude, ed., *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795-1835*, 2 vols. (London, 1882), II, pp. 7-12. The essay is re-printed in its entirety in Murray Baumgarten, 'Carlyle and "Spiritual Optics"', *Victorian Studies*, 11 (June 1968), pp. 503-22.

²¹ Baumgarten, 'Carlyle and "Spiritual Optics"', p. 506.

²² John Ruskin, *Modern Painters, Volume 1* [1843], in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), III, pp. 141-2.

²³ Ruskin, *Works*, IV, p. 333.

²⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* [1833-4], in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. by H.D. Traill,

order to evoke the spiritual blindness of his hapless peers. Readers are informed that '[t]he man who cannot wonder [...] is but a Pair of Spectacles behind which there is no Eye'.²⁵ The Professor also diagnoses a general condition of 'sick ophthalmia and hallucination' brought on by the same 'Motive-grinders, and Mechanical Profit-and-Loss Philosophies' which Carlyle had criticised in his early essay 'The Signs of the Times'.²⁶ The medical condition of ophthalmia, the symptoms of which involve an inflammation of the eye, takes on a figurative significance for Carlyle, as a rhetorical means of undermining the professed social utility of bourgeois political economy.

Martin Jay has located Carlyle's cultivation of this new 'spiritual optics', intended to 'replenish the tired sight of mundane existence', in the tradition of British Romanticism's metaphors of inspired vision.²⁷ Kate Flint similarly points out that '[n]ot to be able to see with the physical eye is to call into play the powerful forces of imagination and memory. Such an idea was one of the most powerful legacies of the early Romantic writers on Victorian sensibilities'.²⁸ Echoes of Carlyle's, post-Romantic, extra-mundane visual discourse are clearly detectable in Morris's writings as, for example, in his reference to 'the eyes of the body or the soul' (CW, 22: 176) in his lecture 'Some Hints on Pattern-designing' (1881). In his lectures on art and aesthetics, delivered in the late 1870s and early 1880s to workmen in the newly-formed schools of art and handicrafts, Morris secularises the metaphor of spiritual optics in order to formulate a rhetorical means of explicating the degradation of the lesser, or popular, arts. In 'The Art of the People', first delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design on 19 February 1879, Morris suggested that the 'great mass of civilised men, have been blinded by untoward circumstances' (CW, 22: 31). The motif is taken up in a later lecture on 'The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation' (1881) in which Morris asks the question: '[h]ow shall we set about giving people without traditions of art eyes with which to see works of art?' (CW, 22: 135). The question signals Morris's debt to Ruskin's aesthetic theory, particularly the emphasis placed on visual training in *Modern Painters* – an emphasis which Robert Hewison has glossed as a call to 'abandon conventional perception, and study nature with our own eyes', thus drawing a link

30 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896-99), I, pp. 202-3.

²⁵ Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, I, p. 54. William Guest claims to have been 'feeding [him]self with wonder' (CW, 16: 99) in *Nowhere*. Phillippa Bennett has also suggested that a rekindling of the sense of wonder is a key attribute of Morris's late romances. Phillippa Bennett, 'Rejuvenating Our Sense of Wonder: The Last Romances of William Morris', in *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Phillippa Bennett and Rosie Miles (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 209-28.

²⁶ Carlyle, *Works*, I, pp. 131.

²⁷ See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 109. Jay also notes that the metaphor of 'spiritual optics' 'continued to have a powerful secular effect well after its original religious sources lost much of their legitimacy' (p. 13).

²⁸ Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p. 23.

between the 'visual sense' and the 'moral sense'.²⁹ Moreover, Morris's posing of such a question, in the context of public lecture, offers a stark challenge to the elitist optic of Matthew Arnold, whose liberalism was undergirded by an assumption that '[t]he mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are; very inadequate ideas will always satisfy them'.³⁰

The popular character of Morris's visual rhetoric was linked to an historicist evocation of a supposedly lost period of universalised aesthetic beauty and appreciation – a period when 'everything that the hand of man touched was more or less beautiful: so that in those days all people who made anything shared in art, as well as the people who used the things so made' (CW, 22: 54) – which appears at various points in his lectures on art and society and in his political journalism.³¹ The contrapuntal quality of this historicism is again indebted to the work of Carlyle, particularly *Past and Present* (1843), as well as to Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin's *Contrasts; or, A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (1836, 1841) and Ruskin's chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3). Carlyle elaborates the simultaneously backward- and forward-looking nature of this philosophy of history at the beginning of the second book of *Past and Present*, in which he imaginatively reconstructs the social life of the twelfth-century monastery at St. Edmundsbury from the papers of one its monks, Jocelin of Brakelond. Carlyle describes his endeavour as an attempt to 'penetrate a little [...] into a somewhat remote Century; and to look face to face on it, in hope perhaps of illustrating our own poor Century thereby'.³² Carlyle proceeds to liken Jocelin's twelfth-century text to a 'magical speculum, much gone to rust indeed, yet in fragments still clear; wherein the marvellous image of his existence does still shadow itself [...]! Will not the reader peep with us into this singular *camera lucida*, where an extinct species, though fitfully, can still be seen alive?'³³ The invitation to participate in an historical peep-show, as well as the reference to the camera lucida, suggest the way in which the new technologies of vision discussed by Cray acted, for Carlyle, as a metaphorical means of exploring and explicating the historical process, in which historical change itself is figured as the 'object' of vision.³⁴ Morris's debt to this aspect of Carlyle's historicism is indicated in *A Dream of John*

²⁹ Robert Hewison, *John Ruskin: The Argument of the Eye* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 42; see also, Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, pp. 174-5.

³⁰ Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism', p. 25.

³¹ For other instances, see Morris, CW, 22: 59, 122, 133, 158; William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal', 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), pp. 276-7, 611-2; *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. by Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 148-9.

³² Carlyle, *Works*, X, p. 39.

³³ Carlyle, *Works*, X, p. 43.

³⁴ See Cray, *Techniques of the Observer*, pp. 97-136.

Ball (1888), where the narrator's dream of fourteenth-century Kent is likened to an 'architectural peep-show' (CW, 16: 215), as well as *News from Nowhere*, in which Guest's fleeting hallucination of the 1887 'Bloody Sunday' demonstration in Trafalgar Square appears as a 'phantasmagoria of another day' (CW, 16: 41). Whilst the camera lucida primarily functioned as an artist's drawing aid, the peep-show and phantasmagoria were more commonly associated with popular entertainment. Morris's incorporation of these devices into his narrative dream-visions of the medieval past and a socialist future could thus be construed as an attempt to mediate forms of collective visual experience, pointing beyond the individualised perspective of the dreamer.³⁵

The naivety of the empathetic historicist hermeneutic espoused by Carlyle, and adopted by Morris, which undoubtedly occludes the seamier side of medieval life, was criticised by James MacNeill Whistler, who poured scorn on the idea 'that certain periods were especially artistic, and that nations, readily named, were lovers of art'.³⁶ Whistler simply disagreed with Morris's claim that 'in the fifteen century Art was engrained in the multitude' and that this vision of 'Arcadian purity' could be contrasted with present conditions in which people 'call for the ungainly, and obtain the ugly'.³⁷ Kate Flint has pointed out that Whistler's primary aim was to disprove Ruskin's assertion of 'any valid relation subsisting between art and history' – a dispute which began with the libel case that Whistler had pursued against Ruskin in 1878 – but Flint also points to the lurking 'social elitism behind the aesthetic position-taking'.³⁸ Whistler's Burkean view of the multitude soon becomes clear, thus suggesting the ideological stakes of the dispute, as well as Whistler's affinity with an Arnoldian optic. In particular, Whistler asserted an individualistic model of aesthetic capability, parodically speculating that '[i]n the beginning, man went forth each day [...] [u]ntil there was found among them one, differing from the rest, whose pursuits attracted him not, and so he stayed by the tents with the women, and traced strange devices with a burnt stick upon a gourd'.³⁹ This account of the origins of individual artistic 'genius' – the originary 'deviser of the beautiful' – contrasts sharply with Morris's affirmation of the collective nature of aesthetic production,

³⁵ For further discussion of Morris's 'emphasis on this kind of visual immersion' and its relationship to the radical print culture of the period see Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 81.

³⁶ James MacNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, 2nd edn (London: Heinemann, 1892), p. 138.

³⁷ Whistler, *The Gentle Art*, p. 138.

³⁸ Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p. 172. Flint detects Whistler's reference to the 'little hamlets [which] grow near Hammersmith' as a piece of mockery aimed in Morris's direction; it is also likely that Whistler may have had in mind the artists' colony at nearby Bedford Park.

³⁹ Whistler, *The Gentle Art*, p. 139.

most memorably articulated in ‘The Art of the People’ (1879), where he wrote that ‘History (so called) has remembered the king and warriors, because they destroyed; Art has remembered the people, because they created’ (CW, 22: 32). For Morris, ‘it was the collective people who have produced all worthy, that is all genuine, art in the past’.⁴⁰ It is less important whether Morris (and Ruskin), as opposed to Whistler, produced the more ‘accurate’ interpretation of social life in an unrecoverable past than it is to recognise the way in which these competing speculative reconstructions valorised contrastive and antagonistic ideological positions in the present. Whilst Whistler’s position is ultimately aligned with Arnold’s elitist restriction on collective modalities of vision and a repudiation of mass culture, Morris’s optic is resolutely popular, without being populist.

Morris’s secularised inheritance of Carlyle and Ruskin’s tradition of social criticism is also a constitutive factor in his decision to transgress against the orthodox Marxist prohibition on utopian speculation, by writing *News from Nowhere* (1890). The protagonist, William Guest, is informed at one point that he ‘may see with [his] bodily eyes’ the fruits of the ‘great change’ (CW, 16: 132) which the projected social revolution has brought about. For Morris, the difficulty of seeing into the projected post-capitalist future was regarded as both a political and a literary problem; the attempt to agitate for social revolution was intimately linked to an elaboration of particular kinds of visual subjectivity. Morris’s journalistic writings for the socialist newspapers *Justice* and *Commonweal*, as well as his lectures on aesthetics, place repeated emphasis ‘giving people back their eyes’ (CW, 22: 135). His aesthetic revolt against the perceived ugliness of Victorian material culture is linked to a political diagnosis of a specifically bourgeois kind of myopia: the emphasis of the lectures and the journalism concerns the failure of others adequately to see the “real” nature of the Victorian society, which, for the later Morris at least, was regarded as being riven by class antagonism and social inequality. By contrast, in *News from Nowhere*, Morris is concerned with another kind of optic, one which involves an act of speculative projection and anticipation as a means of gaining a qualitatively different kind perspective on the present.

The desire to glimpse beyond the horizon of the alienated present, in an attempt to see what might be *genuinely* new in the society of the future, is forcefully expressed by the narrator in the opening chapter of *News from Nowhere*: “‘If I could but see a day of it,’ he said to himself; ‘if I could but see it!’” (CW, 16: 4). The impossibility of this desire to experience the sensuous reality of post-capitalist society returns in the manifest content of the narrator’s dream-vision, shot through as it is with mnemonic tokens which call to mind the nineteenth-century present left behind by the dreaming narrator. The utopian optic of William Guest’s dream-vision constitutes a way of looking at the present, whilst simultaneously glimpsing, from the corner of one’s eye, the suppressed utopian possibilities which were immanent within

⁴⁰ Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 277.

that historical moment. Before returning to this problematic as it is figured in *News from Nowhere*, it is first necessary to examine the contours of the visual rhetoric of Morris's explicitly socialist journalism and lectures.

Morris's desire to see beyond the confines of the alienated present grew partly out of his frustrations with the narrowly empirical focus of the 'practical' socialists of the Fabian, or gradualist, variety. We might look for an example of such a 'practical' approach to Robert Blatchford's popular tract, *Merrie England* (1894). Blatchford offers a satirical portrait of John Smith, the 'typical' Englishman, to whom his letters were addressed. Those readers who would reject the text's socialist message on the grounds that it is 'unpractical' are immediately outflanked on their own terrain. Blatchford's rhetorical strategy is clear, constructing and interpellating his imagined reader as follows:

You are a staunch Liberal, and you pride yourself upon being 'a shrewd, hard-headed, practical man'. [...] Hence you have come to believe that you 'entertain a wholesome contempt for theories', and have contracted a habit of calling for 'Facts' in a peremptory manner, like a stage brigand calling for 'Wine'.

Now, Mr. Smith, if you really are a man of hard, shrewd sense, we shall get on very well. I am myself a plain, practical man. I base my beliefs upon what I know and see, and respect a 'fact' more than a Lord Mayor.

In these letters I shall stick to the hardest of hard facts, and the coldest of cold reason; and I shall appeal to that robust commonsense [...] for which, I understand, you are more famous than for your ability to see beyond the end of your free and independent nose at election times.⁴¹

Blatchford unsubtly mocks the self-limiting, short-sighted quality of John Smith's positivistic valorisation of 'hard facts' at the same time as he reassures readers that the positivist method will be incorporated into the text's own mode of argument. Beliefs, readers are reminded, should be based upon that which can be seen and known. Unsurprisingly, Blatchford's tract contains a wealth of statistical information and 'accomplished facts', culled from the pages of the *Quarterly Review* and elsewhere.⁴² The work of *proving* the case for socialism is over-determined in Blatchford's text by the speculative construction of the projected audience. The empirical trumps the ethical as a means of persuasion, situating Blatchford's text in proximity to the sociological research of Charles Booth and Henry Mayhew.

For Morris, by contrast, the domain of that which can be seen and known extended beyond 'hard facts' and 'cold reason'. Outlining the policy of abstention from Parliamentary elections in a *Commonweal* article entitled 'Anti-Parliamentary'

⁴¹ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (London: Clarion Office, 1894), pp. 9-10.

⁴² Whistler, *The Gentle Art*, p. 29.

(7 June 1890), Morris posed an arresting series of unanswered rhetorical questions:

if we cannot force Parliament to declare its function of safeguarding privilege as an end, when it is obviously in vigorous life; if we cannot jockey it into furthering the very thing which it hates most, and has most reason to hate – Socialism, to wit – what can we do? ‘Nothing’, say our parliamentary friends. I cannot see that. Is it nothing to keep alive and increase discontent with the vile slavery of today? Is it nothing to show the discontented that they can themselves destroy that slavery? Is it nothing to point out to them what lies beyond the period of struggle, and how workers can be happy when they are not robbed of all the pleasure of life by the idlers that live upon their labour?⁴³

For Blatchford, John Smith’s staunch liberalism and his identification of bourgeois parliamentary elections as a legitimate, or sufficient, means of political representation acts as barrier to his acceptance of socialist ideas. By contrast, Morris’s rhetorical questions are designed to press at the limits of that ideological self-identity, rather than to accommodate it in the way that Blatchford does. Morris emphasises the importance of finding a representational strategy capable of breaking the perceived dominance of working-class identification with liberalism, and he suggests that this will necessarily involve moving beyond the terrain of the immediate and the empirical, with its slavish devotion to facts, by risking more speculative kinds of enquiry into ‘what lies beyond the period of struggle’. Morris’s frustrations are again in evidence in his article ‘On Some “Practical” Socialists’ (18 February 1888), published in *Commonweal*, twenty-one months before *News from Nowhere* began to be serialised in the pages of the same newspaper. Rebuking the narrow-mindedness of the ‘practical’ socialists, Morris suggested that ‘they do not see except through the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us; and it seems somewhat strange, not that they should have no vision of the future, but that they should not be ready to admit that it is their own fault that they have not’.⁴⁴ That Morris should fall back, at this point, on an ecologically-updated Biblical allusion – likening the shortcomings of Fabian economism to the difficulty of seeing through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians, 13: 12) – is a clear indication of his inheritance of Carlyle’s religiously-freighted discourse of ‘spiritual optics’, a discourse which Morris sought to mobilise with reference to the strategic problems faced by the emergent socialist movement.⁴⁵

Further examples abound in his lectures. In his 1886 lecture delineating the

⁴³ Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 483.

⁴⁴ Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 338.

⁴⁵ For an extended discussion of the socialist movement’s appropriation of a religious structure of feeling see Stephen Yeo, ‘A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896’, *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (Autumn 1977), pp. 5-56.

political differences between ‘Whigs, Democrats and Socialists’, for instance, Morris employs a tone of self-deprecating humility, describing the nascent socialist movement as a ‘sect or party, or group of self-seekers, madmen, and poets’, in order to carry the important political point that ‘at least they are only set of people who have been able to see that there is and has been a great class-struggle going on’ (CW, 23: 37). By contrast, the Fabians, or ‘soft Socialists’, are said to suffer with a kind of myopia because ‘the barrier which they will not be able to pass, so long as they are in their present minds, [is] *the acknowledgement of the class war*. The “Socialists” of this kind are blind as to the essence of modern society’.⁴⁶ In an earlier lecture on ‘The Hopes of Civilisation’ (1885) this claim to exclusive insight had been set against the blindness of ‘[m]any among the middle classes who are sincerely grieved and shocked at the condition of the proletariat which civilisation has created [...] [but who] nevertheless shudder back from the idea of the class struggle, and strive to shut their eyes to the fact that it is going on’ (CW, 23: 76-7). The rhetorical value of such a claim, made in the context of a public lecture delivered with the explicitly pedagogical aim of converting listeners to the cause, should not occlude the fact that it is empirically questionable.⁴⁷ It is hard to imagine that Messrs Bryant and May, for example, or the employers at the London Docks, were entirely blind to the reality of class struggle, given the match girls’ strike of 1888 and the dockworkers’ strike of 1889. Whilst it is hard to dispute the possibility that certain members of the bourgeoisie would rather avert their eyes from the social consequences of class antagonism, bourgeois class interests would hardly be well-served if the leading fractions of that class were continually to suffer debilitating lapses in vigilance or to pretend that industrial militancy on the part of the working class simply did not exist. Morris’s ire, one assumes, is directed primarily against middle-class liberals and bourgeois philanthropists, whom he regarded as having a mistaken, or inflated, sense of their own progressive credentials.

In certain important respects, then, Morris’s diagnosis of bourgeois myopia is

⁴⁶ William Morris, *Journalism: Contributions to ‘Commonweal’ 1885-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996), p. 613.

⁴⁷ Contrary to Morris’s claim that socialists are the ‘only set of people’ in possession of the cognitive ability to ‘see’ the existence of class struggle, Marx had pointed out in a letter to J. Weydemeyer that ‘no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before the bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes’. ‘Marx to J. Weydemeyer’, in *Selected Works of Marx and Engels* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), p. 679. Marx went on to state that ‘what I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular phases in the development of production*, (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to *the dictatorship of the proletariat*, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*’ (p. 679).

clearly insufficient insofar as it posits socialist commitment to class struggle as a restricted, exclusive kind of insight. Morris's attempt to graft a socialist critique of class society onto the discursive base furnished by Carlyle and Ruskin was thus not entirely successful in political terms, insofar as the seer's privileged insight is frequently construed as the exclusive property of a select, or chosen, few. The discursive inheritance bequeathed to Morris by Carlyle and Ruskin bears structural parallels to one facet of Victorian glass culture described by Isobel Armstrong, who, in noting the 'pellucid transitivity' of glass, points out that it acted as 'both *medium and barrier*'.⁴⁸ Morris's secularisation of Carlyle and Ruskin's spiritual optic as an optic of class struggle had its own discursive limits, as I have tried to elucidate. His inheritance of the visual rhetoric of earlier generations of social criticism takes on a different character in his utopian writing. In *News from Nowhere*, Morris aims to see beyond the present, into an alterior, or radically different, future. William Guest's longing to 'see a day' of the utopian future is concomitant with the fact that those who are said to have brought this other world into being 'worked for the change because they could see further than other people' (CW, 16: 104). The motif of prescience and far-sightedness is the obverse of that bourgeois myopia which Morris condemned in his journalism. His utopian romance imagines the consequences of a full working through of the social contradictions and class antagonisms which he claimed that his political opponents failed to perceive. The transcendentalism of Carlyle's spiritual optics is resolved into the more mundane, or worldly, focus on the immanent possibilities latent *within* the present.

Morris's decision to produce a utopian romance was in itself a bold political move when one considers the force of the orthodox Marxist prohibition against speculative utopianism. The *locus classicus* is found in Friedrich Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), a short text which was translated into English by Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx in 1892, both of whom had been members of the Socialist League, along with Morris.⁴⁹ The orthodox position was reiterated by Ernest Belfort Bax in the Preface to *Outlooks from the New Standpoint* (published in December 1891) where he laments the 'current popularity of Utopian romances, hailed with such joy by some'.⁵⁰ Bax, here, offers a veiled riposte to *News from Nowhere*, which had been serialised in *Commonweal* during the previous year. Bax wrote that whilst it is feasible to

⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 7.

⁴⁹ Apropos the utopian projections of Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and Henri de Saint-Simon, Engels wrote that '[t]hese new social systems were foredoomed as Utopian; the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies'. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892), p. 12.

⁵⁰ Ernest Belfort Bax, *Outlooks from the New Standpoint* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), p. viii.

lay down, in the abstract, the general principles on which the society of the future will be based, [...] we cannot *describe*, that is, picture, in the concrete, any state of society of which the world has had no experience. [...] Our logical faculty can, indeed, as it were, dissolve the present social reality for abstract thought, and show the lines on which the new principle growing up within it is going, but our imagination is quite incapable of envisaging the future social reality in its completed shape.⁵¹

The anti-utopianism of this statement had practical and political motivations, as evidenced in Bax's anxiety in his 'Address to Trades' Unions – Issued by the Council of the Socialist League' (1885) that workers might regard socialists as 'unpractical visionaries with foreign notions in their heads'.⁵² Blatchford similarly dissociated socialism from whimsical reveries of the Land of Cokayne, reassuring his readers that '[s]ocialism is not a wild dream of a happy land where the apples will drop off the trees into our open mouths, the fish come out of the rivers and fry themselves for dinner, and the looms turn out readymade suits of velvet with golden buttons without the trouble of coaling the engine'.⁵³ The force of this prohibition on utopian speculation helps to explain the confusion of narrative perspective in the opening chapter of *Nowhere*. The third-person narrative voice of the first chapter – which purports to report the experience of a 'friend' – is rejected as the narration of the dream-vision proper begins:

Our friend says that from sleep he awoke once more, and afterwards went through such surprising adventures that he thinks that they should be told to our comrades and indeed the public in general, and therefore proposes to tell them now. But, says he, I think it would be better if I told them in the first person, as if it were myself who had gone through them; which, indeed, will be the easier and more natural to me, since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than any one else in the world does. (CW, 16: 5)

The confusion of the 'I' in this passage conflates the narrator of the first chapter and his 'friend' into a single, unitary narrative voice, whilst maintaining a measure of distance between the two. The dreamer is kept ever-so-subtly at arm's length from

⁵¹ Bax, *Outlooks*, pp. viii-ix.

⁵² Ernest Belfort Bax, 'Address to Trades' Unions', in *The Religion of Socialism, Being Essays in Modern Socialist Criticism*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891), p. 154.

⁵³ Blatchford, *Merrie England*, p. 99. Hints of a guarded response to *News from Nowhere* are detectable in the ensuing sentence, where Blatchford wrote that '[n]either is it a dream of a nation of stained-glass angels, who never say damn, who always love their neighbours better than themselves, and who never need to work unless they wish to' (p. 99).

the narrator at the same time as his experiences are recorded ‘in the first person’. This complicated and somewhat clumsy introduction to the narrative serves to remind readers that the communist future cannot be “eyed” directly, as Morris was at pains to acknowledge elsewhere.⁵⁴ Andrew Belsey has drawn attention to this ‘multiple personality’ and the ‘elaborate structure of deception and disguise’ which it produces, but he does not refer to the ideological taboo on utopian speculation as one of the potential motivations for this ‘playful’ aspect of the text.⁵⁵ The title-page of *Nowhere* describes the dream-vision which follows as ‘being some chapters from a Utopian Romance’ (CW, 16: 1) – a phrase which anticipates the romantic sub-plots in the narrative (between Dick and Clara, as well as between Guest and Ellen) at the same time as it invites readers to fall in love, quite literally, with the idea of a communist future. Belsey interprets the various narrative devices of the text in a similar manner, suggesting that its ‘strategy is to intrigue the reader into becoming an agent of the text, and to provide the requisite motivation for political struggle’.⁵⁶

A key moment in the unfolding of this strategy is the ‘last mournful look’ (CW, 16: 210) of Guest’s utopian host, Ellen, a moment of pathos which Guest nevertheless interprets as a call to action. He reads Ellen’s look as an injunction to ‘[g]o back again, now that you seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world [...]. Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle’ (CW, 16: 210-11). It is possible to interpret these lines – and, by imputation, the functional political value of Morris’s utopia – as little more than a consoling palliative, in line with Raymond Williams’ suggestion that the heuristic utopia always stands in danger of ‘[settling] into isolated and in the end sentimental desire, a mode of living with alienation’.⁵⁷ However, Guest’s interpretation of Ellen’s last glance is soon followed by his own, more affirmative statement: ‘Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it,

⁵⁴ Morris frequently disclaims “bad” utopianism in his political journalism and lectures. For example, in ‘Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil’ (1884), he dilates upon ‘the impossibility of constructing a scheme of a new society out of the materials of the old, before we knew which of those materials would disappear and which endure through the evolution which is leading to the great change’ (CW, 23: 118). In ‘True and False Society’ (1887), Morris states that ‘you may be disappointed when you find that I have no elaborate plan, no details of a new society to lay before you, that to my mind to attempt this would be putting before you a mere delusion’ (CW, 23: 215). Similarly, in a short *Commonweal* article entitled ‘Notes and Queries: Practical Socialism’ (1886), he wrote that ‘[w]hen the plan is visible the new state of Society will be realised, it cannot be visible before’. Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ Andrew Belsey, ‘Getting Somewhere: Rhetoric and Politics in *News from Nowhere*’, *Textual Practice*, 5 (1991), pp. 337-51 (pp. 343-4).

⁵⁶ Belsey, ‘Getting Somewhere’, p. 348.

⁵⁷ Raymond Williams, ‘Utopia and Science Fiction’, in *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 196-212 (203).

then it may be called a vision rather than a dream' (CW, 16: 211). Guest's narration of his time in Nowhere is frequently described as a dream-vision, but, at the final moment of closure, the hyphen is suspended as the qualities of dream and of vision begin to point in contradictory directions, illustrating the difficulties of mediating between individual and collective modalities of seeing. The dreaming individual has the potential to act as both a harbinger and a bearer of collective vision, but the conditional phrasing reminds us that the process of mediation is always contingent and indeterminate, inextricably linked to real processes of social struggle in concrete situations. Others have the potential to see the vision as Guest has seen it – they *can* see it, insofar as it there for them literally to see or insofar as *News from Nowhere* is a text available for reading – but there is nothing inevitable about being able to “see” its system of values, in the more abstract and metaphorical sense of sight which is implicit in the final sentence. Any reader of the text will, in one sense, see, in her mind's eye, the society described therein, but, once again, there is an unwitting exclusivism at work: Guest implies that he has seen Nowhere in a particular way, which has made him understand the necessity of struggling to actualise a post-capitalist future; he further implies that others have yet to share in this way of seeing, thereby setting himself subtly apart from the unspecified ‘others’. Matthew Beaumont identifies part of the problem in recognising that the text ‘[addressed] a tight circle of committed readers, at least in its first, serial form of publication’, highlighting the fact the Socialist League, and its organ, *Commonweal*, functioned primarily as a propaganda sect, lacking any substantial link to a mass audience.⁵⁸ The implied and imagined audience, on this account, were *already* committed, thus partly negating the textual strategies of enticement and seduction recounted by Belsey.

The choice of phrase – ‘dream-vision’ – also returns us to Ruskin, particularly his comments on the painterly technique of J.W.M. Turner in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*. There, Ruskin praises the instances of creative licence in Turner's paintings by equating them with the remembrance of previous details. Such instances, Ruskin suggests, are

numerous enough to induce a doubt whether Turner's composition was not universally an arrangement of remembrances, summoned just as they were wanted, and set each in its fittest place. It is this very character which appears to me to mark it as so distinctly an act of dream-vision; for in a dream there is just this kind of confused remembrance of the forms of things which we have seen long ago, associated by new and strange laws.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900*, 2nd edn (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p. 187.

⁵⁹ Ruskin, *Works*, VI, p. 41.

The contrapuntal quality of the relationship between remembered forms overlaid by 'new and strange laws' also animates Morris's utopian vision of Nowhere, which, like so many of Turner's paintings, evokes a landscape suffused with sunlight and structured around an itinerary of dreamt 'remembrances'. Jonathan Crary has specified the contradiction which animates Ruskin's aspiration for a 'purified subjective vision', likening it to a kind of vision

achieved at great cost that claimed for the eye a vantage point uncluttered by the weight of historical codes and conventions of seeing, a position from which vision can function without the imperative of composing its contents into a reified 'real' world. It was a question of an eye that sought to avoid the repetitiveness of the formulaic and conventional, even as the effort time and again to see afresh and anew entailed its own pattern of repetition and conventions.⁶⁰

The reaction against the habitual, the customary and the conventional, which is nonetheless contradictorily bound up with a reassertion and repetition of the same, similarly constitutes Guest's experience in Nowhere, suggesting Morris's own familiarity with the same contradiction.⁶¹ Leaving behind the society of the nineteenth century, Guest enters a 'very new world' where he finds himself 'stripped bare of every habitual thought and way of acting' (CW, 16: 103). He soon learns, though, that in Nowhere 'a tradition or habit of life has been growing on us [...] a habit of acting on the whole for the best' (CW, 16: 80). The tyrannies of habitual modes of perception identified by Ruskin are disavowed, only for habit to be re-imbued with the status of a redemptive category.⁶² Despite the force of the orthodox

⁶⁰ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, pp. 95-96.

⁶¹ In his lecture on 'Early England' (1886), Morris's opening statement that 'I am in the habit of looking at things that pass before my eyes; (which I think has now ceased to be a common habit) and connecting their present outward seeming with times gone by and times to come' is an implicit reassertion of Ruskin's influence and of his accrual of Ruskinian visual habits. Morris, *Unpublished Lectures*, p. 158.

⁶² It is more than a mere digression to note that Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's discussion of the 'gradual and elemental nature' of the projected withering of the state contains a markedly similar treatment of the concept of habit. In the relevant section of *State and Revolution* (1917), concerned with 'The Withering of the State', Lenin asserts that '[o]nly habit can, and undoubtedly will, have such an effect; for we see around us millions of times how readily people get accustomed to observe the necessary rules of life in common, if there is no exploitation, if there is nothing that causes indignation, that calls forth protest and revolt and has to be *suppressed*'. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *State and Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), p. 74. This moment of apparent resonance, or congruence, between Morris's utopian text and Lenin's is further corroborated when one learns that Lenin possessed a copy of the Russian translation of *News from Nowhere*: 'Il n'est pas indifférent de mentionner que l'édition russe des *Nouvelles de Nulle Part* figurait dans la bibliothèque de Lénine'. Paul Meier, *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris* (Paris: Éditions

prohibition on utopian speculation – which sought to lock the socialist imagination into certain specific and delimited ways of seeing – Morris’s utopian narrative attempts to picture, in the concrete, the sensuous reality and lived experience of a communist future. As A.L. Morton long ago pointed out, Morris’s utopia is the first utopia which is not utopian, insofar as it has a history and, one might add, a recognizable geography.⁶³ Guest’s waking in Hammersmith, his swim in the Thames, his trip through central London, passing Trafalgar Square and the Houses of Parliament, function as signifiers of continuity, situating the narrative in the known and familiar world, thus breaking with the generic conventions of foregoing narrative utopianism. The familiarity of Nowhere’s terrain is simultaneously made strange by numerous indications of radical change: Trafalgar Square has been transfigured into an orchard; salmon swim in the Thames and the Houses of Parliament have been ingeniously re-purposed as a storage-place for manure. From the blossom on the fruit-trees in the re-planted Trafalgar Square to the pictures on the walls in the Hammersmith Guest House Morris’s utopian optic is designed to estrange that which is familiar, in order to show the alterity, or otherness, which is latent within the present, could we but make the slightest shift in our way of apprehending that present in order that we might begin to perceive its true potentialities and horizons.

This, then, is the key to understanding the significance of Morris’s utopian romance as a particular kind of political intervention. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci well knew, the ‘attribute “utopian” does not apply to political will in general, but to specific wills which are incapable of relating means to end, and hence are not even wills, but idle whims, dreams, longings etc’.⁶⁴ For Morris, *Nowhere* was not simply a vision of the desired end, lacking any relation to the means of its actualisation; rather, it was an attempt to reconceptualise the nature of the means, thus providing one potential route through which particular individuals might begin to relate means to ends in the ebbs and flows of political struggle. The prophetic aptitude of the utopian imagination will be little more than an idle whim, in Gramsci’s words, if no attempt is made to connect the vision of the desired end to concrete developments and currents in effective reality: the only true prophets, as James Connolly once put it, are those who carve out the future which they announce. Crucially, this involves an attempt to mediate between individual and collective modalities of vision, albeit that the different kinds of visual rhetoric mobilised by Morris, and which I have explored here, were not entirely successful in this regard.

sociales, 1972), p. 832. Meier comments in a footnote that a catalogue of Lenin’s library was published in Moscow in 1961.

⁶³ A.L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1969), p. 213.

⁶⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, repr. 1998), p. 175.

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AMAZONS, SCIENCE AND COMMON SENSE: THE RULE OF WOMEN IN ELIZABETH CORBETT'S *NEW AMAZONIA*

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Abstract

Elizabeth Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889) imagines what the late-Victorian world would look like if it were run by women. Inspired by the *Women's Penny Paper*, a pro-suffrage journal devoted to showcasing women's writing and interests, Corbett used utopian fiction to explore an alternative to the patriarchal values of Victorian England. The women of New Amazonia live in a future Ireland where their freedom from restrictive clothing and other limitations imposed on women has turned them into seven-foot-tall athletic goddesses. The highest posts in the all-female government are reserved for a cadre of celibate women and reproduction is controlled through Malthusian measures and eugenics. Corbett sees a combination of science and common sense as being the key to the health and prosperity of the New Amazonians. In this study I will explore the appeal of scientific progress to late Victorian feminists, and the role of science in shaping hopes for an improved society. I will argue that rather than being a utopian dream, Corbett's vision for an alternative Ireland was grounded in her experiences as a wage-earner and suffrage campaigner, and in her involvement in the alternative women's subculture built up around the *Women's Penny Paper*.

Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett may have situated her fictional country run by women in an alternate future version of Ireland and populated it with seven-foot-tall women calling themselves New Amazonians, but, as I will argue in this paper, her version of utopia is far from being a fantasy wish-fulfilment, and is deeply engaged with contemporary issues, science and personalities. Utopian fiction has been described by Lyman Tower Sargent as 'social dreaming',¹ but in many cases, the dreams are not so much dreams as detailed blueprints for social change. Nineteenth-century writers of utopian fiction were serious about their dreams. Indeed Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) spawned a whole movement for social change in the form of 'Bellamy Clubs'. Corbett, too, is quite specific in her dreaming. In her utopian novel *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), she maps out a society which would eradicate disease, extend life-spans, improve prosperity and showcase women's ability to take part in public life. This study will argue that the polemical power of Corbett's foray into utopian fiction derives from her frequent references to contemporary female role-models and her use of science and scientists to increase the plausibility of the technology behind the improvements she describes. Her confidence that women, if given the opportunity, could achieve this progress is all the more remarkable for taking place at a time when biology was being used to question

¹ Lyman Tower Sargent, 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited', *Utopian Studies*, 5 (1994), pp. 1-37 (p. 4).

women's ability to transcend what were perceived as natural constraints. However, Corbett allied science with the concept of common sense, which she saw as a female attribute, to lay claim to a female-centred science which could be used to demonstrate believable alternatives to the male-dominated institutions of Victorian Britain and support the concept of women making a better job of government than men.

My exploration of these issues will focus on Corbett's involvement in a community of women drawn together by the *Women's Penny Paper*, a pro-suffrage journal devoted to showcasing women's writing and interests. The paper was founded in 1888 by the feminist Henrietta Müller, who advertised it as 'The only Paper Conducted, Written, and Published by Women'. Its aim was to support the cause of suffrage by providing a newspaper for women that would give them an opportunity to voice their thoughts and get more involved in public life. The *Women's Penny Paper* appeared on a weekly basis between 1888 and early 1891 when it changed its name to the *Woman's Herald* which Müller ran until April 1892.² The pages of the *Women's Penny Paper* contained profiles of prominent women, news about women's achievements as well as a lively letter column containing letters from readers, often writing under a variety of pen-names such as 'Eloisa' and 'Minerva', or simply initials. Müller promoted participation from readers through offering advertising space for goods and barter services at substantially lower than commercial rates, as well as encouraging readers to come up with ideas to increase circulation.³ Müller's deliberate attempt at building social involvement through the pages of the *Women's Penny Paper* paid off in the case of Elizabeth Corbett, who found in the paper both an inspiration and an audience for her explorations of what a country run by women would look like. In contextualising *New Amazonia* within this community I also hope to provide a more optimistic slant to critic Matthew Beaumont's description of the gap in late nineteenth century feminist utopias 'between the fantasy of collective social harmony [...] and the lonely individual consciousness of the woman writer'⁴ by showing that for Corbett at least the like-minded community of women already existed, and that in writing *New Amazonia* she was to a large extent writing for this far from fantastical community. By linking Corbett to *The Women's Penny Paper* this study can also offer a counter-example to Darby Lewes's interpretation of late-nineteenth century feminist utopian fiction as 'the literature of dissatisfaction',

² See Rosemary T. Van Arsdell, 'Mrs Florence Fenwick-Miller and "the Woman's Signal", 1895-1899', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 15 (1982), pp. 107-18 (p. 109); Elizabeth Gray, 'Poetry and Politics in the *Women's Penny Paper/Woman's Herald*, 1888-1893: "One Swift, Bright Fore Gleam of Celestial Day"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 45 (2012), pp. 134-57 (pp. 136-7).

³ See Michelle Tusan, *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain, The History of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), pp. 109-18.

⁴ Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 90.

predominantly concerned with expressing women's frustration over political exclusion.⁵

Corbett began her career as a writer in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in the early 1880s, where she contributed to the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* and wrote a number of novels under her married name of Mrs George Corbett.⁶ These were not universally well-received. For example, one reviewer wrote of Corbett's 1895 detective novel: '*When the Sea Gives Up Its Dead* Mrs George Corbett's book of that name will be appreciated - but not until then',⁷ while the *Saturday Review* described *Deb O'Malley*, Corbett's tale of a mill girl who marries a bigamist as 'drearily, conscientiously bulky'.⁸ However, *Hearth and Home* listed Mrs George Corbett alongside Conan Doyle as one of the masters of the art of the detective novel,⁹ and the *Women's Penny Paper* described the fantastical novel, *Pharisees Unveiled* (1889) as 'clever and entertaining'.¹⁰ *New Amazonia* was not the only one of Corbett's novels to deal with the position of women in society. *Mrs Grundy's Victims* (1893) concerned two women victimised by gossip and middle-class hypocrisy, and *The Marriage Market* (1903) highlighted the problems of marriage brokers operating a form of legalised prostitution.¹¹ Corbett herself wrote in a letter to the *Women's Penny Paper*:

I have seldom written anything in which I have not taken the opportunity of airing some of my views regarding the consequences meted out to erring women, in opposition to the popular treatment of equally or more guilty men. Until lately, however, it has been very uphill work to fight against social usages. I remember when a few years ago I published a three volume novel, entitled 'Cassandra,' a writer in the Academy [...] expressed his astonishment at the idea of 'anyone, much less a lady, having the bad taste to make an open allusion to such a subject as man's immorality!'¹²

The Women's Penny Paper certainly made a strong impact on Corbett, who wrote in the same letter: 'A weekly perusal of the *Women's Penny Paper* has shown me that

⁵ Darby Lewes, *Dream Revisionaries: Gender and Genre in Women's Utopian Fiction, 1870-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), pp. 57, 73.

⁶ See Duangrudi Suksang, 'Overtaking Patriarchy: Corbett's and Dixie's Visions of Women', *Utopian Studies*, 4 (1993), pp. 74-93 (p. 76).

⁷ [The Haughty Culture-ist], 'Leaves. To Be Left - or Gathered', *Fun* (15 January 1895), p. 26.

⁸ Anon., 'Deb O'mally's', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (19 October 1895), p. 514.

⁹ Anon., 'People, Places and Things', *Hearth and Home* (1 June 1893), p. 72.

¹⁰ Anon., 'Reviews', *Women's Penny Paper* (3 August 1889), p. 10.

¹¹ Anita Rose, 'Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia*: Gender Equity, Science, Utopia', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, (1997), pp. 6-20 (p. 18).

¹² George Corbett, Mrs., 'Letter', *Women's Penny Paper* (30 November 1889), p. 66.

others are brave enough to denounce existing evils, and has encouraged me in my determination to write unflinchingly, in at least one book [*New Amazonia*], about many things that have often roused my indignation.' Corbett clearly felt at home in this subculture as she wrote another, more controversial letter criticising Queen Victoria for not recognising women in the New Year's honours list, and a chatty article on her experience of canvassing with the Newcastle Women's Liberal Association in the 1890 local elections.

The strength of Corbett's identification with this community of women was demonstrated by her involvement in the protests that ensued when the *Nineteenth Century*, a monthly literary magazine, published an article entitled 'An appeal against female suffrage' in the June 1889 issue. This anti-suffrage petition was signed by over a hundred women, many of them aristocrats or wives of prominent men, claiming that 'the emancipating process has now reached the limits fixed by the physical constitution of women'.¹³ In response, over two thousand women, including Corbett, signed a petition for the rival periodical the *Fortnightly Review* protesting against the article, forcing the *Nineteenth Century* to print some examples of the contrary view in letters from Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Mrs Ashton Dilke. The *Penny Paper* also joined in the debate by pointing out the difference in social circumstances between the largely upper class signatories of the appeal against suffrage and the middle-class women who were fighting to get the vote:

Those who stand on the middle rung of the social ladder [...] have a wider view and a more helpful experience; these see, in middle-class and artizan life, women taking their full share in the work of the world, they see them exact and scrupulous in money matters, careful managers of house and business and school, home-stayers while husbands are wasting their substance in riotous living, breadwinners for father-deserted children, for parents and brothers and sisters.¹⁴

Corbett openly aligned herself with the viewpoint of the *Women's Penny Paper*. In the prologue to *New Amazonia*, which is devoted to the *Nineteenth Century* article, she declared that she was one of the signatories of the 'gallant counter-protest' which was 'signed by the cream of British WOMANHOOD' rather than the 'ladies' of the *Nineteenth Century* magazine who supported 'the most despicable piece of treachery ever perpetrated towards woman by women'.¹⁵ This issue was clearly important to

¹³ Humphry Ward, Mrs, 'An Appeal Against Female Suffrage' *The Nineteenth Century*, 25 (June 1889), pp. 78-87.

¹⁴ Anon., 'Women's Suffrage in the *Nineteenth Century*', *Women's Penny Paper* (22 June 1889), p. 7.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (London: Tower Publishing, 1889), pp. 7, 1. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

the genesis of *New Amazonia* as Corbett uses the protest as a springboard for her venture into utopian fiction. The narrator falls into an enchanted sleep after imagining women's rights campaigner Mrs Weldon as speaker of the House of Commons, and activist and birth control advocate Mrs Besant as Prime-Minister. When the narrator wakes up, she is in New Amazonia. Corbett does not dwell on the mystery of the enchanted sleep, which appears to be mainly a plot device to speedily transport her protagonist to New Amazonia, without losing the polemical energy of the opening section. Instead, Corbett spends her opening chapters establishing the origins of the New Amazonian state from its roots in nineteenth-century Ireland to a war which depopulated Ireland, leaving it open for colonisation by the excess women of England. There is nothing fantastical about the state. It is not in a geographically unreal nowhere like Butler's *Erewhon* or More's *Utopia*. It is located in a future Ireland, but with place names, such as Fawcetville, Beecherstown and Andersonia, which reference prominent women of Corbett's own time. *New Amazonia* has more affinity to Bellamy's future Boston of *Looking Backward*, published a year earlier, except that Corbett's references to the present day signal that utopia could be achieved now rather than a hundred years in the future, if the talents of women in the population were recognised. In fact, Corbett's alternative future provides a more convincing rationale for change than Bellamy's, where the somewhat theoretical forces of social evolution are used to bring about political changes. For Corbett, all that is required is the opportunity for women to set up their own state and the subsequent improvements will inevitably stem from there. Chris Ferns contrasts Bellamy's 'relentless specificity of detail regarding the workings of the more perfect society' to the 'equally telling lack of detail concerning the process whereby it came into being'.¹⁶ Corbett, on the other hand, not only provides details of the historical and political developments which led to the founding of New Amazonia, but unlike other writers of feminist utopias even describes the funding model for the new state.¹⁷

Corbett's utopia is also remarkable for showing an all-female government of a country containing both men and women, not a separatist state like Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1880-1) or Gilman's *Herland* (1915), where the absence of men inevitably dilutes the impact of the female government. Moreover, Corbett's depiction of the New Amazonian government as politically astute and competent is very different from previous satirical examples of female rule where women are portrayed as inept at governing, as for example in Walter Besant's *The Revolt of Man* (1882) where female supremacy leads to stagnation and oppression. Corbett draws support for the assumption that women will make a better job of government than men by citing the real-world example of Oskaloosa in Kansas where the all-woman

¹⁶ C.S. Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 80.

¹⁷ Darby Lewes notes that in the context of feminist utopias 'funding for these projects is rarely discussed' (p. 62).

government was enthusiastically re-elected because, as Corbett put it, ‘within twelve months the place had made such wonderful strides in the trifling matters of social morality, sanitation, and prosperity, that it is the wonder of surrounding towns’ (p. 131).

Corbett’s tactic of using the success stories of her female contemporaries to increase the plausibility of her all-women state was very similar to Müller’s approach in the *Women’s Penny Paper*, where each issue contained a featured interview with a successful woman who could act as a role model to her readers. These interviews included many of the women referred to in *New Amazonia*, the first three being Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Mrs Ashton Dilke and Mrs Annie Besant, as well as women involved with a wide variety of activities such as artists, doctors and a stockbroker. The *Women’s Penny Paper* also tracked news on women in public life and indeed published an article about Oskaloosa under the suggestive title of ‘A City Governed by Women’ in November 1888.¹⁸ Lewes talks of ‘middle-class women’s overwhelming frustration [...] with the apparent failure of the suffrage movement’, their marginalisation and bitter disillusion,¹⁹ but there is very little of these sentiments apparent in the pages of the *Women’s Penny Paper* or in *New Amazonia*. Müller herself was very optimistic about the prospects for improvements in women’s rights, stating in an interview published in 1891, that she looked forward to ‘an *immediate* future for women of the widest freedom’.²⁰ Gretchen Quiring argues that the focus on women’s suffrage in histories of the women’s movement often downplayed the advances women were making in local politics and party political associations, which were exactly the kind of achievements being highlighted in the *Women’s Penny Paper*.²¹

Science was another source of optimism in *New Amazonia*. Like Bellamy, Corbett saw scientific developments as universally positive – at least in the hands of women. Corbett emphasised the plausibility of her scientific imaginings by grounding her ideas in the work of nineteenth-century scientists, mentioning such names as Robert Koch, Louis Pasteur, Austin Flint and Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard. Koch and Pasteur are revered in Corbett’s utopia for their work on bacteriology, which led to the eradication of a whole range of infectious diseases. Flint was celebrated for predicting a revolution in medicine, and Brown-Séquard was the inspiration of for *New Amazonia*’s rejuvenation programme (p. 91). Corbett’s interest in Brown-Séquard might be semi-autobiographical as her unnamed narrator-protagonist claims: ‘I had once met a gentleman who had attended his initiatory lecture in Paris on ‘The Art of Not Growing Old’ (pp. 79-80). Brown-Séquard experimented on prolonging

¹⁸ Laura Johns, ‘A City Governed by Women’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (24 November 1888), p. 2.

¹⁹ Lewes, *Dream Revisionaries*, pp. 44, 57.

²⁰ Anon., ‘Interview’, *Woman’s Herald* (28 November 1891), p. 915.

²¹ Gretchen Lynn Quiring, ‘Petticoat Government: Female Rule in British Fiction, 1870-1890’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Victoria, Canada, 2003), p. 11.

youth by injecting extracts of animal's testicles into himself, but Corbett adopted a sanitised version of the process for *New Amazonia* in which nerve extracts are taken from animals without doing them any harm. The real-world origins of Bändiger, the power of instantaneously arresting sense and motion, are less easy to trace, though the word is German for animal tamer, and may even relate to the kind of mesmerism that propelled Julian West into the future in *Looking Backward*. On the other hand, Schlafstrank, a potion for initiating a healing sleep, was probably inspired by experiments in developing anaesthetic, but is credited with being invented by a female scientist from New Amazonia, Ada of Garretville, in 2239. Corbett also talks about the potential for diet to cure not just medical conditions, but also 'mental and moral failings [...] by means of a wise and judicious selection of food' (p. 92). Her fascination with medical cures appears still to have been strong in 1905 when she provided an endorsement for 'the famous nerve tonic' Phosferine, saying that it 'possesses far and away, beyond any other preparation, really phenomenal Nerve Restoring and Vitalising properties'.²²

Corbett's delight in science is all the more impressive because it occurred at a point in time when science was also being used to oppress women. In 1869, John Stuart Mill argued in *The Subjection of Women* that 'What we now call the nature of woman is an eminently artificial thing',²³ but in the two intervening decades, Mill's logical and rational arguments for the lack of difference between the two sexes were being undermined by a new more consciously scientific approach to the subject.²⁴ Many felt that gender was innate, positing that women's nature was circumscribed by physical laws. Anthropologists linked women and savages together as examples of a more primitive stage of evolution, while craniologists like Paul Broca measured skulls and assumed a direct correlation between size and intelligence. Even where inferiority was not taken for granted, the idea of differences between men and women was underpinned by a conviction that certain characteristics were innate to women's nature and could not be changed. In *The Evolution of Sex*, published in 1889, the same year as *New Amazonia*, Geddes and Thomson argued that 'man thinks more, woman feels more. He discovers more, but remembers less; she is more receptive, and less forgetful'.²⁵ Geddes and Thomson attributed the differences between the two genders to cell biology, claiming that male cells were katabolic and dissipated energy, while female cells were anabolic and preserved energy.

²² Anon., 'Display Ad 3', *The Manchester Guardian* (2 January 1906), p. 5.

²³ John Stuart Mill, *The Enfranchisement of Women [with] the Subjection of Women* (London: Virago, 1983), p. 38.

²⁴ Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 12-13.

²⁵ Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (New York: Humboldt, 1890), p. 250.

There was certainly an awareness of these arguments within the community of the *Women's Penny Paper*. An article entitled 'Science and Women' commented on the fact that Grant Allen was trying to use science to attack the women's movement and oppose higher education for women, but described his attempts as inspired more by 'scientific imagination' than 'scientific research'.²⁶ In another article entitled 'Moral Vivisection' Mrs Alfred C. Osler complained that generalisations about the nature of women were being used to argue against the efficacy of education for women. Women are characterised as incapable of intellectual labour or impartial judgements and resistant to facts or truth. Osler, however, rejected the idea of there being any sound evolutionary arguments against women attempting to work in whatever field they chose, enlisting natural selection to support her case:

[Women] are perfectly satisfied to leave Nature herself to point out by the success or failure of their enterprises, in what direction these capabilities and powers lie. What they cannot admit is that this function, so perfectly and unerringly performed by the law of Natural Selection, should be usurped by a fallible and partial authority; and that one-half the human race should define the aims and limit the aspirations of the other half.²⁷

While Osler does not dispute that women's roles might be determined by nature, she forcibly rejects the idea of women potential being defined by men's construction of their nature. A similar dislike of being defined by men and masculine science comes through from another writer (simply calling herself 'An Odd One'), who remarks on the masculine bias of Darwin and Spencer's observations:

When first I read the works of Darwin and H. Spencer at college, I was very much struck by two things that I observed. One was that all the facts upon which their conclusions were based were either facts relating to males or such as would chiefly come under the observation of males. The second fact was even more surprising than the other, namely, they were both absolutely unsuspecting of their own want of logic, and perfectly unconscious of it. When they thought they were describing Humanity and Life, they were only describing Men, or Males, and they were unconscious that they had left out half the problem. This unwritten volume can only be contributed by women themselves. It is the literature of the future.²⁸

This article highlights a consciousness amongst women involved with the *Women's Penny Paper* that the writing of science was a gendered activity, and that it was

²⁶ Anon., 'Science and Women', *Women's Penny Paper* (30 August 1890), p. 530.

²⁷ Alfred C. Osler, Mrs., 'Moral Vivisection', *Women's Penny Paper* (8 December 1888), p. 5.

²⁸ Anon., 'Oddments by an Odd One', *Women's Penny Paper* (28 December 1889), p. 118.

important for women to contest the masculine-centred discourses of science. Yet, as the article by Osler shows, natural selection could be seen as a positive force for women. As Angelique Richardson has argued, Darwin's emphasis on individual cases and ongoing change spoke against the pigeonholing of women within fixed stereotypes and offered hope for the kind of female empowerment being discussed within the *Women's Penny Paper*.²⁹

Corbett herself did not have much time for masculine constructions of women, writing in *New Amazonia*:

'To be "only a woman" was equivalent in the minds of many male egotists to being only "something better than his dog, and something dearer than his horse" and yet, no sooner did she prove herself gifted with abilities hitherto cherished as exclusively masculine, and therefore infinitely superior to womanly attributes, than she was said to have become "masculine" and regarded as an object of horror'. (p. 36)

In *New Amazonia*, Corbett offers a picture of female evolution as it might occur if untrammelled by the negative environment and culture of Victorian society. The women of *New Amazonia* are nearly seven feet tall and built like goddesses. They enjoy good health and youth till well over a hundred years of age, and freed from restrictive clothing and lack of exercise, they are athletic and strong. These descriptions express Corbett's strong conviction that given the appropriate environment, there would be no limitation on what women could achieve. The key to Corbett's attitude to science can be seen in one of her comments on Koch and Pasteur: 'the world at large looked upon their discoveries as only interesting from the scientists' point of view, failing to recognise that a gigantic revolution in medicine was impending' (p. 91). In other words, science is important to her more as a practical tool for improving everyday life, than as pure research for its own sake. Tellingly, science is allied with common sense by the leaders of *New Amazonia*. When the narrator comments on the disappearance of infectious diseases, her guide replies: 'We have heard of such evils [...] but science and common sense united have combated them effectually' (p. 90). Science and common sense are also linked together in relation to the practical clothing adopted by the women of *New Amazonia*: 'science and common sense had united in forming a costume in which the requirements alike of health, comfort, and beauty had reached their acmé' (p. 11). It could be argued that is it this combination of 'science and common sense' which positions science as a specifically female force within *New Amazonia*. Male scientists have made discoveries, but women have provided the common sense application to the details of day-to-day life. Anita Rose in her commentary on *New Amazonia* also

²⁹ Angelique Richardson, 'Against Finality: Darwin, Mill and the End of Essentialism', *Critical Quarterly*, 53 (2011), pp. 21-44.

sees 'common sense' as a female force, proposing that the 'pure science' arising from the increasing professionalization of science at the fin de siècle 'was often set as a rational masculine domain against what one would be tempted to call a more feminine sensibility or 'common sense'.³⁰ Rose argues that Corbett develops a feminist version of science which sets itself up against a patriarchal scientific ethos: 'Science is respected, but it has been put in its place, implying that in Utopia, the masculine values of nineteenth-century science must also be marginalized. If a scientific or technological tenet is perceived as working against community, it is outlawed in New Amazonia, progressive seeming or not.'³¹ However, this analysis underrates Corbett's appropriation of science as an all-purpose tool to tame and control the utopian space of New Amazonia:

Electricity was made so thoroughly subservient to human will that it supplied light, heat, and powers of volition, besides being made to perform nearly every conceivable domestic use. So well were the elements analysed and understood here that thunderstorms were unknown, and the force which yearly used to slay numbers of people was now attracted, cooped, and subjugated to human necessities. (p. 60)

The scientific dream of controlling nature has been adopted by the female scientists of New Amazonia, and used in the service of women's ideals for a safer, healthier world.³² In New Amazonia food is 'scientifically perfect' and tooth decay has been eradicated because the 'exact chemical constitution of the bone is known' (p. 89). Weather is controlled for the good of all through 'altering the direction of a steady wind and thereby producing either wet or fine weather, by means of a huge artificially created vacuum.' (p. 53)

Even marriage and family life are subservient to science, with proto-eugenic measures being implemented, such as the requirement for a 'medical certificate of soundness' before marriage. More controversially, Corbett also recommended the examination of newborn children to ensure that 'no crippled or malformed infants were permitted to live'. Clearly she saw such measures as being in the interest of the state, despite running counter to maternal instinct, as represented by the 'very painful scenes' witnessed during these examinations (p. 46). However, in the absence of effective birth control or safe abortion, many of the poorest women in Victorian

³⁰ Anita Rose, 'Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia*: Gender Equity, Science, Utopia', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 40 (1997), pp. 6-20 (p. 19).

³¹ Rose, 'Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia*', p. 10.

³² Corbett's vision of women controlling nature is the main way in which she fails to conform to Jane Donawerth's definition of female-centred utopian science. See Jane Donawerth, 'Utopian Science: Contemporary Feminist Science Theory and Science Fiction by Women', *NWSA Journal*, 2 (1990), pp. 535-57.

England were forced to resort to infanticide to cover up illegitimacy or lack of resources to support additional children.³³ In the context of a society where there was an excess of unwanted children, Corbett's measures to remove those least suited for survival might seem like 'common sense', however it also suggests a eugenic concern about the hereditary transmission of defects. Although the term eugenics was not coined until 1883, and eugenics only established as a social movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, the hereditarian principles that underpinned the movement were in practice throughout the Victorian era and earlier. John C. Waller argues that there was a shift in the late-nineteenth-century from a focus on individual marriages to concern over the social impact of hereditary factors on the health of the nation as a whole.³⁴ Corbett describes the children of New Amazonia as being the property of the State, and in this sense is taking the kind of impersonal stance, or as Waller puts it 'population-level gaze' which came to be associated with eugenics and a professionalized science more concerned with statistics than individuals.³⁵ However Corbett justifies this materialistic focus on health through positing an intrinsic connection between health and spirituality. In New Amazonia more spiritual progress can be made whilst alive than after death, so it is important to prolong life, meaning that 'one of the surest ways of reaching heaven is to cultivate the health and perfection of the body'. Conversely, once the body is no longer healthy, spiritual advancement becomes impeded, and so the New Amazonians practise euthanasia to 'liberate the spirit without any wasteful delay' (p. 73). A similar policy is applied to those who are deemed incurably insane. This approach allows Corbett to maintain an ethical rationale for the actions of the state while applying the precepts of modern science.

Corbett does not choose to make any changes to the process of reproduction, as for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman would in her 1915 feminist utopian novel *Herland* where the women reproduce by means of parthenogenesis. Grant Allen described woman as 'the sex sacrificed to reproductive necessities',³⁶ but Corbett's New Amazonians evade this fate by bribing the brightest and best not to reproduce: 'Our laws and social economy hold out wonderful premiums for chastity, and the result is that all our most intellectual compatriots, especially the women, prefer honour and advancement to the more animal pleasures of marriage and re-production of species' (p. 81). In this respect, Corbett's utopia is very different from Bellamy's

³³ See Christine L. Krueger, 'Literary Defenses and Medical Prosecutions: Representing Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Victorian Studies*, 40 (1997), pp. 271-94.

³⁴ John C. Waller, 'Ideas of Heredity, Reproduction and Eugenics in Britain, 1800-1875', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 32 (2001), pp. 457-89.

³⁵ Waller, 'Ideas of Heredity, Reproduction and Eugenics', p. 469.

³⁶ Grant Russell, 'Woman's Place in Nature', *Forum*, 7 (1899), qtd. in Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 4.

future Boston of *Looking Backward*, where ‘the higher positions in the feminine army of industry are intrusted only to women who had been both wives and mothers’.³⁷ Gilman too promotes the value of motherhood in *Herland*, where the best, most gifted women are honoured with the opportunity of becoming mothers, while in Lane’s *Mizora* the leaders of her matriarchal utopian state claim that ‘the MOTHER is the only important part of all life’.³⁸ For Corbett, though, it was ‘the maternal instinct’ rather than motherhood itself that counted in her model for a state where the constitutional relationship would be ‘less that of rulers and ruled, and more like that of mother and children’ (p. 130). Duangrudi Suskang suggests that Corbett emphasised the value of celibate single women to counteract ‘her contemporaries negative attitude toward unmarried women who were regarded as redundant’.³⁹ Lewes also notes a difference in attitude to motherhood between British and American feminist utopian fiction: ‘British heroines effect change by rejecting their traditional roles as wives and mothers and modifying established political structures such as Parliament; American heroines employ their own reproductive power as an instrument of social change’.⁴⁰ Corbett saw a role both for the active, political woman, choosing a career over child-bearing and for mothers, who in New Amazonia were offered ‘as much public homage’ as the unmarried career women (p. 81), though it is interesting that she did not imagine a place for professional women like herself who were both mothers and wage-earners.

Beaumont describes New Amazonia as ‘a eugenicist fantasy’,⁴¹ but, in effect, Corbett is reversing the usual eugenic paradigm of encouraging the most intelligent to breed. Instead the most gifted women are reserved for a kind of priesthood of the intellect, while the women of lesser talents settle for marriage. Corbett was more interested in limiting the population, than choosing which sections should be encouraged to breed. One reason for offering disincentives for marriage is to maintain a stable population, and avoid ‘the ineluctable evils forced on other States by over-population’ (p. 81). Parents of over four children are ‘punished for such recklessness by being treated as a criminal, and deprived of very many valuable civil rights’ (p. 47). This policy is enforced in accordance with ‘Malthusian doctrines’, which in the late nineteenth century signified the kind of contraceptive measures promoted by campaigners for rational reproduction such as Annie Besant, one of Corbett’s role models. Malthusianism, which was about restricting the number of births, had a different focus from eugenics where women’s role was not to restrict births, but to

³⁷ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 153.

³⁸ Mary E. Bradley Lane, *Mizora: A World of Women* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 103.

³⁹ Suskang, ‘Overtaking Patriarchy’, p. 81.

⁴⁰ Lewes, *Dream Revisionaries*, p. 71.

⁴¹ Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.*, p. 124.

select the best men to improve the standard of future generations. However, by the early twentieth century, eugenics and Malthusianism began to converge, with Malthusians using the public interest in eugenics to promote their agenda, even though the eugenics movement did not give official support to birth control methods till after the First World War. Karl Pearson, the first Professor in Eugenics argued that Malthusian teaching ‘reaches only the thoughtful and prudent, and leaves the task of reproducing the community more and more to the bad stock’.⁴² There were also divisions in the women’s movement over the use of birth control, with many women associating contraception with prostitution and promotion of excessive sex indulgence. In the *Women’s Penny Paper* ‘Minerva’ complained about ‘Neo-Malthusians [...] asking wives to adopt the nostrums of courtesans’ when the real problem is that ‘maidens accept impure husbands’.⁴³ On the other hand, Henrietta Müller, the paper’s editor, opposed measures to restrict free access to birth control information and argued in favour of ‘preventive checks’ in preference to continuous childbearing.⁴⁴ Corbett’s main interest was in leaving women free to develop their public role by avoiding marriage and sex completely, but her advocacy of limits on family size suggests that she was also in favour of the use of contraceptive measures.

The *Women’s Penny Paper*’s review of *New Amazonia* showed no concerns about the book’s eugenics or proposals for birth control and concentrates on its positive aspects for women, reading it as ‘an amusing satire on present conditions, and a forecast of the future’.⁴⁵ While it is true that Corbett seemed unaware of the coercive impact of some of her common sense measures, she was obviously convinced that equality, female governance and the sweeping away of corrupt nineteenth-century laws and institutions would inevitably lead to a better world. She could confidently assert that *New Amazonia*, with its aims of ‘[h]ealth of body, the highest technical and intellectual knowledge, and purity of morals’ could ‘boast of being the most perfect, the most prosperous and the most moral community in existence’ (p. 47). Within the context of the community of the *Women’s Penny Paper*, *New Amazonia* can be read as a manifesto aimed at an existing audience rather than a wistful dream for the future. Corbett does not indulge in grandiose schemes to remodel society, which remains a middle-class capitalist state where wealth, health and the individual good are the strongest elements. Instead she focuses on what women could achieve if they used science and common sense to run society. In this respect, she is reflecting back what she has observed of women as breadwinners and

⁴² Letter from Karl Pearson published in *The Malthusian* (January 1900), p. 4, qtd. in Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality* (London: Tauris, 2001), p. 238.

⁴³ [Minerva], ‘Letter’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (6 July 1889), p. 10.

⁴⁴ See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 195, 19.

⁴⁵ C.A. Dawson, ‘Reviews’, *Women’s Penny Paper* (28 December 1889), p. 118.

the inspiration of women's achievements highlighted in the *Women's Penny Paper*. During the short period when the *Women's Penny Paper* was published, it provided a platform for female-centred debate and gave women like Corbett the confidence to express their opinions about the inequalities of nineteenth-century society, contest negative constructions of women's nature, and formulate ideas about what a society run by and for women might look like. Far from being an expression of dissatisfaction over frustrated hopes, *New Amazonia* offers evidence of how feminist utopian fiction played a positive part in the dialogue over women's rights and supported a continuing argument for suffrage and greater representation of women in public life in the late nineteenth century.

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