

**Utopia and the Prohibition of Melancholy: Mulleygrubs and Malcontents in
William Morris's *News from Nowhere***

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*Constipation and melancholy have always gone together.*¹
Walter Benjamin

Abstract: This article has been written as part of my ongoing PhD research. My project re-reads William Morris's utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890) as a mundane intervention into a series of different discursive spaces, which include, but are not limited to, the particular civic space of Trafalgar Square; the metropolitan space of *fin de siècle* London; the figurative space of the national imaginary, as well as its more tangible built environment; the political debates and *lieux de mémoire* of the early British socialist movement and, finally, the generic space of the narrative utopia. The word mundane has a twofold meaning, signifying both the dullness of the routine of political agitation, as well as the non-transcendent worldliness of Morris's utopianism, which is immanently rooted in the everyday life of late Victorian society. In this article, I examine the status of melancholy in Morris's projected utopian society, responding to recent critical discussion of the marginal figure of the Mulleygrub in *Nowhere*. I do so with reference to Frederic Jameson's elaboration of the utopian impulse, as well as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic account of the psychical state of melancholy. The ambivalent status and semantic instability of the Mulleygrubs – a word which can refer both to physical ailments and to psychological dejection – has led some commentators to argue that residual forms of exclusivity persist in Morris's ostensibly hospitable post-revolutionary society. This bears out Wolf Lepenies' hypothesis that utopia necessarily entails a prohibition of melancholy. I argue that the situation is more complexly nuanced. The uncertainty surrounding the Mulleygrubs does not necessarily imply a proscriptive, or prescriptive, desire to cure the 'disease' of melancholy; rather, it should be read as part of an attempted self-supersession on the part of the heart-sick revolutionary agents who brought *Nowhere* into being in the hope of superseding the lived reality of alienation and widespread social melancholia.

The etymological roots of the word melancholy come from the Greek *melagkholia* (from *melas/melanos* black + *kholē* bile), but where does this black bile come from

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Left-wing Melancholy', trans. by Ben Brewster, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press, 1996-2003), II (1999), pp. 423-427 (p. 426).

and what would it be to live in a world which has succeeded in draining it from the social body? This question has troubled would-be founders of an ideal commonwealth at least since Plato's *Republic* promised 'not to promote the particular happiness of a single class, but, so far as possible, of the whole community'.² William Morris's utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890) is emphatically *not* an attempt to figure forth a blueprint for an ideal society. As Morris remarked, '[t]he only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author'.³ Nonetheless, like the *Republic*, the post-revolutionary communist society presented in *News from Nowhere* is concerned with strategies for the (non-utilitarian) maximisation of happiness. The nature of the relationship between utopian speculation and melancholic stasis has been intimated by Wolf Lepenies, who suggests that 'the inadequacy of melancholy' as a response to the nightmare of historical change 'releases utopian desire'.⁴ The protagonist William Guest's dream of Nowhere, then, is just as much a clarion call against the 'desperate pessimists' whom Morris encountered in the course of his socialist activism, as it is a vision of a happier future.⁵ However, it is unclear what place, if any, this future leaves for those who fall prey to melancholy, or whether it can be assumed that the social 'disease' of melancholy has been universally 'cured'. In this essay I offer a reading of *News from Nowhere* which sets out to answer this question with reference to the ambivalent status accorded to the so-called Mulleygrubs in Nowhere.

² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955, repr. 1987), pp. 185-6.

³ William Morris, 'Looking Backward' in *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal' 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), pp. 419-25 (p. 420).

⁴ Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, trans. by Jeremy Gaines & Doris Jones (Harvard, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 21.

⁵ William Morris, *Journalism: Contributions to 'Commonweal' 1885-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), p. 260.

Happiness is seemingly ubiquitous in *News from Nowhere*. This is hardly surprising given that the pioneers of Nowhere soon found themselves asking the following question: ‘What is the object of Revolution? Surely to make people happy.’⁶ The projected society into which William Guest has awoken ostensibly manifests the values of fellowship, conviviality and tolerance. It is a dream-vision of realised communism which provoked Paul Meier to suggest that Morris’s utopia constitutes ‘an act of faith in the possibility of being happy’.⁷ The happiness to which Meier refers has been brought about by the actualisation of a society of non-alienated labour and free co-operation between federated communes. This social reorganisation has inculcated possibilities for human self-development and flourishing. Nowhere is described as a ‘happy world’ (CW, XVI, 136) which has realised the ‘happiness and rest of complete communism’ (CW, XVI, 186). This vision of generalised contentment has a functionally utopian value insofar as it encourages readers to interrogate the set of capitalistic social relations which reproduce unhappiness on such a widespread scale in the present. The image of such achieved happiness in a distant future, however, might offer little more than palliative consolation. Insofar as utopian speculation offers a response to the injustices of the present historical moment, such speculation, by itself, can never entirely supersede the immanent contradictions of this present. The contradictions must first be forced through in the worldlier sphere of social praxis.

Wolf Lepenies usefully draws out the implications of this aspect of the utopian problematic in his ambitious history of melancholy and society. Lepenies notes that

⁶ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1910-15; repr. 1992), XVI, 92. Further references will be given, in brackets, in the body of the text in the following form: CW, XVI, 92.

⁷ Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, trans. by Frank Gubb, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978), I: 260.

‘in utopia, a counterworld is being devised and with it a counter to melancholy’, but he goes on to point out that ‘[t]he danger for a utopia resides only in the residues of world that might manage to survive and might thus provoke melancholy’.⁸ One way in which the residues of the old world survive in Nowhere is in the character of Old Hammond. Ensclosed in the British Library, he is a solitary figure in Nowhere – a last vestige, perhaps, of the capitalistic division of intellectual and manual labour. By his own admission, Hammond is ‘much tied to the past, [*his*] past’ (CW, XVI, 55), but this situation must, to some extent, preclude his being fully present in the redeemed future. As Matthew Beaumont suggests, Hammond’s unique insight into the past makes him something of an ‘anachronism’ and an ‘anomalous presence’ in Nowhere.⁹ Hammond is a repository of historical consciousness in Nowhere; his narrative of ‘How the Change Came’ offers an account of the revolutionary process which brought Nowhere into being, but the story which he has to tell is suffused with a certain kind of melancholy. What, for example, are we to make of the claim that ‘[n]ot a few’ of the reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries ‘actually died of worry’, whilst ‘many committed suicide’ (CW, XVI, 129)? Like Walter Benjamin’s vision of the ‘angel of history’, Hammond’s face remains turned towards the past.¹⁰ His act of bearing witness to the catastrophe of Nowhere’s (pre)history sets him apart from the majority of Nowhere’s inhabitants, who are less familiar with the ‘brisk, hot-headed times’ of

⁸ Lepenies, p. 175.

⁹ Matthew Beaumont, ‘*News from Nowhere* and the Here and Now: Reification and the Representation of the Present in Utopian Fiction’, *Victorian Studies*, 47, 1 (2004), 33-54 (p. 43).

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, trans. by Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michal W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap, 1996-2003), IV (2003), 389-400 (p. 392). In this essay, Benjamin refers to Paul Klee’s painting, *Angelus Novus*, which ‘shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread.’ Benjamin suggests that ‘[t]his is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet.’

the immediate post-revolutionary period (CW, XVI, 55). Neither Guest nor we can ever know what Hammond leaves *out* of this account, nor what recursive sadness is contained within the onward movement of the narrative he presents. The dead will never be awakened, although it remains possible that the loss they represent will become a source of melancholy.

The idea that the failure adequately to mourn a lost object might precipitate the psychical state of melancholy was put forward by Sigmund Freud in his short essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (first drafted in 1915). In Freud’s account:

the distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings.¹¹

Freud’s path-breaking elucidation of the connection between mourning and melancholia represents an attempt to move beyond the contemporary consensus that melancholia was a ‘pathological condition’ needing to be referred to various forms of ‘medical treatment’.¹² In *Nowhere*, however, the cessations of interest in the outside world, which Freud diagnostically couples with melancholia, are seemingly unheard of. This is because Nowherean society is oriented towards praxis: all human self-activity has become externally directed such that ‘by far the greater number [...] would be unhappy if they were not engaged in actually making things’ (CW, XVI, 84). *News from Nowhere* presents a vision of a society in which the sensuous reality of non-alienated labour has become a means towards self-fulfilment, as well as a source of pleasure. Forms of healthy *Vergegenständlichung* (objectification) prevail such that each person individually realises the human potential to ‘put forth whatever is in him, and make his hands set forth his mind and his soul’ (CW, XVI, 150).

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia [1915]’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), XIV, p. 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 243-4.

Ostensibly, the change in productive relations in Nowhere precludes the (re)emergence of melancholic inwardness which thrives in a capitalist society of alienated commodity-production. It is unclear why anyone should fall into a depressive mood if everyone is 'free to exercise his [or her] special faculty to the utmost' (CW, XVI, 81). We cannot be entirely certain, however, that all traces of melancholy have been successfully flushed out from Nowhere's social body.

The presence or absence of melancholy in Nowhere is difficult to determine, given that Guest only encounters a limited number of the society's inhabitants. A clue is offered, though, in some passing remarks made by one of his hosts which acknowledge melancholy as a social phenomenon belonging to the pre-revolutionary era. During Guest's tour of some de-familiarised London locales, his guide Dick somewhat abruptly mentions that

in the early days of our epoch there were a good many people who were hereditarily afflicted with a disease called Idleness, because they were the direct descendents of those who in the bad times used to force other people to work for them.

(CW, XVI, 39)

He goes on to assert that he is

happy to say that all that is gone by now; the disease is either extinct, or exists in such a mild form that a short course of aperient medicine carries it off. It is sometimes called Blue-devils now, or the Mulleygrubs. Queer names, ain't they?

(*Ibid.*)

Dick's account of the changed social relations of production implies that there are two distinct, but not unconnected sources of the 'disease called Idleness', only one of which has properly been eradicated. The first source of idleness is identified with the bourgeoisie, the class of parasites who used to exploit the labour of others. The projected elimination of this class *as a class* during the revolution has ensured that the associated form of idleness has disappeared. However, Dick's casual off-handedness

about the persistence of the ‘disease’ – ‘it is either extinct, or exists in [...] a mild form’ – should alert us to the fact that something is awry in his account, particularly given that the suggestion of its persistence includes that unusual word: ‘Mulleygrubs’, or ‘Blue-devils’. So what are the mulleygrubs?

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) lists the following ways in which the word can be used:

Mulligrub, n., **1.a.** A state or fit of depression; low spirits. Also: a bad temper or mood. [...] **b.** stomach ache, colic; diarrhoea. [...] **2.** A fit or bout of mulligrubs. *Obs. rare.* **3.** A sulky or ill-tempered person.¹³

The queerness which Dick associates with the mulleygrubs partly stems from the word’s semantic instability. As this definition makes clear, its meaning bifurcates to include both bodily and mental afflictions. It is equally clear from this twofold definition that Dick is likely to have confused the lack of motivation to labour which stems from depression with that which arises in connection with the supplementary meaning of the word – referring to an ailment which it would be possible to treat with a ‘short course of aperient medicine’ (CW, XVI, 39). Frederic Jameson includes such aperient medicines in a list of ‘Utopian supplements’ which fulfil a recuperative function within capitalist society by ensuring that consumers achieve accommodation-through-gratification with the status quo.¹⁴ For Jameson, such curious quirks of the free-market represent ‘doses of utopian excess’ which are ‘carefully measured out in all our commodities’.¹⁵ Commodity consumption is an arena of libidinal investment which encompasses ‘even the most subordinate and shamefaced products of everyday life, such as aspirins, laxatives and deodorants [...] all harbouring muted promises of

¹³ <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>> [accessed 08/11/2010].

¹⁴ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005; repr. 2007), p. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

a transfigured body'.¹⁶ Jameson's detection of a utopian impulse in the listed chemical supplements, an impulse which is related to the desire to rid the body of its black bile, bears out Wolf Lepenies' suggestion that '[u]topian thought [...] does not – as a reaction to the misery of the moment – allow for melancholy'.¹⁷ With reference to my particular example, Dick's mention of aperient medicine in *Nowhere* seems to verify Lepenies' suggestion that the concept of utopia entails a prohibition of melancholy.

Some recent commentators have seized upon Dick's unenthusiastic mention of Mulleygrubs in order to claim that residual forms of exclusivity exist in *Nowhere*, despite its apparent openness and tolerance. Patrick Parrinder, for example, reads Dick's remarks as evidence of a libertarian-eugenic current in Morris's thought.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Marcus Waithe's measured discussion of the limits of utopian hospitality in *Nowhere* notes that Morris's 'refusal to grant Guest indefinite asylum' preserves 'the integrity of utopian borders', adding that '[t]he eradication of "Mulleygrubs" and the elimination of idleness have a similar effect'.¹⁹ He quotes Dick's discussion of idleness and points out that 'this is a form of dissent that has never been tolerated in *Nowhere*, not during the transition phase, and not afterwards'.²⁰ This analysis overlooks the fact that idleness itself is not actually proscribed in *Nowhere*, nor is it deemed to be problematic, as evidenced during the boat-trip up the Thames, where Ellen's idleness is described as 'the idleness of a person, strong and well-knit in body and mind, deliberately resting' (*CW*, XVI, 189). More pertinently, Waithe's construal of the Mulleygrubs' 'idleness' as a tacit form of dissent implies that it is both

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Lepenies, p. 91.

¹⁸ Patrick Parrinder, 'Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris', *Utopian Studies*, 8.2 (1997), 1-12.

¹⁹ Marcus Waithe, *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Ideal of Hospitality* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), p. 195.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

intentional and willed, which it may not be. As has been shown, the form of idleness that is *not* tolerated in Nowhere is the form of class-based idleness identified with the exploitative – and, crucially, superseded – social relations of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, if it is to be maintained that the reference to Mulleygrubs represents a moment of unwitting exclusivity in Morris’s utopian society, we must force the ambivalent status of the Mulleygrubs into the open.

I have identified two possible frames of reference with which to pin down the reason for Dick’s hostility to the Mulleygrubs’ idleness. Firstly, there is an idleness which arises from the constitutive lassitude of the bourgeoisie as a class and, secondly, there is a very different kind of ‘idleness’ that results from an overabundance of black bile brewed up by blue devils. If the first way of accounting for Dick’s hostility can be explained with reference to the supersession of class society, this leaves us to account for the second. Dick’s uncritical adoption of the assumption that a ‘short course of aperient medicine’, as opposed to, say, psychotherapy, might be enough to rid any given Mulleygrub of his or her ‘idleness’ is partly indicative of Morris’s failure to think beyond the *fin de siècle* milieu of ‘medical materialism’, described by William James.²¹ What is less clear, however, is whether Dick is being similarly retrogressive in his desire to prevent people from suffering bouts of the Mulleygrubs. This is especially so given Old Hammond’s account of the motive-force behind the revolutionary upheaval which brought Nowhere into being:

Looking back now, we can see that the great motive-power of the change was a longing for freedom and equality, akin if you please to the unreasonable passion of the lover; a sickness of heart that rejected with loathing the aimless solitary life of the well-to-do educated man of [the nineteenth century].
(CW, XVI, 104-5).

²¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, 1906), pp. 13-4.

The reference to the ‘unreasonable passion of the lover’ is telling, not least because the various intimations of sexual jealousy – Clara’s affair and the incident described in *Maple-Durham* (*CW*, XVI, 55-6, 166) – provide further evidence of the persistence of ‘negative’ emotion in *Nowhere*. Jealousy, like melancholy, feeds upon a lack: unavoidably, these emotions will threaten to disturb the plenitude of social life in *Nowhere*. But the fact that Hammond identifies the very revolutionaries who brought *Nowhere* into being with such moments of negativity and heart-sickness is surely significant. This identification complicates the pseudo-dystopian reading of *Nowhere* as an implicitly intolerant society which seeks to root out and liquidate, or coercively cure, rogue members who fall prey to the Mulleygrubs. In light of Old Hammond’s remark, it is more convincing to read the desire to eradicate the Mulleygrubs as a project of self-supersession on the part of heart-sick revolutionaries and as part of a collective effort to supersede the pre-revolutionary legacy of alienation and social melancholia. This curiously self-contradictory position has been clarified by Terry Eagleton, who concurs that the hope for social revolution does indeed go together with a project of self-supersession: ‘[t]he only reason for being a Marxist is to get to the point where you can stop being one’.²² The above-cited examples prove that this project is as-yet incomplete in *Nowhere*; more troublingly, we are asked to recognise that it is a project which may never achieve completion. Negativity lingers in the very name of *Nowhere*. Far from betraying a moment of unspoken intolerance, then, Dick’s ambivalence about the Mulleygrubs suggests that the problem of melancholia is one which *Nowhere* has yet to resolve, and which *nowhere* has yet solved.

²² Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards A Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981; repr. 2009), p. 161.