Narrative Middles
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Unlike the classic utopias of the early modern period, the utopian narratives that flourished in late-Victorian England involve time travel rather than journeys through space. The narrative model inaugurated by More’s Utopia—a traveler who discovers a previously unknown society that is both prosperous and peaceful and which comes to represent the ideal of social organization—gives way in the last three decades of the nineteenth century to a different form of narrative: the voyage now occurs through time and the “no place” visited is familiar, a “here” now transformed into an idealized version of itself. In these novels, time travel usually occurs in the direction of the future, but the future is curiously historical, riddled with the presence of enigmatic relics from an undetermined past, such as the White Sphinx in H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine (1895), or marked in its representation of everyday life as a return to a simpler, pre-industrial way of life, as in the medieval pastoralism of William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890). At once future-oriented and thoroughly historical, nineteenth-century utopian fiction can thus be said to occur in a fictional “no time” in which the “now” of traditional realist representation becomes unmoored from its programmatic presentism.

This state of affairs results in a curious narrative paradox. On the one hand, the middle of the narrative is suspended between a fully realized future (utopia proper) and a doomed or unpromising present for which the future
seems to exist beyond its own capacity to think or imagine it; that is, there is no middle. On the other, the structural suspension of the middle accounts for a characteristic feature of the genre: long expository passages that describe the functioning of the new or evolved society and provide, in retrospect, a historical account of how it came to pass; that is, there is nothing but middle. The suspension of the middle could lead us into a world of pure fantasy in which time would cease to be relational and the temporal division into past, present, and future would no longer obtain. Or indeed it could lead us to its obverse: a thickly described preterite governed by the sequential, expository logic of historical writing in which the past is ever expandable as past. Yet, in the case of late-Victorian utopian fiction (LVU), the latency of the middle gives rise to formal patterns and rhetorical effects that lend the genre a promissory quality we tend to associate less with fiction than with political discourse and which had up to this point been all but absent in post-Romantic literature.

From the perspective of literary form, the latency of the middle accounts for the peculiar amorphousness of the genre. To begin with, LVU consists of a travel narrative in which traveling does not organize the story. Unlike works belonging to the Bakhtinian chronotope of the road (Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Cervantes’ *Don Quijote*, Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*, all belong to this series), LVU takes for granted the displacement of the protagonist and uses his destination, rather than the incidents experienced along the way, as the narrative node of the story. This is true of classic utopian narratives, but, as Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* so amply illustrates, traveling remains the guiding structural conceit making possible the protagonist’s chance encounters with previously unknown societies. The time of time travel in LVU is itself compressed or entirely elided in a before-and-after structure more reminiscent of dream or dreamlike states than of physical displacements. The plot of LVU, moreover, generates no suspense since it is unmotivated, at least internally, by desire. Insofar as it is perceived to have already been fulfilled in the event of utopia proper (the happy ending to end all happy endings), desire is replaced for the protagonist by a sense of enchantment or wonderment that raises expectations about his own society but is experienced as a plentitude arrived at rather than pursued. If LVU lacks the disorienting anxiety and tingling sensations created by suspense when it occurs in a story whose ending is unknown, it also exists in a permanent state of suspension in which no doubt, no enigma, no mystery remains to be solved in a utopian space that, by definition, need not, or need no longer, look forward to a better future. The character system, too, is curiously barren in LVU given that the time traveler always travels alone and neither acts nor is acted upon by those he encounters. The characters he does encounter, moreover, are representative by design and tell us more about
their society than about themselves as individuals. Indeed, as a passive witness to a new way of life that he strives to describe but in which he cannot readily participate, the time traveler in LVU engages in none of the transformative logic on which the biographical narratives so common to the nineteenth century are premised and which the Bildungsroman so aptly illustrates. The travel narrative in LVU treats or exposes the transformation of place rather than of character, of the collective rather than of the individual, and therefore does not follow realism’s traditional narrative logic of development in which the life of a youthful protagonist comes into focus only from the retrospective perspective of his or her mortality. The juxtaposition of two distinct time periods elides the process whereby “this” became “that” and “then” becomes “now.” In LVU, the destination of the time traveler, even though it is portrayed as a radically transformed version of the origin, is presented as a fait accompli rather than as the result of an ongoing process. The narrative form of LVU, in short, is defined by static states rather than by the events that would bring them about.

On a rhetorical level, however, the same narrative reserve that undermines the architecture of the story becomes the condition of possibility of a properly utopian vision insofar as it creates a semantic vacuum that invites speculation on what should come to fill it. In an absent or suspended middle, form is divorced from its putative content, with the result that the unpromising present can no longer appeal to its narrative representation as a means of legitimating it (as in traditional realism) and the future presents itself only as pure or empty form, an abstract construct that is yet to be invested with referential attributes: objects, affect, identifications, institutions, expressiveness, and so forth. Indeed, the hard tendency toward referential density of what Fredric Jameson has usefully called “ontological realism” is suspended in LVU or, better, displaced proleptically as something to be retrofitted into the real of a possible present. To the extent that the absence of form is also a demand for form, the reticence of the middle thus becomes a precondition for reimagining society as something completely new, as something yet to be formed. Time travel situates utopia in the realm of the formally plausible since, by occupying the same geographical space—London in 1890 versus London in 2101, say—it calls for new content, which can only be constructed by evaluating existing social conditions and assessing historical alternatives. LVU can thus be said to gather in its narrative momentum the rhetorical conditions of possibility of the promise: the making of the promise and its fulfillment are separated by a time lag or period of latency during which nothing pertaining to the force of the promise made in fact happens. Similarly, narrative action in LVU is suspended between the present and a future to which it is connected only by virtue of its spatial continuity, a tenuous metonymic traversing the otherwise empty
time lapse that separates two disparate moments of a historically sedimented geographical place. The narrative’s discursive energies are thus directed towards shaping an image of the future as a reality far removed from an already inhabited present. The promise, a performative speech act that spans the middle, is ever open in LVU since the promise made by the imaginative representation of utopia is yet to be fulfilled from the perspective of the present, a fulfillment nevertheless towards which it makes us aspire by deliberately avoiding the false promise of narrative development. A pattern of expectation aptly captured in the title of William Morris’s utopian novel: *News from Nowhere.*

That the future in LVU is as reassuringly uneventful as the narrative that shapes it—nothing actually *happens* in utopia—might well account for the genre’s remarkable popularity. Far from jeopardizing its success in the literary marketplace, LVU’s unexceptional formal properties very possibly helped to guarantee it since the lack of narrative “middle” is also the absence or avoidance of historical change itself (understood as revolutionary violence). To travel into the future is to skip the time intervening between a present that needs to change and a future that represents an already changed reality but bears none of the marks of the transformative events that have led up to it. Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888) is illustrative of such avoidance, proposing the peaceful transformation of nineteenth-century liberal capitalism into a popular twenty-first-century state monopoly that comes about “naturally” as industrial “evolution” leads to political consensus: “Public opinion had become fully ripe for [change], and the whole mass of the people was behind it.”6 LVU promises change, to be sure, but in the form of a future in which the sense of regularity in the everyday has been restored after the messy convulsions we tend to associate with revolutionary change have become a thing of the past or have been altogether avoided. Bourgeois terror of proletarianization is attenuated by staging change as rational choice, while change is itself assimilated into a structure of sameness more in keeping with an ethos of shared prosperity than with an ingrained belief in social equality. From the perspective of narrative dynamics, LVU thus makes a fitting end to a “serious century,” to use Franco Moretti’s suggestive diagnostic, in that it consists almost entirely of narrative “fillers” and points in the direction of an uneventful future filled with nothing but more “fillers.”

Expressed in this manner, the narrative paradox of LVU must be understood to provide imaginative solutions to the cultural anxieties and political aspirations of a society accustomed to a gradual pace of change that now found itself in the midst of transition. But the latency of the middle, as I shall argue in what follows, is more than the formal condition of possibility for imagining the future. The very shape of futurity is at stake in LVU, a genre that
emerges at a historical crossroads in which the cultural assimilation of Marx and Darwin has radically transformed the subject’s perception of time. The latency of the middle is thus the trace that makes visible the difference between the representation of time (narrative) and its allegorizations (mortality). I first trace a genealogy of late-Victorian notions of temporality, and, in the second part of the essay, I read Morris’s *News from Nowhere* as an attempt to come to terms with this newfound sense of temporality by imagining the future as a belated recovery of the past. I end with a brief reflection on the “middleness” of LVU, which, like many of the other paraliterary genres that flourished in the last decades of the nineteenth century in England, belongs to what with hindsight can be described as a transitional narrative space that lies somewhere between a realism that is now perceived to be exhausted as a representational paradigm and the aesthetics of immanence we tend to associate with the as yet to be consecrated program of modernist representation.

**The River of Time**

Commentators of LVU have tended to focus on the economic and political conditions of England during the last three decades of the nineteenth century to account for its emergence. To be sure, the transformational events that gave this period an unmistakable sense of economic and social malaise—the crisis of capitalism that came to be known as the Great Depression of 1873–96; the “scramble” for overseas territories on the part of Western European imperial powers; the political organization of the growing industrial labor force—gave imaginative writers the impetus to speculate on new forms of social organization. But, to the extent that capitalism, imperialism, and socialism were all international in scope, utopian speculation was now obliged to accommodate or be responsive to a new conception of the global. Indeed, the shift in fictional paradigms from a spatial to a temporal horizon of perfectibility at the turn of the nineteenth century corresponds at least in part to the considerable conceptual distance separating the early modern vision of the globe from its modern counterpart. The world from which early modern utopias emerged was still in the process of being charted and news of European explorations made the concept of utopia fathomable at its geographical limits. In contrast, the interconnectedness of the world at the end of the nineteenth century, achieved materially through an ever-expanding network of maritime routes, railroads, and telegraphic cables, had transformed a discourse of “discovery” into one of commerce and colonization.

What little of the globe remained unexplored and unmapped by Europeans at century’s end had ceased to hold...
the promise of a heretofore undiscovered El Dorado, coming instead to be envisioned as an unfathomable Heart of Darkness where civilization, far from reaching perfection, would find its negative image. By the 1880s, the world, as Eric Hobsbawm succinctly puts it, “was now genuinely global.” Accordingly, the conception of an isolated utopia, indeed the conception of utopia as an island like the ones we find in More or in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627), was no longer available as an imaginative possibility. When H. G. Wells calls for a planetary conception of utopia in *A Modern Utopia* (1905)—“No less than a planet will serve the purposes of a modern utopia”—he is invoking the logic of interconnection that informed the different utopian visions that flourished during this period and for which his “World-State” serves as an appropriate speculative coda.

The globalization of the globe goes some way towards explaining why utopian thought at the end of the nineteenth century adopted a temporal narrative vehicle rather than a spatial one, but cannot fully account for the internal temporal dynamics of the genre. Why, for instance, should LVU be premised on a future vision of society that resembles the present only topographically, as in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, which takes place in a future Boston recognizable only by its harbor and the trace of the Charles? And what conditions the possibility of a narrative structure that deprives the middle of any recognizable semantic and cognitive referentiality? We must first briefly look at the cultural comprehension of time in late-nineteenth-century England in order to get a sense of how the Victorians might have understood time travel during a period in which time itself underwent a major conceptual realignment. Several political, technological, and social variables can be adduced to account for this realignment: the standardization of time with the adoption of Greenwich Mean Time in 1847 and its application in railway scheduling and maritime navigation; the acceleration of the pace of everyday life as urban living becomes the central cultural experience of the nation; the management of time in industrial production as a precursor to full-fledged Taylorism; the speeding-up of the means of communication with the reform of the General Post Office and the subsequent introduction of the Uniform Penny Post in 1840 and the GPO’s monopolization of the telegraph after 1869; the implementation of political term limits as the pressures of democratization expand the electoral franchise and more and more citizens participate in a periodic ritual of cyclical political renewal; the future-oriented aspirations of a liberal culture geared towards progress, social mobility, and personal and professional improvement; the biopolitical recalibration of family size and generational turnover as birth-control practices, the prohibition of child labor, and improved rates of life expectancy bring the New Woman closer
to the center of political and cultural life; the foreshortening of eternity and
the foreclosure of the afterlife in an increasingly secular culture; serialization,
mechanical reproduction, and iterative performative practices in the arts. The
significance of each of these developments to a genealogical account of time
in the late nineteenth century is considerable, but in order to understand the
temporal horizon of LVU in particular we must consider two specific discursive
formations whose influence among the imaginative writers who practiced
it was determinant in bringing about their individual visions of utopia: Marxism
and Darwinism.

It is in general well established that writers of LVU submitted the ideas of
Marx and Darwin to the speculative pressure of social planning provided by
More’s narrative blueprint. The publication of Darwin’s The Descent of Man
in 1871 and the somewhat belated dissemination of The Communist Manifesto
(1848) in English in the 1870s with a new preface by Marx and Engels coin-
cided with the publication of Bulwer-Lytton’s The Coming Race (1871) and
Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (1872), two of the texts most often cited in accounts
of LVU for having been among the first to reinvent the utopian fictional
paradigm in the nineteenth century. The cultural assimilation of Marx and
Darwin during the 1870s had in any case created the discursive conditions
necessary for LVU to be intelligible both as a formal solution to contemporary
social contradictions and, at the same time, as a generic logic in its own right
given that both dialectical materialism and natural selection offered alterna-
tive narrative possibilities for imagining the world anew. Furthermore, the
often explicit references to Marxian and Darwinian ideas that we find in LVU
legitimated its utopian claims by providing an all-encompassing or indeed
global theoretical framework for thinking about the future. Northrop Frye, in
his analysis of utopia as a literary genre, remarks on its Marxian undergirding:
“The nineteenth-century utopia had a close connection with the growth of
socialist political thought and shared its tendency to think in global terms.”
Socialism, as Engels conceived it, was “scientific” rather than “utopian,” part of
an all-encompassing historical process in which local, isolated manifestations
of communal living, however perfect, could hamper or slow down the inevi-
table progress towards the global, properly scientific achievement of a classless
society. Darwin’s theory of evolution was equally well suited to provide a con-
ceptual framework for the global scope of the new utopian imagination in that
natural selection is a law that is relevant to all living organisms and, whatever
the merit of its social applications, still stands as an appealing mechanism for
speculating on the malleability of human nature. A common topos of utopian
fiction since More, the question of whether human nature is immutable or
adaptable to political and moral exigencies becomes, after Darwin, a temporal
rather than a categorical issue since change can now be understood to occur gradually and biologically, not abruptly and rationally. One must also include under this head Darwin’s own story as a scientist who was uniquely positioned to formulate a theory of evolution after having traveled around the world aboard the Beagle, a story that had been popularized by the publication of his extraordinary travel journals in 1839. To the extent that his travel journals offer a description of the world as a vast laboratory, the cultural imaginary could hold Darwin’s theory of evolution as a global phenomenon both by the manner in which it was formulated as well as by its promise of universal applicability. Little, however, has been made of the temporal implications of these theories to the conceptualization of time that informs LVU even as it is commonly acknowledged that many of its practitioners were keen readers of Marx and Darwin.

Of the two discursive formations, Marxism clearly offers the most immediately accessible temporal framework for utopian fiction, not least because it offers a theory of history that can be readily extrapolated into the future. If it is true, as Louis Althusser famously claimed, that Marx opened the “Continent of History” to scientific inquiry, it is also true that historical materialism, the theory that he and Engels discovered in this continent, becomes the philosophical formalization of a complex recalibration of time. The first thing to point out in this regard is that in Marxism there is no historical time as such, only specific structures of historicity that are determined, in the last instance, by the different modes of production on which social formations are based. The Hegelian idea of history as a purposeful continuity of time subject to a sequence of presents is rejected in favor of a theory of history in which a number of different levels (economic, political, legal, ideological, etc.) coexist, each with its own historical structure, particular time, and mode of production. These levels are relatively autonomous, each following its own temporal rhythms (punctuated by development, revolutions, breaks, and so on) and articulated relative to the whole, a whole whose temporal structure cannot be read in the continuity of life or on the face of a clock, but must rather be constructed conceptually out of specific structures of production. Indeed, the history of society can be described as a discontinuous succession of modes of production. In The Communist Manifesto, in which we already find the mature formulation of their materialist conception of history, Marx and Engels describe historical change in these terms: “Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man’s ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?” Time, in this scheme, is multiplied, differentiated, complicated; in short, historicized.
Long-standing debates within Marxism on the question of whether historical materialism is teleological or not tend to obscure the degree to which it offers a law of historical development that transforms traditional conceptualizations of causality and temporal sequence. At any given historical conjuncture, several times or temporalities coexist, but we can talk of uneven development, backwardness, or the survival of archaic forms only as a differential articulation, not by reference to a particular temporal baseline against which to measure relative progress. Rather than a concatenation of events brought about by historical agents, history in Marx becomes a dialectical process propelled by class struggles based upon economic interest (upon “the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes,” as the Manifesto puts it) whose internal contradictions will lead inexorably to the collapse of the dominant mode of production. In the case of the capitalist mode of production, the bourgeoisie unwittingly provides the proletariat with the very conditions for its own emancipation. “The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (50). From the perspective of temporality, the point to be made is that historical materialism offers a vision of the future as an inevitable reality that now lies dormant or latent in the present conditions of existence. Internal contradictions doom the present configuration of society, but do not prescribe a particular future as such. Far from being a recipe for inaction, the inevitability of the triumph of the proletariat is conceived of as the result of political organization since the proletariat has first to be formed into a class. This is achieved by laying bare the secret of surplus value, the essential mechanism of capitalist exploitation.

With the formulation of historical materialism and the revelation of the character of surplus value, socialism became a science. In “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” Engels elaborates upon this claim by sharpening the distinction, first made in The Communist Manifesto, between a reactive form of socialism that seeks a resolution to class antagonism through the creation of concrete utopian communities outside society and the properly scientific form of socialism that aligns itself with the working classes and participates in political and revolutionary action. The utopian systems developed by Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen were certainly founded in opposition to capitalism as living embodiments of the spirit of equality and cooperation, but, for Marx and Engels, they seemed both premature (the material conditions of possibility
for the emancipation of the proletariat were not yet present in the early part of the nineteenth century) and counterproductive insofar as they sidestepped political action in favor of social experimentation. The ever-receding horizon of a classless society whose inevitability is scientifically ascertained by historical materialism trumps the actualization of discrete communities that discourage class identification. The point is not that utopia or utopian thought is to be rejected wholesale; rather, it is that concrete utopias make utopian thought seem all too possible. Though not commonly cited within Marxist circles, Derrida in this context offers a valuable insight:

Although there is a critical potential in utopia which one should no doubt never completely renounce, above all when one can turn it into a motif of resistance against all alibis and all “realist” and “pragmatist” resignations, I still mistrust the word. In certain contexts, utopia, the word in any case, is all too easily associated with the dream, with *demobilisation*, with an impossibility that urges renouncement instead of action. The “impossible” of which I often speak is not the utopian, on the contrary it lends its own motion to desire, to action and to decision, it is the very figure of the real. It has duration, proximity, urgency.\(^{17}\)

From this perspective, the constructedness and self-consciously fictive quality of utopian arrangements in LVU accords well with the open-endedness of scientific socialism in that its fantastic quality already places it beyond the realm of the possible and tends to postpone its concretization absolutely. Utopia is not to be thought of in teleological terms at all, but rather in terms of an unreachable ideal; utopia is not an end in itself but an imaginative means out of the present, a call for “permanent revolution” or, in Derrida’s terms, for a “democracy to come.”

There is a further temporal element in Marxist theory worth considering, for it offers a corrective to the seeming timelessness of utopia in LVU or, what amounts to the same thing, its seeming ahistoricity. In Althusser’s classic formulation, the reproduction of the conditions of production is secured by ideology, which functions within ideological state apparatuses. Fictional utopias provide a limit case for the work of ideology insofar as the particular solutions they have brought to bear on the problem of reproduction—the abolition of property, the simplification of the means of production, the elimination of antagonistic classes, the invention or discovery of technologies that reduce or altogether do away with labor, and so forth—render ideology structurally inoperative, at least for as long as these solutions eliminate the need to interpellate individuals as subjects. Yet, the question of ideology remains relevant in
these texts in that they commonly situate utopia in a timeless, ahistorical, static present that is all too reminiscent of the Marxist description of a naturalized ideological state. Ideology, as Althusser notes, is a concept and a category that has no history: “ideology in general has no history, not in a negative sense (its history is external to it), but in an absolutely positive sense.” As a point of comparison, consider that while ideology is hardly ever mentioned explicitly in LVU, it performs a key narrative function in dystopian fiction, acting as both the form and the content of the genre’s critique of totalitarianism (think of doublespeak and Big Brother in George Orwell’s *Nine­teen Eighty-Four* [1949]). Indeed, the very absence of ideology in LVU may well have made the genre all the more appealing for a public living through a period of economic and political uncertainty. The absence of ideology in LVU’s utopian arrangement, in any case, corresponds to the end-of-history moment it tends to occupy categorically, as though utopia’s release from historical time were also an escape from ideology.

Whether this is in itself an ideological effect of utopia (its irrelevance just another form of false consciousness) or a historical possibility in its own right matters less for our purposes than that its absence have some important narrative consequences in LVU. First, if the reproduction of the relations of production has been solved in utopia without recourse to ideology, this also means that there is no subject of ideology and thus no investment in individuality as a compensatory discursive site where the history of subjectification becomes naturalized. This may well account for the relative paucity of “interesting” characters in LVU, which as a genre tends to flatten individualities and do away with psychology altogether. What Fredric Jameson calls the “plebeianization” of the human landscape in utopia is in his view one of its greatest political strengths, signaling a form of desubjectification that eliminates “spiritual private property.” But the lack of character development tends also to attenuate narrative flow since the subject-centered realist protocols to which LVU is discursively indebted are premised on the expectation of personal transformation and psychological amplification. Second, the detailed description of the specific solutions each utopia brings to bear on the problem of production and the reproduction of its means often calls for lengthy digressions that, however vital to the content, contribute little to the interest of the plot as plot. In utopia, society is self-functioning and economic cycles are reduced to the ideologically neutral life cycles of the seasons. The reproduction of the means of production in this context becomes as predictable and as “natural” as biological reproduction.

Described in these terms, natural or naturalized cycles do not suggest themselves as the most absorbing of narrative patterns. The achievements of
utopia as seen through the lens of the Marxian formulation of historical materialism and the theory of ideology that is derived from it result in a subdued sense of eventness in the development of utopian narrative and in an arrested or latent chronology that is made visible only in the retrospective account of its emergence. But nature reappears in LVU in a different register altogether, one that, while proper to the classical utopian genre, at least potentially offers a wider array of narrative possibilities when novelists begin to draw upon Darwin’s theory of evolution: the recurring problem of “human nature.” In its classical utopian articulation, the problem of human nature is categorical: if human nature is understood to be fixed and immutable, social equality can only be achieved either by repressing it (the elimination of private property in More’s Utopia, for instance, curbs asocial human impulses such as greed, temptation, envy, etc.) or by enhancing it (the introduction and implementation of technological solutions to the perennial problem of labor in Bacon’s New Atlantis, for instance, frees humans from unrewarding toil and increases the opportunities for sociability). After Darwin, however, human nature can be reimagined as an evolving adaptable feature (or, better, a conglomerate of evolving adaptable features) existing in a complex environment whose changing conditions will determine its most socially advantageous configuration. The question of whether this form of adaptation is Lamarckian rather than strictly Darwinian or turns out instead to be the by-product of a literary culture operating at some remove from biological determinisms matters less for our purposes than the fact that Victorians took seriously the prospect of an evolving human nature that, under the right circumstances, could overcome its social limitations. Indeed, by virtue of its generic disposition as speculative fiction, LVU makes visible the adaptability of evolutionary theory itself, giving imaginative flight to current ideas of social progress by reconceptualizing the trope of human nature as a variable, mutable, adjustable order subject to the vicissitudes of social competition within and across generations.

At the level of form, Darwin’s theory of evolution offers a wealth of rhetorical possibilities for literary invention. The language of interconnection, kinship, and affinity, as the work of Gillian Beer has masterfully shown, provides a new figurative basis on which to plot human temporality.21 George Eliot’s “experiments of Time” in Middlemarch, to take one of Beer’s examples, offers a view of human agency as an “incalculably diffusive” network of “unhistoric acts” that owes much of its poignancy to Darwin’s description of natural selection as an imperceptible but nevertheless constantly operative mechanism of transformation that accounts for variation over time.22 But the impact of Darwin’s conceptualization of temporality on the construction of literary form goes beyond the structure of knowledge underpinning realist
representation, however figurative. The fantastic or otherworldly character of LVU allows for a fuller expression of the narrative possibilities opened up by Darwinian evolution in that, unlike realism, it is not subject to the constraints of human mortality as the ultimate horizon of imaginative reason. While the temporal scope of realist fiction is biographical, generational, or even historical, LVU has no such limits as a narrative vehicle that, at least in theory, can transport us to a time beyond human history. Indeed, Darwin’s theory of evolution vastly expands the scope of human temporality both by positing a distant common origin for life and by proposing a mechanism of evolution that is both purposeless and open-ended. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn notes that it was the lack of a goal, rather than the notion of a common origin for the living, that made Darwin’s theory a program hard to accept: “For many men the abolition of that teleological kind of evolution [the one espoused by Lamarck, Chambers, and Spencer] was the most significant and least palatable of Darwin’s suggestions. The *Origin* recognized no goal set either by God or nature. Instead, natural selection, operating in the given environment and with the actual organisms presently at hand, was responsible for the gradual but steady emergence of more elaborate, further articulated, and vastly more specialized organisms.”

The absence of a goal goes against the grain of utopian aspirations (utopia is traditionally conceived of as a goal to end all goals), but does not preclude the mechanism of evolution from being brought to bear on the social arena, since its gradualist sense of change accords well with certain views of social transformation. Indeed, in a society that had elected to transform its political institutions through reform rather than revolution, the precepts of Darwinian evolution could be easily transposed. Darwin’s insistence on the slow processes whereby species adapt to their environments through natural selection provides a plausible, if often too hastily assimilated, rationale for social evolution. Here is Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) on the temporal scale of evolution:

> It may be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest; rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life. We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has marked the long lapse of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long past geological ages that we only see that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were.
In this striking description of evolution’s time scale, the infinitesimal and the infinite coincide, simultaneously expanding the horizon of human history, which is now seen to be but a part of a much vaster natural history that remains inaccessible to human consciousness, and shrinking its domain insofar as human historical agency is in the last instance independent of the ongoing, “daily and hourly” operations of natural selection. Biological time is genetic and genealogical rather than temperamental and characterological, shifting emphasis away from the time scale of historical and fictional narrative in which human acts determine the conduct of life to a planetary time scale that dwarfs such acts. In addition, Darwin’s theory posed distinct challenges to the prevailing conception of the nature of the event by reinvigorating the long-standing philosophical problem of chance versus design, mind versus matter, as the causal explanation of things in his formulation of variation as both useful and useless, improvement being relative only to the environmental conditions of an organism’s existence. Moreover, random mutations, the events that natural selection “scrutinises,” are invisible not only in the sense that the changes to which they give rise are slow; they are invisible insofar as they are manifested as variation after the fact, in the belated expression of offspring as a result of sexual selection. When it comes to species, change can indeed be described as “latent” since it is already contained within a generation that does not in itself express it as a general feature. This time gap is perhaps more readily conceived when we consider change as originating in genetic variation, which, occurring constantly yet imperceptibly within a given species, becomes dramatically visible when members of the same species become separated geographically and new species are formed as each population adapts to its own environment. Darwin did not of course have any knowledge of genetics, but his observations led him to postulate that “natural selection will be enabled to act on and modify organic beings at any age, by the accumulation of profitable variations at that age, and by their inheritance at a corresponding age” (86). The time lapse between the event (random mutation) and its manifestation (variation)—what might be thought of as the rate of adaptation—varies widely among species and can often determine whether a species survives or becomes extinct. Insofar as human historical acts tend to be understood within the scope of a person’s or a generation’s lifespan, natural selection as a mechanism of evolution can therefore only serve as an analogue for human temporality in the social arena.

There are thus two incommensurable temporal gaps: on the one hand, the belated expression of change within the mechanism of evolution itself; on the other, the difference obtaining between evolution’s dynamic process of change occurring over generations and human historical timekeeping of
social transformation as an intragenerational phenomenon relevant only within the lifespan of historical actors. The appearance of the two within the general historical context of Darwin’s assimilation therefore challenges the conventional wisdom concerning diachronic and synchronic modalities of time since the different orders of time cannot be said in any straightforward sense to be sequential or simultaneous. At the level of content, the confusion of evolutionary for human time leads in LVU to implausible conceits, such as the underground utopia in Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* that is inhabited by the Vril-ya, an orientalized humanlike race who have achieved social coherence after having followed an alternative evolutionary path, with their putative origin traceable to amphibians rather than primates. The success of the Vril-ya may well be due to their use of Vril, a miraculous source of energy with destructive as well as occult powers, but, in Bulwer-Lytton’s telling, the threat this “coming race” poses to humans is rather more racial than military, as the odd marriage plot in which the human traveler becomes embroiled shows in its very implausibility. In H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, the Morlocks and the Eloi, the two human species the time traveler encounters in the future, represent different evolutionary lineages: the former are white, apelike creatures that have adapted to an underground existence, while the latter are “pretty little people” who, enfeebled and infantilized, merely serve to feed the Morlocks. In this case, the branching out of humans into two distinct species represents a sort of devolution, as though humans had traveled backwards along the branches of the evolutionary tree and reverted to more primitive or less complex forms of animal existence. The “Golden Age” that the Eloi inhabit constitutes a stage of arrested development in which human history exists only as a “natural” environment where huge buildings and other “vast shapes” erected by forgotten ancestors blend into the wooded hillsides as so many topographical landmarks with no cultural significance. The Eloi themselves, with their purple tunics and buskins, seem to be relics from an indeterminate past, a sort of preclassical or even pre-historical human infancy in which the symbolic order has yet to make itself available. But this future is posthistorical, and what at first glance appear to the time traveler to be aspects of a long-established utopia soon prove to be a projection of his own present since the human species of the future have foresworn intellect altogether (“I grieved to think how brief the dream of human intellect had been” [141], he muses at one point). Wells shows that adaptation is a value-neutral operation and evolution, as a whole, dysteleological. Far from being a paradise regained, the future for human descendants has little future; instead, it is a suicidal standoff in which the Morlocks end up feeding on the Eloi.
In terms of character, the traveler in LVU, while no doubt related to the figure of the enterprising navigator used to such good effect by early modern utopian writers, must also be understood to fit the model of the naturalist, a type of traveler whose discoveries, given the organization of knowledge in the nineteenth century, were of great public interest and whose cultural image, enhanced by the symbolic capital derived from Romanticism's rhetorical valorization of nature, gave his form of travel something of the aura of an heroic quest. The works of Darwin, to be sure, but also those of other naturalists who traveled in South America, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russel Wallace, Henry Bates, William Henry Edwards, and William Henry Hudson, were widely disseminated, giving the figure of the scientific explorer who collected specimens a new cultural centrality. Butler's narrator in *Erewhon*, for instance, describes the flora and fauna he encounters with the eye of someone accustomed to observe nature: “And yet everything was slightly different. It was much the same with the birds and flowers on the other side, as compared with the English ones: thus there was a robin and a lark, and a wren, and daisies, and dandelion; not quite the same as the English, but still very like them—quite like enough to be called by the same name. . . .” In addition, the fact that these naturalists were traveling to the *terra incognita* of South America made their quest a form of time travel in itself since they seemed to be traveling back in time to a prehistorical setting where nature had for long been untouched by humans. Darwin opens the *Origin* with a reflection on this form of travel: “When on board H.M.S. ‘Beagle,’ as a naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts in the distribution of the inhabitants of South America, and in the geological relations of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent. These facts seemed to me to throw some light on the origin of species—that mystery of mysteries, as it has been called by one of our greatest philosophers” (1). The passage stages a scene of encounter between Darwin and the inhabitants of South America that is reminiscent of the first encounters between Europeans and Native Americans in the contact zone even as the inhabitants he does encounter in South America are for the most part themselves of European ancestry. The search for the origin of species, moreover, is framed as a quest for the solution to a “mystery of mysteries” that echoes earlier quests. Christopher Columbus’s identification of the mouth of the Orinoco River as the common source of the Tigris, Euphrates, Ganges, and Nile rivers, for instance, was for him proof that he had found the Earthly Paradise (the origin of species, if you will) at the apex of a world shaped like a woman’s breast.

A scene in Butler’s *Erewhon* provides an ironic staging of Darwinian time travel. Having long abandoned technology, the people of Erewhon live in a
“natural” if highly ritualized state that has been purged of mechanical devices, which are now deemed dangerous and immoral. At one point, the King of Erewhon with some alarm asks Higgs, the protagonist, about his watch, which has inexplicably given offense to the people who have already seen it. Having been shown a pamphlet titled “The Book of the Machines” that gives an account of the country’s history, Higgs later learns that approximately five hundred years before the present of the story the increasing sophistication of machines led the people of Erewhon to destroy them, fearing that they could eventually come to replace humans. The pamphlet contains this description of mechanical evolution: “‘Take the watch, for example; examine its beautiful structure; observe the intelligent play of the minute members which compose it: yet this little creature is but a development of the cumbrous clocks that preceded it; it is no deterioration from them. A day may come when clocks, which certainly at the present time are not diminishing in bulk, will be superseded owing to the universal use of watches, in which case they will become as extinct as ichthyosaurs, while the watch, whose tendency has for some years been to decrease the size rather than the contrary, will remain the only existing type of an extinct race’” (203). The watch here becomes a figure for the evolution of machinery and, since it is a timekeeping device, also for the way in which evolution occurs over or in time. The juxtaposition of zoomorphic elements (“creature,” “race”) with temporal markers (“A day may come . . . ,” “. . . at the present time . . . ,” “. . . for some years . . . ,”) and the future tense (“will be,” “will become,” “will remain”) colors the pamphlet’s pseudo-Luddite extrapolation of Darwinian evolution with a sense of foreboding, as if the evolution of the watch were also a revolution in timekeeping, which is as much as to say that it is a revolution in time itself. But the watch, a mechanical device found quite commonly in LVU, is not only a figure for time in a post-Darwinian world. Used most famously by William Paley in his work *Natural Theology* (1802), the watch was a privileged figure in the argument for design in that its complexity, akin to that of, say, the eye, implied, by analogy, a designer for the works of nature. Though Darwin does not directly address this teleological argument for the existence of God in the *Origin*, in his discussion of the complexity of the eye, he makes a point of stating unequivocally that his theory rests on the principle that an organ’s design, however complex, can only have come about by means of natural selection: “If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down. But I can find out no such case” (189). Butler’s conceit can thus be read as an endorsement of Darwinian evolution in a political context that would reject it on the grounds of its success, not of its implausibility.
It would be too neat (that is, clean) to suggest that the relation obtaining between Marxian and Darwinian forms of temporality was dialectical in nature. To be sure, the cultural contemporaneity of the two theories suggests that they both responded to, and assimilated, a similar sense of the Victorian present and its grand scale of possibility. It is not surprising, then, that the scope of their theories were similarly directed towards totality, nature in Darwin, history in Marx, and that their theoretical syntheses purported to be applicable universally. The question of “influence” is fraught, not least because they never met each other and their theories were already independently formulated by the time they read each other. Historically, at any rate, Marx seems to have been a better reader of Darwin than Darwin of Marx. Darwin famously thanked Marx for having sent him a copy of Capital, but he left no record of having read it. Of Darwin, Marx famously said: “Not only is a death blow dealt here for the first time to ‘Teleology’ in the natural sciences but their rational meaning is empirically explained.” And at Marx’s graveside, Engels declared: “Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history.” The intellectual history of the period is less important to the present argument, however, than the impact that their theories, together and in isolation, had on the cultural understanding of time and the specific ways in which this understanding made possible the temporal experimentation that characterizes LVU, to which I now turn.

A “River of Fire”

The nature of time travel in William Morris’s News from Nowhere is at once proleptic and nostalgic. Waking up after a restless night, William Guest finds himself some two hundred years into the future in a world that resembles one that in his own childhood might at best have been a dimly remembered reality, “pleasanter, indeed, than the deep country was as he had known it” (54). The opening chapter, or, more precisely, the transition between the first two chapters, establishes this temporal dichotomy in formal as well as narrative terms. The world he imagines as a remote possibility in the present after attending a meeting at the Socialist League—a grim present in which he is “stewing discontentedly” as he travels in the London underground, that “vapour-bath of hurried humanity”—becomes actualized in the future, “a vague hope, that was now become a pleasure, for days of peace and rest, and cleanness and smiling goodwill” (55). Indeed, it is as though the vision that materialized before him were the fulfillment of a wish whose articulation is fully formed even as its
content is initially obscure: “If I could but see a day of it” (54). But the act of wish fulfillment is not instantaneous: there is of course the time lapse inherent in the very notion of time travel that bridges present with future, but the duration of time travel is also registered in a subtle temporal shift that suggests traveling into the future is itself a time-consuming endeavor: “[I]t was winter when I went to bed the last night, and now, by witness of the river-side trees, it was summer, a beautiful bright morning seemingly of early June” (56). This shift corresponds, in formal terms, with a change in narrative voice as the present, narrated in the third person, becomes a first-person narrative in the future. The switch is self-consciously staged:

Our friend says that from that sleep he awoke once more, and afterwards went through such surprising adventures that he thinks 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 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. (55)

The conceit of making the narrative more intimate and personal by choosing first- over third-person narration is straightforward. But the grammatical structure of the second sentence seems to suggest that the shift is far from self-assured: “But, says he, I think it would be better if I told them in the first person. . . .” On the one hand, the subject pronoun “he” that stands in for “our friend” in this passage is given voice through the indirectly rendered locution “I think it would be better.” On the other, the subject pronoun “I” that ventriloquizes the “he” by using the first-person “I” in indirect speech seems to occupy a different grammatical position in the phrase “if I told them” such that the “I” seems to refer to two different subjects at the same time. Whether taken in isolation, as I have done above, or together, following the grammatical logic of the sentence, the syntactical aberration becomes an instance of the rhetorical figure of anacoluthon. But insofar as this error is self-conscious, the positing of the “I” as a referential placeholder without definitive referent (a subject pronoun without a subject) signals or precipitates a different order of discourse. Indeed, the passage can be said to enact Benveniste’s famous formulation of subjectivity in language: “Language is so organized that it permits each speaker to appropriate to himself an entire language by designating himself as I.”35 In the last clause of the passage (which is a subordinate clause even though it is grammatically rendered by the use of the semicolon as an independent clause),
the “as if” becomes literalized and the distinction between the speaking “I” and the “I” that the “comrade” will now adopt comes undone as a narrative conceit and the direction of linguistic appropriation is reversed when the “I” designates himself as “I.”

While the ostensible aim of the passage is to personalize the narrative by adopting a first-person narrative voice, the reverse is in fact the case, with the third-person narration of the first chapter having been deployed to create an effect of comradeship, since the “he” is already speaking in the first person. The further indirection of the pronoun “them,” which stands in for “adventures” but whose referent can be easily read as “our comrades” by the juxtaposition of the subject pronoun and the verbal forms of “telling” in the sequence “told to our comrades,” “to tell them,” “if I told them,” “the comrade of whom I am telling,” suggests that the performative positing of the subject is an ongoing operation rather than a privative act. In the thematic context of the passage, the positing of the “I” as a multiple, ongoing event becomes a condition of possibility of time travel insofar as it stages the displacement of the present into a future as a sequence of always inaugural acts of subject constitution. The dream is only the narrative vehicle of a form of time travel that is discursive in nature, with the descriptive advantage that dreams, like grammar, stage multiple displacements of personality. Further, the shift in temporal registers accords well with the political objectives of the text insofar as the iterative positing of the “I” is also a collective positing, or better, the positing of the collective. The veiled anonymity of the narrator as a “guest” named Guest (of which more below) can be read in this context as the narrative elaboration of the discursive shifts that become the text’s vehicle of time travel.

These shifts tend to go against the grain of the thematic and experiential stasis that Morris’s novel both inhabits and seeks to promote (tellingly, the novel’s alternative title is “An Epoch of Rest”) as well as the peculiar tone of its discourse, which tends to be at once elegiac and apostrophic. But they correspond at the macronarrative level to the pattern of dissonance and interruption that characterizes the novel’s temporal organization. The voyage in the future can be divided into three parts, each of which has a different temporal orientation: the initial encounter with Dick and his rediscovery of London in the twenty-second century, which is dominated by the present (chapters two through seven); the interview with Hammond at the British Museum, which includes the historical reconstruction of the past as a way of accounting for how the “change” came to pass (chapters eight through twenty); and the trip upriver to participate in the hay-harvest, which faces towards the future even as it ends with Guest’s return to the Victorian present (chapters twenty-one through thirty-two). The existence of different temporal vectors in the novel,
however, is not limited to the narrative structure, since the temporality of each of the three sections is further divided into rhetorical, grammatical, and thematic registers characterized by the commingling of past, present, and future. Narrative continuity is achieved to some extent through Guest’s voice, but his subject position, as we have seen, is unstable and, as a result, his development as a character remains indeterminate even as he experiences a potentially life-changing encounter with the world of the future. The obverse of this view is represented by the city of London, which seems to offer a sense of spatial continuity insofar as Guest’s voyage is a displacement in time, not of place. But the city has undergone such drastic transformations in the interval between Guest’s present and his visit to the future that it is characterized by its substitutability with, rather than by its contiguity to, the London he once knew (it is in this sense its metaphor rather than its metonymy). We are left with a narrative whose structure promises a sense of sequential coherence that it then fails to fulfill.

Nowhere is this pattern more clearly visible than in the novel’s rhetorical treatment of the river Thames. First, it organizes time travel in two complementary senses: on the one hand, as a traditional figure for the passage of time (the same river never flows twice) as well as for travel itself (the river as corridor of global transport), the Thames, as its name might imply, is an apt rhetorical vehicle for Guest’s voyage. The particular attention the text pays to the bridges that span the two banks of the Thames serves as an index of the river’s efficacy as a figure for time travel insofar as the river itself can be said to “bridge” the past to the present, which is the future: “Then the bridge! I had perhaps dreamed of such a bridge, but never seen such an one out of an illuminated manuscript; for not even the Ponte Vecchio at Florence came anywhere near it” (58). The fact that this particular bridge is “not very old . . . it was built or at least opened, in 2003,” suggests that, at least from Guest’s perspective, there are in fact several different bridges, each of which has spanned a different Thames: the bridge he is seeing, the bridge of which he has dreamed, the “plain timber bridge” the former has replaced, the bridge he crossed the night before he traveled into the future (“the ugly suspension bridge,” whose historical counterpart, the Hammersmith suspension bridge, Morris is said to have loathed), and the Ponte Vecchio, whose name suggests that there are ever newer ones that replace it or at least make it outdated. The pattern is again repeated, albeit in reverse, in the third part of the novel, when Guest, traveling upriver, is relieved to discover that “my old enemies the ‘Gothic’ cast-iron bridges had been replaced by handsome oak and stone ones” (201) and, further upstream, to reacquaint himself with Shillingford Bridge “new built, but somewhat on its old lines” (223) and New Bridge,
which Ellen refers to correctly as an “old bridge” (228). We could describe
the juxtaposition of old and new bridges at several points along the Thames
as a form of anachronism (the bridges Guest sees, or no longer sees, in the
present of the story do look out of place to him since they refer to his past),
but the effect is one of timelessness or achrony, since the commingling of so
many different temporal registers also does away with the ordering principle
that would organize them in a logical sequence. The novel’s title, *News from
Nowhere*, captures the sense of timelessness achieved in utopia as a categorical
absence of “news,” or of history-in-the-making.\(^\text{39}\)

On the other hand, the river is itself a stage for traveling in time insofar as
Guest’s voyage up the Thames in the last third of the novel is, with the notable
exception of the train ride in the novel’s opening chapter and the carriage ride
that takes him to the British Museum, the only narrative action that involves
spatial displacement, and, for that matter, the only narrative action in the
novel as a whole. In the third part of the novel when Guest and his friends
travel upstream, the Thames operates as a sort of Bakhtinian chronotope—
the chronotope of the “river of time,” perhaps—in that it gathers the various
semantic and discursive currents of the novel into its flow.\(^\text{40}\) But this spatial
displacement is accompanied by temporal discontinuities, since Guest reads
the Thames in historical terms by comparing, in however implicit a manner,
what he sees with his experience of it in his own present. The effect is uncanny:
the river, understood as a figure for the passage of time, seems to run both
backwards and forwards at the same time as Guest and his friends paddle
upriver in the utopian future while the past reappears in Guest’s reminiscences
of what the river had once been. The process, a sort of narrativization of the
flood tide, is personally as well as politically rejuvenating:

As we went higher up the river, there was less difference between the Thames
of that day and Thames as I remember it; for setting aside the hideous vul-
garity of the cockney villas of the well-to-do, stockbrokers and other such,
which in older time marred the beauty of the bough-hung banks, even this
beginning of the country Thames was always beautiful: and as we slipped
between the lovely summer greenery, I almost felt my youth come back to
me, and as if I were on one of those water excursions which I used to enjoy
so much in the days when I was too happy to think that there could be much
amiss anywhere. (186)

The convergence of present and future, which is here stylized as a return to
the personal past, becomes, in political terms, the projection of utopian ideals
as a concrete recuperation of a simpler social past before the vulgar excesses of
capitalist prosperity ever “marred the beauty” of the river course itself. Time reversal is a shrewd ideological strategy for Morris in this regard since it re-
naturalizes (by returning to nature) what had already ceased to be historical. The point is as follows: ideology works by naturalizing what is in fact histori-
cal (the well-to-do as “naturally” predisposed to impose their “vulgar” taste on nature). By literalizing this process, by making nature itself stand in for what
is natural and, therefore, beautiful (“this beginning of the country Thames was always beautiful”), Morris, who in this follows the Romantics, aestheticizes
the experience of nature (“water excursions”) rather than the things that are “amiss” (such as “cockney villas”) and which need to be “set aside” before one
can be “too happy.” Against the blind valorization of the past, Guest chastises
Ellen’s grandfather, the “old grumbler,” for defending the “damned flunkies” who “destroyed [the ‘Thames’s] beauty morally, and had almost destroyed it physically” (198). The beauty of the Thames is a recurring theme that, as we shall see in more detail below, carries ethical as well as political weight insofar as the river is made to stage in a figurative as well as literal manner the con-
vergence or conciliation between the social and the natural that makes Morris’s utopia an aesthetic experience.

Neither Morris nor the Romantics should be uncritically dismissed as ine-
ffectual dreamers for taking this stance; it is a profoundly moral outlook with
immediate practical implications. “As I strove to stir up people to this reform
[to get rid of the “ugly disgraces of civilization”],” William Morris wrote in the
preface to Signs of Change,

I found that the causes of the vulgarities of civilization lay deeper than I had
thought, and little by little I was driven to the conclusion that all these ugli-
nesses are but the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which
we are forced by our present form of society . . .  

E. P. Thompson notes that Morris’s revolutionary cast of mind was above
all else practical, realizing that, even as the historical conditions in which
he found himself were not ripe for revolution, one must nevertheless strive
wholeheartedly towards making them so in the aesthetic as well as the political
realm. Paraphrasing Morris in one of his last lectures, Thompson writes: “In
True Society, the unit of administration must be small enough for every citizen
to feel a personal responsibility. The community of Communism must be an
organic growth of mutual obligations, of personal and social bonds, arising
from a condition of practical equality. And between False and True Society
there lay, like a ‘river of fire,’ the Revolution. It was the work of a realist to
indicate where that river ran, and to hand down to us a ‘tradition of hope’ as
to the lands beyond those deadly waters." That Morris first used the phrase "river of fire" in a lecture on art ("... between us and that which is to be, if art is not to perish utterly, there is something alive and devouring; something as it were a river of fire that will put all that tries to swim across to a hard proof indeed ...") suggests that politics and art become in practice indistinguishable. From this perspective, the genre of utopia, the one genre in the history of literature that makes thematically as well as rhetorically explicit the mutually constitutive relation obtaining between literary forms and social formations, fruitfully provides Morris with a ready-made convention for speculating on the future from a position "before the revolution." Moreover, by availing himself of the temporal plasticity of the genre, Morris is able to make this future come to life in the concrete detail of his realistic representation of nature. Morris is in this regard both a "revolutionary" and a "romantic."

Fredric Jameson writes on the temporality of utopia in a manner that accords well with this view of Morris: "It is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a new oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place; and Frye is surely not wrong to assimilate the salvational perspective of romance to a reexpression of Utopian longings, a renewed meditation on the Utopian community, a re-conquest (but at what price?) of some feeling for a salvational future." The recuperative logic of *News from Nowhere* centers on the aesthetic valorization of medieval art, less for its own sake than for the simplicity of its design and its relation to natural forms. Morris's medievalism, to be sure, is of a piece with the medieval revival in late-Victorian England (Tennyson, Swinburne, Ruskin, and, as their name plainly suggests, the Pre-Raphaelites, but also, in a second-order relay, the neo-Gothicism of Bram Stoker, Stevenson, and Wilde), but it also contributes in this particular novel to offer new "historical rhythms" to the complex temporal patterns it deploys in its "salvational" utopian project.

Which brings us to the second reason for why the river as a rhetorical device comes undone as a unitary image. As the principal topographical feature in the novel, the Thames seems to provide continuity between the Victorian present of the novel's opening and the utopian future. Yet, the novel remains, for most of its narrative, on the margins of its own central rhetorical flow. The middle section of the novel occurs at the British Museum and consists of a reconstruction of the historical past and a description of the present state of society, which bears the marks of the change that made it possible. At the
level of structure, we can thus describe this middle section as an interruption in the flow of the narrative if we consider the third part as both motivated and conditioned by the initial boat ride during which Guest first meets Dick and which extends into the carriage ride from Hammersmith to Bloomsbury that follows it. The middle section is punctuated by references to the river trip (Hammond: “... I need not say much about all this, as you are going up the river with Dick, and will find out by experience how these matters are managed” [112]), but, in contrast to the first and third parts, it is almost devoid of narrative action and takes place almost entirely indoors. In keeping with the conventions of the genre, the middle section of News from Nowhere, like the middle of most utopian fictions before it from More to Bellamy, offers a static picture of “things as they are.” In this case, however, it must be made to account for the difference between the state of things at “home” with the state of things in utopia in terms of historical time rather than in terms of rationality or national character.

Given the political stakes of the project, it is not surprising that the historical terms used by Morris to account for this difference accord well with the Marxian conception of temporality. As is well known, Morris’s reading of Capital was a transformative experience that led him to become a socialist militant and, in 1884, to found the Socialist League, which features in the first sentence of the novel. The autobiographical elements in News from Nowhere remain implicit, however, and, though no secret is made of the author’s aesthetic tastes and political sympathies, the ambiguity surrounding William Guest’s true identity (not the least of which is that he is addressed indistinctly as “guest” and “Guest”) invites the reader to speculate that the dream-narrative is in fact Morris’s own. Similarly, the historical reconstruction provided by Hammond and, in the aesthetic realm, Morsom, makes oblique rather than direct references to historical materialism. The comparison Guest makes as a matter of course between the future he is visiting and his own present—Ellen calls it his “never-ending contrast between the past and this present” (242)—nevertheless has as one of its narrative aims the constatation of the sort of predictions that the science of history Marx founded would allow one to make. Conversely, the future Guest witnesses gives credence and support to the social projections he and his comrades could only have imagined or dreamed as a possible outcome to a historical situation that could not for long remain unchanged. Fittingly, it is through Ellen’s voice that we get confirmation of history-made-material: “‘It is true,’ she said. ‘It is true!’ ‘We have proved it true!’” (232).

The latent middle of the novel’s narrative structure can be said in this regard to provide the proof, if proof be needed, that both Marxists and Guest’s hosts in the future would need in order to show not only the adequacy but the
justness and inevitability of utopia. The historical situation of Morris’s own present, or his present as history already lived, thus becomes linked to the future as lived experience in the figure of G/guest, with the middle of the novel providing a narrative of historical development that is still latent in the Victorian present, “before the revolution.” Hammond is a suitable “native informant” in that he occupies a “middle” position between the past and the present of utopia: he is old enough to have lived through a period of history that still resembles Guest’s present or to at least have a sense of the culture’s memory of it, and yet is still living in the present, involved with the lives of his relatives (he claims to have “managed” Dick and Clara’s reconciliation [104]) even if he seems to have never left the library in which he’s always worked. Hammond is thus able to decode the present for Guest, treating him as though he were “from another planet” (102). In doing so, however, he also corroborates what Guest, in his present, surmised. Those who worked for change, Hammond tells Guest, “because they could see further than other people went through all these phases of suffering; and doubtless all the time the most men looked on, not knowing what was doing, thinking it all a matter of course, like the rising and setting of the sun—and indeed it was so” (148). The result is that from Guest’s perspective in the future, the change that has come about, regardless of the particulars, is seen as inevitable; that it came about through violence is not. Hammond offers the history of the period as a sequence of stages or confrontations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat that go from State Socialism and the shortening of the working week together with the institution of the minimum wage in 1952 through the organization of labor into a Federation of Combined Workmen and a representative Committee of Public Safety. Civil war eventually breaks out after a peaceful meeting in Trafalgar Square turns into a massacre perpetrated by the army and the country begins a cycle of terror that does not end until a “system of life founded on equality and Communism” is founded (171).

There is nothing surprising or particularly new about the historical sequence Hammond offers, other than the length and detail in which he offers it, in that it follows, in broad strokes, the stages Marx and Engels had sketched in the Communist Manifesto for the future of the class struggle. What is surprising in Morris’s narrative from this perspective, however, is that it offers an aesthetic vision of Communism. According to Hammond, the “new spirit of the time” was to be “delight in the life of the world” in which experience ruled over rationality and love over discord. It is a spirit that, in Hammond’s own historical understanding, resembles a secular medieval spirit: “More akin to our way of looking at life was the spirit of the Middle Ages, to whom heaven and the life of the next world was such a reality, that it became to them a part
of the life upon the earth; which accordingly they loved and adorned, in spite of the ascetic doctrines of their formal creed, which bade them contemn it” (175). The belief in heaven and hell has now of course “gone,” but the view of a “continuous life of the world of men” has been preserved and a new form of art, no longer called art, but “a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces,” now serves as a remedy for the onset of disappointment in the utilitarian comfort achieved (176).

But his meeting with Hammond reveals something else as well that escapes the historical account of the past and present. Upon first meeting Hammond, Guest experiences, quite literally, the uncanny: “. . . I was now looking at him harder than good manners allowed of, perhaps; for in truth his face, dried-apple-like as it was, seemed strangely familiar to me; as if I had seen it before—in a looking-glass, it might be, said I to myself” (101). It is here, with the suspicion that Dick’s kinsman is also his own and that Dick is therefore his relative, that the sense of latency is most clearly expressed even as the genealogical connection is not explicitly made (and how could it?). The notion that utopia can only be achieved by violent revolutionary change, even as it is understood that, in Morris’s present, revolutionary conditions are not yet in place, is very effectively illustrated by the generational conceit of having Guest find his own grandson in the future telling him how it is that the change he could not have lived to see finally came about. The latency of change can be read as forming part of the cultural legacy of Darwinian temporality in Morris’s time even if there are no explicit references to Darwin in the novel. Darwin does not in fact appear in Morris’s writings and there is no evidence that Morris ever read his work, but the retrospective description of utopia as a latent political solution to Guest’s social present suggests that Morris did not see the gradualism associated with Darwinism as incompatible with the massive social mutations of revolutionary change.45

But in another sense, Darwinian temporality comes into play in utopia itself after the “river of fire” has been crossed insofar as it is nature, rather than history proper, that seems to prevail once social equality has been established. Hammond describes it in these terms: “The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place is history enough for them [Dick and Clara]. It was different, I think, when I was a lad, when we were not so assured of peace and continuous plenty as we are now . . . ” (102). The return to nature signifies a slowing down of time when compared to the “hurried and discontented humanity” of Guest’s Victorian present and suggests the social assimilation of biological rhythms. But nature also becomes an aesthetic principle in the future, not only in the sense of its valorization, as we saw in the context of Morris’s medievalism; beauty in nature is considered biologi-
cally advantageous: “You must remember, also, that we are long-lived, and that therefore beauty both in man and woman is not so fleeting as it was in the days when we were burdened so heavily by self-inflicted diseases” (105). Indeed, the voyage up the river in the third part of the novel stages the narrative reconciliation of the social and the aesthetic in nature as Guest travels back into the future towards the hay-harvest accompanied by Dick (his future kinsman), Clara, and Ellen, a woman whose beauty is “strange and almost wild” (193). This reconciliation takes the form of a reconceptualization of nature, or rather its very negation, insofar as nature has become obsolete as a concept in the future. In their conversation with Morsom, which occurs on the third day of their voyage up the Thames, Clara makes this explicit: “Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living?—a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate—‘nature’ as people used to call it—as one thing, and mankind as another? It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make ‘nature’ their slave, since they thought ‘nature’ was something outside of them” (219). The ideological uses to which the “people before our time” put nature so as to make its separation from humans seem “natural” have become superfluous, as did too, after the Great Change, the increasing mechanization of life to which the exploitation of nature once led. Work is not subject to factory time-management; rather it obeys biological cycles and individual choice. As Ellen puts it: “I work hard when I like it, because I like it, and think it does me good, and knits up my muscles, and makes me prettier to look at, and healthier and happier” (199). Dick too thinks of himself as forming “part of it all” and feels the “pain as well as the pleasure in my own person” of the seasons and their gains and their losses (245).

The mechanical production of goods has now been replaced by handicraft and the aesthetic pleasures one is able to derive from work: to handicraft, says Morsom, we “have added the utmost refinement of workmanship to the freedom of fancy and imagination” (220). By the time they reach the upper Thames, the social and the aesthetic, in the form of a dwelling, have become one with nature: “There was no garden between [a quite modern stone house] and the river, nothing but a row of pear-trees still quite young and slender; and though there did not seem to be much ornament about it, it had a sort of natural elegance, like that of the trees themselves” (231). And at the end of the journey, nature itself figures as a house: “Presently we saw before us a bank of elm-trees, which told us of a house amidst them, though I looked in vain for the grey walls that I expected to see there” (238). As Guest and Ellen disembark and approach the village, he feels the tug of the familiar (“almost without my will my feet moved on along the road they knew” [240])
and, when they reach the “many-gabled old house” that Ellen had all along wanted to see (a house whose historical counterpart is Morris’s own Kelmscott Manor), she embraces it and cries: “O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it, as this has done!” (241). The aesthetic experience of nature, or art experienced as nature, exemplified by Ellen’s embrace of the house in this scene is further reinforced a few lines later by Guest’s own description (or discursive “embrace”) of Ellen herself: “Her exultation and pleasure were so keen and exquisite, and her beauty, so delicate, yet so interfused with energy, expressed it so fully, that any added word would have been commonplace and futile” (241). The unusual though deliberate use of the word “interfused” in this verbal description, reminiscent of Wordsworth’s use of it in “Tintern Abbey” (“. . . a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns . . . ” [96–98]), suggests that nature and art have become, from the perspective of experience, interchangeable, even as the words needed to express their relation remain necessary.

It is fitting that the journey should culminate with the history of the Thames and that it should be Ellen to whom Guest recounts it. Ellen is eager to learn about the past, not for herself alone, but for the many children she hopes one day to have and upon whom she wishes to impress “some part of my ways of thinking,” the “essential part of myself” (233). When Guest tells her that the railroads actively prevented the country people from using the waterways as roads and that, as a consequence, the river ceased to have commercial value and became neglected, Ellen responds that this fact “is not stated clearly enough in our textbooks, and it is worth knowing” (235). A sentiment echoed at book’s end by Guest himself, who, though now awake in his own present, ventriloquizes Ellen’s last “mournful look” before he leaves the future: “Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle” (249). The future has become history; a history to be disseminated and used to improve the present and impress upon it a “way of thinking” that might make it come to pass.

Frederic Jameson has argued that utopian fiction emerges at the “moment of the suspension of the political” during which institutions seem to be utterly unchangeable and, at the same time, infinitely modifiable. A state of paralysis in which change is unfathomable, Jameson suggests, is also a precondition for intellectual freedom and imaginative play. Prerevolutionary conditions, in contrast, demand specific political attention and concrete intervention rather than wholesale reinvention. Utopian fiction is the calm before the storm, a moment of stillness that involves social ferment but systemic inertia. The situation of More, writing on the eve of capitalism, or of Francis Bacon, before the
English Civil War, is similar to that of the writers of LVU who wrote as the
world was heading towards the October Revolution and the First World War.
From this perspective, the latent middle of LVU can be said to also involve its
own generic “middleness” as it comes to occupy a moment of political latency
in which the distance marked from political institutions encourages imagina-
tive play. The middleness of LVU can therefore be thought of as a historical
condition of its own possibility. If we consider the emergence of LVU in the
context of the literary production of the last three decades of the nineteenth
century, this same point can be made from the perspective of literary history
since it forms part of a veritable explosion of so-called paraliterary genres
whose aesthetic, discursive, and imaginative bearings were no longer centered
on the institutions of realism nor were they yet inexorably directed towards
the revolutionary program of the modernist avant-gardes. LVU thus occupies
a literary no-man’s-land, a Nowhere without News, whose imaginative license
is paradoxically granted by the suspension or latency of the literary itself. The
literary formlessness of LVU is therefore a condition of possibility of its own
formal inventiveness. The latent middle in LVU makes utopia possible on the
principle of its antiliterary properties and, for the same reason, suspends it
politically in the very middleness of a future always to come.

Notes

1. For the classic elaborations of desire as narrative logic, see Peter Brooks, Reading for
the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and
Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell

2. The notion that narrative endows life with meaning by offering a retrospective perspec-
tive from a moment beyond death is common to models of narrative temporality that focus
on the ending. See Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

3. This point is aptly illustrated by H. G. Wells, who, writing in 1905, explicitly calls for
a “kinetic” modern utopia that “must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage
leading to a long ascent of stages.” See A Modern Utopia (London: Penguin Classics, 2005),
11.


5. Citing Lyman Tower Sargent’s authoritative British and American Utopian Literature,
Beaumont estimates that “hundreds of novels and short stories” were published in the United
States and Britain during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Utopia, Ltd.: Ide-
ologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870–1900 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1. By another esti-
mate, nearly a hundred Utopian fictions were published between 1875 and 1905. See Francis

7. See Franco Moretti, “Serious Century,” in *The Novel*, vol. 1, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 364–400. For Moretti, the realist novel occupies an “intermediate” generic position between comedy and tragedy well suited to chronicle the ‘serious’ middle class, intent on marking its distance from the “carnivalesque” laboring classes. The realist novel’s greatest formal contribution, in this view, is the use of “fillers,” rather than events, as the normative narrative principle of a form intent on representing the everyday as uneventful.


12. Eric Hobsbawm gives a detailed account of the publication history of *The Communist Manifesto* in his introduction to the 1998 edition. According to him, the Manifesto did not begin to be widely read until 1871, when the first of nine editions in six different languages that were to appear in the next two years was first distributed. See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” *The Communist Manifesto*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (London: Verso, 1998), 6.


19. H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* explicitly rejects this model, proposing instead a “kinetic” utopian scheme in which history does not stop: a “hopeful stage leading to a long ascent of stages” (11).


25. This is one of the key advances Darwin made over Lamarck, for whom inherited features expressed a concurrent rather than a latent form of adaptation in the absence of random mutations.

27. For a structural description of the narrative consequences of devolution in the context of science fiction, see Darko Suvin, *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 222–42.


29. A measure of this vision of South America as a laboratory in the British imaginary can be garnered from the monster’s promise in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: “If you consent [to create a mate], neither you nor any other human being shall ever see us again: I will go to the vast wilds of South America.” Victor’s incredulous response confirms it: “You propose . . . to fly the habitations of man, to dwell in those wilds where the beasts of the field will be your only companions.” See Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 99.


31. In Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race*, Aph-Lin’s son rebuilds the protagonist’s watch to make it keep both the time of the Vril-ya and that of the protagonist: “I have that watch still and it had been much admired by many among the most eminent watchmakers of London and Paris” (Toronto: Broadview, 2002), 149–50. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the body of the text.


37. Along with Mark Twain’s Mississippi stories, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, and Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, Morris’s novel is one of the great “river narratives” of the nineteenth century.

38. See note 1 on page 54 in the Broadview edition.

39. For the obsolescence of “news” in utopia, see Buzard, “Ethnography as Interruption,” 451.


in Britain. Thompson uses the phrase “river of fire” as the title of the seventh chapter of the first part of this work.


44. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious, 104.

45. Gowan Dawson suggests that aesthetes such as Morris, Pater, and Swinburne formed something of a bond, or were at least part of a “concurrence,” with Huxley, Tyndall, and other defenders of Darwin in the 1870s in the pages of the Fortnightly Review under John Morley’s editorship, if only because both camps were attacked on similar grounds for blasphemy, paganism, and immorality. See Gowan Dawson, Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–18.
