DEBATING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN UTOPIAN FICTION (MORRIS, BENSON, READ)

Maxim Shadurski

University of Edinburgh

Abstract. This paper explores the mechanism of interaction between major themes and concerns which featured in discussions of national identity, and their interpretation in the utopian novels of William Morris, Robert Hugh Benson, and Herbert Read. Arguing that *News from Nowhere, The Dawn of All,* and *The Green Child* (and, by extension, utopian fiction as a genre) contain mediated responses to current debates about the nation, the paper analyses the historical context of the timeframe between 1891 and 1935, and the methodological dichotomy of utopia and ideology which it attempts to overcome. The next three sections examine how organization of time lends itself to the interpretation of the utopian novels *vis-à-vis* major issues and stresses of debates surrounding national identity. It is concluded that utopian fiction as a conventional mouthpiece of radical transformations is capable of giving voice to the mutable discourse of a dominant ideology and debating the national agenda with nearly equal force.

1. Introduction

The utopian fiction authored by William Morris (1834–1896), Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914), and Herbert Read (1893–1968) spans several decades of British political and socio-cultural history. Insofar as the years between the publication of Morris's *News from Nowhere* in 1891, Benson's *The Dawn of All* in 1911 and Read's *The Green Child* in 1935 encompassed such conventionally complete and arguably sufficient epochs as the Victorian Age, the Edwardian period, and the inter-war years, the whole timeframe from 1891 till 1935 resists being designated as *one* period. In addition, differences between the political persuasions, religious faith, and social standing of these writers present a similarly

broad divide. In compliance with his socialist views, Morris responded to the Whig interpretations of English literature spread at that time with an idealized conception of the English people. However, the awkwardness of this attempt, in Stefan Collini's evaluation, "was evident and Morris anyway remained far outside the circles of respectable academic philology" (Collini 1991:362). Benson's defection, after having been ordained in the Church of England, to Catholicism could also signal his intention to differ both in denomination and from widely accepted values. Although by the early 20th century the predominantly Anglican character of some of the English institutions (e.g. Oxford and Cambridge) had receded (Collini 1991:316), there was obviously no way that Catholicism might reclaim its centrality in the national life. An admirer of psychoanalysis and modernist art, Read took after the Bloomsbury Group. He strongly opposed the political systems of Soviet Communism and German Nazism and styled himself as an anarchist (Woodcock 1972:12). Occupying such varied positions, Morris, Benson, and Read could not avoid being receptive to the ideological dictates of their time.

However, both the historical amplitude of the periods in question and each of the writers' individual position constituted a complex and conceptually rich background against which debates about national identity were taking shape and gaining prominence. Much as debates about national identity can be informed by a dominant ideology co-opted to the system of existing power structures, utopias, according to Lyman Sargent, take centre-stage in every ideology, like "a positive picture – some vague, some quite detailed – of what the world would look like if the hopes of the ideology were realized. And it is possible for a utopia to become an ideology" (Sargent 2010:124). It follows that, apart from putting forward and testing blueprints of mankind's betterment, utopias constitute an essential segment of ideological formation. This paper will make an attempt to explore the mechanism of interaction between major themes and concerns which featured in discussions of national identity, and their interpretation in the utopian novels of Morris, Benson, and Read. Given the transhistorical character of my examination where national identity is presented as a mutable idea, a principal channel through which I intend to investigate how ideology interacts with utopia will be organization of time as a structural element endemic to the three novels. In their respective utopian projects, Morris was equally susceptible to the dynamism of history and the changelessness of a distant past; Benson steered his imagined community toward an ultimate change; Read brought the protagonist to rejecting life and reality for the sake of a timeless order. Such developments point to a common feature typical of the utopian fiction under study – its temporal finality. The novels deal with the future as a temporal *locus* where potentialities will have been realized. I will argue that these three novels (and, by extension, utopian fiction as a genre) contain mediated responses to current debates about the nation and national identity. First, in developing my argument, I will analyse the historical context of the years between 1891 and 1935, and the methodological dichotomy of utopia and ideology which my work will endeavour to overcome. In the next three sections I will examine how organization of time lends itself to the interpretation

of the utopian novels of Morris, Benson, and Read *vis-à-vis* major issues and stresses of debates surrounding national identity.

2. Historical context and theoretical premises of the argument

The context of British history from the 1890s until the mid-1930s was aptly summarized by G. R. Searle as one "marked by continuity as well as change" when the "bombastic self-assertion" of national identity was intermittent with "an undercurrent of uncertainty" (Searle 2004:5, 7). The panorama of events in this time span comprised a wide range of socially significant developments which could stir the sense of national identity and intensify debates about it, i.e. the opening of the National Portrait Gallery, the Boer Wars, the close of Queen Victoria's reign, the exhibitions of Post-Impressionist art in London, liberal reforms, suffrage movements, the Great War, the crisis of liberal values in the Irish Home Rule, the first broadcast of the BBC as 'the voice of Britain', the world economic crisis, etc. Self-assertion and uncertainty were especially noticeable in the British imperial mission. Having completed the building of Empire at home, which culminated in the Acts of Union of 1707 and 1801, the Britons set out on a missionary voyage that would spread "parliamentary government, law, empire, industry, language, sport and humanitarianism" (Mandler 2006:210) around the globe. Nevertheless, in Krishan Kumar's view, this truly galvanizing mission began to seriously falter during the Second Boer War (1899–1902) when the major British exports had to be imposed by force, which devalued their effectiveness and lowered Britain's prestige on an international arena (Kumar 2003:198). The decline of the British imperial mission also transpired in the increase of separatist sentiment in Ireland and a campaign for the Home Rule Bills (1886–1920). Kumar recapitulates that "the English and, more generally the British, could see themselves an 'elect nation', called to carry out a particular, God-given, mission in the world. Only when this sense failed them, only when they had serious qualms about it, did they turn inwards towards themselves, and begin to ask themselves who they were" (Kumar 2003:196).

Self-assertion and uncertainty were also present in what Peter Mandler calls "the decline of Britishness and the reciprocal rise of Englishness" (Mandler 2006:144). On the one hand, if Britishness, for the most part, inspired associations with imperialism, Englishness presupposed resuscitating an Anglo-Saxon heritage of traditions and mythology lost in the mists of time. This switchover from one identity to another was strongly stimulated by the processes of cultural and political revival in the 'Celtic fringe'. Thus, Wales saw the establishment of a national university and a national library at Aberystwyth; a national festival of Eisteddfod was coupled with a growing interest in the Welsh language (Searle 2004:9). Ireland was witnessing a large-scale national renaissance backed up popularly (the 'Gaelic League'), politically (Sinn Fein) and by the Church (Kiberd 1996:2, 193). With the ongoing invention and rediscovery of the Celtic nations, the English also faced a choice of either clinging to Britishness as an old reminder

of their imperial past or initiating an uneasy search for a new identity. On the other hand, threats to Britain's imperial and economic superiority which were closely intertwined with the emergence of stronger national sentiments in the constituent parts of the United Kingdom triggered, according to Mandler, a transformation of the image and roles of the Great Briton into "a different kind of Englishman" (Mandler 2006:144). Unlike his grand predecessor, the 'Little Englander' stopped being a prototype for 'universal man' and acquired far less exemplary features of laziness and sentimentality (Mandler 2006:163, 171). The above examples suggest the fertility of these several decades with potentialities for debating national identity. A remarkable feature of the age was that the old forms of identity were called into question and disputed while the new versions of Britishness and/or Englishness were still in the process of making.

In the theoretical domain, the substantiation of the argument about utopias' responsiveness to discussions of national identity requires a brief overview of the methodological dichotomy of ideology and utopia. The mechanism of interaction between these two types of ideas was elaborated by Karl Mannheim in his *Ideology and Utopia* (1936). Mannheim maintained that the utopian mentality transcends reality by breaking away from the bonds of the 'existing order' and revolutionizing it; "ideals and values in which are contained in condensed form the unrealized and the unfulfilled tendencies… then become the explosive material for bursting the limits of the existing order" (Mannheim 1936:199). Thus, every new order was seen as an outcome of the previous order which had been considerably redefined by the utopian mentality. Along these lines, the utopian mentality and utopias may well be placed in sharp contrast to the 'governing values' of English continuity allegedly redolent of continuities of the English landscape (Searle 2004:602). Collini noted that England "had had three of the defining characteristics of a stable national identity for longer than any comparable country" (Collini 1991:349). These three English continuities (a political existence since the 11th century, legal and administrative forms since the 13th, and a written vernacular language since the 15th) quite neatly fall within the ambit of the Whig political history of England, which particularly stressed progress without revolutionary change. As Brundage and Cosgrove observe, "The country's history was considered to be largely one of incremental progress, punctuated indeed by some dramatic events and even a few setbacks, yet overall moving majestically forward toward greater inclusion and freedom" (Brundage and Cosgrove 2007:3). According to Mannheim, such 'incremental progress' means resistance to give vent to revolutionary action and therefore pertains to the ideological mentality which provides "more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation" (Mannheim 1936:55). Where ideology 'conceals reality', the utopian mentality veers to a disruptive course of action which posits a potential threat to continuous development.

In his study Mannheim distinguishes between the ideological mentality of the ruling class and the utopian mentality of ascendant classes in order to suggest utopia's superiority to and ideology's parasitism on the existing order. Perceiving utopias as challengers to ideology, Mannheim places a superlative premium on the

power of ideas in shaping society and categorizes them into "those which change and those which support the existing state of affairs" (Levitas 1990:75). Not only is this dichotomy, to use Ruth Levitas's term, crude (Levitas 1990:75), but also it does not interiorize either of the mentalities in the socio-political context of a certain period regarding them as external forces which affect the explication of a given order. In Tom Moylan's metaphoric contention, "[u]topia is not simply a challenger to ideology, standing as an unsullied white knight outside the gates of the total system. At least in this century it has been seduced and enslaved into the service of the system itself" (Moylan 1986:19). Utopia as a literary genre shares many of its semantic and structural tenets with the utopian mentality, while the principal difference between them lies in the fictional/poetic realization of a project (Shadurski 2007:9–12; Shadurski 2008:24). Therefore, the utopian novels of Morris, Benson, and Read can also be approached with the dichotomy of the ideological and the utopian mentality. However, there seems to be a more complex rapport where ideological and utopian discourses permeate each other. In the following three sections I am going to investigate how, through organization of time, issues of national identity are brought to the agenda in *News from Nowhere, The Dawn of All,* and *The Green Child*.

3. The nation and landscape in Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1891)

In the wealth of academic sources which include biographies, general literature, studies of political thought and *News from Nowhere*,[1] Morris's idea of England which is placed in the ideological context of the period particularly stands out. According to Faulkner, Morris was especially concerned about the upsurge of imperialism invoked by Disraeli's policies, and the changing appearance of England due to ongoing industrialization (Faulkner 1992:6). Confronting the energy of the New Imperialism, Morris advocated the ideals of fellowship at home rather than rivalry abroad. Morris held the countryside dear because it determined the conditions in which people worked (Faulkner 1992:20). As Levitas comments, *News from Nowhere* addressed "a transformation of Morris's contemporary landscape, and was substantially written against changes which had taken place in the previous twenty years" (Levitas 2002:28).

The present in Morris's novel performs the function of a rather unprepossessing environment which stimulates nothing but aversion on the central character's part. In the present Guest has to cope with a reality that distracts him from his radical thoughts, "As he sat in that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity, a carriage of the underground railway, he, like others, stewed

---

[1] McCarthy, Fiona (1994) *William Morris: A Life for Our Time.* London: Faber & Faber; Faulkner, Peter and Peter Preston, eds. (1996) *William Morris: Centenary Essays.* Exeter: University of Exeter Press; Waithe, Marcus (2006) *William Morris's Utopia of Strangers: Victorian Medievalism and the Ideal of Hospitality.* Cambridge: D. S. Brewer; Coleman, Stephen and Paddy O'Sullivan, eds. *William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time.* Bideford: Green, etc.

discontentedly" (Morris 2003:3). The journey on the Metropolitan Line of the London Tube to his Hammersmith home does not stir his imagination as a novelty that has been put into operation for improving the lives of people. Conversely, he desponds at the sight of discontent on the train and at his inability to change the situation. At the outset it transpires that despair to which Morris's hero is driven in the underground train will abort the discussion of the country's technical achievements in the future. The present with its very dim prospects of betterment, as perceived by Guest, forces him to seek shelter from reality in a dream. The protagonist's dream transfers the action of the novel from the late 19th to the early 21st century, indicating only the time of the construction of a bridge at Putney in 2003 (Morris 2003:8). Leopold pointed out that the early version of the text mentioned the year 1971 and that this alteration of the date is "usually thought to reflect Morris's waning optimism about the imminence of revolution" (Morris 2003:184). The choice of the date can also be put down to the writer's anticipated arrival of socialism in the design he carefully elaborated in the novel.

Views on the nation are revealed in a dialogue with Hammond, one of Guest's main guides. In Hammond's opinion, the nation as such is a misnomer; what is commonly held to be the 'nation' is a collection of families and tribes coerced together into "certain artificial and mechanical groups" (Morris 2003:74). Hammond attributes this process to the actions of the government which is particularly interested in the preservation of inequality rather than promoting diversity. A sole purpose that such intentionally constructed groups may serve is to engender patriotism. Being a set of exclusively "foolish and envious prejudices" (Morris 2003:74), 'patriotism' allegedly enhances national variety and creates an image of the nation on an international arena, in the system of "rival and contending nations". Hammond's concept of the nature of the nation and its formative factors can be read as a critical response to the postulates of Whig patriotism which had a wide circulation when the novel was written. In his study of the question, J. H. Grainger defined patriotism as loyalty to authority, land, laws, customs, and institutions of the country (Grainger 1986:3–5). In Morissian terms, loyalty instigated at the state level gives the government rein to keep the 'nation' under control in order to prevent any revolutionary change. When reviewing England's fictionalized past, Morris comments that the 'Great Change' was not immediate because 'State Socialism' needed some time to attract more adherents from the number of loyalists who tended to see it as a "brutal and ferocious' force" (Morris 2003:95). Concluding the novel, Morris characterizes the future of the reformed England as one of "fellowship, and rest, and happiness" (Morris 2003:182). Though formulated somewhat abstractly, these characteristics do not fitly tap into patriotism and are fairly distant from the current interpretation of loyalty.

Furthermore, Hammond's stance on the nation seems to build on and at the same time contest the understandings of the English nation which crystallized in the British political thought of the 18th – 19th centuries. Although David Hume considered the nation "nothing but a collection of individuals" (Hume 1985:198), he recognized its existence on the principle of government, whose workings, unlike the

"qualities of the air and climate", were able to inspire a common sentiment among large groups of people. Similarly to Hume, John Stuart Mill laid a stress on the government (above language, religion, geography, and national history) in the building of the English nation (Mill 1993:392). In *News from Nowhere,* Hammond does not attempt to debunk these arguments as irrelevant or implausible; on the contrary, as if accepting their validity, he attacks the potential outcome of a process in which the government gets heavily involved. The fact that Hammond is alert to this process signals his awareness of the construction of the English nation in history and the revised course of the nation's development in the future where nation building is no longer at the state's discretion and therefore is not an entity any more. The contestability of the term 'nation', as seen by Morris, may also be illustrated by another example. When standing in Trafalgar Square, Guest's other guide, Dick by name, is puzzled by the collocation the 'National Gallery'. In his mind 'national' connects well with 'curiosities' (Morris 2003:39). This bewilderment harks back to the concept of the nation accepted in this community. If the nation is based on the artificial aspects of loyalty, it should be restricted to the realm of curiosities that are put on display at the National Gallery. Like curiosities, they deserve admiration and attention but must be locked away from day-to-day reality.

The notion of the nation is further contested in the discussion of the principles of representative democracy. From Faulkner's standpoint, *News from Nowhere* presents England "as a place rather than a nation-state" (Faulkner 1992:22). By extending the franchise to the whole people in his utopian land (Morris 2003:65), Morris delivers a blow on the English parliamentary tradition. He abolishes the Houses of Parliament as a foothold of representative democracy by introducing people's direct rule. The shortest chapter of the novel with a heading 'Concerning Politics' comprises only two cues and a paragraph the gist of which is recapitulated as follows, "I will answer your question briefly by saying that we are very well off as to politics, – because we have none" (Morris 2003:73). Having lost their original function, the Houses of Parliament were transformed into a Dung Market. Such a drastic reshuffle of priorities indicates, in Anna Vaninskaya's estimation, Morris's disappointment in the institutional degeneration of the Anglo-Saxon model of governance (Vaninskaya 2010:95). The idea of people's rule that the novel holds out universalizes their fellowship to such an extent that all their energy is fed into cooperation and work on land. This enterprise is governed not by an elected representative body but by families and their neighbours in the district. In relation to the historical fact of reforming parliamentary representation in Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries, Morris's innovations look strikingly new and, like his concept of the nation, take on a radical function disruptive of national continuities.

Committing his imagined community to primordialism, Morris, however, exercises quite a selective approach to the landscape of 21st-century England. The journey transports Guest from Hammersmith to Kelmscott Manor in Gloucestershire and passes through a collection of towns and villages that constituted Morris's mental map of the country: Windsor, Runnymede, Thame, Oxford… Notably, the protagonist does not venture further north towards the 'Industrial

Belt', nor does he move west to the mystic lands of the Celts. Having led his character through these locations, Morris lifts the southern English countryside to special prominence due to, what he describes as, a pervasive sense of the past ingrained in steeples of the Anglo-Saxon era. At the journey's end Guest reminisces of the squalor of the land that he saw in his present and then rejoices at the vision of change, "I thought of all the beautiful grey villages, from the river to the plain and the plain to the uplands, which I could picture to myself so well…" (Morris 2003:172). Guest also rejoices at being present at a hearty dinner which reminds him of church-ale festivals of the Middle Ages (Morris 2003:179). The southern English axis signifies a return to the land's roots, to the area studded with reminders of a distant past. To rephrase Levitas, England's history, "its repeatedly contested future, is a concrete instantiation of Morris's insistent question of what *this* place might have – or might – become *if a different set of social relations were enacted within it*" (Levitas 2002:47).[2]

The activation of distant periods of the past integrated into the English landscape stems from, what Elina Sedyh dubs, a triple aesthetic complex lying at the foundation of Morris's idea of community: idealized mediaevalism – the present riven from the ideal – an ideal future (Sedyh 2009:5). Therefore history (or the narrator's imperfect present) is markedly suppressed, which especially concerns the Bloody Sunday of 1887. These events which saw a large-scale clash between the working classes and the system are chosen by Morris as a point of divergence giving momentum to an idealized future (Morris 2003:100). However, the knowledge of the past is restricted only to "periods of turmoil and strife and confusion" (Morris 2003:26). Because those days are gone, the study of history does not any longer constitute a prime concern. Thus, Morris's utopian vision revolves between looking backward with an eye to a long-gone past and looking forward to social reconstruction. This bifocality seeks to fix the present by ousting the rashness of history from it.

The interpretations of the nation and landscape developed by Morris in his *News from Nowhere* resonate, in a broader political context, with the critical responses of Little Englandism which opposed, in the words of Grainger, "the large patriotisms of British Imperialism" (Grainger 1986:140). Morris viewed the idea of patriotism as well as the nation rather sceptically, taking them to be unifying constructions generated by the state and intended to keep disparate groups of people together. By introducing fellowship as a substitute for the nation in the new England, he not only challenged the land's political continuity but also called into question the sense of continuous history. Instead, he designated the southern English countryside as a form of continuity which was capable of binding a distant past with a perfected future. Morris's practices also anticipated some of the debates about national identity in the early 20th century when, as Mandler noted, "there was no longer a clear and simple correspondence between English values and institutions on the one hand, and the imperial mission on the other, and in this gap an independent English

---

[2] Emphasis in the original.

identity found plenty of room to flourish" (Mandler 2006:147). Radical as it is in its takes on the nation, Morris's utopian vision displays an equally deep concern about the visible continuity of England immersed in the past as about 'fellowship, and rest, and happiness' foreseen in the future.

4. The church in Benson's *The Dawn of All* (1911)

The scarcity of research about Benson's life and work probably testifies to the fact that he could conceivably remain abreast of current discussions though his stand thereon does not seem to have been recognized widely. By no means does this fact belittle the relevance of the novel *The Dawn of All* to the examination of national identity; anachronistically it presents an unjustly neglected case whose significance needs to be reinstated. Organization of time in *The Dawn of All* shows a structural resemblance to the temporality of Morris's *News from Nowhere*. The present opens into a future which is separated from it by an unbridgeable gap of dozens of years. The future becomes available to the protagonist Masterman only in his sleep and functions as an environment which will have transformed his character by the time he awakes. Similarly to *News from Nowhere,* the present charts a further development of the novel by alluding to certain details that will prove telling: Westminster (as the seat of Parliament and the Abbey), the protagonist's Catholic past, and his unfinished study of the history of the Catholic Church (Benson 1911:8, 9, 10).

If Morris's Guest woke up in an England which had already experienced the change and was now living under different conditions, Masterman is brought to the epicentre of a transformation which is about to sweep the country. Interestingly enough, Benson leaves a gap of two years between the realization of the new order in *News from Nowhere* and in his own imagined community. Partly as a reaction to the anticipatory remarks on the rise of socialism made by Morris in the *Commonweal* version of his novel (see Morris 2003:184), and partly perhaps due to his enthusiastic if wary calculations, Benson chose the year 1973 as a tipping point for the future of England. The interim of two years would see a transition of the country from 'State Socialism' to 'State Religion'. Depicted by Morris, the socialist system produced an absolutely isolated country completely unaware of other lands and nations because its citizens indulged in "work which is pleasure and pleasure which is work" (Morris 2003:176), paying little or no regard to the world outside. The pending establishment of the Church, described by Benson, is meant to return England into the Catholic fold of nations from which it was once severed. Since the English Reformation was initiated by the King and was carried out by the state as a 'top-down' incentive, it could contribute to the creation of a national identity only inasmuch as it was "the experiment of a religion resting on the strength of a national isolation" (Benson 1911:277). Therefore Masterman learns to accept that the Reformation, when viewed from a Catholic knoll, was simply a "black blot" on English history (Benson 1911:205). However, because

England has again placed itself at the forefront of innovation and is in the process of becoming the first test case of the established Church, the 'blotted' history can be amended. Such an approach contrasts with Morris's deliberate suppression of history and can be interpreted as a benchmark of the completeness of the image of a future. Along these lines, history is more likely to be revisited when the future looks uncertain or raises doubts, as the case was in *The Dawn of All.* In the 20th century Masterman surveys the country whose centrality in the world is conditional on how firmly the Church is established. Since the new England has seen some of the deplorable effects of socialism, it is commissioned to assist Rome in combating the potential threat that the socialist Germany is now posing. The instance of ostracizing Germany as England's 'Other' is historically compatible with a rapid melt-down of Germanism which pervaded the intellectual discourse in Britain in the 19th century (Collini 1991:365; Mandler 2006:100). Receptive to the rise of Germany as an economic and political rival possessing "the sense of being a nation among other nations" (Grainger 1986:168), Benson directed debates about Englishness toward unity with the continent on the basis of a common Catholic faith rather than socialist ideals.

The establishment of the Church in the novel advances on several fronts. Firstly, the Church has been upgraded from the rank of a department of national life to its centre (Benson 1911:137). Secondly, it is being propagated that the Church and the nation form one indivisible whole where the Church is equal to the soul and the nation to the body (Benson 1911:145). Because the soul needs to be above the body, the Church spreads its influence over the state and disintegrates civil society. This incident showcases a substitution of terms where it is actually the state that aligns itself with the Church and imposes its conjoint rule on the nation. The internal evidence of the tendency can be found in the discussion of the franchise and social structure. The extension of the franchise in this utopian community is considered an unnatural task of allowing "the inexpert to rule the expert" (Benson 1911:30). This, in turn, reveals a truncated structure of society with a monarch as head of state, religious elites as the most influential class, and those who will never have a say because, by definition, they are the inexpert. "It's half-educated, as usual, who's the enemy. He always is. The Wise Men and the shepherds both knelt in Bethlehem. It was the bourgeois who stood apart" (Benson 1911:72). Although earlier in the novel Benson attacked socialism as a form of tyranny of the majority over the individual (Benson 1911:35), the social structure in *The Dawn of All* eventually proves none the less tyrannical. The Church, in Benson's words, "at last put her enemies under her feet – 'repressed' the infidel and killed the heretic" (Benson 1911:152). Summarizing the tonality of reception which the novel garnered after publication, Janet Grayson remarks that Benson disturbed Protestants further, "even Catholics recoiled at the unscriptural concept of the Church Triumphant on earth" (Grayson 1998:88). In this way, Benson, unlike Morris, highlighted the dark side of his utopian project. The transformation of England culminates in the identity of a centralized religious state, intolerant of dissidence and missionary towards other nations. In this respect, neither State

Socialism nor State Religion can strike an appropriate balance between liberties of the individual and the demands of society. Benson discerned astonishing similarities that these two systems share in failing to uphold personal freedoms. Having been appointed Cardinal of the Established Church in his dream, the main character attempts to reassert his free will at death's door. His choice to believe despite the wrong-doing of the Church and the state sends a moral message: in the vicinity of Westminster Cathedral (whose chimes reach the hospital ward) and – apparently – the Houses of Parliament (which opposed the establishment of the Church) he is free to choose whether to follow either or both or neither of them.

The novel produced a perplexing vision of a future which fluctuated between two extremes that Benson attempted to avoid. On the one hand, it countered the 'secularization' of Christianity which became acute at the turn of the century in England. According to Searle, "what was happening was less an erosion of traditional Christian beliefs than watering-down of religious practice, as the churches sought popularity by making their place with an increasingly secular society" (Searle 2004:538). On the other hand, Benson set out to explore a possible outcome of the total churching of an imagined community. Unlike Morris, he went further than the counter-image of the 'existing order' by questioning its silver linings. Reflecting on the period of Irish history when the Church and the state "were obsessed with warding off the constant threat to Catholic purity", Mark Patrick Hederman, Abbot of Glenstal, concludes that this campaign, though it meant to bolster the national identity, resulted in moral paralysis whose excesses continue to emerge nowadays (Hederman 1999:87). Benson seems to have been able to predict that excesses of secularization and churching might lead to very similar repercussions where the individual falls victim to abuse. Although this utopian vision looks uncompromising in form, its message is redolent of the discourses of national identity which favoured the retention of the status quo of national continuities by avoiding radical change.

5. Order in Read's *The Green Child* (1935)

Read enjoyed more lasting resonance among biographers and critics.[3] Some of the major trends of research about him were arguably set out in the monograph *Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source* (1972) written by his contemporary George Woodcock. Taking into account Read's thought, interests, and persuasions lifted from his life and work, Woodcock described Read's politics as a middle ground between revolution and conservatism with a strong lineage of anarchism and Marxism (Woodcock 1972:12, 26). Read was also said to be especially interested in Jungian psychoanalysis which seeped into the imagery of his writing

---

[3] Thistlewood, David (1984) *Herbert Read: Formlessness and Form: An Introduction to His Aesthetics.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; King, James (1990) *The Last Modern: A Life of Herbert Read.* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson; Goodway, David, ed. (1998) *Herbert Read Reassessed.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, etc.

(Woodcock 1972:18). In Woodcock's view, Read's ideological programme was best summarized in his collection of essays *Anarchy and Order* (1945), where the writer proclaimed, "And that is the final aim: neither to believe, nor suffer, nor renounce; but to accept, to enjoy, to realize the anarchy of life in the midst of the order of living" (Read 1954:125). This 'statement of faith' can be seen to have notable presence in Read's novel *The Green Child*. Organization of time in the novel includes two cycles (the past and the future) pivoting on the present. The present moment prompts the activation of a past from which the protagonist, Olivero by name, fled, and then feeds into a future located in a different spatial plane. Unlike in the utopian novels of Morris and Benson, the time line does not suffer disruption which would otherwise have to be bridged by a dream. The present stretches from the main character's return to England up until his lifting the burden of the past. From the outset there develops an incongruity between the protagonist's motive "to escape from the sense of time, to live in the eternity of what he was accustomed to call 'the divine essence of things'" (Read 1947:12), and a reality which he is meant to face. Olivero is led off the path by an intriguing phenomenon incompatible with the ordinary order of things – the river running upstream (Read 1947:55). Resolving to follow a tidal bore, Olivero races against time toward his past which shortly comes into view with his former pupil Kneeshaw and the Green Child in his grip.

The somewhat anti-mechanistic behaviour of Kneeshaw when he overwound a model train in class had had a pronounced effect on the course of Olivero's life; he recollected, "[w]hen that spring snapped, something snapped in my mind. I left the village the next day, and until this day now, thirty years later, I have never returned" (Read 1947:29). This time, seeing the Green Child 'overwound' at Kneeshaw's mercy, Olivero linked the present episode with the recollection of the past. In this way, Read accentuated two contrasting preoccupations by which the main character was driven at different stages in his life. They were civilization in the form of a model train which epitomized for Olivero the human experience, and primitivism in the image of the Green Child who was illiterate and wanton, prone to mushrooms and toadstools, and did not seem to possess a psychology (Read 1947:38, 43). The model train and the Green Child apparently stand at two opposite ends of the spectrum which ranges from progress, nurture, and experience to retardation, nature, and innocence. Olivero came across as an apologist of both; although his defence had a varying degree of ferocity preferring the subhuman creature over the man-made artefact, he opposed violence against these two polarities. Kneeshaw, on the contrary, rebelled against both civilization and primitivism. On the surface, it may appear that Olivero's balanced attitude aligned him with the 'order of living' while Kneeshaw's revolt suggested the 'anarchy of life'. However, the cycles of the past and the future through which the protagonist has gone allow a less direct interpretation. In many respects, the two cycles – the past and the future – are depicted as a counterpoint. Still, at a deeper level they show similarities in pattern and outcomes, as well as the protagonist's discoveries. Set in the 30s – 60s of the 19th century, the novel was written in an atmosphere of

debates about English contributions to civilization which were particularly activated, according to Julia Stapleton, in the works of T. H. Green and Ernest Barker. In line with 19th-century Whiggism, the two thinkers stressed order as an organizing form and England's major export with its parliamentary tradition, Cabinet, and party system (Stapleton 1994:38, 59). The past and the future in the novel centre on the question of order, methods of generating and preserving it.

In the past Olivero's knowledge and experience played a decisive role in shaping a utopian community he had founded at Roncador. Having witnessed various oppressive political regimes on his way from London to South America via Poland and Spain, he intended to even out theory and practice of good governance. In the provisions he drew for a new state he endeavoured to avoid potential threats of isolated societies similar to Christian monasteries which would opportunely amass knowledge and riches but would otherwise be unable to defend themselves. Conversely, in the underworld into which he later plunged with the Green Child all knowledge and experience were limited exclusively to the production of crystals. Obsessed with crystallography, the green inhabitants, like citizens of Morris's socialist England, appeared to be ignorant of other worlds and races, and indulgent in "the divine essence of things" for which Olivero initially aspired. The establishment of the community of Roncador corresponded to Read's understanding of anarchism which meant a "free association of producers working for the common good" (Read 1954:99) and liquidation of bureaucracy. However, the anarchist republic gradually deviated from the course of decentralization after the first signs of general apathy towards politics began to show up. The degeneration of anarchist principles on which Roncador came into being was intimately connected, in Olivero's judgement, with "the absence of conflict, of contending interests, of anguish and agitation" (Read 1947:149). In this atmosphere of rewarding stability the elites prioritized work in their fields and gardens over participation in an election. A universal consensus as to appointing Olivero governor of the land for 25 years put an end to anarchism at Roncador. The history of this community seems to have reduplicated the course of the English Revolution led by Oliver Cromwell. One order of tyranny was successfully deposed only to give way to a new order of a none the less dictatorial regime. Apprehending the aftermath of orderly life which had stalled progress, Olivero made an escape in the hope of discovering an appropriate quota of order and anarchy once again in the future.

However, in the future Olivero became immersed in far more radical displays of order than those he had experienced before. If the past developed dynamically up until the stagnation of the political system of Roncador, the green race did not even have the category of time in their conceptual arsenal. The repetition of a daily routine in shaping and polishing crystals constituted a sole prerogative of the green people intent on revealing "the structure of the universe, beauty, truth, destiny" (Read 1947:174). Interestingly, none of the above notions formed a dichotomy with its opposite because "[o]rder is continuous throughout the universe, and is of one kind", believed the green race (Read 1947:181). Obsessed with the repro-

duction of order in the shape of crystals, the green people rejected the 'anarchy of life' point-blank. Olivero who had willingly fled from Roncador because this community was falling into the iron grip of order found himself in a realm where order was absolute both in theory and in practice. Although he entertained a delusion that he had reached "the freedom of his own mind" (Read 1947:187), his liberation from life and reality did not quite culminate in reconciling order to anarchy. The rebelliousness against the order of life which he shared with his pupil Kneeshaw opened up a whole world for him where his ideals could be tested and reviewed. But, unlike Kneeshaw, Olivero tended to evade and shun life. First he escaped from England failing to confront his pupil's untoward attitude to progress, then he took flight from Roncador failing to "shatter the serenity" of his subjects, and finally discontented with his lifetime discoveries, he removed reality out of sight by drowning Kneeshaw. Having been unable to come to terms with reality, Olivero drifted toward the level of depriving order.

Thus, the past and the future give a perspective on how order (intellectual, political, social) is likely to distance both a community and an individual from the fullness of reality and life. In relation to debates about national identity, it is the present that offers a picture of anarchy realized in the image of a river running upstream and dominating the landscape. One and the same river can contemplatively empty into the sea, or actively flood, or be given to tidal bores. This 'anarchistic' pattern of natural conduct, at first glance, resists reconciliation with the discourse of order prevalent in the period. However, in full accordance with his 'statement of faith', Read furnishes a utopian vision which demonstrates that the 'anarchy of life' in the form of a tidal river can be ensconced in the 'order of living' without radical change. The dialectic of anarchy and order comes to the fore as a precept reconciling the life of an individual with the institutional organization of the state. The discourse of England's identity as "the classic land of liberty" with a "universally admired" tradition of governance (Read 1947:106) serves as a milieu in which the 'anarchy of living' reserves a niche.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the mechanism of interaction between major themes and concerns which featured in discussions of national identity in the late 19th – early 20th centuries, and their interpretations in the utopian novels of Morris, Benson, and Read. The years between 1891 and 1935 witnessed an emergence of debates about national identity in Britain which were fuelled by changing historic circumstances – from the Boer Wars to Ireland's Home Rule. Self-assertion in exporting institutional organization and order intermingled with uncertainty about social welfare, liberal values, and newly sworn national allegiances. In this heavily fraught socio-cultural context, utopias as a genre devising, in Wegner's terms, "an explicit *temporal* transformation of the present" (Wegner 25), found plenty of room for interaction with the ideological discourse

of national identity. Orientated toward the future and committed to temporal finality, the utopian novels of Morris, Benson, and Read addressed a dominant agenda with a varying degree of departure from the ideological stresses of a respective period.

Organization of time in the novels under analysis is realized through visions. In *News from Nowhere* and *The Dawn of All,* the visions of a future hold out an ultimate picture of perfected deficiencies. Morris's protagonist comes to a full understanding of the nature of his vision the moment he awakes and faces a depriving reality of the present, "I was really seeing all that new life from the outside, still wrapped up in the prejudices, the anxieties, the distrust of this time of doubt and struggle" (Morris 2003:181). Masterman's vision is integrated into the framework of his dream and contrasts both with the present of the hospital ward where he regains consciousness and with the repressiveness of Catholicization set up in the future. The visions in these two novels evoke an eternity whose merits are contained in one moment. This picture of eternal bliss extinguishes the movement of history and dismisses it as inherently disturbing. Since utopias, in Elliott's understanding, try to eradicate the pain of the present, they tend to "reduce the amount of 'history' [which is] equivalent to pain" (Elliott 1970:127). In *The Green Child,* organization of time is achieved by absolutizing the role of order in both illusory and genuine dimensions. Having ultimately liberated his mind from the disturbers of order, the main character approaches a 'bourn' of eternity, "Such harmony is the harmony of the universe as well as the harmony of the crystal; my only desire is to become part of that harmony, obeying in my frame its immutable laws and proportions" (Read 1947:194). This transition mutes not only the historical process but also the body and the soul susceptible to it, and signifies an escape from the anarchy of life and reality.

It can be argued that, in *News from Nowhere* and *The Dawn of All,* organization of time is commensurable with Morris's socialist persuasions and Benson's religious creed and may be considered a desirable close of history. The finality in *The Green Child*, on the other hand, forewarns about a zealous attitude towards order which may absorb time into the quotidian rituality of existence and dissipate the impulse for change. In his essay *Paradise and Utopia,* Mircea Eliade contends that utopian futures display an affinity with eschatological vision of the end of the world (Eliade 1973:261). Therefore the utopian 'after' is likely to present quite an intense image of what will have happened after time has come to a close. With regard to the issues of national identity, the three novels leave a horizon of possibility which lies outside the temporal finality of the visions and balances between the existing and the perfected planes. Morris simultaneously forwards two pictures of England – before and after the change. Benson shows the value of free will in choosing the Church and faith. Read dethrones the totality of order as an obstacle in the path of change.

Where the present sets the tone for a further discussion by activating images that will play a symbolic role (the train in *News from Nowhere,* Westminster in *The Dawn of All,* and the river in *The Green Child*), the future offers solutions to

the 'ills' of history by referring back to the past. The past is invoked in order to counter and contest some of the excesses of history: the building of the nation at the state's instigation (Morris), the dissolution of religious practice in the face of external and internal threats (Benson), the obsession with political order as a major 'contribution to civilization' (Read). Responses to these stresses range from disruptive negation to reasserted continuity suggesting either radically new forms of national unity or elevating the importance of the status quo in national politics and social life. Criticizing and even rejecting the past, the utopian futures in the three novels do not fully sever their umbilical cord with it and therefore continue to retain receptivity to current discussions of national identity. The fact that the English landscape is chosen to unite the past with the future, and that England's institutional organization affords more than one vision of a future, testifies to a cohesiveness of the nation with its portrayal in utopian fiction. The utopian novels of Morris, Benson, and Read confirm a cross-fertilization of the utopian and the ideological mentalities across the decades in question. Utopian fiction as a conventional mouthpiece of radical transformations is capable of giving voice to the mutable discourse of a dominant ideology and debating national identity with nearly equal force.

Acknowledgments

Address:
    Maxim Shadurski
    Department of English Literature
    School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures
    University of Edinburgh
    19 George Square
    Edinburgh
    EH8 9LD
    Scotland, UK
Tel.: +44 131 650 3030
E-mail: M.Shadurski@sms.ed.ac.uk

References

Benson, Robert Hugh (1911) *The dawn of all.* London: Hutchinson.
Brundage, Anthony and Richard A. Cosgrove (2007) *The great tradition: constitutional history and national identity in Britain and the United States, 1870–1960.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Collini, Stefan (1991) *Public moralists: political thought and intellectual life in Britain, 1850–1930.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Eliade, Mircea (1973) "Paradise and utopia: mythical geography and eschatology". In *Utopias and utopian thought,* 260–280. Frank E. Manuel, ed. London: Souvenir Press.

Elliott, Robert C. (1970) *The shape of utopia: studies in a literary genre.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Faulkner, Peter (1992) *William Morris and the idea of England: Kelmscott lecture 1991.* Nottingham: Russell Press.

Grainger, J. H. (1986) *Patriotisms: Britain 1900–1939.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Grayson, Janet (1998) *Robert Hugh Benson: life and works.* Lanham: University Press of America.

Hederman, Mark Patrick (1999) *Kissing the dark: connecting with the unconscious.* Dublin: Veritas.

Hume, David (1985) "Of national characters". In his *Essays moral, political, and literary,* 197–215. Eugene F. Miller, ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.

Kiberd, Declan (1996) *Inventing Ireland: the literature of the modern nation.* London: Vintage.

Kumar, Krishan (2003) *The making of English national identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levitas, Ruth (1990) *The concept of utopia.* New York: Philip Allan.

Levitas, Ruth (2002) *Morris, Hammersmith and utopia: The Kelmscott Lecture 2002.* London: Stanhope Press.

Mandler, Peter (2006) *The English national character: the history of an idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Mannheim, Karl (1936) *Ideology and utopia: an introduction to the sociology of knowledge.* Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, transl. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Mill, John Stuart (1993) On representative government. In his *Utilitarianism. On liberty. Considerations on representative government. Remarks on Bentham's philosophy,* 187–428. Geraint Williams, ed. London: J. M. Dent.

Morris, William (2003) *News from nowhere, or, an epoch of rest, being some chapters from a utopian romance.* David Leopold, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Moylan, Tom (1986) *Demand the impossible: science fiction and the utopian imagination.* New York and London: Methuen.

Read, Herbert (1947) *The green child.* London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.

Read, Herbert (1954) *Anarchy and order.* London: Faber & Faber.

Sargent, Lyman Tower (2010) *Utopianism: a very short introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, G. R. (2004) *A New England? Peace and war, 1896–1918.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sedyh, Elina V. (2009) *Tvorčestvo Williama Morrisa v kontekste èstetizacii srednevekov`ja i vzaimo-dejstvija literatury s drugimi vidami iskusstva: Avtoreferat dissertacii.* Sankt-Peterburg: SPbGU.

Shadurski, Maxim (2007) *Literary utopias from More to Huxley: the issues of genre poetics and semiosphere. Finding an island.* Moscow: URSS.

Shadurski, Maxim (2008) *The fictional model of the world in the utopian novels by S. Butler and A. Huxley. Dissertation for obtaining the scholarly degree of a candidate of philological sciences.* Minsk: Belarusian State University.

Stapleton, Julia (1994) *Englishness and the study of politics: the social and political thought of Ernest Barker.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vaninskaya, Anna (2010) *William Morris and the idea of community: romance, history and propaganda, 1880–1914.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Wegner, Philip E. (2002) *Imaginary communities: utopia, the nation, and the spatial histories of modernity.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Woodcock, George (1972) *Herbert Read: the stream and the source.* London: Faber & Faber.