

The Old Grumbler At Runnymede

Jan Holm

The major part of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* is a panegyric on the new utopian world; the old way of life is harshly criticized. It is only in the last third of the novel that we are confronted with a figure who is discontented with life in Nowhere: Ellen's grandfather, who belongs to the group of those grumbling about the new society.

In the context of the novel's narrative structure, the two chapters where Guest meets the grumbler provide the reader something like comic relief. One is granted a certain amount of relaxation after long descriptions and theoretical dialogues about history and politics between Guest and Old Hammond. Morris conceived of the grumbler as a comical counterpart to Old Hammond. They are the only old characters in *Nowhere* who are given special attention.¹ Old Hammond distinguishes himself through his very detailed knowledge of the past. This enables him to appreciate life in *Nowhere* better than anybody else.

Compared to him, Ellen's grandfather appears to be an inveterate grumbler, someone who would not feel content anywhere. This impression is underlined by the fact that one does not get to know his real name; he is only identified as a "grumbler". He would love to go back to the past. In their conversation with him, Guest and Ellen demonstrate that his yearning must be considered escapist daydreaming that complains about the loss of those elements of the past considered to be good, while at the same time cloaking the negative sides of the old system in nostalgia.

The grumbler yearns for the flesh-pots of Egypt without taking into account that, under the old system, he would have had to spend his old age working hard. In the past, it would actually have been much more likely for him to die at an early age. Dealing with the past, the grumbler makes the mistake that A.J.P. Taylor calls the "occupational disease of the historian":

... assuming, when we think back into the past, that we too will be in the top drawer. We shall be jesting with Queen Elizabeth I, building our own palace to rival Blenheim or running a faro bank with Charles Fox. My grandfather was a weaver, so I am less liable to this delusion. If I went back, I should more likely be working eighteen hours a day at a handloom or dying of starvation in a ditch.²

The grumbler identifies himself with the splendour in which the rich and ruling class of the past lived. He gives expression to this sentiment when he complains that in *Nowhere* there are no longer the stately homes of the past. He complains, sighing, "Ah! England was an important place in those days."³ The grumbler cannot comprehend William Guest's angry response that this kind of former wealth should be regarded as stolen property and that such big houses were lived in by vulgar "cockneys." The grumbler's answer actually illustrates how little he knows about the society of the past. It is only his ignorance of history that makes his longing for the 'good old days' understandable. The glorification of the past is unmasked in *News from Nowhere* as a nationalistic nostalgia that cannot see through the pretence of wealth and power and that does not take into account the great sorrow and pain that made the glamour of the rich possible.

Morris opposes not only the suppression and exploitation of the major part of the English population. Following the Marxist tradition, he also voices harsh criticism against the imperialist enslavement of large parts of the world by Great Britain. The British Empire is the most obvious sign of the kind of "importance" that the grumbler would like to go back to. In chapter 15 of *News from Nowhere*, Old Hammond stresses the fact that the glittering facade of the British Empire hid a much darker side:

“I have read books and papers ... telling strange stories indeed of the dealings of civilisation (or organised misery) with “non-civilisation”; from the time when the British Government deliberately sent blankets infected with small-pox as choice gifts to inconvenient tribes of Red-skins, to the time when Africa was infested by a man named Stanley ...”⁴

With this description, Morris not only criticizes Victorian jingoism; he also demythologizes the Social-Darwinist sense of mission among the British, a feeling that found its most outspoken poetic representation in Kipling’s poem of 1899, “The White Man’s Burden.” The Victorian considered himself to be civilized and thus superior to the peoples in the colonies. Old Hammond refutes this self-assessment by describing British genocidal practice as based on Machiavellian imperialism. Nowhere, by way of contrast, lives in peace with all its neighbours. In Morris’s vision, all peoples of the world have equal rights; no one forces anyone else to lose their cultural identity. The emigration policy by which Victorian England tried to solve domestic problems like overpopulation and crime and at the same time strengthen English influence in the colonies has been replaced by the principle of helping your friends. As Old Hammond puts it: “Of course, also, we have helped to populate other countries – where we were wanted and were called for.”⁵

How strongly Morris rejects imperialism can be illustrated by the fact that the English national hero Henry Morton Stanley is called an ‘infestation’ of Africa in *News from Nowhere*.⁶ When William Morris wrote his utopian romance, Stanley had just returned from his third expedition to Africa and was advocating in public for further colonization of this continent. It was not only out of moral resentment that Morris objected to this; he was also afraid that African raw materials and cheap labour would strengthen capitalism and would thus delay the emergence of socialist society.⁷

The grumbler does not know anything about the historical reasons that make Guest feel so negative about the former importance of England. Furthermore, he does not ask Guest to elaborate on the reasons why he rejects his admiration for the glory of the past. The grumbler prefers to change the subject. His ignorance and his lack of desire to take in new information discredit this “praiser of past times” as a serious critic of life in Nowhere.

Wolfgang Schepelmann points out that Morris makes use of a leitmotif – a rather rare structural device in utopian novels – “in order to characterize this old dissatisfied man finally and effectively as a harmless grumbler.”⁸ He thus concludes every dialogue in which he was successfully refuted with a rhetorical question that signals the end of the discussion and at the same time demonstrates his inability to argue.

The chapter in which Guest argues the case that the nationalism of grumblers has to be seen as foolish and dangerous nostalgia bears the title ‘An Early Morning by Runnymede.’ It is highly unlikely that Morris chose the place ‘Runnymede’ without thinking of the meeting between King John Lackland and his Barons, at which they signed the Magna Carta. It is thus important to consider what meaning Morris’s choice of this place might have.

In his essay, ‘Feudal England’, Morris calls the ratification of the Magna Carta “the great, thoroughly well-considered deed, which is conventionally called the foundation of English liberty”.⁹ This view shows that Morris was in favour of this

limitation of royal power. In a Marxist paradigm the barons could be seen as the historically progressive class because their “democratic” deed led to overcoming the king’s claim for absolute royal power. In 1215 there can thus be seen a confrontation between the (bad) despotic and the (good) democratic principle. The good one won. Morris must have – in a conscious or subconscious way – liked this clear romance-like moral antagonism and the victory of the good, for he chose this historical allusion in order to illustrate that in the discussion between Guest and the grumbler two possibilities stand opposed: the morally correct view of Guest and the grumbler’s wrong one.¹⁰

It can thus be said that Morris uses manifold ways to give the reader the impression that the grumbler is mistaken. However, neither Ellen nor Guest manage to convince the grumbler. They cannot really communicate with him. Ellen’s grandfather is bored by the epoch of rest that he has to live in. He finds this earthly paradise without competition dull: “I think one may do more with one’s life than sitting on a damp cloud and singing hymns.”¹¹ The praiser of past times believes that Guest’s age, full of struggle, was much more exciting and tells the visitor, “you are brisker and more alive, because you have not wholly got rid of competition.”¹²

The difference in character between Guest and the grumbler could hardly be greater because it had been the rivalry among men that had led Guest to his dreamland Nowhere. The discussion between them had to end where it started; the grumbler remains discontented and wishes himself back to his Gilded Age:

“Well, for my part I like reading a good old book with plenty of fun in it, like Thackeray’s ‘Vanity Fair’. Why don’t you write books like that now? Ask that question of your Bloomsbury sage.”¹³

Thus an aporia results; only silence can follow.

Morris had not succeeded in convincing the critic of his utopia; therefore he has to eliminate him by letting Dick say that the grumblers are a group in society that is dying out. The grumbler’s inability to argue his case, his ignorance, and the monotonous tenacity of his dissatisfaction discredit this praiser of past times. But for some Victorians – especially the upper class – the grumbler’s criticism that life in Nowhere is boring could have appeared to be justified because it lacks the special kind of satisfaction that the experience of power and military grandeur can yield to a lot of people.

War and imperialism are complex phenomena and there are more reasons for them than economic profit and political advantage. For the British upper class there was little danger involved of getting killed in military campaigns in the colonies, but the gain in honour and glory was immense. The rank and file were more likely to get wounded or killed, but the danger was far outweighed by the satisfaction of feeling superior to colonial natives. The same was true for the “proud” Englishman at home. The experience of personal impotence could be overcome by identifying with a heroic leader and with a powerful nation and by projecting personal weakness on people of a different race. Furthermore, cruelty and destruction seem to offer an atavistic, barbarian thrill to which men can succumb.

The ecstasy of war and the experience of power over people cannot be found in Nowhere, in a society based on principles of harmony. In his dream of a new world, Morris envisions a way of life where love and friendship can overcome hatred and

passion. But it becomes apparent that human life in the earthly paradise of Nowhere can only then be fully satisfying if man manages to take an evolutionary step. The practical application of Morris's dream depends on a new man, the Nowherian. Old grumbling and discontented Adam cannot be happy in Nowhere. Only the children of paradise can bear this state of felicity; not even Guest, the struggler for the new world, can. Morris's doubts about the possibility of man's evolutionary capacity seem to have led to his authorial decision to deal with the grumbler's criticism not in a discursive but rather in a manipulative way that makes the critic of his world appear silly.

NOTES

- ¹ The old man who holds Dick's horse, and Henry Morsom, who is called a "country edition" of Old Hammond by Guest, remain insignificant characters in the novel. Cf. William Morris: *News from Nowhere*, ed. James Redmond (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 152.
- ² A.J.P. Taylor 'Fiction in History', *Essays in English History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 15.
- ³ *News*, p. 134.
- ⁴ *News*, p. 81.
- ⁵ *News*, p. 62.
- ⁶ *News*, p. 81.
- ⁷ Cf. *News*, and Redmond's annotation on pages 190-91.
- ⁸ My translation of the original German; Wolfgang Schepelmann: *Die englische Utopia im Übergang: Von Bulwer-Lytton bis H. G. Wells*; (Vienna: Verband der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften, 1975), p. 106.
- ⁹ Cf. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans, Green, 1910-15), Vol. 23, 45. Modern historiography attributes much less importance to the Magna Carta than Morris when analyzing its significance in the development of "English liberty". Cf. J.C. Holt, *Magna Carta*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), p. 22, and G.O. Sayles, *The Medieval Foundations of England* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 402.
- ¹⁰ This analysis can be supported by the notions that Morris held about medieval society in 1887: "The stir and movement also of the Crusades, and the necessities in which they involved the princes and their barons, furthered the upward movement of the classes that lay below the feudal vassals, great and little; the principal opportunity for which movement, however, in England, was given by the continuous struggle between the Crown and the Church and Baronage." 'Feudal England', *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 42-43.
- ¹¹ *News*, p. 130.
- ¹² *News*, p. 128.
- ¹³ *News*, p. 136.