

# The Landscapes of Nowhere

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The full title of William Morris's *News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest, being some chapters from a Utopian Romance* evokes the tradition of sensationalist seventeenth-century pre-tabloid literature, a genre which can be illustrated by such publications as *Strange News from the West*,<sup>1</sup> or *Sad and Lamentable News from Rumford*,<sup>2</sup> or again *Strange and Wonderful News from Stow-Market in Suffolk*.<sup>3</sup> Yet the allusion is made in a playful way since in *News from Nowhere* – originally delivered in monthly instalments in *Commonweal* – there is no scandal, no extraordinary manifestation of Nature or the Other World, in short very little to lament or wonder about. Why then did William Morris choose such a title? Was it simply to attract potential readers by leading them to expect some sensational narrative? Were the implicitly promised landscape descriptions to be taken as word-paintings of a beautiful alternative reality, or did they, in their paradoxical non-existence, aim at visualising the ugliness of reality?

Nowhere is by definition an imaginary world. Yet, Nowhere as depicted in Morris's words is not completely Nowhere: through unchanged toponymy, the reader is indeed invited to identify it with England. The virtuality therefore relies less on location than on time, making the romance, properly speaking, rather than a utopia, a 'uchronia'. It is a modalised version of the world, not as it looked, but as it 'ought to have looked' in Morris's age.<sup>4</sup>

In order for readers to achieve extraction of the self from their own social, economical, political and cultural contexts, William Morris operated a 'distanciation' – the dream in Chapter One – that is, a narrative technique aiming at de-familiarising readers from their daily waking experience. Furthermore, by locating his romance not in England, but in Nowhere, William Morris aimed at de-automatising the perception of contextual elements we usually take for granted, and at creating a critical

distance permitting a panoramic view of the political, social, moral and aesthetic face of Victorian England. Indeed, for readers of *Commonweal*, it was clear that *News from Nowhere* was not a piece of escapist travel literature, and that the real top of the book was not Nowhere but ‘nowhere’.

The return from dreamland to England takes place as early as Chapter Two, thanks to unchanged locational references – the River Thames, Chiswick, Putney, and Hammersmith, for instance. Indeed, as we know, places and their names possess a mnemonic function. Therefore, during their journey up the Thames, William Guest, the hero, and his Nowherian friends, duly pass evocative places such as Hampton Court or Runnymede.<sup>5</sup>

Hampton Court, just west of London, was an ancient Saxon manor house later transformed into a priory. During the sixteenth century, Cardinal Wolsey spent lavishly in order to build a renaissance palace, but was forced to give it up to his master, Henry VIII. When Henry in turn made it one of his homes, he extended it, and further extensions were later carried out according to designs by Christopher Wren. Therefore, a large part of the history of England is inscribed in the architecture of the building, which retains traces of Saxon, Tudor and Classical styles. In *News from Nowhere*, when the group of friends stop at Hampton Court, William Guest discovers that it has become a public place where ‘there were tables spread for dinner’, and people ‘had an indefinable look of being at home and at ease’.<sup>6</sup> Contemplating the beauty of the building and the surrounding landscape leads to the evocation of the political contrast between past and present:

Dick (...) told me that the beautiful old Tudor rooms, which I remembered had been the dwellings of the lesser fry of Court flunkies, were now much used by people coming and going; for, beautiful as architecture had now become and although the whole face of the country had quite recovered its beauty, there was still a sort of tradition of pleasure and beauty which clung to the group of existing buildings.<sup>7</sup>

Such intellectual appreciation of the landscape seems to give credence to John Ruskin’s judgement that no such thing as the spontaneous and natural love of landscape exists. In his ‘Inaugural Lecture on Art’ delivered at Edinburgh in 1853, Morris’s mentor stressed the cultural aspect of

## landscape appreciation:

No race of men which is entirely bred in wild country, far from cities, ever enjoys landscape. (...) Landscape can only be enjoyed by cultivated persons; and it is only by music, literature and painting, that cultivation can be given. (...) In the children of noble races, trained by surrounding art, and at the same time in the practise of great deeds, there is an intense delight in the landscape of their country as memorial (...); while records of proud days, and of dear persons, make every rock monumental with ghostly inscription, and every path lovely with noble desolateness.<sup>8</sup>

Landscape enjoyment is therefore, for both authors, cultural and above all historical. The Ruskinian accretive power of memory upon which the delight in landscape is constructed, is exactly what the narrator of *News from Nowhere* seems to be experiencing when he states ‘my pleasure of past days seemed to add itself to that of to-day’.<sup>9</sup>

Even when the past is not explicitly invoked, there seems to be a spirit of place which permeates through time. Hence Runnymede, where, on 15 June 1215, Magna Carta was signed, is the paragon of Nowherian freedom and tolerance. Symptomatically, it is the place where the optimistic Ellen and her grumbling grandfather live happily together. It is described as a place of once lost and now newly recovered coherence and integrity. Describing his first daytime vision of the landscape on an early morning by Runnymede, Guest is overcome by a sense of prelapsarian plenitude:

I went out a-doors, and after a turn or two round the superabundant garden, I wandered down over the meadow to the river-side, where lay our boat, looking quite familiar and friendly to me. I walked up-stream a little, watching the light mist curling up from the river till the sun gained power to draw it all away; saw the bleak speckling the water under the willow boughs, when the tiny flies they fed on were falling in myriads; heard the great chub splashing here and there at some belated moth or other, and felt almost back again in my boyhood.<sup>10</sup>

The harmony between humanity and nature is emphasised by an oblique reference to the original Garden of Eden (the ‘superabundant garden’) as well as by the apparent effortless and plenitude of rural life – plants, insects and animals seem spontaneously to provide food for people and animals alike, – and by the reunion and peaceful interaction of the

four elements: Earth (meadow), Air (mist), Fire (sun) and Water (river). The effect of the historical landscape is that through some mysterious power, it enables the narrator to regress in time to the days of his childhood. The spirit of the place which inaugurated democracy in Britain and was the cradle of collective freedom is still at work it seems.

In fact, as is often the case in Romantic literature, History and personal history overlap, the second frequently becoming a metonymy of the first. Therefore, when Guest alludes to his recovered boyhood, he may be simultaneously referring to the childhood of the nation, or even of the world. The 'four ages' division of human life into different stages – infancy, youth, adulthood, old age – mirrors the classical four ages of the world described by Ovid, who associated them with four metals of decreasing value: gold, silver, brass and iron. Such a four-fold sequence was popular enough in the nineteenth century for Thomas Love Peacock to publish in 1820 an essay on 'The Four Ages of Poetry' which opened with the plain assertion that 'Poetry, like the world, may be said to have four ages'. To young men with a classical education and a love of poetry, more specifically people such as Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin and William Morris, this division offered a pessimistic reading of history stretching from Antiquity to the present time, including the Middle-Ages and the Modern Age. In his 'Signs of the Times' (1829), Carlyle thus dubbed his present age the 'Age of Machinery', that is of Iron.<sup>11</sup>

Understandably, as the century drew towards its close, old age seemed to hasten towards death. In 1890, the year in which *News from Nowhere* was published, William Morris himself, although he was only 56 years of age, felt like an old man, trying to recapture the spirit of his youth. Already in April 1878, attempting to convince Jane to move to Kelmscott House, he insisted on the beauty of the garden: 'I do think people will come to see us at the Retreat (fy on the name!) if only for the sake of the garden and river (...) so let us hope we shall grow younger there, my dear'.<sup>12</sup> In the same way as the garden and river promise the company of friends and the return of earlier years, the description of an unspoiled countryside by Runnymede on a morning in June becomes for William Morris a metaphorical vision of the early days of the nation, and draws a portrait of the artist as a young man.

The inscapist and the historicised landscape are two versions of a single Romantic, intro- and retro-spective tendency to cultivate nostalgia.

Indeed, landscape descriptions are held up as mirror images, not of nature, but of the embellished time which shaped it or the idealised people who lived in it. As William Guest discovers, the mirror of nature makes him look considerably younger than he is. The proof is that through the contact with nature, he has recovered his long-forgotten instincts, fresh outlook on the world and youthful power to marvel:

My feet turned that way instinctively, as I wanted to see how haymakers looked in these new and better times (...). I came to the hurdles and stood looking over into the hay-field, and was close to the end of the long line of haymakers who were spreading the low ridges to dry off the night dew. The majority of these were young women clad much like Ellen last night, though not mostly in silk, but in light woollen most gaily embroidered; the men being all clad in white flannel embroidered in bright colours. The meadow looked like a giant tulip-bed because of them.<sup>13</sup>

The comparison between agricultural workers and a bed of tulips informs the reader of Guest's recovered purity of vision and creativity. It also contributes – and this was foreseeable in the case of William Morris – to a moralised and politicised landscape which may have been inspired by the painting by Peter Bruegel the Younger of *Spring* (1632) 'from a planned series of the four seasons hung (and still hanging) at Kelmscott Manor'.<sup>14</sup> This work, representing a village square with neat beds of tulips being tended by men and women villagers, was known to Morris as *The Tulip Garden*.

In Bruegel as well as in Morris, the collective garden becomes a metaphor for a just and happy social order. The moralised landscape, in which nature acts as a mirror of society, draws heavily on the tradition of literary utopias established by Chaucer and by Thomas More. A clearly seen, bright-coloured, well-tended, and happy-peopled landscape testifies to a moral society in which there is nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Guest is explicit on this point when he refers to the disappearance of Victorian country-houses from the landscape of Nowhere:

You decockneyized the place, and sent the damned flunkies packing, (so) that everybody can live comfortably and happily, and not a few damned thieves only, who were centres of vulgarity and corruption wherever they were, and who, as to this lovely river, destroyed its beauty morally, and

had almost destroyed it physically, when they were thrown out of it.<sup>15</sup>

In this moralised landscape, bountiful Mother Nature, who during the Industrial Revolution had been abused by wicked men, has been restored to her former dignity. The personification of Nature places her relationship with humanity in the perspective of gender, generational and class oppression. Morris the Romantic insists on the organic link between Nature and humanity, whilst Morris the Marxist stresses the egalitarian ethos, which does not tolerate the domination of one class over the other. Both point to the necessary and natural interrelation of humanity and nature, and to the absurdity of ‘looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – “nature”, as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind as another’ which leads to the enslavement of nature: ‘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 them’.<sup>16</sup> Nowherians have recovered the moral law which should precede any mercantile one, and by considering Marx’s reflection of the organic link between humanity and nature,<sup>17</sup> they have accepted to become children again. Thus they have freed from her fetters the universal Mother whom they now respect, protect and celebrate in a quasi-pantheistic way. Ellen’s exultation in her love of Nature indeed goes far beyond any aesthetic appreciation:

(She) laid her shapely sun browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, ‘Oh me! Oh 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!’<sup>18</sup>

Her semi-pantheistic, semi-orgasmic outcry makes Ellen more than a character of fiction, an allegory of Life. Through renunciation both of established politics and of religious dogma, the Nowherians seem to have regressed, in an historical perspective, to a pre-capitalist, even a pre-Christian era, indeed to the legendary period when the Western world was inhabited by humans and fairies living in harmony. This perfect age of innocence makes possible the romance between the narrator Guest and Ellen, who is repeatedly referred to as a fairy.<sup>19</sup>

The landscapes of Nowhere are politicised, and moralised: they act as evidences of the spirit of the time, and of the society produced by that time. This concept is fundamentally Ruskinian, and Morris may have discovered it when reading, as a young man, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in which Ruskin wrote that the practical laws of architecture should be exponents of moral ones. In the introductory section of the book, Ruskin implicitly relied on the four ages theory in order to lament the degeneration of contemporary architecture. In art as in humanity, it seemed that lower purposes become predominant with age, leading to the vilest forms of materialism. In order to counteract this tendency, and to maintain a healthy balance between higher and lower functions, there was a need for 'general and irrefragable laws of right'.<sup>20</sup> But Ruskin did not restrict his argument to architecture in the narrow sense of the word, and if we consider it in its broader sense, defining not the structure of a building but that of society and of landscape, then Morris comes very close to his master's conclusions. In the same way as the older man examined medieval cathedrals in order to formulate his diagnosis of the moral condition of the workmen, and then of society at large, his young disciple studied the face of industrialised and polluted Britain and then pointed to the capitalist system as the source of all ills, and prescribed the abolition of money as a drastic but vitally necessary remedy.

It is not paradoxical then that the futuristic landscapes of post-revolutionary Nowhere take their paradigms from a revisited past rather than any scientific dream, and call for a development of lesser arts, not fine arts, originating from natural sources, not from scientific representations. In his lecture of 1881 entitled 'Some hints on Pattern-Designing', Morris insisted on the necessity of

ornament that reminds us of [the outward face of the earth, of the innocent love of animals, or of man passing his days between work and rest], and sets our minds and memories at work easily creating them; because scientific representation of them would again involve us in the problems of hard fact and the troubles of life, and so once more destroy our rest for us.<sup>21</sup>

In his integrative view of nature and human nature, William Morris places himself in the literary and artistic tradition of the pastoral.

John Barrell has noted that 'an almost invariable feature of landscapes in oils produced in the 18th and well into the 19th century (is) that they

were peopled landscapes'.<sup>22</sup> The same statement could be applied to *News from Nowhere*: it is not the beauty of wild nature *per se* which attracts William Morris, but rather the well-tended aspect of a garden-like landscape which is a living image of a wholesome society. In 'Making the Best of It', Morris wrote that a garden 'should look both orderly and rich. It should be well fenced from the outside world. It should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or the wilderness of Nature, but should look like a thing never to be seen except near a house'.<sup>23</sup>

In accordance with the artistic tradition established for instance by Thomas Gainsborough and Richard Wilson, rustics are depicted at work. As if he tried to deny the cliché of the lazy or rebellious rural workers, William Morris depicts industrious and moral country folk. However, the focus is not on the individual but on the group, usually captured in a long shot, as an element of a wider landscape. The distance between the imaginary beholder and the scene described makes the rustics inoffensive and even decorative (the bed of tulips) as they seem to be performing some pleasant social activity. This depiction is radically different from that proposed by Morris's friend Ford Madox Brown, but it is very much in the line of what was exhibited by very popular, and now largely forgotten artists such as Miles Birkett Foster (1825–1899), Benjamin Williams Leader (1831–1923), George Vicat Cole (1833–1893) and Alfred Glendening (1861–1907). Their purpose was not to show the distress of the Victorian agricultural poor, but rather to voice their creators' nostalgia for a Golden Age of social stability, the image of which rests on an arcadian pastoral iconography.

We passed under another ancient bridge; and through meadows bordered at first with huge elm-trees mingled with sweet chestnuts of younger but very elegant growth and the meadows widened so much that it seemed as if the trees must now be on the bents only, or about the houses, except for the growth of willows on the immediate banks; so that the wide stretch of grass was little broken here.<sup>24</sup>

The unbroken fields read as a reaction against the Enclosure movement which not only transformed the English landscape, but also contributed largely to the pauperisation of the agrarian proletariat during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the same time, this short passage underlines the harmonious coexistence of different genera-

tions of trees, to be read as metaphors for human individuals or families. The 'huge elm-trees' signal the implication of Morris in this politicised landscape as a recurring element of his personal mythology. Indeed, one of his articles in *Commonweal* (6 July 1889) is entitled 'Under an Elm-tree; or, Thoughts in the Countryside'. It contains the same arguments as *News from Nowhere*: the physical beauty of both nature and people testify to their healthy vigour under just and equalitarian conditions – that is without a government.

The hay-field is a pretty sight this month seen under the elm, as the work goes forward on the other side of the way opposite the bean-field, till you look at the haymakers closely. Suppose the haymakers were friends working for friends on land which was theirs, as many as were needed, with leisure and hope ahead of them instead of hopeless toil and anxiety, need their useful labour for themselves and their neighbours cripple and disfigure them and knock them out of the shape of men fit to represent the Gods and Heroes?<sup>25</sup>

The righteousness of work is proved by its effect on the body of the worker: whilst 'Useful Work' knits the muscles, browns the skin and sculpts bodies 'fit to represent the Gods or Heroes', 'Useless Toil' cripples and maims prematurely aged workers. By the time he began his literary, and then his later political career, William Morris had completely rejected the religious dogma of his early days. This may explain his insistence on discarding the Biblical chastisement 'In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread': to Morris work and pleasure were intrinsically linked, and only such a vicious political system as capitalism could alienate those two aspects of any worthwhile human activity.

However, Morris's criticism is based on the assumption that there once existed an ideal pastoral world – Merrie England – and his dream of a rural, secularised Eden rests on artistic visions conjured up by Georgic poetry and painting more than on social observation. John Barrell has rightly noted that 'for the most part the art of rural life [of the eighteenth century] offers us the image of a stable, unified, almost egalitarian society'. But he has also insisted that the idea that 'this mythical unity and (...) attempts to pass itself off as an image of the actual unity of an English countryside innocent of division' can be reassessed by the critical historian who may come to see 'that unity as artifice, as something made out of the actuality

of division'.<sup>26</sup> It seems that William Morris admired this form of art, and the social cohesion it conjured up, too much to be critical. The vision it offered of a place free from tension, peopled by sensitive individuals 'unproblematically at one with their surroundings' answers exquisitely the yearning Morris experienced for 'An Epoch of Rest'.<sup>27</sup>

Even though William Morris possessed the historical knowledge which made him aware of the social dysfunctions of earlier ages (as testified in *A Dream of John Ball* for instance), he was attracted by the romanticising of rural life carried out by the adepts of a more simple life, some of whom were his friends. Morris's depiction of the New Man of post-capitalist England is much indebted to the popular imagery of the industrious poor in edifying pastoral scenes of the late eighteenth century brought back to fashion in the late nineteenth century by Foster, Leader, Cole and Glendening. Like his artistic counterparts, Morris was concerned to promote an image of the good, deserving rural poor who seemed remote from reality but yet gave the middle-class readership the thrills of make-believe. In other words, the characters in *Nowhere* do not seem to work but to play at working. Indeed, when William Guest meets Dick for the first time, he remarks that 'he seemed to be like some specially manly and refined young gentleman, playing waterman for a spree'.<sup>28</sup>

The pleasure of role-playing, of changing one's own life and routine for a while, of pretending to be a new person, was a thrill Morris, versatile as he was, had experienced personally. In 1879, as he was comfortably settled down at Kelmscott House, he wrote to Georgie Burne-Jones: 'somehow I feel as if there must be an end for me playing at living in the country: a town-bird I am, a master artisan'.<sup>29</sup> Yet, during his extended stays in Oxfordshire, Morris as a rustic may have felt as elated as Marie-Antoinette playing the shepherdess or the collectors of Alfred Glendening's art sympathising mentally with painted models posing as farmers and cottagers.

William Morris's landscapes in *News from Nowhere* belong to the literary tradition heralded by John Ruskin: that of word-painting. Because he was intimately acquainted with literature and painting, Morris was aware of their interaction with reality: he knew that art could be either a mirror or a lamp, to borrow Ruskin's famous metaphors, or both. Some instances of word-painting in *News from Nowhere* are mirror-holding depictions of devastated landscapes peopled by the degraded victims of a capitalist

economy. Most, however, are lamp-holding visions of a bright and libertarian future. Occasionally, the two pictures are presented side by side as a diptych:

As we went, I could not help putting beside (Dick's) promised picture of the hay-field as it was then the picture of it as I remembered it, and especially the images of the women engaged in the work rose up before me: the row of gaunt figures, lean, flat-breasted, ugly, without a grace of form or face about them; dressed in wretched skimpy print gowns, and hideous flapping sun-bonnets, moving their rakes in a listless mechanical way. How often had that marred the loveliness of the June day to me; how often had I longed to see the hay-fields peopled with men and women worthy of the sweet abundance of midsummer, of its endless wealth of beautiful sights, and delicious sounds and scents.<sup>30</sup>

Visionaries play an important role in helping the less-imaginative of us create what they believe is a better future; this is why their descriptions may more aptly be termed prescriptions. Morris's political prescriptions in *News from Nowhere* produce word-paintings both beautiful to read and visualise, and full of meaning. That was the hallmark of his artistic practice, the same approach he used in tapestry for instance. When explaining to his workers what he expected from a beautiful pattern, he wrote: 'I, as a Western man and a picture-lover, must still insist on plenty of meaning in your patterns; I must have unmistakable suggestions of gardens and fields, and strange trees, boughs and tendrils'.<sup>31</sup> It seems that when he sat down to write his utopian romance, William Morris was equally tempted to cram 'plenty of meaning' in his pattern, weaving in as many allegories, hints and innuendoes as he could in a few lines. The finished piece, a moralised and historicised peopled landscape, is both dense with meaning and artistically successful: it manages to conjure up as vivid, alluring and memorable an image of the future socialist England as any reader thirsty for sensation could wish for, thus keeping the implicit promise of its alluring 'News from...' title.

## NOTES

1. *Strange News from the West, being a true and perfect account of several miraculous sights seen in the air Westward on Thursday last, being the 21st day of March, by divers persons standing on London bridge*, London: J. Jones, 1661, 5 pp. 4°.
2. *Sad and Lamentable News from Rumford, being a true and dreadful relation of the sad and dreadful end of W. Stapeler, who committed a rapt, or ravishment upon a young girl*, London: Printed for B.W., 1674, 8 pp.
3. *Strange and Wonderful News from Stow-Market in Suffolk; being a true relation of a most dreadful earthquake there, and at other places near adjacent, on the 31st day of May 1682*, London: Henry Shute, v.
4. Clive Wilmer, ed, William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, London: Penguin, p. 198. Afterwards Wilmer.
5. Wilmer; Hampton Court, Ch. 22, Runnymede, Ch. 23.
6. Wilmer, p. 171.
7. *Ibid.*
8. John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*, 1887, London: George Allen, 1904, pp. 28–29, (emphasis added).
9. Wilmer, p. 171.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
11. Thomas Love Peacock, ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’, 1820. Full text available at: <http://www.thomaslovepeacock.net/FourAges.html> [last accessed 6 April 2009]; Thomas Carlyle, ‘Signs of the Times’, *The Collected Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Vol. III, London: Chapman & Hall, 1858.
12. Derek Baker, *The Flowers of William Morris*, London: Barn Elms Publishing, 1996, p. 58. Afterwards Baker.
13. Wilmer, p. 178.
14. Baker, p. 54.
15. Wilmer, p. 180.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
17. ‘Man lives from nature, i.e. nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature’. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*. Translated and edited by T. B. Bottomore. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 328.
18. Wilmer, p. 220.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
20. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), New York: John Wiley & Son, 1865, pp. 2–3.
21. William Morris, ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’ (1881), as in Wilmer, p. 259.

22. John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 17. Afterwards Barrell.
23. May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910–15, Volume XXII, p. 91. Afterwards *CW*
24. Wilmer, p. 217.
25. William Morris, 'Under an Elm Tree', 1889, as in Wilmer, p. 364.
26. Barrell, p. 5.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
28. Wilmer, p. 47.
29. Baker, p. 60.
30. Wilmer, p. 169.
31. *CW*, Volume XXII, p. 195.