

News from Nowhere as Séance Fiction

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It is a familiar characteristic of utopia as a genre that we meet the traveller to the place before we encounter the new society itself. Thomas More bumps into Raphael Hythloday in Antwerp, and only subsequently hears about the latter's adventures on the island of Utopia; Julian West introduces himself to us in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and then proceeds to narrate his adventures in the transfigured Boston of the rest of the book; William Guest returns to Hammersmith after a Socialist League meeting, and next day wakes up in the new post-revolutionary world of Morris's *Nowhere*.

Having met such characters, we instantly bond with them and accept their narrative perspectives. We respond positively to all that is energetic or colourful about the utopian narrator – More's Raphael and Morris's Guest are particularly memorable instances – and become involved in whatever problems or perplexities they undergo. Because this identification takes place so early, our interest, once the travellers have actually arrived in utopia, remains locked within it, confined within the categories of the individual subject. We need first of all to know how this new society impacts upon these chosen individuals, how it excites, baffles, disturbs and transforms them. We inhabit not just the emotional reactions of the travellers to utopia (which can be very intense indeed, as with the nervous breakdown which Julian West undergoes during his early days in the new Boston), but also the intellectual decoding operations by which they strive to make sense of it – their attempts to explain to themselves their own arrival there and their efforts to grasp the strange new social customs and structures they see around them.

All this makes for good reading, but it entails something of a constitutive contradiction in the genre itself. Utopia, which aims like no other literary genre to give us a glimpse of a genuinely collective and cooperative political future, seems narratively bound by the device of the individual subject as it seeks to do this. Form seems to run athwart content here, as if utopia can transcend the bad old society semantically but not syntactically. The vision is collective but not the literary means that render it, and what I aim to do in this essay is to defamiliarise

this situation, to think matters the other way round, to consider the utopian traveller from the viewpoint of the new society, not the latter from the bemused and incredulous viewpoint of the visitor.

If we can find a means of turning utopias round 180° in this fashion, a new set of questions comes into focus. Why does the new society receive a visitor? Why does it need one? Why these particular visitors? What do they actively contribute to, rather than passively receive, from the new world? Is there some lurking deficiency within the apparently perfect society which somehow requires that contribution? If so, in what way are those societies, at the end of each book, different – and presumably better – for their having been there? We are certainly in the realm of political paradox here too. For how is it, after all, that the representative of the bad old society can somehow make the good new one (which we initially took to be perfect) better? Can it be, if such intervention from the past is needed, that utopia was not in fact quite so utopian after all, that it was more of a self-problematising ‘critical utopia’, in Tom Moylan’s useful term?¹ In the conventional reading of the genre from the perspective of the individual narrator, the utopian travellers helpfully mediate the brave but baffling new world to a readership still caught up in the categories of the old one; they modestly serve utopia, giving it currency beyond its own shores. In the perspective I wish to work towards, which begins from the collective new society, not from the traveller, the latter’s very presence in the new world in the first place is unsettling. It suggests that all is not quite well, that there are inadequacies here which need addressing; the traveller as it were brushes utopia troublingly against the grain as well as learning from it and helping propound it.

A GENERIC HYPOTHESIS

How, then, do we arrive at such a reversal of the utopian reading experience, how loosen the grip of such charismatic narrators as More’s Raphael and Morris’s Guest on our imaginations? This seems to me the place at which the generic hypothesis of ‘séance fiction’ comes into play. The term was first mooted by Patrick Parrinder in a fine paper delivered at the 1990 centenary celebration of the serial publication of *News from Nowhere*; and I shall endeavour to develop it beyond Parrinder’s purposes in that particular essay.² Rather than generalise it out in relation to utopias at large, I shall stick closely in what follows to *News from Nowhere* itself. My hypothesis can be quite baldly stated: in a moment of political need, the inhabitants of Morris’s Nowhere have convened a séance at the Hammersmith Guest House in order to summon the spirits of the powerful dead, and the image which flashes up before them at this moment of danger (to borrow Walter Benjamin’s phrasing) is none other than William Guest himself.

On the surface level of the text, naturally, Dick, Bob, Boffin and Annie are as baffled to see Guest as he is to meet them; but, as I have already said, I am trying to remain faithful to the underlying collective necessities of the new society, not the individual narrative perspectives of its inhabitants. My hermeneutic wager is that personal puzzlement at that level does not rule out the notion of a deeper collective summoning.

Even so, to call *News from Nowhere* a work of 'séance fiction' may seem to override too brusquely the genial, sunlit secularism of the text itself. I therefore want to evoke briefly some relevant contexts which might strengthen this generic hypothesis for us. First, there was a strong interest in séances and spiritualism in Morris's own personal and political circles. Georgiana Burne-Jones records mysterious table-turning episodes in her girlhood: 'Our removal to London put an end to these séances, but none of us ever understood the things we saw at them.'³ Fiona MacCarthy writes: 'The occult was a bond between Janey and Rossetti, who used to go to séances together. Janey had a definitely spiritualist tendency, giving vivid accounts of ghost activity at Kelmscott: mysterious carriages being driven to the house'. And on at least one occasion Morris himself attended a séance, even if the experience does not seem to have been a great success. Burne-Jones recalled that 'Once I went with Mr Morris to a séance at a house where we dined first with the medium, which I always thought was a mistake.'⁴ John C. Kenworthy claimed in 1897 to have once 'asked Morris his opinion of the so-called "psychic phenomena," upon which "spiritualism" rests. "I once had a dream," he [Morris] said, "that spiritualism was true, and it was the worst dream of my life."' But in *News from Nowhere*, I shall suggest, spiritualism *is* true and this is fortunate indeed for the Nowherians.

Second, there was a general affinity between spiritualism and political radicalism across the nineteenth century. As Russell and Clare Goldfarb put it in their *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters*, which anticipated so much later scholarly work in this area: 'Robert Owen, Horace Grealey, Albert Brisbane, and Margaret Fuller were among those interested in both the theories of Fourier, the French socialist, and spiritualism. Brisbane went to séances with Andrew Jackson Davies, and Robert Owen's son, Robert Dale, published books on his belief in spiritualism. Socialist communities attracted spiritualists and spiritualist communities welcomed socialists'. If political activists could frequent séances, so too, third, and remarkably, could séances be convened for explicitly political rather than personal purposes. The Goldfarbs refer us to an extraordinary 'séance held at the White House on 23 April 1863, when the party included the Lincolns, the Messrs. Welles, Stanton, and a medium, Charles E. Shackle ... the spirit spoke with Washington, Lafayette, Franklin, Wilberforce, and Napoleon, all of whom expressed different ideas on the conduct of the war.'⁶ It is a political séance of this kind which I shall, in effect, take *News from Nowhere* to be.

Moreover, since *News from Nowhere* is a Marxist utopia, we should recall, fourth, the structural affinities between Marxism and the darker literary genres. For as Chris Baldick has finely demonstrated in his *In Frankenstein's Shadow*, Marxist writing is haunted from its inception by a dark underbelly of Gothic imagery. In Marx's own works, Baldick remarks, 'some of the most gruesomely archaic echoes of fairy-tale, legend, myth, and folklore crop up in the wholly unexpected environment of the modern factory system, stock exchange, and parliamentary chamber: ghosts, vampires, ghouls, werewolves, alchemists, and reanimated corpses continue to haunt the bourgeois world, for all its sober and sceptical virtues'.⁷

Fifth, a generic shift in utopias in the nineteenth century seems, almost of itself, to put spiritualism and séances on the agenda. Raphael Hythloday visits a utopia contemporary with himself; he travels spatially not temporally. But once utopia is projected into the future as the result of political transformation, as it is in Bellamy and Morris, the narrator becomes a time traveller, rematerialising in a distant future which postdates his or her own death. Since this is not technologically inspired time travel, à la H.G. Wells, the resources of 'para-science' must be drawn upon to generate a plausible narrative of temporal displacement. Bellamy's Julian West, for instance, is mesmerised into a sleep so deep that it lasts one hundred and thirteen years. Thus even a utopia as relentlessly rationalistic as *Looking Backward* finds itself drawn to the dubious margins of science, evincing a fascination with mesmerism comparable to Matthew Arnold's 'The Scholar Gipsy' or Robert Browning's 'Mr Sludge, the Medium'. It may even be that Bellamy's century-long mesmerised sleep leaves its trace on *News from Nowhere* itself, for Guest awakes 'in a hazy and half-awake condition, as if I had slept for a long, long while, and could not shake off the weight of slumber'.⁸

WILLIAM GUEST AS GHOST

Time travel in Morris is either the flimsiest of wish-fulfilments – Guest yearns to see the new society and then obligingly wakes up in it – or, if we adopt the defamiliarising perspective I am recommending here, it is the result of a collective albeit unconscious séance by the Nowherians assembled in Hammersmith Guest House. Let us try this reading experiment. We must at once revalue our interpretation of the book's opening pages. To identify with Guest is to take the Socialist League meeting and underground train journey home as the realist norm, after which the rest of the volume ascends to vision and fantasy. To begin from the collective experience of the new society, however, is to reverse this hierarchy. We must take Hammersmith Guest House as our realist norm, and see the first chapter as some indeterminate spiritualist limbo inhabited by the restless

ghost of William Guest.

Our memories of that opening chapter are indeed, I would imagine, of empirical irrefutability, of the 'hot room and the stinking railway carriage' (p. 4); how indeed, one might wonder, could the text be more compellingly substantive or generate more of Roland Barthes's *effet du réel* ('reality effect') than *that*? And yet there are interesting slippages at work here which already begin to unsettle and even dematerialise the drab realities of the political meeting and the oppressive journey home. The question of narrative viewpoint is germane: an anonymous 'friend' (never further specified) narrating the experiences of another 'friend, a man whom he knows very well indeed', and eventually deciding to recount them in the first person, 'since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than anyone else in the world does'. (p. 5) Are we dealing with one narrator or two here? Is Morris playing a teasing game with his readers, or is some more unsettling kind of character doubling going on, as it does later in *Nowhere* itself, when Guest finds Old Hammond's face 'strangely familiar', as if he had seen it before in a looking-glass (p. 53), or when Henry Morsom turns out to be 'another edition' of Old Hammond? Bernard Sharratt has written well of the 'peculiarly ambivalent' response of the reader to the opening page of the text, of the 'pattern of oscillations' which thereafter never quite settles back down.⁹

This narrative unsettling continues, in both minor and major ways. Country and city merge unexpectedly in the midnight riverside scene, and banal urban detail begins to deliquesce: 'as for the ugly bridge below, he did not notice it or think of it, except when for a moment ... it struck him that he missed the row of lights down stream'. (p. 4) Well, is the bridge there or not? Has some utopian refashioning of the nineteenth-century river already set in, ahead of Guest's 'official' awakening in the new society, rubbing out the metallic ugliness of the suspension bridge if not quite yet replacing it with its transfigured version 'out of an illuminated manuscript'? (p. 8) Or was the urban scene in fact never as massively material as it appeared in the first place, serving more as an Eliotic 'objective correlative' for Guest's disturbed mental state rather than as an immutable historical backdrop? The journey home on the underground is relevant here too. If on the face of it nothing could appear more compellingly real than the unpleasant sights, sounds and smells of this trip, we need only recall T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* to realise how quickly, in this context, the empirical can metamorphose into the symbolical or mythical. For Eliot, the underground railway is a Dantesque underworld, inhabited by the spirits of those who, never having been truly alive in the first place, could never truly die thereafter. And in Morris, too, such metaphoric over-writing is busily at work, as the empirically observed 'carriage of the underground railway' mutates eerily into a 'vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity' (p. 3) which emits the terrifying, Sartrean message that *l'enfer c'est les autres*.

If the empirical actualities of the London scene waver and oscillate in these opening pages, so too do Guest's behaviour and emotions. The man who initially takes no part whatsoever in the League's discussion (why, one wonders?) subsequently enters it with extraordinary violence and 'finished by roaring out very loud, and damning all the rest for fools'. (p. 3) The man who 'stewed discontentedly' on the train home as he mentally catalogues all the arguments he had failed to find in the debate itself achieves a well-nigh epiphanic moment of calm on the riverbank only to plunge into a traumatic spiritual crisis as he awakes in the middle of the night in:

that curiously wide-awake condition which sometimes surprises even good sleepers; a condition under which we feel all our wits preternaturally sharpened, while all the miserable muddles we have ever got into, all the disgraces and losses of our lives, will insist on thrusting themselves forward for the consideration of those sharpened wits (pp. 4–5).

This restless and destructive self-analysis perhaps points towards the kind of catastrophic breakdown which threatens Julian West during his early days in Bellamy's new Boston. If *Nowhere* represents an 'epoch of rest', what William Guest needs rest *from* is not just the competitive hurry of the nineteenth century but also from the extraordinary emotional turbulence which inhabits him, for he is certainly, to borrow a fine phrase from *Four Quartets*, a 'spirit unappeased and peregrine'. In the new world (which is where I believe we already are in this first chapter) the spirit of Guest haunts his old venues, restlessly replays old failed debates, is caught in an excruciating Freudian repetition-compulsion, both personally and politically. What, one already wonders, could liberate this tormented soul from his wheel of fire?

Meantime, on the same site, a gathering of utopians is taking place: Dick, Bob the weaver, Annie, Boffin the Golden Dustman. The utopians have built their new Guest House on the site of the lecture-room of the Hammersmith socialists in official commemoration of their courageous political forbears, but do they also sense the 'unofficial' energies which inhabit this space, the fierce longings – 'If I could but see it! if I could but see it!' (p. 4) – which cling to it as tenaciously in the utopian present as they did two centuries ago? As Guest later crosses Trafalgar Square he abruptly experiences 'a phantasmagoria of another day' (p. 41), and it may be some related phantasmal sense of his own lingering historical presence that has prompted the gathering at the Guest House. For if 'the ghost of London still assert[s] itself as a centre' (pp. 33–34), so too may the ghost of Guest, centripetally assembling the young utopians for a purpose they are not able to formulate consciously to themselves.

It is noteworthy, certainly, that historians predominate in this gathering: Bob is working on his volume about the 'peaceable and private' history of the nine-

teenth century, Boffin writes reactionary novels (Dick's epithet), and even Annie has found a 'pretty old book' to read and wants to press on with it. In a society that is, by and large, devoted to the sensuous pleasures of the immediate present, an unusual number of devotees of the past have come together; or, as Patrick Parrinder memorably puts it, *News from Nowhere* 'transports us to the future so that we can take part in a rolling symposium of the Society of Antiquaries'.¹⁰ True, they all have their 'official' reasons to be in the Guest House; Bob, for instance, will take on Dick's ferrying, both to toughen himself up physically and to free Dick to help out with the up-river hay-making. But below the threshold of utopian consciousness is it not arguably the raging spiritual presence of Guest which compels them here? And they in turn, once a certain 'critical mass' of antiquarianism has been reached, allow him the crucial breakthrough from purgatorial longing and repetition to renewed actuality in the Nowherian present.

Religion in any formal sense may be absent from the new society, but the latter clearly still preserves its sacred sites where we would expect powerful spirits to be present and occasionally to emerge;¹¹ and it is my wager in this essay that one of these is Hammersmith Guest House. Later in the book, Clara evinces a spiritualistic sensitivity worthy of any nineteenth-century medium when she says to Old Hammond: 'You have been talking of past miseries to the guest, and have been living in past unhappy times, and it is in the air all round us, and makes us feel as if we were longing for something that we cannot have' (p. 136). 'In the air all round us': this surely is where Guest is, in all his pain and isolation, in the opening chapter of the book. That chapter, I propose, is not chronologically prior to the Hammersmith Guest House gathering – either the night before, as Guest experiences it, or some two centuries ago, as the calendar would have it. Its relationship to the utopians in the Guest House is more 'spatial' than temporal; it exists in another dimension of anguished being, not a day or a week or a century before. At the level of their collective unconscious, the utopians are Heathcliff aching for the lost spirit of Emily Brontë's Cathy to return; and Guest in chapter one is that spirit clamouring at Lockwood's casement window for admission. The distance is small enough between his 'If I could only see a day of it!' and her 'Let me in – let me in!' In the white space between chapters one and two the casement opens, the threshold becomes permeable, and Guest descends and enters.

NEEDS IN NOWHERE

If, as I have suggested, we approach utopia from the collective perspective of the new society rather than from the wondering individualist viewpoint of the visitor, then we will begin to ask what *need* in the new world has conjured this figure from the past to its side. If it is his violently unassuaged longing which makes

him still available to be invoked in the first place, there must also be something unassuaged, something deficient, in utopia itself which requires his presence and ministrations – which is to say that utopia may not be quite so utopian after all. What, then, is this gap on Nowhere's side which William Guest might fill? What has he to offer it, rather than it him? Raphael Hythloday arrives with a whole cargo of potential gifts for the inhabitants of Thomas More's Utopia, from which he then offers them a set of classical texts, some vague information about printing and paper-making, and detailed knowledge of Christianity. What gifts, we now need to ask ourselves, does Guest bring to his new world, and why does it need them? In Morris's late romance *The Wood beyond the World*, the sinister Lady tells Golden Walter that he must 'earn thy guesing' (emphasis added);¹² and so too must William Guest in Nowhere.

We will not find much to help us with these questions in Chapter II, 'A Morning Bath', which is a wholesale reversion to the individualist perspective. Wonder and astonishment are its keynotes; and Guest is the visitor who is startled and delighted, like Adam at the moment of his creation, by all he sees. More promising is Chapter III, where Guest enters the gathering at the Guest House. The traffic is now two-way: not just him questioning utopia, but it interrogating him and articulating its own needs in the process. As we piece together the various local needs which Guest serves in Nowhere we shall witness the emergence of a major structural flaw in the new society, which it will then be the visitor's crucial function to stitch back together if he can.

Let us begin with the first set of needs which Guest encounters in Nowhere: the research requirements of Bob and Boffin. If the former tramples over the protocols of neighbourly manners in his eagerness to extract information from the nineteenth-century visitor, the latter approaches Guest looking 'as happy as if he has just got a new toy'. (p. 21) The antiquarians have assembled in a historically charged site, and the potencies of that site have been released; their research needs are met as the Ghost of Socialism Past incarnates himself before them. Guest offers both Bob and Boffin a unique source of firsthand historical information, crucial to them as social historian and historical novelist respectively. What they want is not a chronicle of official events, such as might be provided by James's *Social Democratic History* (referred to later as Guest and Dick traverse Trafalgar Square), but rather the intangibilities of history as lived immediately upon the pulses, a sense of the texture of life below the threshold of official historicity. Bob is writing not about the publicly observable political conflicts of the late nineteenth century, but rather about its 'peaceable and private history' (p. 20), a zone of experience not formally documented and liable to fall into oblivion with the passing of each generation.

We need to resist Dick's brisk dismissals of Bob and Boffin's historical researches as regressive bookwormishness. Bob, at least, is a social historian engaged on a

democratic mission of recovery; his mode of research, that is to say, is fully consonant with the values of his socialist society. The natural history of Epping Forest and the kind of cultural pleasures and economic benefits it gave its nineteenth-century users are perfectly appropriate topics of historical inquiry, even if they are necessarily less dramatic than the compelling narrative of civil war which occupies the middle chapters of *News from Nowhere*; and Bob is a sufficiently competent historian to recognise a uniquely qualified witness the minute he comes across him. Old Hammond later remarks that the younger inhabitants of Nowhere have little time for his tales of the past, but this does not seem to be borne out by the opening chapters in the Guest House. Keen historians have assembled on a site built precisely for commemorative purposes, and the 'new toy' they unconsciously summon into being is a revenant from the past who can appease like no other their cravings for historical information. Even much later in the book Guest still seems to be serving 'research' functions in Nowhere. At Bisham, he, Dick and Clara encounter a young man who 'had stayed at home to get on with some literary work . . . he kept on pressing us to stay over and over again'. (p. 163) Though the nature of the episode is not fully clarified, it is at least possible that this young writer is as keen to lemon-squeeze Guest dry of relevant historical information as Bob and Boffin were.

However, the historical needs of Bob the weaver and Boffin the dustman are not in fact satisfied in Hammersmith Guest House, not through any reluctance on Guest's part, but because they encounter a formidable counterforce in the person of Dick Hammond, who kicks Bob in warning underneath the table, scolds him for his bad manners in tenaciously questioning Guest, and unceremoniously dismisses Boffin before the latter has managed to utter even a phrase or two to the visitor who excites him so much. Why then such preemptory interventions on Dick's part here – including, in that kick, the one act of violence between utopians which we actually witness (as opposed to just being told about)? Guest himself later has a brush with this less genial side of Dick's character when the latter refuses to let him change his old clothes for new ones: 'I saw I had got across some ineradicable prejudice, and that it wouldn't do to quarrel with my new friend.' (p. 35).

Dick's heavy-handed interventions in the Guest House are, at one level, a simple plot function, the injection of a principle of narrative mobility into the tale. Without the prohibition he effectively issues here, *News from Nowhere* might have ended where it began, around a table in the Hammersmith Guest House, after interminable discussions in which Bob and Boffin drained Guest dry of nineteenth-century information while he, in turn, elicited from them essentially the same story of the new society that Old Hammond gives him later. At the most basic narrative level of the text, Dick has to stop this from happening; he must transplant Guest physically to Bloomsbury so that the utopia becomes a practical

survey of the new society en route, not just a discursive exposition of it *in situ*.

But Dick is a less disinterested servant of the generic demands of Morris's utopia than this account might suggest. For in taking Guest to Bloomsbury, he is also self-interestedly serving purposes of his own, as his gathering 'thoughtfulness' on the journey across London later suggests. Old Hammond may contrast the playing and kissing of the utopians with his own tales of the past, but the kissing, in Dick's case, is not going too well at present. His separation with Clara seems firmly entrenched and he, unlike her, has not found another sexual partner. Moreover, the tale of sexual tragedy he tells Guest as they wend their way across London – 'a mishap down by us, that in the end cost the lives of two men and a woman.' (p. 35) – suggests that all may not be well with sexual relations across Nowhere at large, despite the genial everyday comradeship between men and women we have witnessed at the Hammersmith Guest House. For Dick to transport Guest to Bloomsbury is to salvage his own sex life from stasis as well as the text, bringing him and Clara opportunely together in the British Museum more rapidly than Old Hammond himself could have contrived. Dick's insistence on Guest's needs, on the authoritative exposition Old Hammond can offer the visitor to utopia, neatly dovetails with his own.

One of Guest's minor functions in this new society is thus to bring the estranged lovers back together, and it may be some obscure inkling of the catalytic role he is to play here which prompts Dick to attach himself so firmly to the new arrival on that June morning in his offer to 'be the showman of our new world to you.' (p. 11) In the conversations between Guest and Old Hammond before lunch there is a surprising amount of friction, considering that the two characters are on the same side politically; they are constantly needling each other, making move and counter-move in what looks more like a war of nerves than an equable exposition of the principles of the post-revolutionary society. I am inclined to relate these tensions to the claims that Old Hammond later implicitly makes about the reunion of Dick and Clara. When the two lovers reappear at lunchtime Hammond 'looked on them like an artist who has just painted a picture nearly as well as he thought he could when he began it.' (p. 99)

Such complacency indicates that, in the old man's view, he himself has played the crucial role in bringing Dick and Clara back together, and this certainly appears to have been his long-term game plan; he has lodged Clara and her children with his daughter precisely in order to keep her on hand for an eventual reunion with his young kinsman. On the other hand, at the very last moment, the very day before Old Hammond finally summoned Dick to Clara, Dick has turned up under his own steam, through Guest's good offices. In terms of being the catalyst of sexual reunion, William Guest has clearly pipped his elderly interlocutor at the post, somewhat tarnishing the final triumph of his matchmaking stratagems. In the political conversation which follows, Guest and Old Ham-

mond respond to each other 'crustily', 'peevisly', 'somewhat nettled' and so on, with an emotional intensity that seems excessive in relation to the overt political subject matter under discussion. It therefore seems to me that we should take their competing claims in relation to Dick and Clara, the war of catalytic precedence they are playing out here, as funding the emotional undercurrents of the subsequent political debates between them.

At any rate, by the time Guest returns from Bloomsbury with the reunited partners in tow, his sexual function in *Nowhere* has come very close to the surface of consciousness for all concerned. Clara's decision on the ride back to Hammersmith that Guest should at last acquire new clothes might be interpreted as a gesture of gratitude on her part for his role in bringing her and Dick back together, and a similar acknowledgement is perhaps made more generally later that day, for 'we had quite a little feast that evening, partly in my honour, and partly, I suspect, though nothing was said about it, in honour of Dick and Clara coming together again.' (p. 140) It is ironic indeed that it is the loveless Guest, who had returned to an apparently empty house in Hammersmith, who can bring the estranged utopian lovers back together again. Yet it may be the very intensity of his frustrated sexual desire, displaced into utopian political longing in his famous cry 'If I could but see a day of it!', which propels him into the twenty-first century in the first place or, rather, keeps him raging restlessly for two centuries in a limbo spirit world from which he can be summoned to meet the future society's needs as required. The sexual reunion of Dick and Clara is, for the ancient Old Hammond, a largely cerebral affair, a matter of complex moves and counter-moves which enhances an egoistic sense of mastery on his part – 'So I managed it all.' (p. 56) But for the desperately yearning Guest, who himself finds Clara an attractive woman, the stakes are altogether more personal, even if he is not consciously aware of them at this point in the text. If he can be the catalyst of restored sexual happiness for Dick and Clara, then this may be a token of the possibility of later fulfilment for himself.

STRUCTURAL FISSURE: SENSES VERSUS INTELLECT

In the opening chapters of *Nowhere*, then, Guest serves both historical and sexual functions.¹³ Such are the purposes for which, in this séance-orientated reading, the new society has summoned him into being, prompted by some unerring impulse from its collective unconscious. But, crucially, such functions are incompatible: Dick needed to kill off the historical exchanges with Bob and Boffin in order to remove Guest to the British Museum so that he might catalyse the reunion of the estranged lovers. It is not only a principle of narrative mobility which interrupts the Guest House conversations; significant thematic issues are also coming into

play. For if there is a tension or incompatibility between Guest's historical and sexual functions, between the intellectual and bodily gifts he can bestow upon the new society, then that tension seems in fact to inhere deeply within *Nowhere* itself, in the opening chapters of the book. Guest himself, wrong though he is about so much else in the new world, instantly spots the telling contrast between Dick's formidable physique and Bob the weaver's slighter and paler frame; and Dick at once develops this, contrasting his rugged outdoor work to Bob's sedentary weaving and mathematics. In principle, these might simply be alternate lifestyles within utopia, peaceably co-existing on the spectrum of enhanced human possibilities that socialism makes possible. But evidently this is not the case. Bob certainly recognises the animus behind Dick's attack on his intellectual pursuits: 'it is clear to me that this is a kind of revenge for the stupidity of that day [the nineteenth century], which despised everybody who *could* use his hands. But, Dick, old fellow, *Ne quid nimis!* Don't overdo it!' (p. 20)

We should not see such 'overdoing' as a mere character foible on Dick's part. It is rather, I would suggest, the index of a profound structural split within *Nowhere* itself. A society which has officially overcome all the dichotomies of capitalist culture, so that in its opening pages Dick's 'work' on the river is indistinguishable from play, is yet deeply fissured within itself. The initial visual contrast and accompanying emotional tensions between the hyper-athletic Dick (who enjoys nothing more than an hour or two's work with a pickaxe to pass the time of day) and his pallid and spindly friend Bob are further developed in the contrast of the younger and older Hammonds at the British Museum. The formidable young athlete is counterposed to his ancient cerebral relative: on the one hand, a figure who seems to concentrate all the physical vitality of the utopian world in his own person, and, on the other, one who is now so ancient and immobile that he seems to be more of an artefact within the museum than an active custodian of it.

In short, *Nowhere* is structurally split down the middle between body without mind (Dick) and mind without body (Old Hammond); a 'sundering flood' of its own flows through it, to borrow a powerful metaphor from Morris's late romances. It is true that one can produce some countervailing evidence to this account; Dick after all impresses Guest at one point as being a 'man, who read Shakespeare and had not forgotten the Middle Ages.' (p. 49). But such complexities operate at the level of the individual character and do not, I believe, affect the overall deep-structural account of *Nowhere* I am offering here. This structural split is then powerfully thematised by Old Hammond himself in a passage I have already alluded to and which can now be given its full weight in announcing the incompatibility of sensuousness and intellect, the present and the past, in this society: 'though it is pleasant enough to see these youngsters moving about and playing together so seriously, as if the whole world depended on their kisses (as indeed it does somewhat), yet I don't think my tales of the past interest them

much. The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market place, is history enough for them.' (p. 54) One wonders just how dismissive the tone of those last two words actually is.

It is this structural fissure in the utopian society which it is Guest's mission to heal, which will be the task whereby he 'earns his guessting'. He is, in Walter Benjamin's terms, 'a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'. Historical materialism, Benjamin argues in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 'wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to men singled out by history at a moment of danger'.¹⁴ Benjamin's phrasing here usefully opens our eyes to a sense of crisis or emergency in *News from Nowhere* which the sunlit neighbourliness of much of Morris's text can all too easily obscure from us. But there are enough expressions of unease and apprehension in *Nowhere*, sufficient old grumblers and Obstinate Refusers, to make us grasp that all is not quite well; and the acts of sexual violence 'off-stage' narrated by Dick and Walter Allen give a sharper focus to this pervasive discontent. Later in the book, Ellen, as if she were one of the foreseeing old women of Morris's late romances, is acutely aware of future dangers which may lie in store for the Nowherians, for 'we may be bitten with some impulse towards change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to resist, too exciting not to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid.' (p. 194) The text boldly extrapolates here from the piecemeal dissatisfactions we have witnessed earlier; occasional dyspeptic comments about the lack of colour or competition in contemporary life now seem, followed through to their logical conclusion, to threaten the very basis of the socialist culture of *Nowhere*.

In thus highlighting the underlying political emergency to which Guest's arrival in the future is a response, Walter Benjamin's sixth thesis illumines Morris's utopia, but Benjamin's own model of the recurrence of the past here, based as it is on Marcel Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, is too passive for our purposes. Guest doesn't just involuntarily 'flash up', as Proustian memories famously do at the taste of a madeleine. He is, rather, in my séance-orientated reading of the text, actively summoned into being, conjured back into substance and activity from the purgatorial limbo he has hitherto been fruitlessly inhabiting. Consciously, the utopians may be surprised to see him; unconsciously, he is their invited guest, for if they are slowly sliding into crisis, they at least retain enough collective wisdom to know how to deal with the emergency too. They cannot, it appears, deal with it head on, but they have found an agent from the past who can, in mediated form, handle it for them. We need to recall that remarkable séance at the White House in April 1863, in which the spirits of Washington, Lafayette, Wilberforce and Napoleon were summoned in order to advise President Lincoln on the conduct of the American Civil War. It is a less dramatic but still pervasive crisis which afflicts *Nowhere*, and which prompts it to summon its tutelary spirit, William

Guest. We are used to the convention in contemporary science fiction whereby a society in danger may, through time travel or some mechanism of cryogenic suspension, call back a figure from the past in order to solve its problems or fight its battles for it; R.A. Lafferty's novel *Past Master* (1968), in which the citizens of a future utopia transport Sir Thomas More from the past to deal with their difficulties, affords a memorable instance. In Morris's low-tech utopia, however, séance replaces science.

THE REMAKING OF ELLEN

How, then, does Guest exercise his political efficacy in utopia? The answer, as Patrick Parrinder has indicated, lies in the river journey which occupies the final third of the text, and more particularly in Guest's relationship with Ellen. Parrinder gives us a trenchant account of Guest's 'political function in Nowhere' in these chapters: 'His function, in her eyes, is to halt any further erosion of the collective memory, since those ignorant of history are condemned to repeat it'.¹⁵ This is broadly correct, but I don't think it captures as precisely as it might Guest's salvational function in relation to Nowhere's crisis, nor does it allow for the full complexities of his relations with Ellen. If Nowhere calls Guest into being, so too does he, in turn, summon Ellen into existence; for prior to his advent she is locked in a state of restless emotional limbo analogous to his own back in nineteenth-century London. As she confesses to Guest, 'I must tell you ... I have often troubled men's minds disastrously. That is one reason why I was living alone with my father in the cottage at Runnymede.' (p. 188) 'Disastrously' is a strong word indeed by Nowherian standards, and takes on a sombre colouring in the light of the jealous sexual violence and manslaughter we have heard of elsewhere in the book. 'Often' is still more disturbing. No doubt anyone might be caught up in a sexual tragedy once or twice in a lifetime, but the recurrence of such situations surely suggests some culpability on Ellen's part, as if she relishes the piquancy of such complications when they do happen and perhaps even actively seeks them out. Certainly *this* Ellen is more a symptom of Nowhere's crisis than any kind of possible solution to it. She has at least moved a step beyond such sexual delinquency by immuring herself at Runnymede, though the old complications to some extent still recur, since she is required to deal with 'two or three young men who have taken a special liking to me, and all of whom I cannot please at once.' (p. 184), and Clara certainly still sees her as a potential sexual threat. But life at Runnymede merely puts Ellen's life and energies into suspension; it offers no redemptive new direction for them. Internal exile at Runnymede has the air partly of a moral choice of Ellen's own and partly of a collective sending of her to Coventry on Nowhere's side; and her grandfather accordingly has an ambivalent

status too, being at once kindly companion in her brave decision, and something of a prison warder whose job it is to make sure that society's edicts are enforced.

Guest's initial task in relation to Ellen is simply to galvanise her back into action, to restore her to herself, to give her the energy to break out of the enclosure at Runnymede and to begin a process of social reintegration. I have suggested elsewhere that these chapters of *Nowhere* are best read in the narratological light of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*: Guest then metamorphoses into the Proppian quest-hero who battles with the villain (grandfather) in order to liberate the princess (Ellen) and who then flees upriver with her.¹⁶ I shall not repeat the detail of that extended analysis here, but only wish to emphasise that what *Nowhere* has done for Guest he in his turn has done for Ellen, summoning her out of limbo into substance. Guest is no longer just the passive object of a séance, but also its active subject.

As Guest and Ellen travel up the Thames together a mutual process of transformation occurs. The physical exercise of the rowing imparts to Guest a vigour he has not felt before; his feelings towards Ellen deepen towards sexual desire; and he begins to relax and settle more fully into the utopian world he has entered. No longer marked out as an interloper by his Victorian clothing, Guest seems well on the way to becoming a full participant in the new society, as does Julian West in *Looking Backward*. Ellen's being also dilates. A physical sensuousness which seemed in relative stasis at Runnymede now develops to the full, though in the direction of a benign celebration of natural beauty rather than the messy sexual entanglements of her earlier career. Yet at the same time she becomes more fully aware, through Guest, of the necessity of history, of modes of extended intellectual consciousness beyond the immediately sensuous. Not that she has been wholly unhistorical before his advent, having had lessons from Old Hammond himself and apparently belonging to some sort of group – 'those of us who look into these things' (p. 192) – which has disagreed as deeply over the prehistory of the Revolution as the Socialist League meeting at the beginning of the book did over its Morrow. But in Guest's company Ellen's grasp of the political importance of historical consciousness to her culture takes a qualitative leap forwards.

Ellen's enigmatic and vivid energies are highlighted by the text from the moment she first appears in its pages, but under the tutelage of Guest on the upper Thames they at last take on more positive form, marking her out as the utopian resolution of that Eliotic 'dissociation of sensibility' which earlier characterised *Nowhere*. As sensuously energetic as Dick Hammond, Ellen is simultaneously as historically alert as his elderly relative in the British Museum. She thus fuses senses and intellect, potentially reintegrating her culture (and, in the process, herself back into it) in the feast at Kelmscott at the close of the book. Ellen is what I am inclined to term a 'second generation' utopian, a figure of altogether more stature and complexity than Bob, Dick, Boffin or Clara; she is testimony that this

'epoch of rest' has after all not stopped growing, and that it may well now have the inner resources it needs to deal with the crisis we have seen creeping up on it. Ellen, one might argue, is the objective absence from the initial Hammersmith Guest House gathering which leads to the necessity of Guest's summoning in the first instance. As she takes her rightful place in the Kelmscott community at the close of the book, his work in *Nowhere*, which is the active moulding of the fully adequate utopian personality in Ellen, is now done; he has indeed handsomely 'earned' his guesting.

THE EXORCISM OF WILLIAM GUEST

So far this is a benign account of the Guest-Ellen relationship. There are, however, emotional undercurrents in these chapters of the book which are more unsettling, more eerily in keeping with a *séance*-orientated reading. It is not just that Guest soberly educates Ellen into a new maturity beyond her earlier sexual proclivities. He certainly does this, but in the process she projects into him, with extreme intensity, that propensity for sexual disturbance which had caused her to be incarcerated in Runnymede in the first place. She disturbs *his* mind disastrously, in ways Old Hammond had shrewdly predicted much earlier in the book: 'the inexplicable desire that comes on a man of riper years to be the all-in-all to some one woman ... the older man caught in a trap.' (pp. 57–8) Guest's developing but impossible love for Ellen has to be seen, I think, as a fierce exorcism of her capacity for sexual disaster into him. He takes the full brunt of it from her, but perhaps also absorbs it more widely from the society at large, internalising within his own longing self that 'evil and feverish element' round about him which had characterised the earlier sexual tragedies of the book and from which he does not seem able to escape. (p. 166)

Once this sexual poison has been fully exorcised out of Ellen and into Guest, she and her culture have no further use for him. He fades rapidly from her consciousness, and the gathering at Kelmscott church reverses the good work of the Hammersmith Guest House, banishing back to the past the Benjaminian image which the utopians had called up. As Guest's anguish in these pages attests, he returns not only to the class torment of the nineteenth century, but also now bears within himself the sexual torment of the twenty-first – which can thereafter, one trusts, resume more placid relationships between men and women. Guest's initial role in catalysing the reunion of Dick and Clara was only, it now appears, a scratching of the surface of the sexual problem in *Nowhere*. More fundamentally, and at great cost to himself, he has had also to exorcise the sexual disturbance which had separated them (and others) in the first place. No wonder, then, that the first extended discussion between Guest and Old Hammond is of love and

sexuality (rather than, as in more classical utopias, of politics or economics), since so much of his task in Nowhere will reside precisely in this troubled dimension of human being.

The episodes on the upper Thames are thus a dark exorcism as well as a genial maturation, and I think one can develop this account further. The Nowherians need ultimately to exorcise not just Ellen's sexual disturbingness but Guest himself. As I have noted, Guest gains a new confidence on the river; 'I was, as it were, really new-born.' (p. 164) He becomes physically stronger, even physically boastful, and 'taking the skulls, set to work to show off a little.' (p. 182) Such increased muscular vigour prompts a sharp initial sexual jealousy of Dick's relationship with Ellen, though this rapidly dissipates. Guest's more vigorous will in this stretch of the text even, I suggest, has its impact on Ellen. It binds her to him sufficiently for her to make the offer to Guest to live with her and her grandfather when they move to the north. I suspect we must conclude that, in making this proposal, Ellen's own mind has been disturbed disastrously; it would be a hopeless dead end both for her and for her culture. As the utopian resolution of the dissociation of sensibility which afflicts her society, Ellen clearly has henceforth a major role to play within it. She can at present only conceive that role in terms of a fecund maternity – 'I shall have children; perhaps before the end a good many' (p. 194) – but we should probably view this suggestion as a biological metaphor for the wider social influence which she will hereafter transformatively exert in Nowhere.

But this wider social role, whatever it is (and we would need a sequel to *News from Nowhere* to fully demonstrate it to us), is clearly going to be stopped in its tracks if she immures herself with Guest and grandfather in an exile 'by the Roman wall in Cumberland' even more thorough than that which she had endured at Runnymede. The fact that Guest's desire for her drives her to make this proposal to him must, from the viewpoint of Nowhere's political future, be seen as a fundamental misdirection on Ellen's part. Guest has shifted from being a benign force who can soak up and expunge her disturbance into a more forceful and malign one who disturbs her himself and knocks her socially off track. The 'tool' that has been summoned by séance from the past is on the point of becoming a dangerously self-willed implement, as with the sorcerer's apprentice's broom in the Goethe poem. Ellen might now truthfully say of Guest what Dick light-heartedly does just after their swim at Kelmscott: 'I should have thought it was your doing, Guest; that you had thrown a kind of evil charm over me.' (p. 207)

How, then, does one exorcise the spirit one has summoned? William Guest, thoroughly settled in the new society and gaining strength by the hour, is not likely to go willingly; he is, indeed, likely to prove the most alarmingly Obstinate Refuser of them all. The means of exorcism in the final chapters of the book turn out to be surprisingly conventional. Critics have often noted the absence

of formal religion in Morris's utopia, and though this is true enough, we should note that religious architecture, at least, makes an unexpected comeback in the later chapters of *News from Nowhere*. Travelling up the Thames, Guest and his companions pass the long church at Dorchester and the remains of Godstow nunnery, and note the delicate spire of an ancient building as they halt for lunch on the upper reaches of the Thames. The culmination of this vein of imagery is, of course, Kelmscott church itself, where the closing feast of the book is held. This church turns out to be an anti-Hammersmith Guest House, as it were: the latter was a politically sacred site which allowed Guest's troubled spirit to be called into being; the former is a traditionally sacred locale whose religious associations enable him to be packed firmly off again to the past.

Fortified by this auratic site, the Nowherians decisively reassert themselves against Guest. Dick, whose physical prowess has been partly challenged by Guest's renewed vigour, 'was looking round the company with an air of proprietorship in them, I thought', thereby sloughing off whatever claims Guest thought he had on Ellen. (p. 209) Ellen herself '*did* seem to recognise me for an instant [but] she shook her head with a mournful look' (p. 209); and one can emphasise, as the book encourages us to, the plaintive regret here, or, alternatively, as I should prefer, stress the decisive act of will – 'shook her head' – which issues a veto to Guest powerful enough to propel him two hundred years back into the past. Integrated fully into Nowhere at last, Ellen has understood that this is her future destiny in her society; the objective gap at the Hammersmith gathering which set the whole text into motion in the first place has been closed at last. She may be grateful to Guest for breaking her out of the enclosure of Runnymede, but she has now grasped that the proposed sojourn with him in the north is a baneful idea.

In a text preoccupied with bridges, Guest has been a bridge back to normality for Ellen; and the Great Clearing which has been directed at so much of the capitalist past in Nowhere is now brought forcefully to bear on him. His banishment in Kelmscott church, then, constitutes an anti-séance, as the group around the table implicitly uses the traditional Christian associations of the place in order to exorcise his now troubling presence. The time has at last come, as Guest himself dolefully notes, 'when they would reject me' (p. 210); and at this point a séance-orientated reading of the text comes to its natural close, having revealed *News from Nowhere* to be much closer to Tom Moylan's idea of the self-problematizing (but in this case also self-correcting) 'critical utopia' of the 1970s than the classical instance of the genre we had formerly taken it to be.

NOTES

1. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, London and New York: Methuen, 1986, pp. 10–12.
2. Patrick Parrinder, 'News from the Land of No News', *Foundation*, no 51, Spring 1991, pp. 29–37. Afterwards Parrinder.
3. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones: volume 1, 1833–6*, London: Macmillan & Co Limited, 1912, p. 94.
4. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, London: Faber & Faber Limited, p. 347.
5. John C. Kenworthy, 'William Morris: A Memory, Personal and Otherwise', *New Century Review*, vol. 1, 1897, p. 130
6. Russell M. & Clare R. Goldfarb, *Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters*, Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1978, pp. 47, 42.
7. Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 121.
8. William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, in May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, London: Longmans Green and Company, 1912, volume XVI, p.5. Afterwards *Collected Works*. All subsequent page numbers in the text refer to this edition.
9. Bernard Sharratt, 'News from Nowhere: Detail and Desire', in Ian Gregor, ed, *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, London: Vision Press Ltd, 1980, p. 293.
10. Parrinder, p. 32.
11. As this formulation would suggest, it is also possible, in another generic thought-experiment, to read *News from Nowhere* as a Japanese Noh play. See my 'Japanising *News from Nowhere*', *Eigo-Sei-Nen*, Tokyo, no 3, March 2009, pp. 682–6 (in Japanese).
12. William Morris, *The Wood beyond the World*, *Collected Works*, vol. XVII, p. 47.
13. A minor additional function of Guest's is to answer from firsthand experience the rightwing 'grumblers' of the new society, such as Ellen's grandfather, who are convinced that economic competition is the basis for a more vigorous social and cultural life.
14. Hannah Arendt, ed, *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, London: Fontana, 1973, p. 257.
15. Parrinder, pp. 32–33.
16. See my as yet unpublished paper 'Narratology and Nowhere: The Structural Adventures of William Guest'.