

The Dialectic of Nature in Nowhere

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I want to offer a four-stage theoretical model of how Nature functions in *News from Nowhere*, a model (or dialectic) which takes as its starting point the notion that Nature in Morris's utopia is a matter of *genre* as well as politics, of literary form quite as much as content. This being so, we shall witness the operation of a textual dynamic whereby a new initiative in terms of Nature at one level may produce unwelcome consequences at another, which then must be 'managed' by further textual innovations at a third level, which in their turn may ... and so on. To what extent this might be a conscious process on the author's part, I shall not be concerned with here; for I shall be guided by D.H. Lawrence's great dictum: 'Never trust the artist, trust the tale'. And after all, as *News from Nowhere* itself knows in its discussion of Eton, what ultimately counts is not the 'founder's intentions', but what subsequent history (or textuality, in the present case) makes of them.¹

As for my opening assumption, that Nature is inseparably a matter of both politics and genre in this work, I shall not argue that through as an abstract proposition; but I hope it will gain in persuasiveness as the first move of the Nowherian dialectic – politics impinging troublingly upon genre – is demonstrated in detail in what follows. I shall be presenting this dialectic as a broadly diachronic process through the text, both for ease of exposition and because to some extent it does genuinely seem to lay itself out across the book in this manner. But as *News from Nowhere* is itself aware in the case of aesthetic changes after the revolution, 'there was much overlapping of the periods'. (p.153) The various textual logics I depict here are in fact at work simultaneously as well as sequentially; and this is apt enough in a work whose later vision of Nature will make great play of its 'mingling' and 'blending', its complex melding of apparent opposites.

Stage one in the Nowherian treatment of Nature is familiar enough, as a matter of both practical observation and theoretical statement in the post-revolutionary world of the twenty-second century. With the defeat of capitalism in

the civil war of 1952-54, the deprivations of that economic system on physical as well as human nature begin to be systematically undone; and by the time we move from the immediate Morrow of the Revolution to the 'future of the fully-developed new society', (p.3) Nature has been fully restored to itself. William Guest swims in the waters of a Thames so clean that salmon have returned to it; he breathes in air from which industrial smoke and noise have been entirely purged and which is redolent now only with the delightful scents of early summer; and he treads an earth which is no longer the 'old shoes and soot' of which Morris once complained that his Kelmscott House garden was composed,² but is rather so wholesomely fertile that it produces abundance of strawberries, roses, and fruit trees. Guest's journey by horse and cart across London to Bloomsbury only reinforces these opening impressions; for this is not just utopia, but ecotopia too. Such firsthand sense perceptions will later be further reinforced by the leisurely journey upriver to Kelmscott Manor in the final third of the book, where they also receive a good deal of doctrinal support. We have already read Old Hammond's exposition of England as a 'garden' where nothing is spoiled or wasted. Clara will later emphasise that humanity no longer considers itself separate from its natural environment, and Dick Hammond will use the memorable metaphor of the theatre to evoke this benignly altered Culture/Nature relationship.

However, as Morris himself knew in his sombre meditation on political defeat in *A Dream of John Ball*, what you fight for is not always what you get; and in *News from Nowhere* this ironic reversal takes place not politically but generically. For that a certain generic instability is built into this utopia in the first place is signalled by elements in its subtitle: 'some chapters from a utopian romance' – to which one is surely inclined impatiently to retort: well, make up your mind, which are you, utopia *or* romance? We certainly know, as a matter of biographical fact, that Morris wrote his political utopia in the midst of his renewed – indeed indefatigable – bout of romance-writing in later life: if the latter begins in 1888 with *The House of the Wolfings* and ends in 1897 with the posthumous *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood*, then *News from Nowhere* fits snugly into that period, written as it was in 1890 and published in book form in 1891. And many critics over the decades have recorded their sense that the utopia/romance boundary is peculiarly porous in Morris's later work.

If *News from Nowhere* is indeed both utopia and romance at once, if it constitutes some curious, perhaps unprecedented generic hybrid, then there are two ways of responding to that fact. One might regard such hybridity as intentional, as a particularly clever piece of literary construction on Morris's part whereby he intends to have the best of both worlds, welding the unique strengths of utopia and romance into a new artefact which is richer than both and reducible to neither; we might then have to invent a new generic term altogether and refer to the book as a 'utomance' or a 'romopia'. Alternatively, one might (as I shall do here)

view such generic ambivalence as fatality rather than intentionality, as a danger that threatens *News from Nowhere* at every point as a utopia risks being magically metamorphosed into a romance, almost without its knowing it. Politically, Morris wants to write a utopia; but in literary terms, the romance form powerfully elbows its own way into the project and at times may even take it over entirely. Does it matter if it does, however? What exactly is at stake here, if we once start to see Morris's great work as a tug of war between these two genres?

Let us return to the text, then, and see how this struggle works itself out in detail, which will be stage two of my Nowherian dialectic. I have discussed William Guest's early dealings with utopian water, air and earth, but in fact the most substantive image of Nature present in the early chapters of *News from Nowhere* is the *forest*, first abstractly, in the discussion of Epping Forest in the Hammersmith Guest House, and then practically, as Guest encounters the new Kensington/Middlesex Forest on his way across London with Dick Hammond. In the transfigured garden-city, as we soon realise, these two forests almost meet, and no sooner is this new arboreal reality introduced into the text than questions of genre are at once at stake, as Dick Hammond alerts us: 'This is Kensington proper. People are apt to gather here rather thick, for they like the romance of the wood; and naturalists haunt it, too; for it is a wild spot even here... it gets through Kingsland to Stoke-Newington and Clapton, where it spreads out along the heights above the Lea marshes; on the other side of which, as you know, is Epping Forest holding out a hand to it'. (p.23) The 'romance of the wood': though Dick later apologises to Guest for not being a 'literary man', he has certainly hit the nail on the head as far as the literary-formal issues at stake here are concerned.

For no natural phenomenon, surely, could be more central to Morrisian romance than the wood or forest. A forest for Morris is always, almost by definition it seems, a 'wood beyond the world', to borrow the title of his 1894 romance, an eerie, unmappable and dangerous space outside society. In the very first of his later romances, *The House of the Wolfings*, the Goths live amidst a great forest called Mirkwood (a name which Tolkien would borrow for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*); and it is deep in the forest that the goddess Wood-Sun gives to Thiodolf the magical hauberk which proves to be more of a curse than a gift. In the opening pages of *The Roots of the Mountains* Face-of-god confesses to his kindred that 'the dark cold wood, wherein abide but the beasts and the Foes of the Gods, is bidding me to it and drawing me thither';³ and the very next day he gives in to this strange compulsion, discovering a world full of figures named Wood-wise, Wood-wont, Wood-wicked, and the like. Only a few lines into *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* we learn that the town of Utterhay is hard on the borders of a great wood which its inhabitants fear to enter, and in no time at all Birdalone is kidnapped by the witch-wife and led away into that forest, which is appropriately named Evilshaw. In *The Well at the World's End* we hear first of

the Wood Debateable on the northern edges of the kingdom of Upmeads, but the young hero Ralph heads south towards the Wood Perilous instead and when he reaches it his adventures at once commence in earnest; for as the maiden of Bourton Abbas puts it, 'it is the Wood which is the evil and disease'.⁴ Woods or forests in Morris, we might say, are 'debateable' generically as well as militarily; they are the places where an apparently naturalistic world can metamorphose in the blink of an eye to romance. It is, then, not just the young Face-of-god but Morris's fiction itself that 'longest for the wood and the innermost of it'.⁵

Once we have grasped what an essential romance *topos* the wildwood is, we can see how its appearance in *News from Nowhere* transfigures every early element of the text to the point where we feel it has indeed almost generically metamorphosed from utopia to romance. Old Hammond may defend the presence of great forests in Nowhere on utilitarian grounds (the utopians need lots of timber for building), but they have textual effects well beyond the merely utilitarian. Why, for instance, does William Guest arrive in Nowhere in June? Might that not partly be because, as *The Well at the World's End* alerts us, June is the appropriate month for setting off on a romance quest? Guest's five a.m. dip in the Thames anticipates the early-morning outdoor-bathing motif which is repeated innumerable times in the late romances, and the more radically mythic notion at work here, of a magical water which cleanses and heals, is (as the book's name suggests) at the very heart of *The Well at the World's End*. Moreover, those tasty salmon in the river may themselves evoke the mythic Salmon of Wisdom which Jessie Weston alerts us to in Celtic fairy-tale in *From Ritual to Romance*.⁶ Dick Hammond as ferryman and old Hammond as his occasionally crusty ancient relative are from the very start close to the textual roles allotted by Morris's own late romance *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (published at the same time as his utopia) to Puny Fox the ferryman and the ancient and embittered Sea-Eagle of the Isle of Ransom; when Hammond senior announces that he is 'old and perhaps disappointed', (p.50) he certainly sounds as though he too needs renewing on the shores of the Glittering Plain itself. Even to take Guest as one's surname, as the visitor to utopia does here, is already to enter the terrain of pre-realist narrative modes; for there are several such figures in the Icelandic sagas Morris translated.

Moreover, we have a particularly clear example of this generically transformative process before us as we see how Henry Johnson, the Golden Dustman of *News from Nowhere*, begins to mutate, via Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott', towards full-blown romance significance as Lancelot: 'I looked over my shoulder, and saw something flash and gleam in the sunlight that lay across the hall; so I turned round, and at my ease saw a splendid figure slowly sauntering over the pavement; a man whose surcoat was embroidered most copiously as well as elegantly, so that the sun flashed back from him as if he was clad in golden armour'. (p.18) With that final 'as if' formulation, an imminent generic trans-

formation, whereby Boffin metamorphoses into Tennyson's dazzling Lancelot or even into the Knight of the Sun who bests Ralph early in *The Well at the World's End*, is linguistically disguised (or contained) as mere simile or metaphor.

There is one moment in *News from Nowhere* when the generic transformations to which this text is subject come close to the surface of its consciousness, though it is another non-realist genre – fairy-tale rather than romance – which is at issue here. The illustrations from the Grimm stories on the walls of the hall of the British Museum lead to an interesting discussion of the nature of art in utopia; but for our purposes what is more to the point is Dick's observation that such non-realist genres can come to invest quotidian reality itself, as when 'we used to imagine them going on in every wood-end, by the bight of every stream: every house in the fields was the Fairyland King's House to us'. (p.87) This is a retrospective observation about the vividness of imagination in childhood, but the habit seems in Dick's case to persist into adulthood too. Thus at Runnymede he remarks: 'doesn't it all look like one of those very stories out of Grimm that we were talking about ... we have come to a fairy garden, and there is the fairy herself amidst of it'. (p.133) If *Nowhere* decorates itself with fairy-tale images, so fairy-tale archetypes come to incarnate themselves in its social reality, to the point indeed where they begin to pervade the language of the text even when they are not specifically evoked as a topic of debate, as when Guest remarks on 'the spell' that Ellen had cast about him, (p.174) or when Dick refers to Guest as throwing a 'kind of evil charm' about him in the Kelmescott fields. (p.178) And it is certainly no accident, as we shall see later, that this 'fairy-tale-isation' of *Nowhere* clusters around Ellen in this way.

The 'romancing' continues apace as William Guest and party travel upriver; for the whole journey on the 'wet way from the east' from Hammersmith to Kelmescott might be regarded as a version of Birdalone's quest across the great lake in her *Sending Boat* in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. At the level of official political content, the trip up the Thames offers Guest a chance to see utopian country life after his initial exposure to its transfigured urban existence in London; yet no sooner does he set off in his boat than he takes on the aura of a hero setting off on an arduous quest, of Jason embarking with his comrades on the *Argo* in pursuit of the Golden Fleece, or of a riparian version of Browning's *Childe Roland*. I will suggest elsewhere that the whole of the river adventure may be plausibly rewritten in terms of the narratological categories of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, with Guest as the hero liberating the princess (Ellen) from captivity in Runnymede;⁷ and this should hardly surprise us given Hammond's evocation of a Norwegian folk-tale in his expositions to Guest and the extended discussion of the Grimm fairy stories over lunch in the British Museum.

It is certainly the case, at any rate, that as an older man entranced by a very much younger woman who desires a secret knowledge which he alone can offer

her, Guest takes on the Arthurian mantle of the mage Merlin to Ellen's Vivien at Runnymede and after. The 'force-vehicles' on the Thames which travel without any visible means of propulsion might be seen as versions of the magically self-powered Sending Boat of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The somewhat difficult parent-child relationships that Guest comes across upriver – Ellen and her (grand)father, Phillippa and her daughter – have about them something of the aura of that abusive adult/kidnapped child pairing which is such a recurrent feature of Morrisian romance. And Kelmscott Manor is an entirely appropriate destination for this romance quest up the Thames since, as the opening pages of *The Well at the World's End* clearly show us, it is itself a kind of 'hinge' between the genres of utopia and romance, serving as the place where one ends and the other begins.

By now, however, matters are getting out of hand, textually speaking, and the third stage of the Nowherian dialectic must therefore kick in. If the political liberation of Nature (stage one) led on to what is coming close to a full-blooded generic transformation (stage two), then *News from Nowhere* must now attempt to close back down the turbulent generic forces it has set free; it must do its best to put the genie back in the bottle, in terms of literary form and mode. Thus against the run of those earlier doctrinal formulations which asserted humanity's benignly interactive role in a redeemed natural environment, we have Old Hammond's sudden startling claim that the Nowherians 'won't stand any nonsense from Nature in their dealings with her'. (p.63) I shall read this as a self-reflexive textual moment, in which the work is describing its own technical procedures in stage three quite as much as it is saying anything substantive about labour practices in the new society. For the book now goes to work in a systematic way to contain or 'manage' the natural energies (and their concomitant generic implications) that it had set free in the first instance.

It does this by a strategy of what we might call, after F.R. Leavis, 'adjectival insistence'. The term comes from Leavis's exasperated account of *Heart of Darkness* in the Conrad chapter of *The Great Tradition*:

Had he not ... overworked 'inscrutable', 'inconceivable', 'unspeakable' and that kind of word already? – yet still they recur. Is anything added to the oppressive mysteriousness of the Congo by such sentences as: 'it was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention'? The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors ... So we have an adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence on 'unspeakable rites', 'unspeakable secrets', 'monstrous passions', 'inconceivable mystery' and so on.⁸

The thrust of Morrisian adjectival relentlessness proceeds in exactly the opposite

semantic direction to the Conradian version, as we shall see, but Leavis's stress on readerly exasperation applies as aptly to the heart of utopia as to the heart of darkness. We already in fact have an excellent analysis of Nowherian adjectival practice in John Helmer's shrewd essay on 'The Prettiness of Utopia', where he notes the '*tableaux* of innumerable objects' that constitute such a memorable part of *News from Nowhere*'s literary appeal, and then comments: 'We are struck by the recurring sameness of the means of describing these things, so that all of them – men, women, behaviour, objects, gardens – are touched by the same adjectives – pretty, nice, quaint, dainty, handsome and gay ... To be sure, this repetition has been noticed before, and critics of *News from Nowhere* have tended to call the work after Morris's own names – as pretty, quaint or dainty'.⁹

These are admirable observations, and Helmer produces plenty of apt textual detail to back up his general case; but his essay seems to me incomplete because it misses out the one crucial Nowherian adjective which is both implicit in and ultimately comes to govern all the rest. Helmer's spirited effort to uncover weightier etymological significances which Morris is trying to unleash in his recurrent adjectives does not, I think, in the end hold water; for even if we can intellectually appreciate Morris's would-be recovery of powerful roots, these cannot override our modern sense of the belittling force of his most frequent adjectival choices. Pretty, nice, quaint, dainty, handsome and gay: yes indeed, these words are used with as much monotony in Morris's utopia as 'unspeakable', 'implacable', 'brooding' and so on in Conrad's darkly dystopian work. But the central element of Nowherian adjectival insistence is the epithet 'little' – to the point, indeed, where it even comes to dominate chapter headings themselves: 'A Little Shopping', 'The Little River'.

Helmer persuasively demonstrates how ubiquitous his chosen adjectives are through the text, and I merely want to add to that analysis the point that they are so often combined with the key word 'little'. So that, for example, there are 'quaint and fanciful little buildings' upon the new Hammersmith Bridge, (p.8) a 'pretty little brook' runs through the new Middlesex forest, (p.23) a 'dainty little basket' is filled with Latakia tobacco, (p.31) a 'pretty gay little structure of wood' occupies the new Trafalgar Square, (p.36) we see a 'very pretty little village' and a 'little town of quaint and pretty houses' on the journey upriver, (pp. 124-125) Ellen's boat is a 'gay little craft', (p.155) and Ellen herself sees England as 'this little pretty country'. (p.161) Sometimes the epithet threatens to multiply out of control, shouldering every other adjective from the sentence, as when Ellen's cottage is described as 'a little house, one of whose little windows was already yellow with candle-light' (p.127) or when Kelmscott church becomes 'a simple little building with one little aisle'. (p.179) Later in the book the adjective is raised almost to the status of an existential philosophy in its own right, as when we learn that the Nowherians are 'eager to discuss all the little details of life: the weather, the

hay-crop, the last new house, the plenty or lack of such and such birds'. (p.147) And this is to ignore all the uses of 'little' on its own, which are so frequent in the book that I defy anyone to tot up their total number – little twigs of lavender, little forest ponies, little shiver of the night-wind, little clouds, little plain, little hill, little avenue of lime-trees, and so on – not to mention its equivalents such as 'small' or its intensifiers such as 'tiny' (e.g. 'a tiny strand of limestone-gravel' at Kelmscott, p.172).

No doubt the application of such remorseless adjectival insistence gives the book, like its glass-blowers, 'such a sense of power, when you have got deft in it'; (p.40) and certainly it has 'compelled nature to run into the mould', not of 'the ages' as Guest would have it, but of the epithets. (p.121) But the reader's response is very different, surely: 'I was beginning rather to resent his formula ... his formula, put with such obstinate insistence'. (p.131) This is William Guest on Ellen's grandfather, but it could just as well be us as readers of *News from Nowhere*, protesting against its own adjectival insistence. There is nothing about the Thames itself which compels it to be experienced in this 'belittling' mode; indeed, when William Guest describes it as 'what may fairly be called our only English river', (p.159) one feels that he is favourably contrasting it with other more diminutive rivers, and we can certainly find passages in Morris's other writings where the Thames is evoked in altogether more eerie and impressive mode than it is in *News from Nowhere* (see, for example, his fishing expedition in the floods at Kelmscott on November 1875, or his experience of the Northern Lights on the river during August 1880).¹⁰ It is not, then, the nature of the object which calls into being this insistent vocabulary of littleness; it is, rather, a textual strategy, an imposition on the object from without, whereby the generically disruptive energies of liberated Nature can be reduced back down to something manageable.

What *News from Nowhere* is doing to its object-world by such adjectival insistence can be clearly grasped by a comparison with what Gudrun Brangwen does to the natural world as an artist in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. Whereas the Conradian adjectives of *Heart of Darkness* open their objects out in the direction of a vague, echoing portentousness, the Nowherian epithets consistently diminish them, much as Gudrun does in her practice of sculpture. Here is Ursula Brangwen evoking her sister's artistic predilections: 'Isn't it queer that she always likes little things? She must always work small things, that one can put between one's hands, birds and tiny animals. She likes to look through the wrong end of the opera glasses, and see the world that way – why is it, do you think?'¹¹ Both Gudrun in her sculpture and *News from Nowhere* in this phase exercise a clenched 'will-to-power' over the natural object, rejecting all that is spontaneous and thus unpredictable about it in favour of their own projects of conscious control and diminution. Gudrun thereby aligns herself with those other embodiments of domineering rational will in *Women in Love* – Gerald Crich, Hermione, Loeke

– and Morris’s utopia, though it can powerfully diagnose such dominative will-power elsewhere, here in stage three of its own dialectic of Nature falls subject to it itself. The impulse behind both Gudrun Brangwen’s work and *Nowhere’s* adjectival insistence is neatly encapsulated by the French phenomenological critic Gaston Bachelard, who argues that ‘The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it’.¹²

Morris’s systematic semantic ‘belittling’ of the created world of the text then generates its own narrative counterpart – its ‘objective correlative’, in T.S. Eliot’s famous term – in the form of the leisurely journey upriver from Hammersmith Guest House to Kelmscott Manor. While Marlow in the narrative frame of *Heart of Darkness* looks down the Thames towards its opening into the North Sea, William Guest’s upriver trip towards the riparian source takes him towards an ever-dwindling rather than expanding landscape, into a vision which Morris had vividly evoked in his first-ever public lecture in 1877: ‘the land is a little land ... all is measured, mingled, varied, gliding easily one thing into another: little rivers, little plains, swelling, speedily changing uplands, all beset with handsome orderly trees; little hills, little mountains, netted over with the walks of sheep-walks: all is little’.¹³ By this point the initial vision of a liberated post-capitalist Nature which unsettlingly threatened to open out into the sinister numinous energies of the romance genre, all forests, witches, questing knights, kidnapped children and magic boats, has been closed down into a traditional aesthetics of the ‘beautiful’: a world of gentle ‘minglings’ and ‘blendings’, of quaint, pretty and above all little natural objects which constitutes the greenly English riverscape that, in readerly retrospect and for many contemporary eco-critical interpretations of the book, dominates our overall memory of *News from Nowhere*. The disturbing romance intimations of phase two of the Nowherian dialectic have by now been as thoroughly excised from the text by Leavisite adjectival insistence as the colourful medieval images on the walls of Kelmscott Church was by Puritan whitewash.

‘The times have grown mean and petty’, declares the Old Grumbler; (p.128) and certainly the depiction of Nature in *Nowhere* has become mean and petty in this phase of the book’s dialectic, so we might borrow another of the text’s memorable phrases and refer to this third stage as ‘the time of the Degradation’. (p.138) But if Nature is closed down in this way, if the text adjectivally leaps upon it as a tiger upon its prey (to purloin an image from Old Hammond) and seeks thus to contain its generically transformative energies, we shall note, as the fourth and final stage of my Nowherian dialectic, a strong counter-impulse whereby *News from Nowhere* not only registers its deep frustration at this containment strategy, but actually breaks it open all over again, in a major aesthetic shift within the text from an aesthetics of the beautiful to an altogether more turbulent cult of the sublime.

'Having nought but this little they yearned for much': this is *The Well at the World's End* on King Peter's sons;¹⁴ but it applies aptly enough to *News from Nowhere* too. For a whole series of allusions to the North now betrays the text's frustration with its own southern Thames valley enclosures. Old Hammond's reference to 'Old Horrebaw's Snakes in Iceland' gets a chapter all to itself, (p.73) and while the immediate point being made is a satiric gibe at nineteenth-century class politics, the reference to Iceland evokes everything which we know that those eerie, violent Northern lavascapes meant to Morris – so far removed as they are from the genial Home Counties Englishness of his utopia. Moreover, we hear references to proposed journeys to the north within utopia itself, as if the text is feeling the pull of these northern landscapes: Hammond suggests that Guest has a look at the Yorkshire 'Three Peaks', Dick proposes letting him see how his friends live in the north country, and Ellen offers him the opportunity to come with her to Hadrian's wall. Beyond such suggestions, we even begin to hear of actual events in Nowhere which seem as if they belong to the troubled northern landscapes of Iceland. There is, after all, Walter Allen's startling reference to 'the earthquake of the year before last', (p.143) at which the mind surely boggles: if William Guest had arrived in Nowhere two years earlier, then, would he have found its Mote-houses in rubble, its everyday social routines shattered, and significant numbers of its utopians dead and wounded among the debris? An event of this kind simply does not make sense, does not 'compute', in the placid Thames valley riverscapes which the book presents to us, so we must take it, I believe, as a powerful local instance of the text hankering for more than the aesthetics of the beautiful allows, for a degree of physical turbulence and social upheaval that point us much more towards the traditional aesthetic opposite of the beautiful: the sublime.

News from Nowhere may not actually be able to deliver the earthquake of which it notes the occurrence – non-human Nature in the text is by now too rigidly tied down within a rhetoric of the beautiful and the 'little' for that – but it generates an alternative means of reintroducing into itself some of the violently disruptive values which the earthquake symbolically stands for. We must note, first of all, that the book forges an equivalence between external Nature and the female body; this is achieved by means of a series of doctrinal statements and by subtler metaphorical touches within the local texture of the prose. Old Hammond refers early on to 'some beautiful and wise woman, the very type of the beauty and glory of the world which we love so well', (p.49) and he reinforces this equation later when he refers to 'delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves'. (p.113) The conventional Western coding of Nature as female (Mother Nature, etc) and woman as close to Nature (removed by her biology from male Reason) is intensified within

Morris's utopia both by such theoretical statements and by delicate local touches throughout the book, as when the British Museum waitresses are 'chattering sweetly like reed warblers by the river-side', (Ch.XVI) or when Clara, impressed by the beauty of Ellen's garden, 'gave forth a little sweet "O," like a bird beginning to sing'. (p.127). This equation being made, a new concept of Nature in the text can then be embodied by the extraordinary new female figure who materialises in the last third of the book: the twenty-year-old Ellen, whom Guest, Dick and Clara first meet at Runnymede.

That Ellen represents a new force in the text is at once clear from the semantic field which attaches to her: 'strange and almost wild beauty', (p.130) 'her strange wild beauty', (p.137) 'this strange girl' (p.157) – already with this terminology we have moved far away from the dainty littleness which characterises so much of the object-world of the book at this point. If in one sense she intensifies Guest's pleasure in Nowhere, she also very quickly hollows it out thoroughly, so that he begins experiencing pain, jealousy, anxiety, even bitterness. She herself knows perfectly well how emotionally disruptive she is, as when she informs Guest that 'I have often troubled men's minds disastrously'. (p.162) 'Disastrously' is a very strong term in itself, particularly when we have already heard stories of sexual jealousy leading to multiple deaths; and 'often' only compounds the offence here, surely. Anyone might once or twice in a lifetime disturb the mind of members of the opposite sex, but to do it 'often' implies that this is almost a habit or hobby; and indeed she seems to be at it again in Runnymede, where she apparently has two or three boyfriends on the go at the same time.

William Guest may have been baffled by the utopian new world in the early pages of *News from Nowhere*, but once Ellen turns up in the text he realises retrospectively how familiar much of it was to him after all, as he makes clear in what is in my view the book's major statement about its twenty-year-old heroine: of all the persons I had seen in that world renewed, she was the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of. Clara, for instance, beautiful and bright as she was, was not unlike a *very* pleasant and unaffected young lady; and the other girls also seemed nothing more than very much improved types which I had known in other times. But this girl ... was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise and please me. (p.157)

What is at stake here is Ellen's *uncategorisability*, not only in nineteenth-century terms but even with the new, transformed concepts which utopia itself offers ('work-pleasure', 'easy-hard work', and so on). If, as we have seen, in this book Nature and woman are ultimately indistinguishable concepts, then with the arrival in the text of this strange, wild, disastrously troubling and entirely uncategorisable young woman, we can say confidently that we are now in the presence of Nature as the sublime, as that disruptive force of awe and grandeur

conventionally represented by mountains, waterfalls, volcanoes, storms or the sea.

If Ellen thus represents the sublime, then the turbulence she incarnates cannot be embodied by any adequate sensory form, not even by her famous 'embrace' of Kelmscott Manor (though I do not have space to demonstrate this here). The fierce desire which is structural to her being exceeds all externalisation, all oneness with the natural realm. So disruptive is she, indeed, that she is capable, even in a chapter entitled 'The Little River', of breaking open the shrunken concept of Nature-as-the-beautiful towards a renewed opening onto the genre of romance; for she remarks to Guest that 'the smallness of the scale of everything' paradoxically gives her 'a feeling of going somewhere, of coming to something strange, a feeling of adventure'. (p.163) It is as if Ellen senses the imminence of Kelmscott Manor just a few miles further up the river not as the endpoint of this utopia, but rather as the starting point of *The Well at the World's End*.

If Ellen herself cannot find a way of externalising her inner feelings, no more can the text in which she appears find a satisfying way of 'embodying' her, of giving her a role and future in the book which is an adequate 'objective correlative' of the disruptive force she represents. There is a merely gestural reference to her perhaps having a good many children in the end, and this textual elusiveness is apt enough, since the sublime is that which always resists and exceeds representation. We will have to make up our own stories of Ellen's turbulent future in Nowhere; this is indeed a responsibility which she herself enjoins upon us when she tells Guest that the other Nowherians 'fell to making stories of me to themselves – like I know you did'. (p.162) What Ellen as the sublime above all alerts us to is the lack of finality of Morris's utopia, its openness to further revolutions beyond the Great Change of 1952-54, to what old Hammond dubs 'the world's next period of wise and unhappy manhood, if that should happen'. (p.88) It certainly *will* happen with Ellen around, but how we actually model those further revolutions, how we in detail develop and plot what in effect then becomes a sequel to Morris's own future vision, is a matter for us and our own cultural, narrative and political predilections. But we have certainly broken decisively beyond the closure of the book's third-stage cult of the 'little', of the benign blendings and minglings of the Englishly beautiful.

Finally, then, let me sum up the Nowherian dialectic of Nature in highly schematic form. First of all, politically speaking, with the defeat of capitalism in 1952-54, Nature is liberated; it is slowly restored to itself after its thorough-going nineteenth-century despoliation. Almost immediately, however, in the second stage of the dialectic, such reinvigorated natural energies, particularly as they cluster around the *topos* of the forest, threaten to transform the text generically; they begin to transmogrify a utopia into a late Morrisian romance, reprogramming its every last textual detail in mythic or archetypal mode. Third, in a powerful coun-

ter-strategy which is embodied narratively in the journey upriver, but even more so in the relentless adjectival insistence of the book, *News from Nowhere* attempts to shut down the transformative generic energies it has unleashed, subsuming the sinister dimensions of romance landscape within a genially English aesthetic of the 'beautiful'. But the book then, to its credit, becomes deeply frustrated by its own strategy of diminishment, and in the fourth and final stage of the Nowherian dialectic (having previously enforced an equation between Nature and woman), it generates a new kind of woman, who articulates an entirely new concept of Nature. 'Disastrously troubling' as Ellen proclaims herself to be, she embodies the sublime within this book, those overwhelming forces of Nature which disrupt enclosed certainties, overwhelm routine and which will ultimately throw the whole of Morris's twenty-second-century society into a renewed turmoil or metaphorical 'earthquake' from which it may or may not recover. Just as the Nowherian dialectic began with politics (the liberation of Nature from capitalism), so it ends there too, with a glimpse at the 'political Sublime' into which Ellen may precipitate her world, plunging it into an uncategorisable 'change beyond the change', to borrow an apt phrase from *A Dream of John Ball*. But to try to model how *that* might go would be the task of another essay altogether.

NOTES

1. David Leopold, ed, *William Morris, News from Nowhere: Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 138. All subsequent citations included in the text.
2. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, London: Macmillan, 1912, Vol. 2, p. 86.
3. Michael W. Perry, ed, *More to William Morris: The House of the Wolfings and The Roots of the Mountains*, Seattle: Inkling Books, 2003, p.105. (Afterwards *More to Morris*)
4. *The Well at the World's End. A Tale by William Morris*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1975, p. 37. (Afterwards *The Well*)
5. *More to Morris*, p.106.
6. Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957, pp. 124, 130.
7. See my unpublished 'Narratology in Nowhere: The Structural Adventures of William Guest'.
8. F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1948, pp. 177-9.
9. John Helmer, 'The Prettiness of Utopia', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, IV, No. 1, Winter 1999, pp. 5-7.

10. Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. 1, 1848-1880*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 276; Nicholas Salmon with Derek Baker, *The William Morris Chronology*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, p. 104.
11. D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (1922), Chapter III, 'Class-Room', Harmondsworth: Penguin Books (Charles Ross, ed), 1989, p. 88.
12. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, New York: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 150.
13. 'The Lesser Arts', 1877, in A.L. Morton, ed, *The Political Writings of William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1973, p. 46.
14. *The Well*, p.2.