

Kinetic Utopias

H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere*

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H.G. WELLS'S *A Modern Utopia* (1905) is, in its author's own term, a curiously 'hybrid' work.¹ It gives a sketch of its own ideal society – its buildings, its economic arrangements, its educational system – but simultaneously stands back from this detailed social blueprinting in order to offer a series of general meditations both on the historical tradition of utopian writing from Plato onwards, and on theoretical problems of utopia at large. It is, that is to say, as much a meta-utopia as a utopia, and this generic hybridity is then realised in its bifurcated literary form, with the garrulous middle-aged lecturer who serves as Wells's narrator in the text lucubrating at length on general issues of utopia, while behind him, as on a cinematograph screen, flash episodes of the actual detailed utopia which the narrator and his botanist friend discover on a star beyond Sirius.

As a meta-utopia, *A Modern Utopia* has a good deal to say about Morris's *News from Nowhere*, a powerful precursor text which, after all, predates it by only fifteen years. And it is, as we see from its very early pages, notably ambivalent about Morris's social vision. 'Were we free to have our untrammelled desire', Wells writes, 'I suppose we should follow Morris to his Nowhere, we should change the nature of man and the nature of things altogether; we should make the whole race wise, tolerant, noble, perfect – wave our hands to a splendid anarchy, every man doing as it pleases him, and none pleased to do evil, in a world as good in its essential nature, as ripe and sunny, as the world before the Fall' (p. 12). But we are not free in this sense, in Well's view. For him, we have to make utopia, if we are to make it at all, from the

imperfect human material and the often hostile natural environment that we find around us. Morris is therefore, on this showing, guilty of a gross idealisation in *News from Nowhere*, a radical abstracting away from the human complexities we actually find around us.

Now whether this account holds good for *News from Nowhere* or not (and I don't think it does), what we need to note here is how, just a couple of pages later, Wells himself begins to contradict it. The utopias of the past have indeed invariably been abstract, he reflects: 'there must always be a certain effect of hardness and thinness about Utopian speculations' (p. 13). Then, however, we get a crucial qualification: 'In almost every Utopia – except, perhaps, Morris's *News from Nowhere* – one sees handsome but characterless buildings, symmetrical and perfect cultivations, and a multitude of people, healthy, happy, beautifully dressed, but without any personal distinction whatever' (p. 14). So suddenly Morris's text begins to represent complex sensuous particularity in contrast to the schematised Platonic diagrams of the utopian tradition. *News from Nowhere*, we might say in Bakhtinian terms, has been 'novelised', subject to the decentralist and particularising impulses of the novel which pull it away from the pure geometry of Plato or Thomas More. And when Wells's narrator writes dismissively of his botanist companion some 40 pages later that 'it is open to him to try a *News from Nowhere* utopia with the wine left out' (p. 51), it is clear just how strongly Wells has responded to the sensuous intensities of Morris's genial socialist world.

We can see then how self-divided *A Modern Utopia* is about its great precursor text. What I want to do here, however, is not to pursue these reflections on Morris through Wells's book but rather use one of the latter's central theoretical concepts as a way of opening out a new reading of *News from Nowhere* itself, a reading which will approach Morris's text not as a single, self-unified utopia but rather as *two* utopias bound within the same set of book covers. To get to this point, we need first to reflect on Wells's title: *A Modern Utopia*, yes, but in what does 'modernity' consist for this text? To be modern, for Wells, is to exist on the other side of that epoch-making intellectual breakthrough which is the Darwinian theory of evolution, to have taken it on board not just cerebrally but to have let it soak deeply into one's fundamental sense of human possibility. Before Darwin we had utopias in the Platonic tradition:

‘Those were all perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won for ever against the unrest and disorder that inhere in things. One beheld a healthy and simple generation enjoying the fruits of the earth in an atmosphere of virtue and happiness, to be followed by other virtuous, happy, and entirely similar generations, until the Gods grew weary. Change and development were damned back for ever’ (p. 11).

But to those of us who live on the other side of Darwin, of his Heraclitean vision of an unceasing evolutionary emergence of new individualities, such Platonism is no longer possible; and thus for Wells, in a crucial statement of principle, ‘the Modern Utopia must be not static but *kinetic*, must shape not as a permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages’ (p. 11; my emphasis). Such kineticism is then challengingly embodied in the detail and texture of the social blueprint Wells offers in *A Modern Utopia*, which with its impressive new means of transport incarnates the ‘travel age of mankind’ (p. 37) and, intriguingly, is about to switch to using units of energy as its new currency.

What I am interested in is whether *News from Nowhere* is kinetic in this sense. Does it live up to Well’s criteria for utopian modernity, does it contain principles of change and transformation within itself, such that the revolution of 1952 is not simply a punctual, once-and-for-all event but in some sense (to borrow and misuse Trotsky’s term) permanent? There is obviously a fair amount of critical commentary which has answered this question already, in the negative, and this even from commentators who are otherwise politically sympathetic to Morris’s project. For such writers, who include Raymond Williams, *News from Nowhere* is too static, too pastoral, too simple a vision of an achieved socialist society; it is a regressive fantasy compensation for the pains of actual political struggle – in which of course Morris immersed himself so admirably – rather than a genuinely inspiring clarion call to such struggle.²

Now one could tackle such criticism at the level of content, by pointing out that there is a good measure of sexual disturbance, of social anxiety, and even of violence at work in this new society; but I want to try to make a more positive case by attending to the form and structure of *News from Nowhere* rather than its thematic substance; and to do so a brief excursus, rather in Wells’s own manner, into the

history of utopian writing will be helpful. One rough but useful way of periodising utopias is by attending to the means whereby they get the utopian visitor to the ideal new society in the first place. For earlier utopias, the means are usually *geographical*: you go on some vast journey to the other ends of the earth, as does Raphael Hythloday in Thomas More's *Utopia*, you come across an alien society and then, as you begin to appreciate its utopian nature, you stroll around its streets, chat to its inhabitants, soak up its new customs and laws. A significant shift happens in the nineteenth century when utopias tend to be projected *temporally* rather than spatially, into a future that is yet to be collectively built in one's own society rather than into some already existing island at the furthest corners of the world. So the initial long journey of discovery now becomes a matter of *time* travelling, not space travelling; you require a more or less literal Tardis to get you to utopia. So in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* Julian West travels forward in time, through the peculiar device of mesmerism, to the new Boston of the year 2000, and then does his leisurely tour of the new society with his guides, the Leete family.

Let us now take this periodising model into *News from Nowhere* itself. Morris uses the new convention of time travel to get William Guest into the utopian world in the first place, and then, predictably enough, Guest does his slow, appreciative tour of it, chatting to Dick, Annie, Bob and Boffin in Hammersmith Guest House, and travelling relaxedly with Dick by horse and cart across the garden city that London has become. The long discussions with Old Hammond extend the tour of the new world in a historical rather than geographical sense as Guest burrows back into the political struggles that have brought Nowhere into being, and the tour concludes with the slow ride back across London to the Guest House, with the reconciliation of Dick and Clara being the cream on the cake of this happy excursion.

So far, so good; and *News from Nowhere* could quite plausibly end here. *Looking Backward* does end at this point, after all, with Julian West settling comfortably into the new Boston. But what does Morris do with his 55-year-old hero? Instead of letting him settle into the new London, as arguably befits his advanced years, he propels him on a vast new journey up the Thames, 120 or 30 miles of upstream rowing to Kelmscott. So if the typical generic pattern for utopia is voyage of dis-

covery plus tour, Morris in his London scenes has already given us enough for *one* utopia – time travelling to the future, then the leisurely tour of it – and now in effect gives us the start of a *second*: the long voyage of discovery up the Thames towards – what?

Well, what Guest discovers on the Thames – not all that far from where this conference is taking place – is a fundamentally new kind of utopian, Ellen, and his encounter with her entails a drastic revaluing of what he had formerly seen in London. Ellen is intriguing, enigmatic, even dangerous – ‘I have often troubled men’s minds disastrously’, she boasts – and she brings a quite new energy into *News from Nowhere*.³ Guest liberates her from the surly grandfather who has her trapped, I would argue, in the Runnymede cottage (though it would take a fullscale reading of the text in the light of Vladimir Propp’s narratology to establish this fully), and he liberates her intellectually too as he gives her a sense of history and politics that she has hitherto lacked. But she in turn liberates him, not just sexually – though that is an important aspect of her meaning in the text – but from what I’m inclined to see as the idyllic illusions of the London he has just left. In the light of Ellen’s complexity, we can see that the new utopian London, of which Dick Hammond, the Arnold Schwarzenegger of this text, might stand as an emblem, is dangerously anti-intellectual, culpably blind to history. We might say of it what Yeats says of Ireland in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’: ‘Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect’. Such neglect may even ultimately threaten the longterm political future of the new society. For as Ellen herself crucially notes, without a tougher political and historical consciousness Nowhere may well find itself so attracted by superficial features of the past that it drifts unwittingly back into capitalism all over again:

‘I think sometimes people are too careless of the history of the past – too apt to leave it in the hands of old learned men like Hammond. Who knows? Happy as we are, times may alter; 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’. (pp. 167–68)

So Ellen's arrival in the book seems to me to negate much of what has preceded her. The garden-city utopia is now seen as overall too pastoral, too sensuously immediate, as in some respects debilitatingly stress-free and unchallenging. Such remarks are, of course, exactly what Morris's critics over the years have been saying about *News from Nowhere* as a whole. I think there is some justice to them, with the crucial caveat that the book itself knows them to be true, that it *incorporates* its critics' insights; it asks us to reassess substantially its idyllic London scenes and tries to offer something tougher beyond them. Utopia mark one, the garden-city world that Guest wakes up in, is left behind as the book launches a new utopian voyage of discovery up the Thames; and through Ellen utopia mark two potentially comes into being – a leaner, more challenging, more energetic, fully historicised and political world.

We can thus say, in Wellsian terms, that *News from Nowhere* is not just kinetic in its narrative structure, kicking boldly off into a new utopian venture just as we thought Guest might settle placidly in Hammersmith Guest House for good, but actually incarnates the very principle of kineticism in itself in the person of Ellen, 'in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next', as Guest puts it (p. 157). And such kineticism even accelerates in the closing pages of the text. 'I shall have children; perhaps before the end a good many', declares Ellen, as if she means to populate the whole of Nowhere with people as energetic and as productively disturbing as herself (p. 168). While Wells, in his meta-utopian speculations in *A Modern Utopia*, mulls ambivalently over the degrees of Platonic stasis and Darwinian flux in Morris's work, I think we can see by attending to the full significance of the journey up the Thames that *News from Nowhere*, though a good deal less theoretically self-conscious than Wells's text, has centrally incorporated the motif of kineticism, of ceaseless change and self-transformation, which is such a striking feature of the Wellsian utopian vision and which is surely equally necessary for us too in any satisfying twentieth or twenty-first century utopia.

NOTES

1. H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, edited by Gregory Claes and Patrick Parrinder (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2005), p. 8. Page references to this edition are hereafter included in my text. I dedicate this paper to the memory of John Evans, who made such lively and thoughtful contributions to the 'Ruskin, Morris and Utopianism' seminars in which its ideas were first formulated.
2. Of the 'achieved new condition' in *News from Nowhere* Williams writes: 'The air of a late Victorian holiday is made to override the complexities, the divergences, the everyday materialities of any working society'. See his essay 'Utopia and Science Fiction' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), p.205.
3. William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, edited by James Redmond (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p.162. Page references to this edition are hereafter included in my text.