

A rejoinder to Barbara Gribble

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Had Barbara Gribble limited her article ('William Morris's *New From Nowhere*: A Vision Impaired', *The Journal*, Summer 1985) to a criticism of the desirability of the society depicted by William Morris in *News From Nowhere*, there would be no requirement for a response; after all, there is no shortage of academics who foresee subtle dangers within the apparently desirable socialist vision, and they are as entitled to their fears as socialists are to our hopes. My dispute with Professor Gribble concerns not whether she perceives Morris's 'Nowhere' as an appealing social goal, but her claim that Morris himself regarded 'Nowhere' as 'a negative example' of what socialism could be like.

Let me summarise Professor Gribble's argument. She states that '*News From Nowhere* can be seen as something quite other than simple utopianism': it is 'an inquiry into self-deception and stasis'. The novel points to 'something more complex than a simple achievement of harmony'. Indeed, it is suggested that Morris sought to present the 'Guest's experience as a negative example' and this was because Morris was 'instructed by disappointment' following the events of Bloody Sunday in 1887 and wished to offer 'pointed advice to the readers of the 1890 *Commonweal*'—the advice presumably being that they should not view with hope or desire the picture of socialism presented in *News From Nowhere*. Two evidential assertions support Professor Gribble's extraordinary conclusion, both of which are based on the claim that there is a contradiction between Morris's own ideas about pleasant living and the lifestyle portrayed in *News From Nowhere*. Firstly, it is pointed out that Morris revered books, whereas the inhabitants of the socialist 'Nowhere' 'ignore' or 'revile' them. Secondly, it is argued that the emphasis upon co-operative, socialised happiness in Morris's socialist vision conflicts with his personal distaste for the kind of authoritarian compulsion explicit in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. It is suggested that 'in projecting personal happiness as an end rather than a means, they (the inhabitants of 'Nowhere') are overlooking something even more basic to human fulfillment'. In order to refute the curious thesis that Morris wrote *News From Nowhere* as 'a negative example'—a dystopian spectre, perhaps—it will be necessary to examine Professor Gribble's two supporting arguments.

It is alleged that there is 'a telling discrepancy . . . between Morris's own attitude toward books and that of "Nowhere's" people'. Morris did revere books, although it is a pity that the two quotations from him regarding the value of books used in Professor Gribble's article are couched in the language of Morris's pre-socialist Romanticism, both having been written *before* he became a Marxist in 1884. Morris understood the tremendous importance of books, never more so than when he appreciated their value as conveyors of social consciousness. But we should not forget

the historical context within which Victorian book-reading was perceived by Morris: in the late nineteenth century the mass of the people were both illiterate and so deprived in their access to books as to make 'bookishness' a right of class privilege; at the same time Victorian printers produced large numbers of scholarly works which disregarded or distorted the experiences of working-class lives, as well as a proliferation of sentimentalised, self-indulgent novels for the amusement of rich people with little to think about but imaginary happenings. In short, Victorian 'bookishness' was both a symbol of class exclusivity and a retreat from social consciousness. It is that attitude to books—one quite alien to Morris the revolutionary socialist—that the inhabitants of 'Nowhere' had no time for. But can it be said, as Professor Gribble does, that 'the general tendency in "Nowhere" is, at the least, to ignore books, and, at the most, to revile them'?

In Chapter V we learn that children in 'Nowhere' learn through social experience and natural self-motivation. 'Most children, seeing books lying about, manage to read by the time they are four years old' (RKP, edited by James Redmond, 1970, p. 24). Children also learn to speak other languages, often before they can read English; it is to be presumed that such familiarity with the spoken word would make easy comprehension of foreign-language books. Children also 'learn Latin and Greek' (p. 25), surely not indicative of a society which ignores or reviles books. Apart from 'a few story-books' children under the age of fifteen 'don't do much reading', but by the time they are twenty most inhabitants of 'Nowhere' 'find their level' and decide how much they need to learn from books and what can be better discovered from active experience. It is worth noting how favourably this vision compares with present-day standards of literacy (and more so with those of Victorian England) and in no way indicates a society which wishes to ignore or revile books. Dick's knowledge of capitalist parliamentarianism is derived from books (p. 26); Old Hammond lives surrounded by books and Dick describes him as being 'part of the books' (p. 43) and Hammond himself accepts the label of 'a literary man' (p. 51). In addition there are several examples of a concern for books cited in Barbara Gribble's article. How, in the light of this, can she assert that 'attitudes of "Nowhere's" inhabitants toward the written word are curiously negative'?

What can be said is that the attitudes to books of 'Nowhere's' inhabitants contrast with the bookish intellectualism which characterises the contemporary (both now and then) escapism from experiential reality by those who are engaged in an alienated educative process. It was Ellen (speaking for Morris, I would suggest) who proclaimed the unalienated person's attitude to books:

When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much?
(p. 129)

She points out that her grumbling father's books 'were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure, and when they must needs supplement the sordid miseries of their own lives with imaginations of the lives of other people' (p. 129). Such was the predicament of Morris, seeking escape from the wretchedness of a system he despised through the artificiality of book-wisdom. But he would be the first to recognise how impoverished a substitute that was

for experiential wisdom. That, surely, is why Morris visited Iceland to breathe in the sensual information which books could not offer him.

In her second supporting argument Professor Gribble states that ‘Just as “Nowhere’s” general disregard of books contrasts with Morris’s view, so its insights concerning man’s goal in life are similarly awry.’ She states, quite correctly, that Morris envisaged a socialist system in which man will not only seek his own comfort, but ‘the happiness of the whole and therefore . . . his own through the whole’. Now, Barbara Gribble concedes that this happiness is ‘certainly worthy of human attainment’, but that such a social goal overlooks ‘something even more basic to human fulfillment’. As we are not informed what this more fundamental goal might be—that which is more fulfilling than humanity’s collective happiness—we must regard this as an incomplete argument and turn to the two more explicit criticisms of ‘Nowhere’s’ urge to collective happiness given by Professor Gribble.

It is claimed that the happiness of ‘Nowhere’ is based upon self-deception; that ‘the tacit assumption exists that they are under an *obligation* to be happy with the status quo’. In short, where mutual happiness is the social custom those who refuse to offer the smile of acceptance could become outcasts or worse. That is the claim, but it is not supported by the contents of Morris’s *News From Nowhere*. Old Hammond puts the matter clearly to the Guest:

. . . perhaps you will be shocked when I tell you that there is no code of public opinion which takes the place of . . . courts, and which might be as tyrannical and unreasonable as they were. I do not say that people don’t judge their neighbours’ conduct, sometimes, doubtless, unfairly. But I do say that there is no unvarying set of rules by which people are judged; no bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their lives . . . (p. 49)

This is all a long way from any alleged ‘obligation to be happy with the status quo’. If such an obligation existed it does not seem to have harmed the old grumbler at Runnymede who lives well, is cared for by a beautiful daughter who does not share his views, is free to keep and read his books connecting him to times past and to persuade any stranger he meets that capitalism was better than socialism—no prison for dissidents or lunatic asylum or constant surveillance is his fate. Again, in Chapter XXVI we encounter The Obstinate Refusers who prefer to ‘do their own thing’; in Professor Gribble’s vision of ‘Nowhere’ we might expect them to be rushed away to the Ministry of Happiness, to be forced to meet their obligation to what makes other people happy—but that scene belongs in another novel, not Morris’s.

The happiness envisaged by Morris in *News From Nowhere* is not presented as ‘a negative example’. The desirability of such happiness lies in its freedom from the alienating constraints of the market; ‘by the absence of artificial coercion, and the freedom for every man to do what he can do best, joined to the knowledge of what productions of labour we really want’ (p. 79). Surely, it is the market, with its compulsion to manipulate real needs and create artificial ones which presents us with a deception of happiness (one well embodied in the grotesquely consumerist American Dream), not Morris’s socialism, free from the buying and selling of happiness as a high-priced commodity.

Professor Gribble then argues that “Nowhere” is an example of stasis: ‘. . . the people of “Nowhere” lack both a capacity for real progress and for accommodation to change’. In stating this criticism she misses the point that the stability and tranquility of ‘Nowhere’ is not a consequence of stagnation or inertia, but of a society which has come to peace with itself, is in the conscious possession of its inhabitants and has therefore overcome alienation. Morris, as a Marxist, saw socialism as being no less than that: the achievement of a non-alienated society. One might turn to Chinese philosophy to throw some light on this: the literal meaning of the Chinese term, *wu wei*, is nonaction, but this is not the sense in which it is used in Taoist philosophy. The sinologist, Joseph Needham, defines *wu wei* as ‘refraining from action contrary to nature’ and Lao Tzu states that ‘By nonaction everything can be done.’ Similarly, although Morris’s alternative title for *News From Nowhere* was *An Epoch of Rest*, this does not mean that the socialist society he is depicting is asleep or in slumber or stasis. The ‘rest’ referred to is a rest *from* the pressures of capitalist alienation and that restfulness which comes from social and natural harmony—a kind of rest which is quite compatible with dynamic activity. That is why Old Hammond explains that ‘it is each man’s business to make his own work pleasanter and pleasanter, which of course tends towards raising the standard of excellence . . .’ (p. 83). This hardly accords with the quotation from Professor Gribble at the beginning of this paragraph. She wonders ‘how Dick or Walter would react to a sudden epidemic of smallpox or an invasion of malicious aliens. Never placed under healthy stress, they would in all likelihood lack the readiness of response so crucial in an emergency.’ One hopes that they would react better than the highly stressed capitalists of the present whose response to sudden epidemics is to cut overseas aid and whose response to malicious alien invasion is to threaten to blow up the world. Being neither a stagnating society, as Barbara Gribble sees ‘Nowhere’, nor a decaying society, as modern capitalism is, the socialist society of Dick and Walter could at least be relied upon to deal with any emergencies without regard for profit or class selfishness.

Barbara Gribble is quite right to point out that ‘At various times, Morris hints subtly that the achievement of “Nowhere” represents something less than perfection.’ No society will (or should) seek unimprovable, naturally untainted, perfection; indeed, as a Marxist materialist, Morris was not in the business of establishing some brand of idealistic perfection. That is why he went out of his way in *News From Nowhere* to show that socialism would *not* be a problem-free utopia. But that he conceived it as a desirable social system there can be no doubt, and critics should not attribute their own misgivings about socialism to William Morris.