Mind in Morris’s Englands

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I

Not long before he began News from Nowhere, in his lecture on ‘The Society of the Future’, Morris spoke of his projection of a possible future as a personal vision, and therefore as only one among many:

... one thing I must confess from the beginning, which is that the visions of the visionary or practical people differ largely from one another, and that we are not much interested in each others’ visions; whereas the theories of the analysts differ little from each other, and they are hugely interested in each others’ theories – in the way that a butcher is interested in an ox – to wit, for cutting up.¹

I will argue here that News from Nowhere is conceived fundamentally as a vision of a world re-civilized on a new basis: the universal belief in a new faith, a new secular religion. The new religion has its own consistency and coherence; its articles of faith are shown in relation both to practical matters and in an ultimate mystical experience of the sumnum bonum, the greatest human good.

What I propose here is a re-reading of Morris’s most famous book in accordance with this thesis. But to do so in a way that is useful requires that this re-reading be seen to some extent as it relates to the ongoing discussion of News from Nowhere. The main contributions to that discussion in recent years have not stressed the visionary function, certainly not as the central function of the tale.²

II

For me, the current debate about News from Nowhere is dominated by two voices. For most of the hundred years since Morris published News from Nowhere, critical approaches to it tended to stress its vision. But in the 1970s, Lionel Trilling gave a good deal of time and attention specifically to the “theory” of News from Nowhere, returning again and again to the same subject. His paper ‘Aggression and Utopia: A Note on News from Nowhere,’ is not so much a “note” as a fully characteristic essay in analysis of its ideas.² And after that he made an extended reference to it in ‘Mind and the Modern World,’ the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Lecture of 1972, and – in a shorter passage – in his last essay, ‘Why We Read Jane Austen,’ left unfinished when he died on November 5, 1975.³ All three of these articles, written in the last years of his life but with all of Trilling’s customary vitality, penetration and power, originate from what has often been called the liberal or classical “mainstream” of our criticism.

Trilling’s case is opposed to Morris, but it is the more potent because he adopts an attitude that pays Morris the compliment that always accompanies serious attention; and the critic is not without respect, even admiration, for the vision of News from Nowhere, “a deeply moving book,” he says, because it, “embraces an ancient and universal dream” (152). And his respect extends to the motive of the book. With his extraordinary capacity to enter into and define the quality of other minds, Trilling
acknowledges that Morris was a man on a very large scale indeed. His thought was large, was ultimate: its informing idea was the goodness of life, and its end in view was nothing less than making that goodness universally apparent and universally accessible. (150)

But it is not Morris's largeness of mind, nor his imaginative vision, with which Trilling is concerned. For all the clarity and sympathy of his approach, Trilling is concerned to make the case why we should not accept Morris's argument. For him, News from Nowhere acquired a new and ominous significance because it “eight decades ago stated the case against mind that is now being openly litigated in our culture”. He says that:

... at the end of the nineteenth century a voice was raised to say that mind in its traditional authoritative and aggressive character was so far from being in the service of mankind as actually to constitute a principle of social evil. The voice was that of William Morris in News from Nowhere ... (112)

News from Nowhere, in his view, gives serious expression to the mood of that moment of history we now know as “the Sixties,” giving voice, Trilling says, to “the deep animus against the presuppositions of the humanistic tradition that has established itself in our culture.” (158) Perhaps the first critic to take literally Morris's many assertions that he opposed “civilisation” itself, Trilling's method is simply to abstract what he takes to be Morris's argument from News from Nowhere, resting his case on the repugnance Morris's opposition to intellect may be expected to arouse. The life Morris described as an ideal is, in Trilling's description of it, demeaning. Morris's “conception of man's nature and destiny,” he says, “is informed by what might be called a calculated modesty” and a “principled limitation of ambition”. (151) Morris's goal for human life in Nowhere is nothing more than ease, an absence of stress or effort. Trilling observes that,

... perhaps not the least revolutionary element of his program was his willingness to jettison an assumption which is integral to high western culture: that man's nature and destiny are fulfilled not through his success in achieving pleasure but through setting himself goals which are beyond pleasure – though not, of course, beyond gratification – and pursuing them with unremitting energy, with ceaseless devotion in the face of defeat and frustration. (150)

In contrast to this, Trilling describes a Morris who has redefined the goals of human life downward: “Childhood and rest. Not maturity and activity but childhood and rest are represented,” in News from Nowhere, “as making the ideal condition of man.” (158) The implication is that News from Nowhere represents the contrary of progress – an openly acknowledged regression into infantilism, a position that has potentially fearful consequences for society.

It is now over fifteen years since I first read this analysis of News from Nowhere, but its impact has remained with me, particularly because Trilling was one of the heroes of thought of my university years (the other being Northrop Frye), but also because of the peculiarly mixed response he evoked, compounded of roughly equal parts of admiration of the argument and dismay at what that argument does to Morris's book.
The other main contribution to the News from Nowhere discussion in our time needs less explanation because it is more familiar, especially to readers of Morris and the Morris literature. Edward Thompson, who writes from the critical tradition of the left, can be taken to represent a school of critical thought which also includes Rex Bossert and M.-H. Abensour. Though he describes Morris’s tale as a “constructive vision,” Thompson agrees with Bossert in reading the utopia as a significant imaginative counter to prevailing cultural assumptions—social, political, economic, and aesthetic. To them News from Nowhere offers a way out of the ideological impasse of the Victorian world, a world which saw its own culture as both inevitable and eternal and could imagine no other way of life. The story, according to this view, re-establishes the human capacity to imagine alternatives, alternatives created in response to the social evils of the author’s time, the alienating aspects of existing social, political, and economic arrangements. Rex Bossert says:

... what truly distinguishes utopian fiction, especially from fantasy and romance, is not that it captures the actual feeling of the lived experience of the fictional culture it depicts, for this is rarely the case in utopian fiction, but instead that it continually turns readers back to face specific aspects of their own culture.

Like Thompson, Bossert stresses that the purpose of the utopia is to introduce the “other,” to imagine cultural arrangements and values to which the reader's known world may be compared. This implies that the strategy of the utopia is aimed at a critical appraisal rather than systematic argument or a coherent vision. As criticism, that strategy necessarily involves the reader in a vacillating movement between life in the imagined or fantastic world, and life in the world of quotidian experience, the points of contrast being selected on the basis of the author’s experience of the ills of his own world. Because of the utopian author’s pre-occupation with the ills of existing society, with making available alternatives that serve as a critical riposte to the world as it is, the details of the future world are often not consistently worked out. A similar point is made when Thompson glosses with approval Abensour’s view that Morris’s intention was to embody in the forms of fantasy alternative values sketched in an alternative way of life. And what distinguishes this enterprise is, exactly, its open, speculative quality, and its detachment of the imagination from the demands of conceptual precision.

And here I should make it clear that the question at issue between Trilling and the Marxist critics is not whether Morris is writing as a Marxist. To Trilling as to Thompson, the influence of Marx on Morris is unquestionable—Trilling saying that “socialism ... was the central concern of Morris’s later years.” (149) But that is simply not germane to his perception of the central crux of News from Nowhere. In both of these critical accounts, what we find in Morris’s book is of Morris’s own devising and has no counterpart in Marx. And this reflects a crucial change in the discussion of Morris and of News from Nowhere. As Edward Thompson says in his ‘Postscript’:

Where the old argument had been, ‘was Morris a Marxist or a not-Marxist?’, it turns out that, in a major part of his Communist propaganda, he was neither. He was somewhere else, doing something else, and the question is not so much wrong as inappropriate.
But the differences between this reading and Trilling's are more important than any seeming agreement about Marx's influence. Trilling is concerned only with ideas and their relation to a clearly organized argument. He emphasizes the consistency and the coherence of the logical framework and gives no attention to elements that might suggest inconsistency or indeterminancy. Of technology, Trilling notes that in *News from Nowhere*, "... hopelessly unpleasant and dehumanizing work is relegated to a certain few highly sophisticated machines which have a kind of secret existence" (154), but he asks none of the questions that might be asked about how such technology can exist in an essentially rural society, a time of which it is said, by Walter Allen, that "this is not an age of inventions"; questions like how this technology can come to be without the structures for research and development, or the concentrations of population required for mass production, or how the population of Britain has been kept roughly the same size over two hundred years. Trilling does not ask such questions because his case is that there is a clear and consistent argument in *News from Nowhere*, an argument about western humanism and the place of mind and aggression in human life. The other approach, which for convenience can be referred to as Thompson's, welcomes inconsistency as an indication that the writer's purposes lie elsewhere, in a criticism of the actual world rather than in the coherence of the fancied one. Here it is the free play of ideas that is paramount, a free play that sometimes disregards everyday rules of logic in order to view, from new and critical standpoints, issues of some human consequence. The indeterminacy of the narrator's point-of-view in relation to the author contributes to the experience, and occasional inconsistencies present no problems, because no "closure" is intended regarding the subjects discussed. What Engels defined as "scientific socialism" *News from Nowhere* is not.

The presence of inconsistencies in the pictures we get of life in "Nowhere" is a useful indicator that Morris is concerned with other things, especially when we consider the inescapable sense of unity the book conveys. And to single out Morris's attitude toward mind, as Trilling has done, has the value of regarding the story as a whole, as the concentration on critical alternatives doesn't. The story begins with a debate, and it proceeds as an essentially "dialogic" structure of conversations. These dialogues all have to do with ideas and their relation to actual conditions of life. As Trilling suggests, they have to do with mind and the place it occupies in human affairs.

But if we test our own responses to seek out the book's direction, we find immediately that there is a radical disjunction between Trilling's abstracted ideal of "childhood and rest" and the actual effect of the narrative. It is not rest that we are moved to by *News from Nowhere*, but resistance; not a childish absorption in inconsequences that we contemplate, but a constant attempt to stimulate the reader to mature consideration of a different way of looking at human relations, past and future. While it raises some of the most intractible of human dilemmas, *News from Nowhere* is at the opposite pole from quietism or inaction. The effect of Morris's message is not restfulness, a relaxation of mind, but the kind of heightened awareness that the word "News" in the title tends to excite.
The place of mind in the history of both of Morris's Englands, the present and the future, is sketched in by Old Hammond, who makes it clear that history is not a continual progress, but a series of cycles or "epochs," not a steady "march of mind" to ever better things, but a succession of new beginnings. Each of these epochs has its own more or less coherent system of beliefs, formulations by which the people of each epoch related themselves to the world. The world as seen from Nowhere is markedly different from that seen from the classical perspective, as Hammond says:

"The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be 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; this, I say, was to be the new spirit of the time. All other moods save this had been exhausted." (Ch. 18; 132)

Mind had a kind of significance in classical Greece that it never had before or since:

"the unceasing criticism, the boundless curiosity in the ways and thoughts of man, which was the mood of the ancient Greek, to whom these things were not so much a means as an end, was gone past recovery." (ibid.)

The Gothic time that followed the classical world had a vision of man in relation to the world that is much closer to that of Nowhere, and the "spirit" they share has religious origins:

"More akin to our way of looking at life was the spirit of the Middle Ages, to whom heaven and the life of the next world was such a reality, that it became to them a part of the life upon the earth; which accordingly they loved and adorned, in spite of the ascetic doctrines of their formal creed, which bade them contemn it." (ibid.)

In this account of intellectual and spiritual history - and Hammond handles these terms as synonymous - the nineteenth century comes in dead last. Like Fourier, Morris identifies the "civilization" he hates with the social order that came in with the sixteenth century and extended through his own time, a social order based on what Morris called "monopoly." The printed book, the machine of exquisite design and efficiency, the "advance of science," all those things identified with "the march of mind" represent power dissociated from human welfare, bound to the system of "commercialism" and serving profit, not people, except accidentally. In the Commercial Society that succeeded the Medieval there was a pretence of Greek curiosity and intellectual vitality, but the earlier spirit of knowledge as an end in itself was beyond recall:

"nor had there been really any shadow of it in the so-called science of the nineteenth century, which as you must know, was in the main an appendage to the commercial system; nay, not seldom an appendage to the police of that system. In spite of appearances, it was limited and cowardly, because it did not really believe in itself." (ibid.)

Old Hammond insists that in the era of which the nineteenth century marked the end, mind became authoritative and aggressive in consequence of serving and seeking
power in a social and economic system in which power, as determined by wealth, counted for more than truth. In Nowhere, however, the change to a new “spirit,” has not extirpated mind; the new Oxford has changed, but not from intellectual pursuits: “real learning, knowledge cultivated for it is own sake – the Art of Knowledge ... is followed there, not the Commercial learning of the past” (70). And “scientific men and close students” are present in significant numbers in Nowhere (205).

The deepest continuities of Nowhere – intellectual and spiritual – are with the Middle Ages, which provided for a love of earthly life by a natural extension of the faith in a supernatural life. As Hammond puts it, Medieval Christianity,

“with its assured belief in heaven and hell as two countries in which to live, has gone, and now we do, both in word and in deed, believe in the continuous life of the world of men, and as it were, add every day of that common life to the little stock of days which our own mere individual experience wins for us.” (132)

The England of Nowhere has secularized medieval belief. Peter Stansky expresses this by combining the traditional term “religion” with the modern term “socialism“: “What he [Morris] believed in was the ‘religion of socialism’; it became a faith for him."¹⁰ That faith is most clearly expressed in News from Nowhere, and that is why it seems to me inappropriate to describe this work either as “speculative” and “open,” or as childish or ignoble in its aims. As a faith that partakes of religious experience (of which more later) it involves values that lie too deep for mere speculation, values that reflect a clear decision regarding the greatest good for humanity and that issue in a consistency of outlook throughout. Old Hammond has a name for this new faith; he calls it “the religion of humanity.” In the nineteenth century it was talked of: “In times past, indeed, men were told to love their kind, to believe in the religion of humanity ...” (132). But the conditions for such a belief did not exist until the revolution made it possible for human beings to live up to their potential. Hammond puts it this way:

“But now, where is the difficulty in accepting the religion of humanity, when the men and women who go to make up humanity are free, happy, and energetic at least, and most commonly beautiful of body also, and surrounded by beautiful things of their own fashioning, and a nature bettered and not worsened by contact with mankind? This is what this age of the world has reserved for us.” (133)

The ultimate end of the new faith is the greatest possible human happiness, and its articles of belief, the essentials of its creed, are freedom, equality, and love that leads to an ever closer union between human beings and between the human and the natural world. And the tale shows this belief applied to practical matters.

In applications of mind, such as developed attitudes towards books and technology, News from Nowhere provides examples of this belief in operation. Books are among those topics frequently arising in the conversations in Nowhere, with several characters – like Bob, who is writing a history of the time before the revolution; “Boffin,” the writer of “reactionary novels”; and Clara, who wishes she and her fellows were “interesting enough to be written about” – being fictionally placed as characters in terms of their slightly eccentric bibliophilia. It is obvious at the same time that, though “the plague of book-making” is “waning” (surely a tongue-in-cheek reference when it comes from the founder of the Kelmscott Press), books are
still respected and preserved, at Eton, at the British Museum, at Oxford, and elsewhere. Shakespeare and Dickens are generally known as well as the “queer old-world myths and imaginations, which in yesterday’s world only about half a dozen people in the country knew anything about” (100). But books are not an ultimate good, as Ellen makes clear in her argument with her grandfather, sometimes called the “old grumbler.” He actually puts a quite powerful argument, one that sounds a bit like Ruskin’s thesis that art is a document revelatory of a nation’s spiritual condition. He complains that books in Nowhere do not equal those of the past:

“There is a spirit of adventure in them, and signs of a capacity to extract good out of evil which our literature quite lacks now; and I cannot help thinking that our moralists and historians exaggerate hugely the unhappiness of the past days in which such splendid works of the imagination and intellect were produced.” (Ch. 22; 150)

Ellen, who as the tale proceeds is increasingly identified with the energetic spirit of the new England, replies that an active engagement with the world, with love, and with the creation of the hand-arts is superior as an experience to the reading of books:

“Books, books! always books, grandfather! 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? (ibid.)

She directs attention to the beauty of the summer night, the joys of young lovers, and the interest of acquaintance with different people, like Guest and her eccentric old grandfather himself, as better sources of happiness, saying,

“Yes, these are our books; and if we want more, can we not find work to do in the beautiful buildings that we raise up all over the country (and I know there was nothing like them in past times), wherein a man can put forth whatever is in him, and make his hands set forth his mind and soul.” (ibid.)

And she goes further, making a case against the “high” art of the past as a substitute for truer satisfactions unavailable in that miserable world, an art that that provided merely an escape to “an isle of bliss,” that required the reader to forget real misery in order to enjoy a sham happiness. In short, Ellen attacks the truthfulness of the great fiction of the nineteenth century. But Morris ensures that the new world neither prohibits the eccentric from following their taste for the past, nor fails as a society to preserve that past in the form of its books. It is not a bookish world, but books and those who love them enjoy from the majority the toleration that freedom requires.

Technology figures in News from Nowhere more as a subject of social and philosophical discussion than as actual machinery. The only advanced machinery mentioned is the mysterious “force barges” that have aroused so much critical comment. Northrop Frye has observed that “there is ... a minimum of industrial and factory production. Morris started out, not with the Marxist question ‘who are the workers?’ but with the more deeply revolutionary question ‘what is work?’”11 As Old Hammond describes work in Nowhere it concerns only “real necessaries” rather than the “sham necessaries” that had previously been produced for the market economy. The magnificent technology of the nineteenth century, great in itself, had gone to serve that “sham,” as Hammond makes clear:

“ ... it may fairly be said that the great achievement of the nineteenth century was
the making of machines which were wonders of invention, skill, and patience, and which were used for the production of measureless quantities of worthless make-shifts.” (Ch. 15; 96)

Because all work is either art work and a source of pleasure, or happiness, or wearisome mechanical tasks, the role of technology is easily proscribed:

“all work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without.” (97)

Sufficient technological resources are available in Nowhere to do all necessary work, and Henry Morsom, the “antiquary” of Wallingford, relates how some people thought before the revolution that to do so would free the “more intelligent part of mankind” to “follow the higher forms of the arts, as well as science and the study of history” (178). But two things – the “aspiration for complete equality” and the discovery of work-pleasure – followed “the Great Change” and set feeling against “a mechanical life.” It is Clara, “flushing a little,” who describes the intellectual source of the pre-revolutionary drive toward technology as the drive towards “mastery.” “Was not their mistake,” she asks,

“once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? – a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – ‘nature,’ as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind as another? It was natural to people thinking this way, that they should try to make ‘nature’ their slave, since they thought ‘nature’ was something outside them.” (Ch. 27; 179)

The “aspiration for complete equality” puts nature on a new footing and leads to a desire for union of humans with nature and each other.

IV

Morris designs his story as a progress towards the fullest expression of this union. The journey up the Thames, punctuated as it is by the conversations we have been considering, is a journey from the periphery to the center, from externals to the inner reality, the heart, of the new faith. The completion of the journey at Kelmscott is the climax of the tale, just as it is also, especially for Guest, a journey forward in time. At Kelmscott the time of “Equality of Life,” as Ellen names it, receives its consummate expression in the personal mystic experience of Guest and Ellen in the Manor House, and in the communal celebration of the Haysel Festival in Kelmscott Church.

Religious imagery accumulates as the travellers approach their destination. The new beauty in buildings is made to have a spiritual content by being compared with church architecture of the Middle Ages. Ellen observes Guest's astonishment as he observes “a mill which spanned all the stream save the waterway for traffic, but which was as beautiful in its way as a Gothic cathedral” (195). And when Guest and Ellen enter the gate at Kelmscott the beauty of the garden and the house come as the vision or revelation that brings together in a higher union the elements previously prepared: the love of nature, the growing affection between Guest and Ellen (a delicately told love story) and the beauty of the garden and house within their natural setting:

... the garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers,
and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious superabundance of small, well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty. (Ch. 31; 201)

The birds have human attributes, and the house has another function than shelter, a symbolic function that relates it intimately to its setting:

The blackbirds were singing their loudest, the doves were cooing on the roof-ridge, the rooks in the high elm-trees beyond were garrulous among the young leaves, and the swifts wheeled whining about the gables. And the house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer. (201)

Ellen's response emphasises her union with that beauty, the joining of the natural and the human:

She led me up close to the house and laid her shapely sun-browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, "O me! O me! How I love the earth and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it, – as this has done!"

It is the moment of ecstatic vision or heightened consciousness, revealing a secular mysticism towards which the story has moved in both mental and physical progression, the religion or spirit of the new England, with its joy, love, and hope contrasted with the long journey Guest has made from the nineteenth-century England with all its pain, hatred, and despair.

The "Haysel" dinner that concludes the tale is described in terms of a medieval religious seasonal festival. Guest observes that Kelmscott Church, where it is held, has "no modern architectural decoration in it":

It was, however, gaily dressed up for this latter-day festival, with festoons of flowers from arch to arch, and great pitchers of flowers standing about on the floor; while under the west window hung two cross scythes, their blades polished white, and gleaming from out of the flowers that wreathed them. (Ch. 32; 208)

As Guest observes, "this was somewhat new to me, this dinner in a church, and I thought of the church-ales of the Middle Ages" (208). But it is also the end, the point of return for Guest, who finds himself excluded as "all consciousness" of his presence "faded" from Ellen's face. This dinner, the most clearly religious occasion of the story, is not open to him because his epoch, a "time of doubt and struggle" (210), has not won entry to the new faith. Like the Catechumens of Rome, excluded from the Mass of the Faithful, he is excluded from the ultimate communal rite of Nowhere:

Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say, "No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you. Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship – but not before." (210)

Can there be any doubt that News from Nowhere is Morris's account of his revelation or vision of a new world informed by a new faith? As such it is not demeaning but noble, not indolent but energetic, not open and speculative but committed and definite, not inconsistent in any disabling way but coherently anchored to a fundamental belief.
NOTES


2 Delivered at a conference on psychoanalysis and psychology on 26 December, 1971, and published in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* in April 1973.


5 Bossert, 14.

6 Bossert, 14–19, *passim*.

7 E.P. Thompson, op. cit., 791.

8 Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, written as part of a longer work in 1877, was first published separately, in French, in 1880. It was not published in English until 1892. See Introduction by George Novak to his edition (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 63.

9 See ‘On some Practical Socialists’, *Commonweal*, 18 February 1888.
