William Guest Goes Shopping

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“If others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.” Thus I concluded the account of my journey into the England of the future in *News from Nowhere*. The Socialist Utopia which I witnessed was indeed a vision towards which all my previous work had led and which, I trust, may have given at least a little inspiration to those who followed. For, although I was reluctant to return to “reality”, Ellen’s parting look seemed to say:

“Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.”

Nevertheless, I was also aware that my journey – in the literal sense at least – was a dream, and in the interests of completeness I feel it is only fair to share with you a second dream, although I suspect it is more likely to promote fear and panic than hope and inspiration. Furthermore, those who struggled to believe in the possibilities of my vision (for thus I would still rather call it) in *News from Nowhere* and who found it altogether too far-fetched are likely to dismiss my later dream as a wild fantasy and the product, perhaps, of an unstable mind. Be that as it may, however, I must record the second dream as faithfully as the first and allow you to draw your own conclusions.

Once again, I awoke with a feeling of “oppression”, although in this instance I could not attribute it to the weather which – in complete contrast to my earlier vision – was wet and cold. Having learnt from my previous experience that there was little to be gained from procrastination, I ventured outside and boldly enquired of a passerby as to the date and location. Having informed me (in a rather surly manner) that the year was 1995 and the location Sheffield in Yorkshire (which at least explained the inclement weather), the young man was about to set off when he suddenly seemed to remember his manners and ascertaining that I was a stranger to the area, kindly offered to “show me the sights, for a price”. Although I was slightly unclear as to his meaning I nevertheless accepted his offer gratefully, checking that he was free to assist me in this way and that I was not detaining him from his work. At this suggestion he laughed as if the idea of working was itself amusing, which interested me greatly for it suggested that, like my earlier vision, work was no longer a burden and rather was a pleasure to be taken up and put down as desired.

To be brief, this young man – who went by the name of Rick – outlined some of the most famous parts of Sheffield, enthusing, in particular, about a place called “Meadowhall”. Remembering my earlier vision I was keen to see this Meadowhall, as it obviously had much in common with the communal halls in which people would meet and discuss important issues over a friendly glass of wine. Moreover, I was keen to see the beautiful meadows in which this Great Hall was situated, for I was already feeling a need for some natural scenery and fresh air. Therefore, I readily accompanied Rick to the place in question.
My surprise upon entering Meadowhall can hardly be expressed, for rather than one great hall it appeared to be a series of huge interconnected buildings on several levels. Furthermore, there were no meadows to be seen at all in the surrounding area, merely rows of horseless carriages at rest upon stone. Most surprising of all, however, was the function of the “hall” which, far from being a place of intellectual discourse, was actually an enormous market-hall full of shops, all competing for the business of the crowds which milled between them.

Surprised as I was at the nature of Meadowhall, I was perhaps more surprised when I ventured to look into the shops themselves. Many of them seemed to be selling (for, unlike my earlier vision money was – all too clearly – passing hands) items which I could not easily comprehend, but this was only to be expected for technology had obviously made giant strides forward. However, what did astonish me was that few of these shops appeared to sell items which could be described as “essential”; there were no food shops, for example, and although there were several shops specialising in clothes, these appeared to be of the most flimsy and unpractical construction imaginable.

By this time I was feeling so overawed that I felt obliged to ask my companion if there were not some place nearby where we could partake of refreshments. He replied in the affirmative; there was such a place within Meadowhall itself and he could obtain some drinks without payment, for a female acquaintance worked there. At this my spirits lifted considerably as once again I recalled my earlier vision and the complete absence of money, for food and drink – like all else in that Utopia – were given freely according to need and not in accordance with some arbitrary ability to pay. Perhaps, I considered, my judgements of this place had been overhasty and money was not the sole concern of the shopkeepers.

Having seated me in the ‘Olde English Tea Room’ Rick went to seek his friend and, to tell the truth, I was content to be left on my own with only my thoughts and a book left behind by a previous customer for company. The book in question was called *Illuminations*, written in 1936 by one Walter Benjamin, and I opened it at an essay called ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, for this was a subject in which I have some interest and which appeared to be of particular relevance to my surroundings, given the evidence of “mechanical reproduction”, which was everywhere to be seen.

Prior to giving this article my attention, however, I carefully surveyed my surroundings in the tea-room, interested by the attempts of the proprietor to reproduce a tea-room of the past, for it was clear that the decoration of the room was considerably different to that of the rest of Meadowhall. The room’s style was not totally dissimilar to that of a tea-room in my own time, but it had been “gentrified” and was more “quaint” than those to which I was accustomed.

The question which most intrigued me, however, was not in respect of the faithfulness of the copy, but why it should be adorned in such a style at all. My reluctant conclusion, based on what I had seen of Sheffield in the 1990s, was that my worst fears regarding ancient monuments and architecture had been fulfilled and all the interesting buildings from the past had been destroyed. It would seem that my appeal for the setting up of an association to “watch over and protect these relics” had not been heeded and regret had followed too late. Certainly, I had not seen any genuine old buildings of any significance since my arrival in 1995 and can only conclude that these had been destroyed in the name of “progress”. I must admit to
some despair that the “ignorance” of the architects of my own time appeared to have continued for the following one hundred or so years, for as I had argued:

... there must be many people whose ignorance is accidental rather than inveterate, whose good sense could surely be touched if it were clearly put to them that they were destroying what they, or, more surely still, their sons and sons’ sons, would one day fervently long for, and which no wealth or energy could ever buy again for them.7

Thus, I explained to myself at least part of the reason for the “copy” nineteenth-century tea-room in which I found myself. I was also, however, uneasy that this apparent need for nostalgia indicated something missing from the lives of the Sheffield people in 1995, for otherwise they would surely look to the present or the future rather than the past?8 Furthermore, the craftsmanship involved in the reproduction puzzled me somewhat, for, whilst considerable skill had obviously been utilised in the construction of the tea-room, there was little attention to detail or “authenticity”. Rather, as I suggested earlier, the nineteenth-century tea-room had been used as a starting point only, and all subsequent effort had been aimed at creating a pleasant and quaint environment rather than attempting to recreate an historically accurate imitation. This suggested to me that in this society the “pleasant” is more important than the “true” and I set to pondering upon why this should be.

As I have noted, Meadowhall appeared to be a collection of shops and its sole purpose, therefore, lay in the area of commercialism. I need hardly say what a disappointment this was to me, for I have long held that commercial competition is merely another word for War. As I argued in an article in 1888:

War, or competition, whichever you please to call it, means at the best pursuing your own advantage at the cost of someone else's loss, and in the process of it you must not be sparing of destruction even of your own possessions, or you will certainly come by the worse in the struggle.9

As in any war the real casualties are not the generals or politicians, but the ordinary foot-soldiers, or consumers in this case, who have no say in the matter:

... the consumer is perfectly helpless against the gambler; the goods are forced on him by their cheapness, and with them a certain kind of life which that energetic, that aggressive cheapness determines for him.10

The evidence of Meadowhall and the rather cheap, shoddy - and often, as far as I could see, useless - goods on offer was that this state of capitalism had been victorious over the commonsense of socialism. Thus, I assumed that the shallow cheerfulness of the “Olde English Tea-Room” was nothing but a marketing ploy to sell artificial, unnecessary wares to a helpless consumer. If this was not the case, then I felt certain that a better attempt to reproduce accurately the nineteenth-century tea-room could have been made, for the construction of Meadowhall suggested that the architects and professional men of the twentieth century were more than able technically to achieve such a feat. Instead, however, the energies of the period appeared to be channelled towards frivolity and monetary profit.

Here, then, at Meadowhall, was confirmation of my worst fears. Here was evidence of the effects of the dictates of a supply-and-demand market, in which goods are
produced in ever-increasing amounts to satisfy a “demand” and then, when the market is glutted by the over-production, the workers are “thrown out on the streets”.11 This was the very thing which I had foreseen and against which I had fought so vehemently, arguing that socialism was the only sensible alternative. Socialism offers the option of an economy with no over-production due to careful regulation of the markets, with the effect that the cycle of over-work one month followed by a lack of work the next does not occur. There is, therefore, a concentration upon producing goods of a high quality, “not cheap market wares, that is to say, adulterated wares, with scarcely any good in them, mere scaffold-poles for building up profits ... but such goods as best fulfilled the real uses of the consumers ... for, profit being abolished, people could have what they wanted, instead of what the profit-grinders ... forced them to take”.12

My disappointment at this society of the 1990s was, therefore, immense, especially when I compared it to my previous vision and the quality of craftsmanship which went into such a mundane object as a pipe, for example.13 The difference, it was clear, was directly attributable to capitalism, for in my earlier vision the pipe had been lovingly crafted for the pleasure of it and not for financial gain. In this second dream, however, financial gain was the sole purpose of production and I suspected that this profit was not even enjoyed by the worker himself but by the owner of the means of that production.

As you can see, therefore, I had no shortage of thoughts with which to occupy my mind in the absence of my guide, Rick. However, stepping out of my reverie and noticing his continued absence, I turned to the article by Walter Benjamin, which lay still open in front of me. As I have noted, by a fortunate coincidence the subject matter was of particular relevance to my own situation, although I do not profess to have understood all of its technical terms. In the article Benjamin argues that in respect of a work of art “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition”.14 The tea-room wherein I sat could hardly be called a work of art, even in its original form, but the point remains relevant. Benjamin explains this further by arguing that “technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself”.15 Certainly, the existence of a nineteenth-century tea-room within a 1990s shopping market is an example of the type of phenomenon to which Benjamin refers. The “copy of the original” had indeed been put into an unusual situation and existed in a void, isolated from the modern buildings which surrounded it.

This consideration of the validity of reproducing buildings reminded me of a letter which I had written in 1890 on that very subject.16 In this letter I objected to the building of a copy of the ancient reredos under the stalls of a church in Stratford-on-Avon. The basis of my objection was that it would be more “authentic” to leave the old church as it was, rather than attempting to recreate an idea of how it may have appeared in its original state. As I stated in my letter, this attempt would merely create a building “which can claim none of the respect due to either an ancient or a modern work of art”.17 Unfortunately, the same could be said of the tea-room, although, admittedly, it might not have been considered a notable building in its original form. On the other hand, however, it would at least have been able to boast of its authenticity; in its copied state its only claim was novelty.

I would not wish it to be thought that my tastes in architecture were so conservative as to reject any attempts to update traditional styles, however. In considering the
juxtaposition of architectural styles within Meadowhall - for the tea-room was not
the only ‘building’ which appeared to be out of place - I cast my mind back to the
Hammersmith market which I had encountered in my earlier vision. The market
building on this occasion was a mixture of several styles; the Gothic of northern Europe,
Saracenic and Byzantine, “though there was no copying of any one of these styles”. In
common with so much else in that earlier vision, the best parts of existing cultures
had been fused and a new style lovingly created for the pure pleasure of doing so.
Contrast this with the calculated “copying” at Meadowhall, produced with no feeling
at all except that which is born of the greed of capitalism. It cannot but anger me when
I consider the wasted energies and resources of all kinds which have been poured into
creating this Meadowhall. What has become of my vision of “the noble communal
hall of the future, unsparing of materials, generous in worthy ornament, alive with
the noblest thoughts of our time, and the past, embodied in the best art which a free
and manly people could produce”? When I considered this waste my blood began
to boil and, my thoughts being occupied with what Benjamin had to say on the subject
of art, I decided to forego my tea (which showed no sign of arriving, anyway) and
seek refreshment of a more spiritual nature. In short, I set out in search of Art!

My quest took me past many shops of various types, but Art in any form remained
elusive and I was close to despair when I observed a brightly lit sign, some short
distance away, reading ‘Athena’. Surely, I reasoned, this establishment must bear at
least some relation to the World’s Great Works of Art? Peering through the window
I was not entirely disappointed, for I could see copies of several well-known paintings
adorning the covers of books and, to my astonishment, several of my own designs
serving the same purpose. I decided, therefore, to enter ‘Athena’ in order to examine
these copies further.

My first impression upon entering this shop was that I had been slightly deceived,
for although the racks were full of copies of paintings and photographs, the vast
majority of these images were of an extremely poor quality. Again, I found myself
feeling disappointed that a society with so much apparent technical skill should care
so little about the quality of the items which it is reproducing. I should not have been
altogether surprised, however, for the seeds of mediocrity are all too present in the
nineteenth century, as I observed in a lecture in 1878, referring to the shortage of
“intelligent popular art”:

... a few artists of the kind so-called now, what can they do working in the teeth
of difficulties thrown in their way by what is called Commerce, but which should
be called greed of money? ... What can these grains of sand do ... amidst the
enormous mass of work turned out every year which professes in some way to be
decorative art, but the decoration of which no one heeds except the salesmen who
have to do with it, and are hard put to it to supply the cravings of the public for
something new, not for something pretty?

It would appear that society has ‘developed’ to such an extent that it is not just
new art which is trivial and commercial, but the Great Art of the past has been turned
into mere novelty, adorning diaries and note-books. This in itself, however, need not
be a matter for disapproval, for an elitist art produced by a handful of exceptional
men offers nothing to the majority of the population and would be better swept away
altogether.
The presence of so many reproductions of works of art in one place was, nevertheless, overpowering and yet, at the same time, the impact of the pieces was surprisingly muted. In the article which I had read in the tea-room Benjamin had written: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” Certainly, the impact of Rembrandt’s ‘The Night Watch’ was very different in this brightly lit, noisy shop in Sheffield in 1995 from the context in which I had been fortunate enough to see it some one hundred or so years before, and this difference was not solely due to the nature of its reproduction and scaling down in size. The “quality of its presence”, as Benjamin writes, has indeed been depreciated, for its “authenticity” has been interfered with.

Benjamin’s notion of “authenticity” stems from the history of the art object: “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning”. The historical context of the object is interrupted by the very process of reproduction, for there is a loss of control over the reproduction which inevitably has an impact on the original work of art. Thus, for example, I felt sure that the experience of viewing Rembrandt’s painting would be forever influenced by having seen twenty reproduced versions of it scaled down and neatly packaged onto the fronts of 1995 diaries. Benjamin goes further, however, than merely arguing that the existence of a reproduction influences the way in which the original work of art is viewed, for he appears to attribute “authority” to the art object itself. In other words, he is concerned with what he calls the “aura of the work of art”, in addition to the effect of that piece of art (or its copy) on the spectator. This may be a difficult concept to grasp, for it gives almost living qualities to inanimate objects, but it is one with which I have the utmost sympathy. My own position regarding art is that it is inextricably linked with the social conditions of those producing it; hence my argument that worthwhile art cannot be produced under conditions of mass oppression. Thus, I would agree with Benjamin that there is more to a work of art than the physical brush-strokes on a canvas and that the contexts of both production and viewing are crucial to its existence.

Benjamin is, nevertheless, more concerned with the viewing context than I can claim to be, for this context is clearly of less importance in the nineteenth century when reproduction is on a much smaller scale. In particular, Benjamin argues that reproduction “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition”, and that this leads to a “shattering of tradition”. I would suggest that this “shattering” may be something to be commended, although Benjamin clearly views it as regrettable. “By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence”, Benjamin writes. My view is that it is not the existence of the copies which is regrettable, but the lack of skill involved in producing them.

Interestingly, Benjamin attributes the “contemporary decay of the aura” to two circumstances which had been strongly suggested to me even in my short visit to 1995. These circumstances are “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” and their desire to overcome “the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction”. In Meadowhall reproductions of various types were to be seen everywhere; from reproductions of the past, such as my tea-room, to imitations of foreign places (I had seen a whole Italian street, for example) and copies of classical statues and architecture. Such was the effect that I often had to remind myself that I was indeed in Sheffield in 1995 and not the Florence of 1695!
It is no wonder that Benjamin hints at a confusion between image and reality, for in what way is the original Ancient Greek statue more ‘real’ than an imitation in a 1995 shopping hall when the viewer has experience only of the latter? The obsession with imitation made me wonder at the insecurity of a people who had brought together a history of world culture under one roof and would, thus, surely be in danger of losing their sense of place in time and space.

In his concern over the authenticity of the single, original art object Benjamin overlooks the potentially beneficial aspect of reproduction. This is perhaps surprising as he appears not to share my doubts over the intrinsic merits of Great Art and, therefore, one would assume that such works should be enjoyed by as many people as possible. On the other hand, unfortunately Benjamin is not alone in his apparent belief that the production or enjoyment of art can be restricted to a relatively small number. My view could not be more opposed to this, for, as I wrote in 1893:

I do not believe in the possibility of keeping art vigorously alive by the action, however energetic, of a few groups of specially gifted men and their small circle of admirers amidst a general public incapable of understanding and enjoying their work.

I would stress, however, that the act of increasing access to Great Works of Art — so that the masses can enjoy or even own a copy of ‘The Night Watch’, for example — is not at all what I mean by “popular art”. My concept of popular art is one which requires active participation by all in the joy of skilled labour and is not dependent upon the patronage of an upper-class elite. Popular art is, therefore, not possible in the present “thrall of muddle, dishonesty and disunion” that is the capitalist system and we should guard against the misconception that equality of access means equality in any but the most superficial sense.

It is not entirely without regret, nevertheless, that I adopt this attitude to Great Works of Art, for there is undoubtedly much to be gained from the study and appreciation of such works and I hope that one day all mankind will be free to enjoy them. My argument is that this cannot happen until there is a radical shift (indeed a revolution) in the structure of society. At that time we will have leisure to contemplate “the dreadful times of the past ... in pictures and poetry”, as Old Hammond did. Perhaps, I may be criticised for appealing only to the “pleasure principle” and for denying the importance of the intellect in the appreciation of the Art of Great Men? If so, then I would direct my accusers to this ‘Athena’ of 1995 where Great Art is readily accessible, but treated with the same disposability as the novelties that occupy the racks on either side.

Depressed by what I had found in ‘Athena’ I made my way out of the shop in search of at least a ray of hope for the future, for what I had witnessed so far had filled me with horror. The society of 1995 appeared to be concerned only with novelty, shallow pleasures and commercialism. This caused me the utmost despair when I considered the implications for the average man; for how must his daily existence be when he chooses to spend his spare time at a place such as Meadowhall?

In this frame of mind I wandered into another shop, ‘Virtual Reality’, and found myself immediately accosted by a young ‘Sales Assistant’, who painstakingly explained the concept of this new invention. Finding me, perhaps, rather slow in understanding (for I admit to comprehending only a small proportion of what I was
told) he urged me to try it, explaining that by simply wearing a headset I would find myself in – of all places – the late nineteenth-century. Needless to say, after what I had seen of the late twentieth-century, I accepted his offer with open arms.

NOTES


2 This view is supported by E.P. Thompson in William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (1955), London: Merlin Press (1977):

The writing of News from Nowhere strikes one with a sense of inevitability – it is such a characteristic expression of Morris’ genius, springing so logically from his development both as creative artist and as political theorist. (p.692).

3 News from Nowhere, p.301.

4 i.e. News from Nowhere.


6 William Morris: Letter to The Athenaeum, 10 March 1877; p.81. Morris is referring to the ‘restoration’ of Tewkesbury Abbey and appeals:

Would it not be of some use once and for all, and with the least delay possible, to set foot an association for the purpose of watching over and protecting these relics?

7 Letter to The Athenaeum, 10 March 1877; p.81.

8 John Urry makes the same point in ‘Cultural Change and Contemporary Holiday-making’ from Theory, Culture and Society, Vol. 5 (1988), arguing that until the 1970s nostalgia trips were “fairly surreptitious and ambivalent because we didn’t want to relinquish our hold on the present, on whatever it meant to be modern ... Now that the present seems so full of woe ... (there is) a general abdication, an actual desertion from the present”; p.52.

9 William Morris, ‘How we live and how we might live’ (1888); p.160.

10 ‘How we live and how we might live’; p.163.

11 ‘How we live and how we might live’; p.167.

12 ‘How we live and how we might live’; p.168.

13 News from Nowhere, p.213. The pipe in question was “carved very elaborately, and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems ... as pretty and gay a toy as I had ever seen.”

14 Benjamin, p.223.

15 Benjamin, p.222.

16 William Morris, Letter to The Times, 15 August 1890; p.83.

17 Letter to The Times, 15 August 1890; p.83.


19 ‘How we live and how we might live’; p.176.


21 ‘The Lesser Arts’; p.104. Morris goes on to profess faith, however, that this sweeping away will not be necessary as “men will get wiser ... (and) more learned.”
Above all, his optimism for the future of art is based on “leisure ... from the greed of money, and the craving for that overwhelming distinction that money now brings.” Morris’ argument is that in a society without money elitism in terms of art and education will disappear and Great Art as well as “popular art” will be accessible to all.


24 In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin comments; “The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope”; p.225.

25 In ‘Art and Society’ Morris asks: “What business have we with art at all unless all can share it?”; p.139.


27 ‘Popular Art’; p.106.

28 News from Nowhere, p.271.

29 Theodor Adorno is in the tradition of Morris when he writes; “... in a communist society work will be organised in such a way that people will no longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction.” ‘Letter to Walter Benjamin’, 18 March 1936, from Aesthetics and Politics translated by Harry Zohn, London: New Left Books (1977), pp.122-3.