William Morris's *News from Nowhere*: A vision impaired

Barbara Gribble

Since its publication in 1890, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* has generally been considered another manifestation of man's ageless quest for the ideal, an idyllic alternative to contemporary woes. Marie Louise Berneri's response is typical: 'William Morris' utopian England appears like an oasis where he would like to stay, if not forever, at least for a long time.' Similar evaluations are fostered in varying degrees by four distinct factors: first, the romance's publication in the Socialist League's *Commonweal*; second, Morris's contempt for Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which he had read with distaste in 1889, the year before the publication of *News from Nowhere*; third, the author's wholehearted commitment to man's well-being as revealed in his active response to social, political, and artistic problems; and fourth, the many obviously utopian elements of pleasure which *News from Nowhere* embodies. Such internal and external conditions do, in fact, point to an interest in social idealism, yet such interpretations as Berneri's fail to consider a fifth element of perhaps overriding significance: that of the tension between many of the characters' expressed beliefs and Morris's more encompassing values. Analyzed internally and placed within the context of Morris's most immediate concerns, *News from Nowhere* can be seen as something quite other than simple utopianism; for it becomes instead an inquiry into self-deception and stasis.

Admittedly, the futuristic Nowhere seems ideal. The very roses in the garden, no longer embodiments of man's meddling attempts to enlarge and improve, are the healthy expressions of readjusted values. Trees have grown back in areas previously razed for construction, Kensington Gardens has been permitted to revert to its original state of wilderness, and a similar lack of constraint—evident in the absence of divorce courts, prisons and political systems—characterizes Nowhere's people. Industrial pollution has vanished, the necessities of life are freely and graciously distributed, and work has become a vehicle for the pleasure of self-expression and accomplishment. As one might expect, even the older inhabitants are in blooming vigor and health, and their lives have become models of peace and tranquility.

Viewed in the context of Morris's total thought, however, *News from Nowhere* can be seen as an embodiment of something more complex than a simple achievement of harmony. In the first place, a telling discrepancy exists between Morris's own attitude toward books and that of Nowhere's people. Though Arthur Compton-Rickett attempts to devalue Morris's estimate of the written word with the observation that the latter 'was at heart, perhaps, one of the least literary of our poets'—that 'he cared
for books only as they spoke to him of Life—or Art', this statement goes far to reveal the extent of Morris's esteem. For Morris, Art encompasses far more than wallpaper or tapestry, stained glass or fine architecture—it is 'the godlike part of man', the element that 'will rise from the dead, whatever else lies there'. To say, therefore, that Morris valued books 'as they spoke to him of Life—or Art' is to reveal the intensity of his concern. It is a Morris who respects them with fervor who recalls his early life with the observation that 'ever since I could remember I was a great devourer of books[,] ... and by the time I was 7 years old I had read a very great many books good, bad and indifferent' and whose life-long interest in literature ranged from the established classics of Sir Walter Scott and Dickens to the national epics of Finland and India. In no place, perhaps, is his love of books more expressly evident than in J.W. Mackail's description of Morris's last pleasures, when a friend relieved the discomforts of terminal illness by bringing Morris a series of medieval manuscripts from the Dorchester House Library. Morris's translations of such works as The Aeneid and The Odyssey underscore this esteem, and it is reiterated in an 1886 response to The Pall Mall Gazette. Asked to list his favorite books, he meticulously categorizes the fifty-four which, he says, have 'profoundly impressed myself', and his daughter May reinforces their significance for her father by describing them as a 'part of the material of his life—the very friends of his life'.

Morris, then, held a deep regard for books; yet the attitudes of Nowhere's inhabitants toward the written word are curiously negative. Although Annie leaves the visiting Guest to complete 'a pretty old book', and though Dick the waterman can talk of Shakespeare (49)* and Morsom plans to obtain some reading material at the Bodleian Library (180), the general tendency in Nowhere is, at the least, to ignore books and, at the most, to revile them. Robert the weaver speaks offhandedly about the 'waning of the plague of bookmaking' (20); Dick observes gratefully that most youths in Nowhere soon learn to yield any antiquated habits of bookishness 'when they see most people about them engaged in genuinely amusing [italics mine] work, like house-building and street-paving, and gardening, and the like' (31); and an old man tells of having 'read a muddled account in a book—O a stupid book!—called James' Social Democratic History, of a fight which took place ... [at Trafalgar Square] in or about the year 1887' (42). Robert the weaver, to be sure, is composing a historical volume (20), yet such efforts, like the novelistic tendencies of Mr. Boffin (22), are generally viewed as unproductive, for if fiction usually concludes with 'the hero and heroine living happily in an island of bliss on other people's troubles' (151), a knowledge of history is equally irrelevant to life, the information which it provides being either superfluous in an epoch free from 'turmoil and strife and confusion' (30) or else purposefully deceptive. As an old man concludes when he fails to understand Guest's first-hand account of 1887's Bloody Sunday, 'Friend, I expect that you have been reading some rotten collection of lies, and have been taken in by it too easily' (43).

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. As he explains to Guest about

* Page references eg (49) are all to the Collected Works, Vol. XVI
the transformation from nineteenth-century squalor and injustice to the present idyllic state, Old Hammond reveals the common aim: ‘“The more you see of us”’, he tells his visitor, ‘“the clearer it will be to you that we are happy... What more can we ask of life?”’ (72). The problem is not that the inhabitants seem to enjoy their present state; it is that in projecting personal happiness as an end rather than a means, they are overlooking something even more basic to human fulfillment. ‘“What is the object of Revolution?”’ Old Hammond inquires philosophically. ‘“Surely to make people happy”’ (92). Such a goal is reflected in the altered motto of his country: ‘“Thou shalt not steal’’, Guest learns, ‘“had to be translated into, Thou shalt work in order to live happily”’ (81).

For Morris, such terms as happiness, pleasure, and amusement are frequently interchangeable, and the agreeable sensations which these words suggest are certainly worthy of human attainment. Yet though Morris frequently stresses his desire for a society in which ‘a great organic mass of well-regulated forces [will be] used for the bringing about a happy life for all’; and though he defines happiness as ‘the pleasurable exercise of our energies’, he also proceeds several steps further. In the first place, the truly ideal society which Morris envisions ‘will tend to make us good human animals, able to do something for ourselves, so that we may be generally intelligent instead of dividing ourselves into dull drudges or duller pleasure-seekers according to our class’. To transform common humanity into acceptably ‘good human animals’, this pleasure must be relegated to its proper domain. The highest fulfillment will result only from ‘the performance of those functions which wise and healthy people desire to see performed; in other words, if mutual help be its moving principle’. The ‘energies’ which this level of happiness exercises, therefore, ‘include the moral’, those which necessarily consider the state of the world about them. Ideally, therefore, every man will seek not primarily his own comfort but ‘the happiness of the whole and therefore... his own through the whole’. One begins to observe a discrepancy between Morris’s thought and that basic to Nowhere when his guide asks the visitor Guest to remain in his nineteenth-century garb for the sake of spectacle. ‘“Surely it wouldn’t be right for you”’, Dick asserts, heedless of Guest’s obvious discomfort, ‘“to take away the people’s pleasure of studying your attire, by just going and making yourself like everybody else”’ (35). Later, as Dick tries to entice Guest away from Old Hammond in order to entertain him, Guest once again reveals an uneasiness: ‘“In point of fact”’, he asserts,

‘I did not by any means want to be “amused” just then; and also I rather felt as if the old man, with his knowledge of past times, and even a kind of inverted sympathy for them caused by his active hatred of them, was as it were a blanket for me against the cold of this very new world...’ (103)

Although Guest’s attitude toward Nowhere subsequently changes, Dick’s hospitable efforts fall far short of achieving the ‘happiness of the whole’ which Morris so values. Guest himself, in fact, senses that Dick has been trying too hard, for when Dick asserts that ‘“people not liking to work [is]... too ridiculous”’ (40) for comprehension, Guest notes that his companion’s raucous laugh seems somewhat too hearty ‘“for his usual good manners”’ (40). Dick’s friend Walter is equally unaware of the potential
irony of his own view as he reflects upon an overly-penitent murderer: ‘[W]e are all inclined’, he observes, ‘to excuse our poor friend for making us so unhappy, on the ground that he does it out of an exaggerated respect for human life and its happiness’ (168). Gradually one begins to see faintly ominous overtones in the end so dear to these people, for though they work together at physical labor and though they pride themselves on their marital and social stability, the tacit assumption exists that they are under an obligation to be happy with the status quo. ‘Thou shalt work in order to live happily’ (80) is an obvious command. Under its yoke, the assurance that in circumstances regarding only himself ‘everybody does as he pleases’ (87) becomes questionable, and one begins to wonder whether the pervasive activity is much more than a palliative designed to inhibit thought and disruption of the present state.

At various times, Morris hints subtly that the achievement of Nowhere represents something less than perfection. Even as he attempts to justify its philosophy to Guest, Old Hammond becomes somewhat pensive: ‘My friend’, he muses, ‘I am old and perhaps disappointed, but at least I think we have cast off some of the follies of the older world’ (58). Though Old Hammond is now willing to ‘drink to the days that are!’ (102), his earlier expression of unease parallels the disturbing intuitions of others. His reflections upon ‘past miseries’ have disturbed Dick’s lover, and she perceives that his words have infected the present. A sense of emptiness ‘is in the air all round us’, Clara observes, ‘and makes us feel as if we were longing for something that we cannot have’ (136). And despite his obviously deserved reputation as a grumbler, the old man at Runnymede reinforces the view that something is amiss. ‘I really must appeal to you to say’, he requests of his visitor, ‘whether on the whole you are not better off in your country; where I suppose, from what our guests say, you are brisker and more alive, because you have not wholly got rid of competition’ (149). Though Lloyd W. Eshleman asserts that Morris believes ‘anarchy and competition, eternally and in all things, . . . [to be] the laws of death’,17 Morris’s antagonism may be more limited than is generally suspected. As he observes in ‘The Lesser Arts’, his criticism of manufacturers is directed primarily against their ‘competition of cheapness, not of excellence’.18 As a result, the old man’s interest in a land that has ‘not wholly [italics mine] got rid of competition’ underscores Nowhere’s quite opposite status, where even friendly strife for quality seems to have given way to busy self-expression. In view of the old man’s concern, Old Hammond’s recollections take on a special significance as he remembers a time when

‘a kind of disappointment seemed coming over us, and the prophecies of some of the reactionists of past times seemed as if they would come true, and a dull level of utilitarian comfort be the end for a while of our aspirations and successes’ (133).

The remedy, he assures his companions, was found in the ‘production of what used to be called art’ (134), yet when one recalls Morris’s equation of Art to ‘the godlike part of Man’, one realizes that fine tobacco pipes, statues, and collective good times are something short of Morris’s concept of man’s highest potential.

As they work simply to maintain their present level of achievement rather than to prepare themselves for the decisions of life or to strive toward new goals, the people of Nowhere lack both a capacity for real progress and for accommodation to change.
One 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.

As the old man of Runnymede reflects upon his world, he isolates still further its deficiency. In the tomes of the past, he observes, as in the society they reflect, '“[t]here is a spirit of adventure . . ., and signs of a capacity to extract good out of evil which our literature quite lacks now”' (150). In its very assumption that it has demolished the foundation of Evil, Nowhere deprives itself of a primary source of fulfillment: that of victory over odds, of success in the face of defeat. Old Hammond inadvertently reinforces these views as he looks back upon the birth of the new society, for as he recalls the beginning of a widespread prosperity, he reveals an awareness of conditions which no longer exist. ‘“The sloth, the hopelessness, and if I may say so, the cowardice of the last century”’, he tells Guest, ‘“had given place to the eager, restless heroism of a declared revolutionary period”’ (128). This heroic potential has now faded, and without it Nowhere is incomplete. In distinct contrast are those former days, when the ‘“general instinct amongst . . . [men was] towards the essential part of . . . life”’, and when ‘“many men saw clearly beyond the desperate struggle of the day”’ (128–29) and into the potential results. Despite his contemporaries’ beliefs to the contrary, Old Hammond is well aware of an important fact: that ‘“the men of that day who were on the side of freedom were not unhappy”’ (128–29).

The happiness of the revolutionists, unlike that of Dick and his contemporaries, is largely a byproduct of losing themselves in a larger cause and therefore serves as a foil to Nowhere’s more mundane designs. Though Old Hammond assures Guest that his people take the ‘“keenest pleasure in all the life of the world”’ (58), the world to which he refers is that only of the present. His contemporaries believe they have found the antidote for misery, and as a result, they neither value the past nor plan for the future and therefore inhibit their possibility for growth. It is this fact that the old man at Runnymede attempts to point out to a Guest increasingly enamored of his new surroundings as he refers once more to the competition characteristic of Guest’s society: ‘“Are you not on the whole”’, he inquires,

‘“much freer, more energetic—in a word, healthier and happier—for it?”

I smiled. ‘You wouldn’t talk so if you had any idea of our own life. To me you seem here as if you were living in heaven compared with us of the country from which I came.”

‘“Heaven?” said he: ‘You like heaven, do you?”

‘Yes’, said I—snappishly, I am afraid; for I was beginning rather to resent his formula.

‘Well, I am far from sure that I do’, quoth he. ‘I think one may do more with one’s life than sitting on a damp cloud and singing hymns’ (151–52).

It is Ellen, the old man’s daughter, however, who most forcefully expresses a need for something more than the happiness of this static paradise. Alone with Guest, she reflects upon the passive tendencies of her fellows. ‘“I think”’, she tells her companion,

‘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 toward change, and many things may seem too wonderful for us to catch at, if we do not know that they are but phases of what has been before; and withal ruinous, deceitful, and sordid.'

(104)

And if they will not know what to avoid, neither will they know what to pursue.

Morris’s depiction of a society in many ways superior to Guest’s own, then, is not altogether positive. Nowhere represents a fulfillment only of Guest’s earlier ‘vague hope . . . for days of peace and rest, and cleanliness and smiling goodwill’ (4). Yet Guest fails not only to see that the summer into which he has awakened is neither the best nor the last but also to extract from his experiences a meaningful sense of purpose. Though he interprets Ellen’s final glance as an admonition to ‘“be the happier for having seen us”’, to ‘“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”’ (211), one expects him to take up once again his former and ineffectual habits. Despite his experience, his capacity for effective action has not expanded, as his encounter with a farm labourer well demonstrates. For as he makes his way alone back into the nineteenth century and meets a representative of his former world, he responds with obvious aversion to the grimed features and ragged clothes (21). The man greets him courteously, yet Guest cannot conceal his distaste: ‘Inexpressibly shocked’, he remembers, ‘I hurried past him and hastened along the road that led to the river and the lower end of the village’ (210).

If Nowhere has offered him a vision, it is that only of peace and tranquility, for from it he fails to gain the insight necessary to the regeneration of his own society.

Like the Guest of his romance, Morris had committed himself to a dream when he had attempted to march in 1887 with a body of socialists to the prohibited Trafalgar Square; and like Guest, he was forced to behold the evanescence of his vision as the masses were bludgeoned and dispersed and the people upon whose strength he had counted for reform had revealed to him their ineptitudes. In Guest’s failure to perceive Nowhere’s limitations and to work actively to foster within his own era the development of Nowhere’s assets, he represents a valuable lesson for Morris’s contemporaries. If, as Compton-Rickett observes, Morris’s own initial shock at the outcome of Bloody Sunday was accompanied by ‘the realization that his efforts for the future must be directed along more peaceful and more humdrum lines’, it is a man instructed by disappointment who offers, in the guise of a story, pointed advice to the readers of the 1890 Commonweal. With Guest’s experience as a negative example, Morris reveals in News from Nowhere that real progress is realized by neither self-deception nor indulgence. Only with clear insight and persistent effort can humanity create something akin to a Utopia.

NOTES

2 In a letter to Bruce Glasier, Morris sums up his response, observing that he ‘wouldn’t care to live in such a cockney paradise as he [Bellamy] imagines’ (The
At times, to be sure, he approaches insight’s periphery, as when, having scrutinized Morson’s impressive display of past and present artifacts, he inquires, ‘ “What is to come after this?” ’ (180). Such glimmers of understanding, however, are short-lived, and it is a regretful Guest who must re-enter the nineteenth-century world.