NEWS FROM NOWHERE is both a dream and a vision. As a vision, it is one of what Shelley in his A Defence of Poetry calls 'the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present', for it is in tune with the vast dialectical movement of history. As a dream, it stands in the relationship of wish-fulfilment to the particular dreamer, a late nineteenth century socialist. Further, a visionary is aware that what he sees are shadows, without doubting that behind them stand an ultimate reality: a dreamer mistakes the shadows for reality. Since the protagonist, Guest, is both visionary and dreamer, a tension is created in his mind which gives News From Nowhere a richness and complexity not usually found in works of this nature.

The uncertainty which the dreamer feels as to his relationship to this new world is shown in the name he adopts, Guest. We are never told his real name but, judging from the recognition scene between Old Hammond and Guest of Chapter IX, his real name is also Hammond. Old Hammond mentions his grandfather, who had fought for the revolution. Thus both Old Hammond and his grandson Dick are projections of the dreamer's personality into the future, and as such they share some of his character traits, in particular a hasty temper. Old Hammond identifies Guest's dream with childhood memories—'second childhood'—and from both Old Hammond and young Dick Guest receives his intimations that he will have to return to his own world. They make explicit his own half-conscious awareness that this is not his reality. Guest's predicament is made clear by the two religious symbols Morris introduces. The dreamer first sees the new society after his immersion in the river; he is, as it were, baptised into the future. But he can never be at home here, for at the closing communion or love-feast of the community in the church he can not take his place. Instead he turns back to the river, meets his ancient self, and is
drowned in black oblivion. The dream has ended, leaving only 
the vision to give conscious directives to his socialist efforts to 
initiate the new world.

There are many obvious projections of Guest's own ex­
perience into the future. For example, the dreamer tells his 
companions in Chapter vii that he was present on Bloody 
Sunday in 1887 when the meeting of Radicals, Irish and 
Socialists at Trafalgar Square was attacked by city police, killing 
three people and sending hundreds to hospital. In Chapter xvii, 
‘How The Change Came’, this meeting is enlarged by the 
imagination to provide a basic part of the story of the revolu­
tion. Other details seem to be taken from events which oc­
curred during the French Revolutions of 1848 and 1871, and 
during the London dock strike of 1889, with which Guest 
would be familiar.

Memories of persons, too, are projected into the future. The 
most obvious ones are of John Ruskin, and the first tribute to 
him is the picture of the young men, ‘looking much like a boat­
ing party at Oxford’, mending the road. Ruskin's famous at­
tempt to break down the barrier between mental and physical 
work by leading his Oxford students to build roads had begun 
in 1874. A little later Old Hammond almost paraphrases the 
message of Ruskin's Unto This Last, ‘There is no wealth but 
life’, when he says, ‘The reward of labour is life.’

Another projected memory of a literary figure is that of 
Dickens, the Dickens of Our Mutual Friend: but Guest may 
have got this merely by reading The Commonweal, in which 
parts of the novel were reprinted.1

The journey up the Thames river is a journey into the 
countryside of the dreamer's childhood, as he tells us. As the 
work's sub-title, An Epoch of Rest, indicates, the whole atmos­
phere of peace and joy is a compensating wish-fulfilment for 
the guest from an age of feverish and senile activity.

Yet the picture is not entirely a subjective dream of peace, 
as is shown by the figure of Ellen. She is a forecast of the next 
age, which will be more vigorous, more intellectual, and more 
willing to absorb the best from the past. As such, she is not 
fully comprehensible to Guest. But because both are, in a sense, 

1 But not all literary references are projections; some are purely functional, 
as when Old Hammond uses the reference to the chapter in Horrebow on 
snakes in Iceland to hint to Guest that he is present only as a recorder, a 
Boswell.
misfits; because they share some superficial similarities; and
because Guest knows that she will absorb and use knowledge
given her by such as himself and her reactionary grandfather,
a curiously close intimacy springs up between them. Her keen
mind quickly cuts through his disguises, so that their intimacy
is based on reality and truth. She leads Guest through the house
of his childhood, through the dream and into the vision.

There are a few peculiarities that remain to be noted. Since
this land of the future, this green and pleasant land in which
the garden and the city are one is a land of fellowship rather
than authority, there are no fathers: a generation is always
skipped. As Freud might have said, the authority-figures are
absent. Fancifully, one might imagine Freud and Marx co-
existing in News From Nowhere: the dream has all the elements
of the wish-fulfilment compensating for an unsatisfactory
present, but by Guest's awareness of anti-thesis—between his
own epoch and that which he is visiting, and, through Ellen,
between that and the age beyond—the final emphasis is brought
down on the Marxian vision of the dialectical movement of
history.

A second peculiarity or problem remains. How closely are we
to identify Guest, or Guest-Hammond and his projections, with
Morris himself? William Guest's biography, or what we are
given of it, seems to be similar to that of Morris. And many
critics see, in the relationship of Dick and Clara, an idealized
picture of Morris' own marital difficulties with Jane. Certainly
Morris intended his readers to make, at the least, a partial
identification, for he was following the conventions of Medieval
dream literature, in which the author is imagined to be record-
ing his own dream. But especially from Chaucer, Morris had
acquired the technique of using in his work a figure apparently
identical with the writer who yet in reality did not embody
the author's full personality. This is of course a formal necessity
when the object of the vision is to instruct. I think therefore
that a critic should be extremely wary of taking as auto-
biographical anything in News From Nowhere which may be
accounted for simply by Morris' adoption of this (admittedly
congenial) form.

2 Oswald Doughty, A Victorian Romantic, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
passim.
Morris called *News From Nowhere* ‘A Utopian Romance’. It would perhaps be more useful for us to call it an arcadia. The arcadian or pastoral tradition was originally a poetic one: it often had political overtones—the natural freedom of the Forest of Arden is contrasted to the vices of the court in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*—but the main ingredient has always been escapism, often mixed with nostalgia for a vanished golden age. It was not until Rousseau that the arcadia could be used as a serious tool for social criticism. In England, it was mainly the romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley, who so used it, and all of these, as well as Cobbett, influenced Morris. The setting for the arcadia is always rural, and the values it embodies are spontaneity, creativity, love and freedom. In this it is in sharp contrast to the utopia which, with its urban setting, embodies stability, uniformity, efficiency and hierarchy. Morris hated the utopia, and the immediate cause of his writing *News From Nowhere* was his reading of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, a work which, like its predecessors backs to Plato’s *Republic*, described a stable urban society with carefully graduated ranks, in which all classes cheerfully performed the tasks ordained for them by Nature/God/Society/their benevolent masters. But the challenge Bellamy offered was a particularly critical one: while the utopias of his predecessors had been philosophic structures established outside the influence of history, Bellamy’s utopia was prophetic—that is, it was imagined, not as isolated from history, but as developing out of it. It therefore challenged both Morris’ view of the ultimate goals of human existence, and his Marxian conception of the nature and direction of historical development.

Morris’ revolt against the utopian form is a significant one. Traditionally, utopias had been written by intellectuals frightened of the possibility of social chaos who presented as desirable a society from which liberty and the private life, with its attendant potential for disorder, had been abolished. But for twentieth century writers tyranny, rather than chaos, has been the main fear. For writers of an age in which the ideal of complete control of man by the state has become an ever-present possibility, the regulated utopia appears less desirable. Yet lacking Morris’ faith in man and history, modern writers (despite their fear of its increasing power) cannot imagine the regulative state as anything but permanent and necessary. In addition, they have felt that abolishing the state would also
mean dismissing the Industrial Revolution and all the release from physical necessity that it represented. Unable to accept the arcadian ideal, and no longer finding the utopia desirable, modern authors have turned to writing satiric or ironic utopias. However, arcadian elements remain. In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, a degenerate arcadian, Mr Savage from the Reservation, is brought into contact with a degenerate utopia. In George Orwell’s *1984* arcadia has dwindled to a rural bower of bliss where Winston Smith first consummates his love for Julia, a rose-like coral paperweight, and partly-remembered verses about the bells of the great churches built in the age from which Morris had drawn inspiration. These arcadian elements are linked to Winston Smith’s pathetic attempts to preserve a private life, to maintain control over his own consciousness by establishing a continuity with his own and his society’s past—a past nostalgically seen as disappearing forever. William Golding, in *Lord of The Flies*, goes one step further. Arcadia is not the pastoral world of golden childhood, a glimpse of the innate good and potential for love and joy in man, for Golding does not share the belief popularized by Rousseau in man’s innate goodness. Rather, a pastoral setting is used as a background against which to portray the innate evil in man, the original sin that Saint Augustine felt justified sending unbaptized babies to Hell.

‘It is quite useless to declare that all men are born free’, wrote G. B. Shaw in his preface to *Major Barbara*, ‘if you deny that they are born good.’ Morris did believe that men were innately good. Human relationships had become perverted because the social environment encouraged the treating of human beings as objects, possessions, means for producing wealth over which one had power. Communism for him meant complete equality, with no more predatory claims of one person over another—of master over worker, ruler over ruled, husband over wife, or parent over child. Relations can be natural, and while this will not solve all problems (such as sexual jealousy) it will allow human consciousness to assume its rightful quality. For it is the quality of the lives lived under any system that is the ultimate yardstick of that system’s virtue. This is the news Guest brings back from his dream-vision.