News from Nowhere in Recent Criticism

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One result of the new structuralist emphases in literary criticism which is encouraging for admirers of Morris is the greater attention now being given to works of fiction outside the canon of nineteenth-century realism. Although this is sometimes carried to absurd lengths in the denigration of the realist approach, it does mean that works like News from Nowhere are now getting a good deal more critical attention. In this article I will be considering two recent discussions of that work, by Michael Wilding in Political Fictions (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) and by Bernard Sharratt in Reading the Victorian Novel: Details into Form, edited by Ian Gregor (Vision Press, 1980).

Dr Sharratt’s is the briefer and less polemical account. He draws attention to the various references in the text to the tradition of the Victorian novel and relates these to Morris’s use of a different kind of fictional form to express a more dynamic and critical view of society. Two aspects of his account struck me as of particular interest. The first concerns the use of references to what is termed, inelegantly, ‘the extra-textual “real”’ (p. 294)—such things as the Socialist League, the tube, Bazalgette’s suspension bridge, Kelmscott Manor. Morris, it is claimed, makes the juxtaposition of the real and the ideal more vivid than in most Utopian writing by his physical closeness to facts, especially topographical facts, of his own age: ‘Guest’s route from 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, to Bedford Square and the British Museum (ch.4. to ch.8) can easily be traced in detail in a London A–Z’ (p. 294). In fact, though Dr Sharratt doesn’t say so, anyone doing that would have three rather than two levels of comparison, with Morris’s London, our own, and that of the future to provide plenty of material for consideration. This is consistent with the argument here that the details are not offered as in a realistic novel to form a complex unified whole, but rather to stimulate the reader into considering ‘the essential elements of an adequately human society’ (p. 297). Morris sometimes makes use of what are now termed ‘self-referential’ elements for this
stimulation, as in the reference to ‘a queer antiquarian society which had done some service in past times’ and had managed to preserve the Houses of Parliament—for a manure-store. This is certainly part of Morris’s method in creating his fictional/historical world.

Dr Sharratt’s second point is slightly less obvious, and to that extent more interesting. He argues that the quality of affection in the human relationships described, which is symptomatic of the egalitarian and humanistic basis of the whole society (relevantly compared to what Orwell experienced on his arrival in Republican Spain), is particularly dramatised through Guest’s attitude to the women he encounters. Morris admits an erotic element in Guest’s response to women in an open and un-Victorian way, but he also uses this element in controlling the reader’s responses through the narrative. Guest is attracted by the self-confident women he meets, but the meetings (as in the guest-house) are casual and so are naturally followed by partings. The deepest relationship is that with Ellen, who disappears in Ch. 24 but returns in Ch. 27. However, the reassurance to Guest—and the reader—suggested by her return is not to be the prelude to a romantic ending, such as occurs even in Utopian fiction where ‘the explorer of Utopia finally marries the inevitable heroine’ (p. 300). When Guest is separated from Ellen at the end the reader is cheated of the romantic conclusion, and his frustration is ‘brought into the service of the political desire that the text seeks to provoke’ (p. 300)—the response asked of the reader ‘means endeavouring, outside the anti-climax of the tale, to achieve the kind of society where such a relationship might be possible, it means re-establishing that future’ (p. 300). This is a convincing account of how the romantic element (however psychologically explained) contributes to the overall effect of what might be termed creative frustration.

Finally, Dr Sharratt comments on the expository pages given to Old Hammond which are sometimes criticised for being out of key with the rest of the work. The answer given is that they ‘need cause no more of a formal problem than catechetical exposition does in Plato’ (p. 302). Since the story has all along acknowledged its own fictiveness, there is no breach of convention. And by making explicit what is usually implicit in Victorian fiction, the moral/political point-of-view of the author, Morris undermines a convention that has the danger of not always being recognised as one by readers: ‘these chapters, one might say, bring together Morris’s equivalent of all those quasi-authorial comments on morals, the organisation of society and common sense wisdom which operate as the voice of truth in the hierarchy of voices
that constitute the realist mode' (p. 303). It is interesting, though, that although the emphasis is on the unity of form and content, there is no discussion of the wider, political implications of Hammond's account of 'How the Change Came'—a point which will be taken up again in relation to Dr Wilder. Meanwhile it only remains to note the irony of the fact that Dr Sharratt's positive view of News from Nowhere is followed in the book in which it appears by 'Interchapter 5', apparently by Professor Gregor, who in summing up remarks that Morris's political aims result in 'an art whose "thinness" is essential to the strategy of its critique of Victorianism; but which therefore, though the conclusion isn't drawn, can hardly avoid being thin, and unsatisfying, as an experience' (p. 306). This, Professor Gregor goes on to suggest, is because we are more used to reading novels in the realist tradition, while Morris's work remains isolated and unusual. Possibly, though many readers know Gulliver's Travels as well as Middlemarch. At all events, there is a feeling that a peculiar significance is being put on the word 'experience'. Surely the convincing part of Dr Sharratt's argument was that the reading experience can offer many interests and pleasures, and those of political and social thinking are just as valuable as those associated with psychological realism.

Certainly Dr Wilding's central thesis is along these lines. Indeed, at times it seems to go a good deal further. The purpose of his book, we are told in the Introduction, is to extend the notion of political fiction embodied in works like Irving Howe's Politics in the Novel (1957), which were restricted to 'the bourgeois realist novel' (p. 3) admired by critics like Lukacs and Leavis. The emotive use of the adjective 'bourgeois' suggests a left-wing stance, and this becomes clearer when we are told that the fact that Marxist works like News from Nowhere and Jack London's The Iron Heel are 'rarely found on educational syllabuses' shows they 'have effectively been suppressed' (p. 18). This does not prevent Dr Wilding from remarking later that 'News from Nowhere has survived as an immensely popular, immensely moving art work for the best part of a century' (p. 53). This kind of extravagance seems characteristic of the 'radical literary criticism' here practised, which sees its task as including the restoration of 'works like News from Nowhere or The Iron Heel to a central position in any thinking about political fictions' (p. 9). (The other works considered in this lively and challenging book are Huckleberry Finn, The Rainbow, Kangaroo, Darkness at Noon and Nineteen Eighty-four.)

But the most interesting part of Dr Wilding's book, at least in relation to Morris, is when he attempts a criticism that is 'responsive to a radical-
ism of form as well as of content’, remarking that Marxist criticism has not traditionally been happy in this area’ (p. 19). He is thus arguing along the same lines as Dr Sharratt, though here again he is more extreme and less convincing. His remark that the fiction of George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope offered readers ‘the confirmation of their own value systems’, confirming ‘the necessary belief in bourgeois individualism’ (p. 52) is as extravagant as it is inaccurate: and a critic who can place Dickens and Trollope so neatly together shows himself disabled from serious discussion of the Victorian novel. Fortunately, however, Dr Wilding is a far better critic than his rash generalisations would suggest, and his account of News from Nowhere raises a number of points well worth considering.

One of these concerns the status of artefacts in Morris’s world. Dr Wilding suggests that Morris’s detailed and emphatic descriptions of the beautiful objects used in his future society remind us of ‘the bourgeois artefact collector, art as the ideology for property acquisition—attitudes of mind and behaviour that would have appalled Morris and that he would have rejected’ (pp. 56-7). Thus the breakfast described on Guest’s first morning is said to embody both ‘the pastoral of garden nature’ and, more disturbingly, ‘the aesthetic of the still life, the heaped foods commemorated in oils’ (p. 57). This is associated with the ministering presence of young women: ‘It is a ritual not a self-service. His is a vision determined by having had servants’ (p. 57). This strikes me as an interesting if not finally convincing criticism—the austere antithesis of ritual and self-service may be capable of resolution—and it is certainly not one I had been led to ponder before. Unfortunately Dr Wilding, as at a number of other points in his argument, suddenly changes direction and admits what all admirers of Morris will have been wanting to argue: ‘But it would be wrong to stress the bourgeois components of the stress on beautiful objects, at the expense of Morris’s socialist vision of those objects’ (p. 57), which leads to a perfectly fair account of Morris’s view of the relation between art and labour. It seems an awkward method to pass from assertion to contradiction rather than to reveal the complexity of the issues in a more unified way.

The same seems to me to happen in the discussion of the even more central issues of machinery and social organisation. After pointing out that a single barge powered by a ‘force machine’ is all that we are shown of the new technology, Dr Wilding remarks emphatically: ‘We are not convinced. We still feel a need to see the infrastructure of this technology—to see it in action and in theory to be sure that it is there’ (p. 83). However, soon afterwards Morris is applauded for realising ‘the
trap in struggling for merely economic dominance', and that 'the whole concept of machine civilisation must be re-thought' (p. 84). There is nothing misleading in the account given of the place of machinery in the new society, but we can't help feeling that the argument would again have profited from more measured exposition.

Still, it would be unfair to leave the final emphasis there. Two further areas of the discussion deserve attention. One is of Morris's view of human sexuality as potentially disruptive, because apparently independent of all social determinants' (p. 87). Dr Wilding remarks that Morris could not have held this view if he 'had had a deeper, total materialism or if he had had a mystic cosmic consciousness about the unity of all things'. He is presumably prevented by his own commitment to the former from remarking that for many readers the admission that the human problems of jealousy and possessiveness still occur after the revolution is a brave kind of moral realism. But it remains an open question how far it is consistent with the assumptions about human nature expressed elsewhere in the text.

The second significant suggestion concerns the overall atmosphere of the book. Contrasting it with the violence of London's *The Iron Heel*, Dr Wilding argues that a strongly Victorian note of 'exhaustion, tiredness with the futility of things, the wish for the Lotos-eaters' permanent stasis, spreads strongly through this projected future' (p. 78). He finds this quality 'formally dominant'—by which he seems to mean in the mood and tone, even when the narrative deals with the revolution. His account of the romantic vocabulary of 'dreamy pleasure' and 'balmy freshness' convincingly supports the point. But he seems unsure how far the mood is carried into the story's ending. At one point he quotes 'the positive progressive message' (p. 79) of the last words of the book, adding, 'The dream becomes on this higher level a vision'. But in his final summing-up he argues that 'for all the beautiful future that Morris creates for us, the final note of the book is one of sadness' (p. 90) and praises Morris for having incorporated into his narrative awareness of current anxieties as well as hope for the future. There is no contradiction here, only a matter of emphasis, which may remind us that even Morris's apparently simple fable has its complexities and possibilities of varied response.

Finally, a word about the treatment here of Old Hammond's exposition referred to earlier in the article. Dr Wilding suggests that Morris's rejection of the realist mode allows him freedom to use the most appropriate form for giving necessary information without the need to
provide any ‘realistic dramatisation’ of his ‘tale within the tale’ (p. 73). Thus we can have the catechism of Ch. 11 ‘Concerning Government’, which is able effectively ‘to demystify the nineteenth-century bourgeois concepts of parliament, the law courts, patriotism’ (p. 75)—and the demystification is best accomplished in this overtly didactic way. The account of the Change is given as ‘historical summary and statement’ (p. 75) because of the concision of this method—Morris had no wish to expatiate over these matters. On one level, no doubt, he is choosing ‘to stress how anonymous co-operative group action achieved the change, rather than romantic individualism’; but the real reason is that ‘He is recoiling from the material of the struggle’ (p. 76) and wants to get on to describing the achieved Utopia as soon as possible. Dr Wilding tellingly quotes from earlier in Ch. 11 when Guest asks Old Hammond for ‘further explanation’ and then records: ‘Old Hammond settled himself in his chair with a look of enjoyment which rather alarmed me, and made me dread a scientific disquisition: so I sighed and abided’ (p. 48). This, it is suggested, reveals ‘the split in the consciousness of people like Morris’ (p. 49), who are both involved in political activity and impatient to be doing more creative and satisfying things. And it also accounts for the emphasis in News from Nowhere on the creativity of the future, together with its proto-factual acknowledgement of how the Change came. In such suggestions Dr Wilding, like Dr Sharratt, gives us valuable help in coming to terms with Morris’s remarkable fiction.

One last convincing observation from Dr Wilding, in discussing the questions of conventions about how novels should end. He notes that the main point about the society Morris portrays is that it puts no pressure on the individual and therefore the usual causes of ‘narrative impulse’ are absent: instead, we have an atmosphere which he calls ‘inconsequential’ (p. 54). There is, he notes, nevertheless a boat journey up-river which ‘puts a dynamic into the novel’. However, this co-exists with the suggestion of inconsequentiality:

The journey up-river is inconsequential—it is not quite a quest with an end in view, but a journey whose purpose is its total experience; the significance is in the experience of the beautiful river, not a desperate search for some mysterious grail. The pleasures of this future society are in the discovery of living now . . . (p. 80).

In pursuing this line of argument Dr Wilding comments that the reader needs the journey of discovery, but in the future society it is inconsequential: ‘down-river is as clear and fresh as up-river’. This is a neat account of the atmosphere of serenity rather than exhaustion that seems to me to give the vision so much of its lasting appeal.