News from Nowhere as Erotic Dream

Jan Marsh

For a political blueprint, News from Nowhere is a surprisingly sexy book. From the start, the reader can hardly fail to notice — and perhaps be discomforted by — the openly sexual response of the narrator, William Guest, to all the women he encounters on his dream journey.

Immediately after meeting Dick and Robert, for instance, he is greeted in the Hammersmith Guest House by three young woman who, he comments, were ‘at least as good as the gardens, the architecture and the male men’ and who, he adds, were so kind and happy-looking in expression of face, so shapely and well-knit of body, and thoroughly healthy-looking and strong. All were at least comely, and one of them very handsome and regular of feature. They came up to us at once and merrily and without the least affectation of shyness, and all three shook hands with me. (Ch.II).

A page later, the utopian quality of Nowhere is specifically confirmed by its seemingly miraculous effect on women’s looks. When the narrator guesses that Annie, the prettiest of the three, is twenty years of age, she replies; “I am well served out for fishing for compliments, since I have to tell you the truth, to wit, that I am forty-two”. At this, Guest stares, for there was not a careful line on her face; her skin was as smooth as ivory, her cheeks full and round, her lips as red as the roses she had brought in; her beautiful arms which she had bared for her work, firm and well-knit from shoulder to wrist. She blushed a little under my gaze, though it was clear that she had taken me for a man of eighty. (Ch. III)

As he is in fact fifty-six, the preservative qualities of Nowhere are evidently gender-free, but the main impact is on the women, whose physical attractions are emphasised throughout the book.

As Guest is driven through London, he surveys the womenfolk with silent but keen interest:

As I spoke, my eye caught the face of a beautiful woman, tall, dark-haired and white-skinned, dressed in a pretty light-green dress in honour of the season and the hot day, who smiled kindly on me, and more kindly, still, I thought, on Dick ...

(Ch. IV)

Despite his discussion with Dick concerning poverty, Guest’s gaze turns as they pass, for that pretty girl was just disappearing through the gate with her big basket of early peas, and I felt that disappointed kind of feeling which overtakes one when one has seen an interesting or lovely face in the streets which one is never likely to see again; and I was silent a little. (Ch. IV)

This pattern of arousal and disappointment is in fact a key, recurrent, motif in the text. As Dick and Guest stop at the tobacco shop, “a very handsome woman, splendidly clad in figured silk” offers to hold their horse. Guest’s admiration is now verbal:
“What a beautiful creature!” said I to Dick as we entered.
“What, old Greylocks?” said he, with a sly grin.
“No, no,” said I; “Goldylocks — the lady”. (Ch.VI)

When they come out of the shop, however, she too has vanished:
To my disappointment, like a change in a dream, a tall old man was holding our horse instead of the beautiful woman. He explained to us that the maiden could not wait, and that he had taken her place; and he winked at us and laughed when he saw how our faces fell, so that we had nothing for it but to laugh also. (Ch.VI)

In the nicest possible way, the two men are sexually on the make. Dick is the first to have his desires satisfied, through his unexpected reunion with Clara. Almost imperceptibly jealous, Guest takes refuge in admiration of the young lovers’ frank physical response to each other. “Somewhat boisterously” Dick promises to take Clara haymaking, saying
“and we will manage to send you to bed pretty tired every night; and you will look so beautiful with your neck all brown, and your hands too, and you under your gown as white as privet…”
The girl reddened very prettily and not for shame but pleasure. (Ch.XIX)

Later, Guest notices how, watching Dick row, Clara responds to his body:
She looked at him fondly, and I could tell that she was seeing him in her mind’s eye showing his splendid form at its best ... as women will when they are really in love, and are not spoiled with conventional sentiment. (Ch.XXII)

On their return to Hammersmith, the blushing Annie welcomes Guest with a generous kiss but sends him on his way alone. As he reflects, “so delightful a woman would hardly be without a due lover of her own age”. But this sequence of expectation and disappointments only paves the way, or excites the appetite, for his meeting with Ellen, who is clearly the heroine of the book as well as Hammond’s successor as chief utopian guide and interlocutor. When first seen she is lying on a sheepskin rug, and both her brown skin and bare feet are explicitly admired:
We went up a paved path between the roses, and straight into a very pretty room, panelled and carved, and as clean as a new pin; but the chief ornament of which was a young woman, light-haired and grey-eyed, but with her face and hands and bare feet tanned quite brown with the sun. Though she was very lightly clad, that was clearly from choice, not from poverty, though these were the first cottage-dwellers I had come across; for her gown was of silk, and on her wrists were bracelets that seemed to me of great value. She was lying on a sheep-skin near the window, but jumped up as soon as we entered, and when she saw the guests ... she clapped her hands and cried out with pleasure, and when she got us into the middle of the room, fairly danced round us in delight of our company. (Ch.XXII)

With her light gown and suntanned skin, Ellen is the most ideal representative of the new society. Of all the persons ‘in that world renewed’, says Guest, ‘she was the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of.’ Clara (who incidentally discards some of her own clothing and her stockings in emulation of Ellen) reminds him of a very pleasant and unaffected young woman of his own time, whereas Ellen
was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of a “young lady”, but was in all ways so strangely interesting; so that I kept wondering what she would say or do next to surprise and please me. Not, indeed, that there was anything
startling in what she actually said or did; but it was all done in a new way, and
always with that indefinable interest and pleasure of life which I had noticed more
or less in everybody, but which in her was more marked and more charming than
in any one else that I had seen. (Ch.XXVII)
She has knowledge, intelligence, ability, sensitivity and intuitive awareness beyond
the reach of her compatriots. And all these qualities are firmly linked to her femininity
and thus, implicitly, to her sexuality. As Hammond puts it earlier, the spirit of the
new world is that of physical love:
“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.” (Ch.IX)
As a literary text, *News from Nowhere* is thus suffused with erotic language, which
steadily grows more insistent. Indeed, it has to be held in check by the convention of
the genre that the time traveller may observe but not intervene in the action — a
device which frequently resembles that of the dream narrative. The problematic nature
of what can only be called Guest’s lust is made explicit in the early morning at
Runnymede when the three travellers glimpse Ellen in the garden; Guest protests at
being left out of the fable Dick invents for the occasion and is told that he may imagine
he is wearing the cap of darkness, seeing everything, himself invisible. Fulfillment
must again be deferred.
Nevertheless, Guest’s relationship with Ellen follows a courtship pattern. She
leads — often literally taking him by the hand — with hints and promises of
consummation which are frank and friendly on her part — one of Nowhere’s chief
attractions is the absence of coyness — and flirtatiously suggestive on his part, as
befits a denizen of the unreformed present. Thus:
“I should like to go with you all through the west country — thinking of nothing”,
concluded she, smiling.
“I should have plenty to think of”, said I.
and
“This evening, or tomorrow morning I shall make a proposal to you to do
something which would please me very much, and I think would not hurt you
....” I broke in eagerly, saying that I would do anything in the world for her ...
(Ch.XXVIII)
Despite, or indeed because of, his frequent disparagement of his fifty-six years,
it is clear that Guest’s youthful desire has returned — such rejuvenation is a chief
feature of this new life — and his slow, dreamy conversations with Ellen follow the
movements of lovemaking, enacting the caresses and hesitations of sexual pleasure
in syntax and cadence, with further hints in the imagery and vocabulary. This is
especially clear in Chapter 29, which describes the picnic lunch on the upper reaches
of the Thames, and ends:
As we went slowly down towards the boats she said again: “Not for myself alone,
dear friend; I shall have children; perhaps before the end a good many; I hope so.
And though of course I cannot force any special kind of knowledge upon them, yet,
my friend, I cannot help thinking that just as they might be like me in body, so I might
impress upon them some part of my ways of thinking; that is, indeed some of the
essential part of myself; that part which was not mere moods, created by the matters
and events around me. What do you think?”

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Of one thing I was sure, that her beauty and kindness and eagerness combined, forced me to think as she did, when she was not earnestly laying herself open to receive my thoughts. I said, what at the time was true, that it was most important; and presently stood entranced by the wonder of her grace as she stepped into the light boat, and held out her hand to me. And so on we went up the Thames still — or whither?

As a changeling, Guest cannot of course mate with an inhabitant of fairyland, so their intercourse — as Ellen “lays herself open to receive my thoughts” — is that of philosophical discussion, and their children remain hypothetical, dream progeny. Their embraces are similarly displaced. “On we went”, says Guest, his heart beating with “new-born excitement about Ellen and my gathering fear of where it would land me”, to arrive at their journey’s end. Here Ellen makes her promised proposal, which is indeed no more than a chaste but meaningful invitation “to live with us where we are going”, but following which they approach the old house in a state of expectant arousal. “Take me on to the house at once”, Ellen whispers; “we need not wait for the others; I had rather not”. On the path, she gives a sensuous sigh of joy, as the climax is reached:

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!”

I could not answer her or say a word. Her exultation and pleasure were so keen and exquisite, and her beauty, so delicate yet so interfused with energy, expressed it so fully, that any added word would have been commonplace and futile. I dreaded lest the others should come in suddenly and break the spell she had cast about me; but we stood there a while by the corner of the big gable of the house, and no one came .... (Ch.XXXI)

In this post-coital silence rests, as has often been noted, the apex of the story. For, of course, there is no happy ending to this romance. As in an erotic dream, the narrator must wake before fulfillment, at the village feast in the church, when he stands smiling with delight on the threshold, ready for the festivity. Suddenly, the vision begins to slip; he becomes literally invisible and turns to Ellen, whose face saddens:

she shook her head with a mournful look, and the next moment all consciousness of my presence had faded from her face. (Ch.XXXII)

News from Nowhere is thus unmistakeably a masculine vision of paradise, imbued with the feeling and imagery of male desire. But this is, paradoxically, not a limiting but a liberating — and, as I would argue, a dominant — element in its appeal. For one thing, the women’s responses are as frankly sexual as the men’s: here at least is equality of desire. More importantly, the fact that the loss of paradise takes place at the feast, in a social setting, indicates that although eroticism pervades the depiction of Nowhere, sexual love or desire is only part of its vision of the future. Lust (in its original sense of passion rather than vice) in fact works, throughout the text, as dynamic metaphor or carriage for utopian desire, just as Ellen stands, in her strange wild beauty, as a personification of the new age, at once alluring and unattainable.

For it is longing that drives News from Nowhere, from the opening cry of the narrator “If I could but see a day of it! If I could but see it!” And it is the sense of impossibility that sustains the reader’s answering desire — for, once gained,
satisfaction or joy begins to dwindle: utter happiness is always out of reach, or fades into banality, giving rise to discontent. And it is Morris's skill in holding this emotional yearning dramatically in tension with the social perfection of Nowhere that takes his narrative beyond the notion of a blueprint, with every detail "correctly" sketched in, and saves it from any sense of smugness. Utopia, indeed, is perhaps best defined as a promised land that can only be imagined, never attained, existing beyond the nearest and furthest edge of possibility, in the realm of everlasting desire.

In his discussion of Miguel Abensour's study of socialist utopias, E.P. Thompson (without specifically mentioning the erotic thrust of News from Nowhere) noted that what distinguishes Morris's enterprise "is, exactly, its open, speculative quality, and its detachment of the imagination from the demands of conceptual precision". More important than approving or disapproving of its specific formulations — as people are apt to criticise it on economic or political grounds — "it is the challenge to the imagination to become immersed in the same open exploration":

in such an adventure two things happen: our habitual values (the commonsense of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter into Utopia's proper and new-found space: the education of desire ... "to teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way".

After talking of past miseries, Clara senses unhappiness in the air, "as if we were longing for something that we cannot have". In this awareness of impossibility, as with Ellen’s sensitivity to Guest’s liminal position, seeing but not reaching paradise, both women articulate the imaginative core of the text, that continues to "arouse the reader's desire without, finally, satisfying it. As a story, News from Nowhere enact[s] its own meaning.

And it is above all through the unashamed, though never crude, erotic movement of the writing that the reader’s response is stimulated and sustained, as we share in the dream, knowing that, like Guest, we can never gain this heaven where passion and politics coalesce. For it is in the passionate strength of Morris’s socialist desire that eroticism, finally fused with social fellowship, shapes and impels the story of News from Nowhere, not as an intellectual exercise but as an expression of human feeling and the demand for joy. Without such desire, there can be no hope. And in the final analysis what matters, and makes the text continually worth re-reading and re-printing, is precisely the immediate challenge to our own imaginations to desire more, and better, and in a different way, in order to change things.

NOTES


A longer and slightly different version of this article, discussing the social representation of gender in News from Nowhere, is contained in the collection of essays William Morris and News from Nowhere, edited by Stephen Coleman and Paddy O’Sullivan, to be published 1990 by Green Books, Bideford, Devon.