The Liveliness of News from Nowhere: Structure, Language and Allusion.

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News from Nowhere is so pleasantly arcadian that some have described it as bland or even boring. It isn’t. Although on the surface we find order and rationality, beneath the surface are darker, irrational and potentially destructive forces. These darker elements are suggested by the animated disagreements which turn to grumbling, by obstinate refusals to join the common work program, and by report of a violent murder. But the tension of real life is also present within the prose itself, in Morris’s imaginative use of structure, language and allusion. It is this which gives News from Nowhere its special character as a Victorian utopia which is neither loose and baggy nor dull.

The structure of the novel is not linear but dialectical. The alienated narrator begins by longing for a new world as he travels home from the League to the “Western suburb” of Hammersmith. In his dream he travels from Hammersmith to Bloomsbury and back again. Then comes the upriver journey to Kelmscott. It is June, yet the references near the end to “dark days”, “shorn fields”, “empty gardens”, “autumn”, and “winter”, prepare for an emotional modulation back to shabby Hammersmith. We realize that in one sense the Guest has not gone anywhere, because in the midst of Hammersmith “he felt as if he were in a pleasant country place – pleasanter, indeed, than the deep country was as he had known it”(4). The narrative locates utopia in a future time and place, provides an elaborate circumstantial description of getting there, yet tells us clearly that utopia is only a projection. We are, if we would only realize it, already there. The alienated narrator of the beginning and the alienated visitor to utopia achieve a sort of integration in the narrator of the epilogue, who will use his vision of the future to inform his work in the present.

The dialectical play of present and future, of despair and hope, is reflected in Morris’s use of point of view. This narrator is a slippery character and his approach to telling his own story introduces many contradictions and ambiguities. The opening chapter begins with a voice reporting an account by a “friend” of a discussion “up at the League”. The friend’s report is about a third person, one of the “sections” who got drawn into the discussion, ended by “damning all the rest for fools” (3), then set off for Hammersmith on the railway. The conclusion blends these two voices (represented by the two first-person pronouns in the first sentence) into one – the “I” at the end of this passage:

But, says he, I think it would be better if I told them in the first person as if it were myself who had gone through them; which, indeed, will be the easier and more natural to me, since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom
I am telling better than anyone else in the world does. (5)

However, ambiguity continues in the utopia as Guest meets several characters who seem to be projections of himself, including old Hammond and Ellen. The narrator disappears as narrator in Chapter XI, when he reduces himself to a character whose words are being quoted in a sort of Socratic dialogue with Old Hammond. And, although the point of view remains constant, in the famous Chapter XIII the narrator provides a chapter about politics to tell us that there are none, which (in view of the subsequent description of the motes) is at best an equivocation. This narrative play emphasizes the lively tension of unity and diversity. The resolution of the narrative voices into what is clearly the single narrative voice at the end – the Hammersmith dreamer’s – perhaps suggests the individual integration of self which anticipates the social integration to come.

Contradictory feelings and ideas are captured in the language of individual sentences. Expressing positives in terms of negatives is one method which has been noted by Michael Wilding: “No one unburdened with very heavy anxieties could have felt otherwise than happy that morning”(162). A similar effect is achieved with conjunctions: “a few necessary pieces of furniture, and those very simple and even rude, but solid and with a good deal of carving about them, well designed but rather crudely executed”(52); “their crockery being lead-glazed pot-ware though beautifully ornamented”(101). The sentence structure emphasizes the contradictions (such as between beauty and utility), which is obvious when simple substitutions are made: “their crockery being lead-glazed pot-ware [and] beautifully ornamented”. A little warring amongst the crockery is perhaps appropriate enough for utopian folk who live in “reasonable strife with nature”(58), which seems a more interesting, although oxymoronic, situation than living in mere harmony with nature. When the Guest becomes aware of “green forest scents” in Kensington Wood we are silently reminded of that strife by the suggestion of synaesthesia – we know that a scent cannot be green, just as we “know” that this whole world does not really exist.

Various poetic devices create subtle opposition to the forward movement of the narrative. Such passages invite us to slow down, to become aware of form as well as meaning. The three alliterated b’s in “beauty of the bough-hung banks”(144) are a mirror image of the three alliterated d’s in “dull despair of the drudge”(63). As a unifying motif Morris uses the word ‘mingle’ a number of times within thirty pages: the song of the blackbirds is mingled with the sound of water(169); the tune of the tinkling trowels mingled with the humming of the bees(176); hopes of youth mingled with the pleasure of the present(187); and the folk on the bank mingled their voices with the cuckoo’s song(199). The following passage is not the only one which makes use of poetic rhythm to enliven the prose: “it does not make a bad holiday to get a quiet pony and ride about there on a sunny afternoon of autumn, and look over the river and the craft passing up and down, and on to Shooters’ Hill and the Kentish uplands, and then turn round to the wide green sea of the Essex marshland, with the great domed line of the sky, and the sun shining down in one flood of peaceful light over the long distance”(68). The almost iambic rhythm reinforces the beauty of the scene, but its existence, along with alliterative and repetitive devices, creates a lively tension between the poetic and prosaic elements of the book.

The novel often suggests the religious – for example, in the Wordsworthian
landscape of the passage quoted above – yet it does so within a context which is clearly secular. The spirit of medieval people is invoked in Ch. XVIII ("to whom heaven and the life of the next world which was such a reality"), although nowadays the only religion is the "religion of humanity" (132). London before the change was the modern Babylon of civilization (65). Supposedly realistic nineteenth-century novels might as well have dealt with the "times of the Pharaohs" (102). Sinning no more (83), not gathering grapes from thorns (92), grains of sand in the balance (93–94), sheep lacking a shepherd (124) – the novel is full of scriptural and religious echoes. Morris shows us a "new world informed by a new faith" despite its "official" position as an agnostic utopia. There is no theology, no structure of religious belief, to be derived from the novel. Yet the many religious allusions are not merely "aesthetic", a comment sometimes made about Pre-Raphaelite use of religious allusion, but reflect an unmistakable spirit of what Carlyle called "reverence".

The imagery of food and eating is also used ambiguously, in both positive and negative ways. The Socialist stews discontentedly as he travels home on the underground railway (3); the utopians believe children should not stew inside houses (28); and the slums of old London are described as stews for rearing and breeding men and women, who live "packed amongst the filth like pilchards in a cask" (66). Education in the old days is described as "a niggardly dole of not very accurate information; something to be swallowed by the beginner in the art of living whether he liked it or not, and which had been chewed and digested over and over again . . ." (63). No wonder workers suffered from the disease known as "Mulleygrubs", a disease of the digestive tract which could be cured by a "short course of aperient medicine" (39). During the Revolution the images grow darker. The "appetite of the World-Market grew with what it fed on" (94). The rebels are accused of "tearing out the bowels of their 'common mother', the English Nation, for the benefit of a few greedy paid agitators" (122), perhaps an allusion to the greedy sheep of the first book of More's Utopia. Often the references to food are positive: the sweet smells, the colours of food and wine, the texture of bread, the delicious tastes, all of which suggest the pleasant abundance of utopia. A stretch of "blossoming wheat" observed by Guest (162) neatly reflects both the utility of nourishment and the beauty of the flowers. Religious imagery and food imagery blend in the climatic dinner which is held in a former church decorated with "cross scythes" and "cross tables", and this meal is (as Morris put it elsewhere) a sort of secular sacrament.

A series of allusions can establish "a symbolic pattern structure within an adopted text," which can qualify or even contradict the surface meaning. For example, allusions to Homer's Odyssey suggest epic adventure and a heroic character for the wanderer in utopia. But when the narrator refers to "man's grief and evil day" (57) or says he does not want to tell "Odyssean lies" (184) to account for his past, the connotations are darker or less than heroic. The same is true of the carvings based upon Grimm's Fairy Tales. When Guest first sees these on his first visit to Bloomsbury Market he is surprised to find evidence of such "childishness" (100). This leads to a discussion of art in which Hammond argues that it is the child-like part of us that produces works of the imagination, and the utopians rejoice that they have got their childhoods back again. "Second childhood" says Guest in a low voice, then he blushes at his rudeness and hopes Hammond has missed the remark. Hammond has heard, but does not take it as rudeness, perhaps not being so attuned to literary echoes as
is the man from the past. Guest’s reference to second childhood reminds us of the famous speech from *As You Like It*, in which life ends in “second childishness and mere oblivion/Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything”. This melancholy view balances the happiness of Arden, so an allusion to it in *News from Nowhere* reminds us of the non-utopian reality from which Guest has come. Just before Guest leaves Nowhere he encounters near the village cross an old man whose “dulled and bleared” eyes, and whose “thin and spindly” calves echo the old man of Jaques’ speech, with “spectacles on nose” and “shrunk shank”, and who personifies the note of sorrow from the old world which gives this utopia its unique tone.

We do not usually think of sorrow and pain when we think of fairy tales, at least not at first. Morris’s allusions to fairy tales bring these feelings to our conscious awareness. ‘Seven Swans’ may be an allusion to the story of the Six Swans who are really the lost brothers of the heroine, and perhaps the almost correct title suggests the struggle for integration of male and female. ‘Faithful Henry’ is possibly an allusion to ‘Faithful John’, the story of a servant to a young king. There are two characters named Henry in the novel. Henry Johnson is Boffin’s real name and Henry Morson the name of the old man they meet while travelling up the Thames. This sort of substitution has the effect of weaving the stories together and at the same time establishing, as it were, the unresolved tension of something “wrong” within the text. ‘The King of the Golden Mountain’ is another kind of story about kingship. It is a bitter tale in which a black mannikin tricks a man out of his son, the son becomes a king but is betrayed by his wife, and the story ends with his violent revenge fantasy of magically decapitating a room full of people, leaving him “sole king and lord of the Golden Mountain”. This is a primitive, childish and very un-utopian conclusion, and the allusion reminds us of this dimension of our human nature which the rationally censorious utopian mind often ignores. Such tensions are later resolved when the Bloomsbury allusions are referred to in Chapter XXIII and Ellen is identified as the “good fairy” in the midst of a “fairy garden”, moving this motif from the minor to the major key.

Morris includes reference to the Norwegian folk-tale about the husband who minded the house, which reflects another important tension in the novel. This comic tale, which concludes with the man hanging halfway up the chimney and the cow dangling from the roof, is supposed to illustrate that women should do what they can do best and men are neither “jealous of it or injured by it”(59). The tone of this passage might seem almost reactionary. To say it is a “great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skilfully” may be true, but unless it is also stated that managing a house skilfully is a great pleasure to a clever man, the statement could be interpreted as a patronizing diminution of the role of women. Old Hammond’s summary of the Norwegian folk-tale (and we note that it is not the narrator’s) seems happy to suggest that men are simply not suited for housework; it could be cynically paraphrased as “look what a cute mess the man made, better leave this sort of work to the women”. In fact, the folk-tale makes clear that the woman goes out into the fields and does the man’s usual work, then returns home to discover the mess made by the man, which is sexist in the opposite direction. We see no young men serving in the guest house, and it is not explained why the head carver, Philippa, cannot be the “foreman” as well. Morris’s position of full sexual equality is very clear, but his allusions and examples are at odds with his position, which gives the sense of a sexual equality which is emerging rather than emerged.
In Chapter XV the nineteenth century is described as a man who has lost his clothes whilst bathing and has had to walk through the town. “You are very bitter about that unlucky nineteenth century” says Guest to Old Hammond(96). If we see this naked man from the outside (perhaps recalling tales such as ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’, or thinking of John Taylor’s ‘Water-mens suite’) the allusion can be seen to be a comical one because of the incongruity of the situation. But if we allow ourselves to identify with the naked man, as Guest seems to do because he uses the word “bitter”, such a naked condition would be shameful, painful, not comical at all. Such interpretive ambiguities, which range from the merely playful to the undeniably dark, make for a utopian book which is serene and pleasant but also very much alive.

NOTES


7. Perhaps the allusion is to “the truth shewes best being naked” from ‘The Water-mens suite concerning players’, in The Works of John Taylor the Water Poet, New York: Burt Franklin Research and Source Works Series, 1967, p. 176. The seventeenth century Thames Waterman was a spiritual ancestor to Boffin, being a poet and satirist as well as a waterman. He is the author of a short farce called ‘Sir Gregory Nonsense, His Newes From No Place’, which purports to translate the “Utopian Speech” of this unknown knight into English.