Liberationist Sexuality and Nonviolent Resistance:
The Legacy of Blake and Shelley in Morris’s
News From Nowhere

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William Morris’s News From Nowhere has sometimes been criticized for being inconclusive, inconsistent, and contradictory. Many of these negative critiques of Morris’s masterpiece derive from certain readers’ desire to see the text as utopian romance, coherent dream vision, or socialist prophecy. I suggest that News From Nowhere needs to be situated in another tradition, the tradition of revolutionary Romanticism that finds its fullest statement in the writings of Blake and Shelley, figures with whom Morris is not usually connected. We should consider News From Nowhere not solely as a utopian romance, but as a revolutionary document, a visionary ‘poem’ in the tradition of Blake’s Jerusalem, The Four Zoas, America, and Europe, as well as Shelley’s Queen Mab, Laon and Cythna, ‘The Mask of Anarchy,’ and Prometheus Unbound. From the perspective of the revolutionary aspects of Romanticism, what may look like weaknesses in News From Nowhere turn out to be strengths. Morris transforms visionary idealism into practical action – not only in terms of his political writings and speechmaking – but also by way of a fictional romance that offers a historicized version of revolutionary, not merely utopian, change in place of the more abstract visions of Blake and Shelley.

My purpose is not to trace a series of direct influences or subtle echoes among Morris, Blake, and Shelley. Rather, I suggest that the sexual politics and revolutionary energy behind the imaginings of Blake and Shelley find another important voice in the future world described in News From Nowhere. While Blake and Shelley paint their visions in psychological and symbolic terms, in News From Nowhere, Morris links an imagined dream world with the harsh realities of late Victorian life through a series of fantastic oppositions. The result is a powerful political text that has rarely been recognized for its romantic elements.

We feel the power of Morris’s communal and agrarian world, for example, at least in part because we know how sharply it contrasts with the reality of London life in 1890. In this regard Morris reminds us of Blake in Songs of Innocence and Experience, who is able to juxtapose a dream-world of psychic coherence and human unity (“And then I’ll stand and stroke his silver hair, / And be like him and he will then love me,” “And all must love the human form, / In heathen, Turk or jew”) with the horror of post-Enlightenment materialism: “When my mother died I was very young, / And my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep.”

As Asa Briggs has noted, Morris did not rest his dream world “on his imagination alone, nor was he simply concerned … with escape. He juxtaposed the ugly world
of his own time, as he saw it, with his Utopia: he never allowed himself to shake off
the nineteenth century. Furthermore, in describing how his own ugly world was
transformed into a Utopia, he sketched a sequence of events which his social and
political theories suggested to him was likely to happen.” This description could be
applied equally well to the fantastic but nevertheless prophetic dream-visions of
Blake’s *Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem* or Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound.*

Morris has rarely, if ever, been connected with romantic visionaries like Blake and
Shelley, in part because of his own comments on the poets – to Cockerell, Morris
commented that Shelley “had no eyes” – and also because a great deal of Morris’s
work was a reaction against what he took to be the abstract and escapist excesses of
Romanticism. But a close look at Morris’s own comments reveals more of a connection
to Blake and Shelley than might at first be supposed. In 1880, in ‘The Beauty of Life,’
Morris discussed the rebirth of literature in England that was encouraged by the
energy of the French Revolution, citing Blake and Coleridge as examples of a radically
new kind of poet. In 1883, Morris re-read Blake; and, in 1886, he responded to a
questionnaire from the *Pall Mall Gazette* about his favorite authors by including
Blake (“the part of him which a mortal can understand”), Coleridge, Shelley, and
Keats. Earlier, writing about the relationship of architecture to poetry, Morris had
asked “were the rows of square, brown brick boxes which Keats and Shelley had to
look at … to be the perpetual concomitants of such masters of verbal beauty.” As
early as 1855 he had praised the language of “To a Skylark,” noting the escapism
and sense of longing that accounts for this lyric’s appeal.3

I would like to focus on two chapters from *News From Nowhere* – ‘Concerning
Love’ and ‘How the Change Came’ – as a way of emphasizing connections between
Morris and his revolutionary Romantic predecessors. In both of these chapters we
see tensions inherent in a great deal of Romantic thinking echoed in Morris’s story.
We should remember that Morris called his work “some chapters from a utopian
romance”, suggesting the fragmentary quality typical of so many Romantic works.
Any vision of the world made new necessarily depends upon a contrast with the state
of the world as it is. Like satire, visionary writing only makes sense if it sets an
imagined future against the contemporary realities it is trying to address. Morris’s
text succeeds, in part, because it balances our sense of the old – actually his
contemporary world – with his vision of the new. Like Blake and Shelley, he is able
to paint a picture of the ideal future by showing us the dehumanizing limitations of
the real present.

Morris’s account of the relationship between men and women in *News From
Nowhere* is part of a long line of nineteenth-century thinking about reform in sexual
and marital politics. Old Hammond describes a world in which men and women are
united by passion rather than by law; couples remain together only so long as their
own wishes dictate. Dick and Clara have been “married” once before; they are about
to be “married” again, and there is no shame associated with their sexuality: “one
had no feeling of shame in looking on at their little-concealed love-making” (Ch. 16,
268). Marriage in Morris’s Nowhere is identical to what we would now call “living
together” – a contract based solely on the agreement of the participants, devoid of
legal sanction or supernatural stricutures. There is no divorce in Morris’s communal
future, since all divorce settlements are finally matters of property dispute, and private
property is a concept that has ceased to have meaning. Not only are there “no law
courts to enforce contracts of sentiments or passion,” there is also “no code of public opinion which takes the place of such courts” (233). Men and women are free to interact as they choose. Although Hammond admits that his society does not “believe that we can get rid of all the trouble that besets the dealings between the sexes” (231), at least there are no legal or doctrinal impediments to ideal unions between humans.

As early as 1813, in his notes to Queen Mab, Shelley had railed similarly against any law that pretended “to govern the indisciplinable wanderings of passion,” arguing that “a husband and wife ought to continue so long united as they love each other; any law which should bind them to cohabitation for one moment after the decay of their affection would be a most intolerable tyranny.” Like Blake, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Godwin before him, Shelley saw prostitution, venereal disease, bastardy, and domestic misery as the logical outcomes of a marital system that treated women as property. “Prostitution,” Shelley wrote, “is the legitimate offspring of marriage and its accompanying errors.” Shelley drew on Mary Wollstonecraft’s argument to claim that the institution of marriage was merely one aspect of a system that rendered every woman a sort of prostitute. If a woman could not own property, could not receive an education, and could not vote, then even aristocratic females were forced to sell themselves — i.e. their bodies — in exchange for comfort, security, and social standing. “Can man be free,” Shelley asked in his poem Laon and Cythna (later The Revolt of Islam), “if woman be a slave?” (II. xliii, 1040). Indeed, most of Shelley’s male and female characters — Laon and Cythna; Prometheus and Asia; Emily, Jane, and the first-person narrator of the poems addressed to them — consistently explore the implications of love relationships based not on law or religious doctrine, but solely on the emotions of the lovers.

Morris reminds us of Blake, Godwin, Wollstonecraft, and Shelley in his claim that the conventional nineteenth-century “marriage bed” is a fundamentally “commercial” arrangement. Old Hammond’s “Guest” (Morris’s persona) wonders at the physical attractiveness of the inhabitants of Nowhere, a characteristic Hammond attributes to marital reform. “A child born from the natural and healthy love between a man and a woman,” he says, “even if that be transient, is likely to turn out better in all ways, and especially in bodily beauty, than the birth of the respectable commercial marriage bed, or of the dull despair of the drudge of that system” (236). Morris also hints at a connection between conventional marriage and venereal complaints; men and women live longer and look better in the new world because they are not “burdened so heavily by self-inflicted diseases” (232). Old Hammond goes so far as to claim that the “Emancipation of Woman movement” makes no sense, since “the men no longer have any opportunity of tyrannizing over the women, or the women over the men” (234).

Such an idea of sexual tyranny is central to Blake’s critique of gender politics. For Blake, corrupt sexuality is one sign of the fallen condition of the human psyche. Uncorrupted sexuality — “the lineaments of Gratified Desire” (180) — implies a reunified sexuality, linking male characteristics with female characteristics that exist in both sexes. In Blake’s Eternity, each individual can be seen as containing, and recognizing, its masculine and feminine portion so that Marriage does not exist: “Humanity is far above sexual organization & the Visions of the Night of Beulah / Where sexes wander in dreams of bliss among the Emanations” (Jerusalem 79.73–74). In the state called Beulah, Blake imagines the union of the sexes as completely ideal.
and unrestricted. Men cannot tyrannize over women, nor women over men, if they see the apparently opposite gender as part of themselves. Blake describes his own utopian vision as a communal psychological state: “Mutual in one another’s love and wrath all renewing we live as One Man; for contracting our infinite senses / We behold multitude, or expanding, we behold as one, / As One Man all the universal Family” (Jerusalem 38.16–19). Likewise, in Night the Ninth of The Four Zoas, humanity unites in a communal state that represents a reintegrated human personality: “Thus shall the male & female live the life of Eternity” (IX, 219).

Like Blake, Morris acknowledges the profound psychological implications of the marriage contract. The world of Nowhere emerges, at least in part, because it has dealt with the psychological and social consequences of repression. “Many violent acts,” Old Hammond tells his guest, “came from the artificial perversion of the sexual passions, which cause overweeving jealousy and the like miseries” (Ch. 12, 253). Even such psychological consequences, however, have legal causes. Hammond explains that much of society’s past violence derived from “the idea (a law-made idea) of woman being the property of the man … That idea of course vanished with private property, as well as certain follies about the ‘ruin’ of women for following their natural desires in an illegal way, which was of course a convention caused by the laws of private property” (Ch. 12, 253). The model of human beings as property, and of a society organized around property rights, generates levels of greed, jealousy and sexual violence that would be unthinkable if property was seen only in communal terms. Blake’s harlot “blights with plagues the marriage hearse” not merely because she passes venereal disease to the next generation, but because her market value to males assures that all women will be seen by men in primarily economic terms. Blake takes the issue of sexual repression even further than Morris, claiming a link between military conflict and unsatisfied male sexual desire: “I must rush again to War,” the soldiers in Jerusalem cry, “for the Virgin has frown’d and refus’d” (68.63).

Warlike violence is another aspect of England that has vanished from Morris’s imagined future. But it vanishes only by way of a series of violent protests that precipitated the Revolution of 1952–54. These protests have a great deal in common with Shelley’s view of the causes and potential solutions to political violence. Morris’s view is not as extreme as Shelley’s, but it rests on a similar linkage between violence, pacifism, and the concept of shame.

In August 1819 Shelley was living in Italy when he learned of the Peterloo Massacre, in which mounted British troops had charged an unarmed group of men, women, and children who were protesting for Parliamentary reform. Several of the protesters were killed, and scores were wounded, although contemporary accounts range from eight to eleven dead and eighty to five hundred injured (Reiman 301). Shelley’s outraged response was ‘The Mask of Anarchy,’ perhaps the first modern statement of the principle of nonviolent protest. Shelley begins his poem with powerful images of the unjust forms of authority of his time — “God, and King, and Law” — and then imagines the stirrings of a radically new form of social action: “Let a great assembly be / Of the fearless and the free.” The crowd at this gathering is met by armed soldiers, but the protesters do not raise a hand against their assailants:
And if then the tyrants dare
Let them ride among you there,
Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew, –
What they like, that let them do.

... With folded arms and steady eyes
And little fear, and less surprise
Look upon them as they slay
Till their rage has died away. (340–47)

Shelley goes on to elaborate the psychological consequences of violence met with pacifism. The guilty soldiers, he says, will return shamefully to society, where the “blood thus shed will speak / In hot blushes on their cheek.” Women will point out the murderers in the streets, their former friends will shun them, and honorable soldiers will turn away from those responsible for the massacre, “ashamed of such base company.” A version of Shelley’s principle was taken up by Thoreau in his essay ‘Civil Disobedience,’ and later by Gandhi in his doctrine of *satyagraha.* In more recent years, Martin Luther King understood that a large enough crowd beside the Lincoln Memorial could prove what Shelley had only imagined a century-and-a-half earlier in a poem: “Ye are many—they are few.”

In *News From Nowhere,* Morris describes two mass protest gatherings connected with his imagined twentieth-century revolution, both of which bear comparison with Shelley’s vision of the effects of nonviolent protest. Morris first mentions a riot which took place “in or about the year 1887” in which “there was no fighting, merely unarmed and peaceable people attacked by ruffians armed with bludgeons” (218). The character of the Guest is here recounting the actual ‘Bloody Sunday’ assault of November 13, 1887, in which Morris himself had participated, when mounted guardsmen cleared Trafalgar Square of a crowd of radicals, Irish nationalists, and socialists: scores were arrested, hundreds treated in hospitals; at least three of the protestors died of their injuries. Morris had written to Andreas Scheu at the time, “I shall never forget how quickly those unarmed crowds were dispersed into clouds of dust.” Cunninghame Graham described the scene as follows: “I saw repeated charges made at a perfectly unarmed and helpless crowd. I saw policemen... repeatedly strike women and children.”

Morris’s earliest Trafalgar Square meeting in *News From Nowhere* is clearly based on the historical reality of the 1887 ‘Bloody Sunday’ – with its similarities to Shelley’s vision of nonviolent protest in ‘The Mask of Anarchy.’ Morris’s second mass gathering is an entirely fictional account of a 1952 massacre that precipitates civil war and leads to the communistic society described in the narrative. Morris does not depict these twentieth-century demonstrators as completely nonviolent. Old Hammond describes an eye-witness who recorded that “by far the greater part [of the crowd] were unarmed” (282), although one group of protesters bear arms and return the soldiers’ fire. It is perhaps not incidental that Morris describes how almost all of the armed men are killed in the first discharge of the soldiers’ weapons. From this point on, nonviolent resistance plays an important role in the story of the fictional 1952 massacre.

After the first assault on the Trafalgar Square crowd, the eye-witness describes how he “saw the officers going up and down the ranks urging the men to fire again; but
they received the orders in sullen silence, and let the butts of their guns fall” (284). Here we see another version of Shelley’s principle; the horror of their first violent action prevents most of the soldiers from firing again: “But when they called to mind that the soldiery in the ‘Battle’ of Trafalgar Square were so daunted by the slaughter which they had made that they could not be made to fire a second volley, they shrank back again from the dreadful courage necessary for carrying out another massacre” (290).

“After the massacre, however, it was at all times doubtful if the regular soldiers would fire upon an unarmed or half-armed crowd” (293). The first act of unjustified violence seems to have prevented subsequent acts of violent retribution. Morris hurries us over the details of the subsequent civil war, suggesting that it was a war fought in and for people’s minds and hearts, not of and with their bodies. We get no accounts of battles, fatalities, or injuries, but only descriptions of the vicious looks and “sulkiness” that confronted the remaining forces of reactionary conservatism following the initial massacre. The armies are described as worn out “by difficulties,” and the noncombatant sympathizers with the army are “so worried and beset with hatred and a thousand little troubles and annoyances that life became almost unendurable” (296). This psychological suffering, coupled with the vast destruction of property — the visible signs of the failed commercial and capitalist spirit — are the only details Morris provides of the two-year civil war following the first bloody exchange. Morris suggests, as had Shelley, that violence directed at mostly unarmed people has helped bring about a reformation in society. Morris also implies that it is unity of purpose aided by strength of numbers — “ye are many” — that finally wears down reactionary resistance to a new spirit of communal socialism.

Many of Shelley’s other writings contain ideas that bear striking similarity to the world described in News From Nowhere. In 1813 — long before Ruskin or Morris could have made such a claim — Shelley says in his notes to Queen Mab, that “there is no real wealth but the labour of man” (804). Shelley’s economic analysis of the condition of England sounds like a prototype for Morris’s own view. “Employments are lucrative,” Shelley says, “in an inverse ratio to their usefulness,” part of “a system admirably fitted to produce all the varieties of disease and crime, which never fail to characterize the two extremes of opulence and penury” (804). Shelley goes on to define wealth as “a power usurped by the few, to compel the many to labor for their benefit.” Shelley extends this logic to argue that “if the labour necessarily required to produce [necessities] were equitably divided among the poor, and, still more, if it were equitably divided among all, each man’s share of labour would be light, and his portion of leisure would be ample” (805). A similar state of affairs is clearly part of Morris’s version of utopia. Shelley bases his own defense of leisure on William Godwin’s claim that if every able-bodied person labored two hours a day, the necessities of life could be easily produced. Coleridge and Southey relied on identical hourly figures in the calculation of their labor needs in planning for a Pantisocratic utopia.

Shelley’s Queen Mab, we should also recall, was pirated by William Clark, who was then prosecuted for the publication. Clark’s edition was turned over to Richard Carlile, the radical bookseller, who distributed the remaining copies. The poem was known as the ‘Bible’ of the Chartist Movement in the 1840s, and continued to influence British Socialist thinkers into the twentieth century. The ephemeral poet spoke powerfully to a whole generation of political activists. Mary Shelley understood
the implications of her husband’s politics when she said he “believed that a clash between the two classes of society was inevitable, and he eagerly ranged himself on the people’s side” (Note on Hellas, 481). Shelley was also the author of lines that sound like a call to more than passive resistance:

Men of England, wherefore plough
For the lords who lay ye low?
Wherefore weave with toil and care
The rich robes your tyrants wear.

Sow seed, – but let no tyrant reap;
Find wealth, – let no imposter heap;
Weave robes, – let not the idle wear;
Forge arms, – in your defence to bear.
(“Song to the Men of England,” 1–8)

And the revolutionary vision that closes ‘The Mask of Anarchy’ presents a social ideal that stretches all the way from the idealisms of Shelley and Ruskin, through the communisms of Marx and Morris, to the democratic movements of Walesa and Havel in our own day:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number –
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you –
Ye are many – they are few.

This model of political power places strength in numbers and commitment. Sufficient numbers of individuals, wedded to a democratic ideal, will succeed in the long run even if they face discouraging and destructive setbacks along the way. Ideals translate into meaningful action only when enough people come to believe in them.

One of the strongest tensions in Romanticism develops at the intersection between the social and the anti-social. As Northrop Frye has noted, there is something fundamentally antisocial at the heart of the cultural vision we have come to call “Romantic,” a longing for a safely isolated place where the cares of the world might vanish in a vision of unity and rest. At the same time, Romantic writers like Blake and Shelley unflinchingly record the horrors of the world in which they live, and they work to present a social and political vision that will lead toward a more just society. This same tension is often apparent in Morris, the “idle singer of an empty day” – as he called himself – who sometimes longed to retreat into a medieval world of fantasy, while at the same time working radically to transform his own society in social and economic terms. But like Shelley and Blake before him – and perhaps to an even greater extent than these poets – Morris found a way to transform the antisocial aspects of his vision into positive social change: through writing and through political action. The world of News From Nowhere is not a world we are meant only to dream about; it is a world we are meant to help bring about.
NOTES

1 All citations of Blake are from Blake: Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972 [1966]).

2 In his introduction to William Morris: News From Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs, ed. A. Briggs (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 [1962]), p.18. All citations to News From Nowhere are to this edition. James Redmond has said that "the main value of News From Nowhere is that more than any other single work of the period it relates the Romantic dream to the reality of contemporary life," in his edition of News From Nowhere: or an epoch of rest, being some chapters from a utopian romance (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p.192.

3 Morris's praise of "To a Skylark" appears in a letter of April 1855 to Cormell Price. See The Collected Letters of William Morris, Volume 1: 1848-1880, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), p.11. See Jack Lindsay, William Morris (New York: Taplinger, 1979) pp. 12, 108, 279, 298 for Morris's other comments on Blake and Shelley. See also The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris, ed. Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1969), where Morris comments on the Romantic poets in his lecture "The Gothic Revival (I)", p.72, and Blake in his lecture "The Gothic Revival (II)": "Blake ... who, visionary as he was understood not only the power of words in verse but also the power of form and colour to delight the eye at the same time that it exalts the mind" (75).


5 See A Vindication of the Rights of Women, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: Norton, 1988 [1975]), where Wollstonecraft describes how "successful" marriages often ruin the very women they are supposed to save: "many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, ruined before they know the difference between virtue and vice: — and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous" (71).


10 See particularly Roland A. Duerksen’s introduction to his edition of Shelley’s Political Writings (New York: Meredith, 1970), pp.vii-xxii. Duerksen notes comments on Shelley by Marx and Tolstoy, and points out that Gandhi read 'The Mask of Anarchy' to vast audiences during the campaign for a free India.

"But he were king, or kinges eyr...": Morris's re-telling of Havelok

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According to David Latham and Sheila Latham's recent Annotated Bibliography of William Morris¹, there has been no substantial study of Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair. Morris printed the story in a handsome Kelmscott Press edition in 1895, to follow his first wholly heterocosmic fiction, The Wood Beyond the World. Apart from the Collected Works text, there is only one later edition, published in 1977 with an interesting introduction by Richard Matthews².

Three striking aspects of its thirteenth-century "source" ought to make us expect something special of Morris' re-telling. First, it is emphatically English, from the Danelaw, in language as unfrenchified as even Morris could have wished. Second, it juxtaposes, with great gusto, the harsh life of the labouring poor and the power-drives of the court, yet it is the hero's beauty and prowess that creates the happy ending; Morris was always attracted by tales in which the central character's beauty and luck were decisive. Third, it assumes the absolute priority of royal blood: specific "noble" virtues of temperament can only be found in royalty. Morris was so little reverent of the aristocracy of his own or any period that such naive royalism could not but be a challenge to him. Naturally, in a useful sense of that word, he pits the second aspect against the third – and it wins!

Havelok tells an ironic story of the defeat of usurpers who oppress children. Dying, the kings of England and Denmark both leave a single child; the first is an infant queen entrusted to a guardian and the other a boy king entrusted to a regent, but both lords are corrupted by power. The poem begins with the heroic English king, Athelwold, on his deathbed. He is concerned that his death will leave Goldboru, his infant daughter, unprotected in a turbulent court:

That was so yung that sho ne couthe
Gon on fote, ne speke wit mouthe.³

Earl Godriche swears a sacramental oath at Athelwold's deathbed that as regent he will both administer the country and guard the girl,

Til that she were tuelf winter hold,
And of speche were bold;
And that she couthe of curtesye
Gon, and spoken of luue-drurye... (192–196)