Beauty and the Body in
News From Nowhere

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The utopian impulse informs William Morris's entire career, from his early association with members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, through his work in design and the revival of handicraft in 'The Firm', to his socialist activism and his vision of the socialist future in *News from Nowhere*. I will argue that a radical reconceptualization of beauty and of the body was central to this maturation from aesthetic dreaming to active work on behalf of social change. Ultimately, Morris's recognition of the importance of embodiment - what he sometimes calls 'animal life' - necessitates a conception of beauty as not merely a quality to be perceived or appreciated in the material world, but as a quality to be passionately experienced in the physical self.

My starting point will be a quite remarkable, almost parenthetical comment tossed off by Morris in his 1884 lecture, 'How We Live and How We Might Live'. After an analysis of the 'present state of society [as] based on a state of perpetual war', Morris enumerates four 'claims for a decent life' - essential human needs. They are 'first, a healthy body; second, an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present, and the future; thirdly, occupation fit for a healthy body and an active mind; and fourthly, a beautiful world to live in'. None of this seems particularly surprising; and the fourth claim, a beautiful world, is certainly typical of Morris. Everywhere in his writings on art and politics, he stresses the human need for beauty in architecture, in nature, and in domestic goods, and, in this area, his thinking on beauty is well-known.

But the passage continues toward a much more striking argument about beauty. Morris goes on to define good health in this way: 'To feel mere life a pleasure; to enjoy the moving one's limbs and exercising one's bodily powers; to play, as it were, with sun and wind and rain; to rejoice in satisfying the due bodily appetites of a human animal without fear of degradation or sense of wrong-doing; yes, and therewithal to be well-formed, straight-limbed, strongly knit, expressive of countenance - to be, in a word, beautiful - that also I claim'. We have, he claims, a right to be beautiful.

This seemingly casual statement is entirely at odds with the dominant Western conception of beauty as a quality to be apprehended outside of the self, particularly in objects or in visual representations of the human figure. This kind of beauty has been identified with such characteristics as harmony, symmetry, smoothness and softness. It is to be appreciated in a distanced, disembodied way; the true aesthetic response, we are told, does not even call up the desire to touch the beautiful object, and certainly is not at its basis physiological. To quote Carolyn Korsmeyer, 'The conventional notion of aesthetic pleasure ... is not a pleasure that indicates the satisfaction of a goal or desire, not a pleasure in practical achievement, not a moral approval; and in strict constructions it is not a cognitive pleasure, nor a sensuous or sensual pleasure. In its purest form (e.g., in Kant) this is pleasure in the apprehension of form unsubsumed by concept' and as such is understood as a rational pleasure.
In this tradition, the disembodied nature of aesthetic pleasure marks its superiority to lower pleasures, the presence of which suggests imperfect art. In his essay on feminine beauty, for example, Kenneth Clark remarks approvingly that Goya's 'Maja Desnuda' is 'painted so coolly that she awakens no feelings of desire'. Now, a cooler eye than Clark's, one feeling no need to moralize appreciation of one of the sexiest painted ladies imaginable, might have a different opinion. But to Clark, and others like him, we are to contemplate beauty, not feel it; or at least to feel it in our souls, not in our flesh. Furthermore, the evaluation of beauty is 'primarily applied to entities whose most defining qualities are not considered to be active, consciously transformative, or socially constructive'. Thus, by definition, beauty and transformative efficacy are divorced.

This same disembodied and politically inert beauty dominates the work of the Pre-Raphaelite painters who so influenced Morris's early aesthetic. Though Holman Hunt claimed that art should 'raise aspiration to the healthy and heroic' and objected to conventionalized nymphs as 'waxen effigies rather than living figures', beauty in Pre-Raphaelite work is most often characterised by stillness and lassitude; the subjects are often women having 'out-of-body' experiences: trances, dreams, reveries, swoons, and death. Recurrent figures of sleepers, as in Moore's 'Dreamers' or 'Midsummer', or Burne-Jones's 'Sleeping Beauty', are only the most obvious instances, of which Rossetti's ecstatic 'Beata Beatrix' might be considered a variation. The typical Pre-Raphaelite beauty is far from vigorous: posed in a pensive mood, with the head turned aside and slightly drooping, she is 'remote, unattainable, and sad', 'the perfect object of desire because she herself is without desire'. Even in figures of dancers, as in Burne-Jones's 'Garden of the Hesperides', flying draperies provide the only sense of motion. The stillness in these faces reflects a traditional aesthetic that opposes 'the body as aesthetic object, passive and still-the exemplar of the beautiful-to action, source of the experience of the sublime'.

Furthermore, despite the open sensuality of works like Rossetti's series of 'stunners', flesh is banished in an oddly prudish way; the women are most often swathed in furs, silks, feathers, fans, and flowers. Only Burne-Jones produces very many nudes, and even these, usually representing mythical or allegorical figures and thus 'spiritualized', are pale and lacking in muscular definition. Qualities such as strength, agility, or speed—those qualities that give physical pleasure to their possessors in the absence of an observer—are rarely suggested. The lack of active agency in the subjects reflects the essential quietism of Pre-Raphaelite utopianism, which sought ideal beauty with little awareness of the social and political contexts in which beauty may be achieved or acquired. As E. P. Thompson puts it, the Pre-Raphaelites 'sought to create great Art with their backs turned on the world'. Undeniably lovely, these figures are offered up as objects for aesthetic contemplation, images of a refuge from the strivings of material life: a place of peace, purity, and tranquillity.

What then would it mean to consider beauty as something we have a right to be, as well as something we have a right to have? This is quite a different matter from Morris's well-known arguments on the importance of a beautiful world to live in. To be beautiful: to take pleasure in oneself as one might take pleasure in the natural world or in beautiful objects, is a more difficult matter, and a far more ambitious goal. I do not believe that by this phrase Morris meant we had a right to be beautiful in the eyes of others. Rather, he claims for all human beings another kind of beauty,
located in the experience of the flesh rather than in the eye, and perceived from inside-out. It would be an attribute of how we feel ourselves to move in the world and to be touched by the world. Furthermore, it would be an attribute of active, productive bodies, and therefore a kind of beauty necessary to, as well as resulting from, the social transformation he envisioned in his political work and writings.

In *News from Nowhere*, Morris devotes a good deal of time to exploring this new concept of beauty, through representations of the utopian body as both beautiful and vigorous. First, one must note that the ‘comeliness’ of the people is not primarily a matter of beautiful *faces*. Narrator Guest immediately notices the health and strength of the women he encounters, ‘so shapely and well-knit’ (3: 14), and he frequently comments upon their sun-browned faces and arms. In part their beauty is simply a result of their physical health and freedom from malnutrition or overwork. Another explanation of the ‘increase of beauty’ in utopia is offered as well. According to old Hammond, the utopians believe ‘that a child born from the natural and healthy love between a man and a woman ... 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’. They say, ‘Pleasure begets pleasure’ (9: 62). This explanation parallels Morris’s belief that the products of workers who take pleasure in their work would naturally be beautiful. And indeed, his attempt to unite utilitarian and aesthetic spheres in the production of domestic crafts is entirely congruent with an appreciation of human beauty as a quality of bodies that are active and of use.

The body in Morris is a means of union with the natural world as well as with friends and lovers. His utopians feel in their bodies the pleasure and pain of the changing seasons. Furthermore, the utopian impulse itself is understood as an erotic one; as Mendelson observes in his discussion of *The Wood Beyond the World*, there is in Morris an ‘alliance between the body electric and the body politic’.14 The longing for freedom and equality was, says Hammond, like the ‘unreasonable passion of the lover’ (17: 105); the ‘spirit of the new days’ is also compared to the lover’s feeling for his beloved (18: 132). Social transformation thus both results from and brings about a disalienation from our animal selves; his ‘Society of the Future’ is a world in which ‘men (and women too, of course) would do their work and take their pleasure in their own persons, and not vicariously... The pleasures of such a society would be founded on the free exercises of the senses and passions of a healthy human animal’.15 Though dressed in silks even when working the fields, these men and women handle boats and burdens with ease and find in strenuous labour what Morris elsewhere calls ‘that mysterious bodily pleasure which goes with the deft exercise of the bodily powers’.16 They enjoy their own and each other’s bodies, they take a stranger’s hand, pat an arm, and kiss as naturally as children, with a freedom also evident in their relatively unconstrained sexuality. And they love the small sensual pleasures of daily existence, the stretch of exertion, the softness of fine fabric, the changing quality of the air.

The figure of Ellen offers the strongest imaginable contrast to the Pre-Raphaelite beauties like the frail Elizabeth Siddal or Morris’s own wife Jane, who was, according to Thompson, ‘silent, languorous, frequently unwell’.17 Healthy, sunburnt, barefoot, and strong, Ellen has a dazzling beauty that is always in motion, laughing and windblown. Her eyes are direct and keen, ‘like light jewels’ (23: 155), and everything
she does is marked by an ‘indefinable interest and pleasure in life’ (27: 182). The mobility and responsiveness of her face reflects her intense engagement in life, an engagement as deeply physical as it is emotional. In the unity of her physical, emotional, and rational capacities she lives out the promise of Morris’s socialist utopia. Given the importance of the body to Morris’s concept of utopia, it is appropriate that Guest’s departure from Nowhere is marked first by a process of disembodiment, as he becomes invisible to his utopian friends, and then by his encounter with a figure strangely contrasting with the joyous, beautiful people I had left behind...

It was a man who looked old, but whom I knew from habit, now half-forgotten, was really not much more than fifty. His face was rugged, and grimed rather than dirty; his eyes dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping. His clothing was a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me. As I passed him he touched his hat with some real goodwill and courtesy, and much servility (32: 209–210).

Degraded and prematurely aged by poverty, toil, and hopelessness, this body can only be a burden to its possessor. And as such it serves as a painful emblem of the failings of the industrial world from which Morris’s novel offers an ‘epoch of rest’. In its beauty and joyful physicality, the utopian body of News from Nowhere incarnates all that Morris saw possible in socialism as well as his understanding that a beautiful world can be achieved only by active endeavour. And it demonstrates the distance he had travelled since his essentially apolitical Pre-Raphaelite beginnings. Though the aesthetic of Morris’s utopia is Pre-Raphaelite in many ways – particularly its nostalgic medievalism and its attention to natural detail – what we might call the ‘kinaesthetics’ of News from Nowhere map out a new aesthetic territory, founded in, and productive of, a liberated utopian body.

NOTES
All quotations from News from Nowhere are from The Collected Works of William Morris, (London: Longmans, Green & Co 1910–15), ed. May Morris, Volume XVI.

2 ibid., p. 156.
3 ibid., p. 158. Emphasis added.
8 ibid., p. 86.


13 *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, op. cit., p. 60.


16 ibid., p. 67.

17 *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, op. cit., p. 75.