Teaching *News from Nowhere* in France for the CAPES and the Agrégation in English Studies, 2004–2006

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**INTRODUCTION**

In 2004, *News from Nowhere* was set on the syllabus of the CAPES and the *agrégation* in English studies. The following year the book remained on the program for the *agrégation interne*, a competitive exam designed for tenured secondary school teachers who have previously passed the CAPES and who wish to reach a higher level of qualification. So for two years, approximately 7000 candidates for nation-wide competitive exams, called *concours* in French, had to work on Morris’s utopian romance, among other objects of study including literary texts such as Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, or Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, linguistics and didactics. *News from Nowhere* was thus part of a wider – and altogether more demanding – syllabus, consisting of a total of three literary works and one question of *civilisation* for the CAPES, and up to six literary works and three questions of *civilisation* for the *agrégation*. This impressive range of assignments is a major constraint on the part of the university teachers in charge of the CAPES and *agrégation* courses, as their students are in need of background knowledge on the work itself, which they are supposed to have carefully read, and on its con-
text. But it is not feasible to ‘overdose’ students with information, to paraphrase Dick’s remark to Guest.

Nonetheless, setting *News from Nowhere* on the syllabus of these *concours* was a splendid opportunity for a whole generation of French *anglicistes* to become acquainted with such a towering Victorian figure as Morris and for French academics to engage with one of his key works which has been insufficiently studied in France since Paul Meier’s *La Pensee Utopique de William Morris* (1972).

According to Franck Lessay, Professor at the Sorbonne Nouvelle and president of the *agrégation* jury, who in that capacity was behind this choice, studying Morris’s utopian romance would allow French candidates to become more familiar with the utopian tradition in Britain and would encourage their reflection over the distinctness of the socialist experience on both sides of the Channel from the late nineteenth century to the present day.

Based on personal observation and on interviews with colleagues in charge of the lectures and classes on *News from Nowhere* in various French universities, this article seeks to present the way the book was approached and how students responded to it.

**THE TEACHING OF ‘NEWS FROM NOWHERE’ AND TURF WARS IN ENGLISH STUDIES IN FRANCE**

The initial reaction among those university teachers responsible for the ‘civilisation’ aspect in the competitive exams’ programme was to question the judiciousness of setting one specific work for the *concours*. Some of my respondents would have clearly preferred the study of *News from Nowhere* to be integrated within a more general question such as ‘The Rise of Socialism in Britain, c. 1880–1914’. The choice of such a book seemed to many a potential source of confusion among students between what pertained to the ‘literature’ and to the ‘civilisation’ parts of their pro-
The presentation of the text which appeared in the *Bulletin Officiel de l'Education Nationale* made it very clear that it was Morris’s political career on which emphasis had to be placed, but it also mentioned Morris’s artistic legacy, in particular his impact upon the Arts and Crafts Movement. More problematically, it contended that Morris the Marxist remained a disciple of Carlyle and Ruskin, that the book had some ‘relevance to contemporary ideological debates’ and to the late-twentieth-century ‘crisis of State socialism’ and that through the ‘aporias and contradictions’ in the romance one could partly explain ‘the contemporary crisis of utopias’.6 Clearly, teaching *News from Nowhere* was not to be an ‘epoch of rest’, but the source both of border disputes between the various specialist fields in English studies and of political strife between academics over the alleged ideological bankruptcy of the Left in the Western world.

The first problem that had to be solved was thus how to deal with *News from Nowhere* in a civilisationiste perspective – i.e. as a historical document – without bypassing the identity of its author both as an artist and as a writer. So, what happened in a good many French universities, my own (Lille) included, was that local specialists in English Literature who had previously worked on Morris took part in the teaching, usually taking charge of introductory lectures on Morris’s biography and his literary works.

What overcame initial apprehensions in French civilisationiste circles was the complex status of the book itself which promised interesting perspectives for all specialists in civilisation britannique, whether their own particular domain of expertise was the history of ideas, women’s history, or imperial, political, social or cultural history.

As a utopia, it could be presented as belonging to a long Anglo-Saxon lineage, starting with Thomas More and echoing, or even directly responding to, more contemporary works such as Richard Jefferies’ *After London* or Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Here, specialists in the history of ideas were given the possibility of encompassing the whole British approach to
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utopias, thus acquainting students with little-known aspects of this type of narrative, in particular utopias of the British Enlightenment or the dystopian and utopian novels of the Victorian Age.

This first dimension of the book also enabled lecturers whose research areas covered political history to present News from Nowhere within the context of the rise of scientific materialism in the British Isles and the gradual discarding of earlier, utopian forms of socialism. It allowed lecturers to place Morris in a broad nineteenth century perspective delineating the rise of socialism in Britain from the 1830s onwards. Incidentally, this required lecturers to discuss Morris’s own brand of socialism and his fidelity towards contemporary Marxist orthodoxy. In my opinion, this is one of the chief reasons why teaching News from Nowhere to French anglicistes was a welcome addition to our students’ knowledge of British political culture. All in all, the Conservative, the Liberal and the Radical traditions are well covered in English studies in France, and our students are usually well acquainted with the Labour Party and its twentieth century evolution. But the existence of revolutionary Socialism in late-Victorian Britain was very much a discovery for many of them. Beyond drawing attention to a neglected form of political discourse in the British Isles, the study of News from Nowhere also raised the issue of the Morrisian roots of British Labour politics: that is why some articles in the collections of essays on News from Nowhere published in France addressed the question of Morris’s impact upon the Labour movement, with some articles more particularly dedicated to Morris’s influence on Guild Socialism.

Concerning the text as a piece of political propaganda, the difficulty was to give students some working knowledge of Marxist ideology – an object of study quite unfamiliar to students who are trained to become linguists first and foremost, and which is regarded as somewhat extraneous to their usual first- to third-year fare in civilisation britannique et américaine. Similarly, it was imperative and no less challenging to help students find their whereabouts regarding the various strands of socialism that exist-
ed at the time and to follow the part played by Morris himself in the wranglings between and within the Social Democratic Federation, the anarchists and the Socialist League. The earlier stage of Morris’s public career as a Radical meant that lecturers had to clarify the identity of that political family, whose agenda differs so greatly from France’s own radical tradition. Finally, the affinities between Morris’s socialism and some aspects of Toryism’s anti-liberal and anti-utilitarian tradition needed to be alluded to without overplaying their resemblances. More confusingly still, Morris’s anti-statist approach had to be set within the liberal discourse itself and its contempt for the ‘Unloved State’, to borrow a phrase from one of Martin Wiener’s articles. Contextualising News from Nowhere eventually required lecturers to sketch out the broad outlines of Victorian Britain’s multifaceted political culture to a public little acquainted with the ideological intricacies of the ‘Age of Reform’.

Specialists in women’s history were given the possibility of discussing the status of women in the book and could set Morris’s approach in the context of the rise of female suffragism and the contemporary challenge to the notion of separate spheres that materialised in the passionate debates of the 1890s about the so-called ‘New Woman’. Those with an interest in imperial history chose to insist on the romance as an anti-imperial tract which deliberately went against the grain of the jingoism of the time; social and economic historians introduced students to Britain’s economic plight at the time and its repercussion upon the working-classes, in particular the rise of radicalised forms of trade-unionism; cultural historians tackled the importance of mediaevalism in Victorian Britain and the strength of the preservationist movement in which Morris took such an active part. Clearly, for the French specialists of Victorian history, the study of News from Nowhere soon opened a large spectrum of historical enquiry that was bound to enhance greatly the grasp of young anglicistes on Victorian society.

The official guidelines published in the Bulletin Officiel de l’Education Nationale and their insistance on the contemporary relevance of Morris’s romance went by and large unheeded. The
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teaching strategy consisted in returning to the Victorian age to make sense of the book rather than in instrumentalising it to make sense of features of the contemporary period such as the rise of New Labour in Britain and of ecological movements in the Western world.

TEACHING ‘NEWS FROM NOWHERE’
AN OVERVIEW OF COURSES AND MANUALS

A typical example of how courses were constructed in France may be viewed on François Poirier's website. Pr Poirier, who teaches at Paris 13, is a well-known specialist in the UK's social and political history of the working-class movements. As such, soon after the publication of the official CAPES and agrégation programmes, he sent a circular to his colleagues via the newsletter of our professional association, the Société des Anglïcistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur, to insist on the necessity of adopting a historical perspective concerning News from Nowhere. In his course outline, we can find short biographical elements and brief reminders of Morris's earlier career as a poet and a designer, while the bulk of his lecture notes dealt with the utopian tradition, the rise of socialism in Britain, Morris's position in late-Victorian debates over socialism, and highlighted various aspects of the book, like the clash between the cities and the countryside, environmentalism, education, the way the narrative reveals Morris's personal approach to socialism, anarchism and the revolution. Pr Poirier also wrote the book published by the Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED), France's equivalent to the British Open University, with the collaboration of Dr Elizabeth Gaudin (Paris 7). Its structure is similar to what Pr Poirier developed in his series of lectures at Paris 13. It is composed of three parts: the first corresponds to one-fifth of the 186-page book and deals with Morris's life. The second part represents about three-fifths of the volume and tackles the context of the book (the utopian tradition; the working-class movement
from Owen and the Chartists to Morris’s time). The last part is specifically dedicated to the analysis of six key aspects of the book (city and countryside; women’s status; education; art and work; nature and environment; the Great Change), and the parting shot is a short passage on Morris’s posthumous influence. This form of course organisation reflects the structure of a whole body of publications designed to cater for the needs of fretful candidates in the shape of collections of essays covering the most salient aspects of the work.  

An overview of what these essays covered will provide a broad picture of what it is that lecturers wished to put forward for the study of the book. English-speaking specialists of William Morris – for example, Clive Wilmer, Peter Faulkner, Florence Boos, David Latham, or Marcus Waithe – contributed to these collective books, which enabled French students to be abreast of the latest critical work. Generally, these papers are synthesis articles. Some attempt to define Morris’s socialism, or his influence on British socialism, or the Victorian conflict between the city and the country. Aspects of News from Nowhere discussed include the status of women and the issue of domesticity in the narrative, such distinctive features of the Nowherians as health and pleasure, or News from Nowhere as a rejoinder to Bellamy’s Looking Backward. Morris’s literary and artistic career, together with the aesthetic dimensions of the book, are not neglected, although in quantitative terms the majority of these papers left the purely aesthetic, artistic or literary contextualisation of the work out of the picture.

For students, having to write synthesising essays on the work meant that they had to have some knowledge of the various critical, historiographical and political interpretations of Morris’s career and of his utopia. For that reason, they were provided with extensive bibliographies, but their attention was mostly directed to E. P. Thompson’s William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary, which was the first scholarly work to retrieve Morris’s socialism as a central part of his life and works after a long minimisation of his controversial conversion to Marxism, to Paul Meier’s La Pensée Utopique de William Morris,
which contains numerous and conflicting quotations from early appraisals of the book, to Florence Boos’s collection of essays *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, and to the *ad hoc* collective books I have just mentioned. Aubier also reprinted its 1957 bilingual edition, with an introduction and a translation by Victor Dupont, one of the early commentators of Morris’s work in France, but students were told to purchase the 1998 Penguin Classics edition with an introduction by Clive Wilmer.

What now remains to be seen is how students responded to the book, to the contextual knowledge they were given during lectures and to the reading suggestions that were made.

**STUDENT RESPONSE TO **NEWS FROM NOWHERE**

The reaction of French *agrégats* and *capessiens*, as the students preparing these two exams are called in French academic parlance, was gleaned from two distinct sources. Student response was on the one hand assessed during tutorials dedicated either to a commentary on excerpts from the text or from discussion of essay titles in preparation for the *concours*. Essays also provided useful insights into how students viewed the text, its overall meaning and the context in which it is inscribed. Between 2003 and 2005, I was given ample scope to assess how students had handled the text, as I marked a substantial number of essays and commentaries written by my students in Lille, but also by candidates nationwide, since I worked both as an examiner for the CNED and as a member of the CAPES jury.

The only occasion on which *News from Nowhere* was actually set as an exam paper was for the 2005 session of the CAPES. It turned out to be a commentary on a passage from Chapter XVIII, when Old Hammond describes the revolutionary process. Otherwise, the passages which students worked on to prepare for the exam covered most of the book. In the case of what I personally dealt with for the preparation of the commentary, I chose excerpts taken from the *incipit* (*Discussion and Bed*, the first chapter), from Chapter II, ‘A Morning Bath’, in
particular Guest’s very first encounter with Dick, from Chapter IV, ‘A Market by the Way’, which was the opportunity to discuss the ruralised London envisioned by Morris, and the chapter ‘Children on the Road’, to tackle the issue of childhood and education. Extracts from the long conversation between Guest and Old Hammond were given a good deal of attention, as they covered most of the utopian world’s transformations after the Great Change. Whether for my own classes or in the case of other lecturers, the second part of the book was all-in-all understudied, apart from the encounter with the Old Grumbler and with the Obstinate Refusers. The reason why the trip down the Thames seemed to elicit less interest on the part of lecturers is related to its more leisurely narrative pace and to its lesser informative quality – clearly, the work of contextualisation of the book back into its Victorian roots was less rewarding for that part of the romance.

Concerning essay titles, these usually offered students the opportunity to discuss Morris’s socialism, or News from Nowhere’s overall meaning. For example, the distance-learning preparation offered by the CNED set the following essay titles: ‘That News from Nowhere is intent upon preserving, not to say sacralising, Britishness, is beyond dispute’;19 ‘For some critics, the end of the Victorian era was an age of both stability and despair. Is this ambivalence reflected in News from Nowhere?’; ‘When reviewing Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward, William Morris wrote in Commonweal (22 June 1889): “The only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author”. Can this recommendation be applied to his own News from Nowhere?'; and the rather cryptic ‘Recycling and rejection in News from Nowhere’.

In Lille, my students were asked to discuss early critical judgements passed on Morris’s work by Edouard Guyot: ‘Morris envisions the future more as a poet and an artist than as a politician and a social scientist’ or by Robert Steele and W. R. Lethaby in the Quarterly Review: ‘There was nothing modern or scientific about Morris’s Socialism. He turned to the Middle Ages, because what he detested did not then exist, but he never for-
mulated a scientific scheme of Socialism. Indeed, it is doubtful if he can be called a Socialist at all. 20

I hope that the following remarks will not be judged as the uncharitable highlighting of the misjudgments made by French students, as I preferred to discuss the cognitive dissonances, to use the jargon of didactics, caused by the book, which seems to me a more valuable exercise than the mere registering of how the study of *News from Nowhere* enhanced our students’ knowledge of William Morris, his life, his work and his times.

Among the elements that particularly focused the students’ attention, the most recurrently – and hotly – debated was that of women’s status in Nowhere. The salience of that topic is probably related to the type of audience attending CAPES and agrégation classes: around 80% of candidates preparing the CAPES and the *agrégation interne* in English are female. The general impression was that women’s blissful espousal of household chores in Nowhere smacked of male chauvinism – in other words, Morris might have been a revolutionary, but in terms of the sexual division of labour, he was clearly perceived as a traditionalist. Old Hammond’s jocular reference to ‘an old Norwegian folk-lore tale called How the Man minded the House failed to elicit mirth, 21 and the assertive Mistress Philippa who appears in Chapter XXVI was considered too exceptional a figure and too belated an addition to the narrative to be entirely sincere.

This had implication for the wider understanding of the work, the radical nature of which many failed to acknowledge, as the other elements tending to confirm Morris’s so-called traditionalist leanings were grist to the mill of those sceptical of Morris’s actual repudiation of Victorianism. This often led to intimations that Morris endorsed the Victorian system of separate spheres, and that women were confined to a purely ornamental role in his utopia. Nowhere’s indebtedness to the Middle Ages was at times evoked to support this minimisation of Morris’s revolutionary agenda. In such a perspective, the praise of mediaeval crafts­manship or the return to the Saxon Mote were interpreted as pertaining to the same rejuvenation of archaic social or political
forms. This is how, bizarrely enough, Morris the revolutionary was turned upside down to become Morris the conservative.

In a similar vein, one of the passages that spurred a lot of misunderstanding was that of the encounter with the Old Grumbler. The Old Grumbler, who rejects Nowhere’s new-found bliss, suggesting that its happy denizens are in fact ‘sitting on a damp cloud and singing hymns’, was very often construed as acting as Morris’s mouthpiece in the narrative. To my mind, this reveals the difficulty experienced by some students in applying to the Civilisation part of the exam the required tools of analysis, and in refraining from using the methods which are specific to the Literature part of their program. Indeed, interpreting the Old Grumbler as evidence of Morris’s own qualms about his own utopia stemmed from our students’ acquaintance with post-modern critical analysis and its insistence on the narrator’s playful attitude to and often ironic distance from his own work and characters.

But the most startling aspect of the work for French students remained Morris’s attitudes towards education. For would-be school-teachers, the disappearance of schools and teachers constituted a particularly disquieting innovation. For young linguists, the perfect ease with which Nowhere’s children acquire foreign languages – ‘our guests from over-sea often bring their children with them, and the little ones get together, and rub their speech into one another’, as Dick remarks – was a mind-boggling proposition, which was discussed at length in the third part of their essays when they considered the limitations and inconsistencies of Morris’s utopian world. The disappearance of schools was thus used as an argument supporting the view of Morris as an anarchist, or as the inventor of a ‘republique vacancière’, as Victor Dupont once dubbed it in his introduction to the Aubier bilingual edition.

This leads to another widespread reaction to the book, namely how Nowhere appears too perfect a society to be entirely convincing. The way Morris repeatedly insists on the beauty, the health, the vigour and the happiness of the inhabitants of Nowhere ended up being construed as the book’s major flaw.
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This led to interpretations of Nowhere as a land of uniformity and standardisation, which was obviously at odds with Morris’s intention and his awareness that this was exactly one of the most hackneyed arguments against socialism in the anti-socialist arsenal. For students with few qualms about anachronism, Nowhere heralded Soviet Russia.

In my opinion, what these misinterpretations have in common is that they neglect how much Morris as a propagandist knew of the arguments his adversaries had been levelling at socialism and the extent to which News from Nowhere is as much a ‘vision’ designed to enthrall the socialist convert as a rejoinder to the antisocialist rhetoric of the time. Generally, it was once the status of the book as propaganda was lost sight of that such errors of judgement were made – judging the work with criteria and concepts taken from contemporary literary criticism was the surest means to de-contextualise and de-politicise Nowhere.

Pointing out Nowhere’s lack of verisimilitude, Morris’s seeming inconsistencies in the narrative or the sense of boredom and uniformity experienced by the reader all seem misguided critical work. Due respect to appropriate historical method implies that reading News from Nowhere as a historical document precludes any normative or aesthetic judgement on the fictional deficiencies of the romance – what actually matters is not the verisimilitude of Morris’s post-revolutionary world, but why and in response to what alternative socialist or anti-socialist discourses he wrote it the way he did. Such a critical stance also obliterates another key aspect of Morris’s work, namely how keen he was for his romance not to be regarded as a programmatic blueprint for reform but for it to be read as a vision.

CONCLUSION

News from Nowhere eventually proved to be an invaluable pedagogical instrument. Its status as a classic of Victorian literature and as a key document in the history of the working-class movement in Britain familiarised our students with a text that quick-
ly became the bedside book of the Labour movement, rivalling Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as the favourite reading of Labour activists from the early twentieth century onwards. As such, it provided young French *anglicistes* with crucial insights into the political culture of the Left in Britain and into the assumptions of its supporters.

The book was also an opportunity to make students aware of the conflicting interpretations of Britishness in the nineteenth century. Indeed, *News from Nowhere* mounts a challenge against most of the Victorian age's upbeat certainties about industry, free trade, monarchy, Empire, trial by jury and protestantism as pillars of national identity. Furthermore, the values which it substitutes for these emblems of Britishness, namely mistrust towards centralisation, the pursuit of peace, the religion of humanity, the rise of highly localised forms of government like the Motes, the ruralisation of the country, the diffusion of craftsmanship into all fields of activity, are all radical ideas which go against the grain of the Victorian mindset, but which are also rooted in earlier or less consensual interpretations of national identity. Morris's work could thus be made to illustrate both the dominant values of British society and the various discourses which then sought to contest this primary definition of Britishness which Morris intended to question. More paradoxically, for all its revolutionary reinvention of Britain, Morris's utopia has features which remain recognisably English, such as fellowship, love for the countryside and craftsmanship and a high value placed on domesticity — all aspects which eased the book's absorption into Labour circles. For these reasons the study of *News from Nowhere* fed our students' reflection over the construction of national identity in the British Isles and over British Labour's subsequent features.
NOTES

1 For readers unacquainted with the way France’s Ministry of National Education recruits its secondary-school teachers, let me briefly explain those two terms. The CAPES, which stands in French for the Certificat d’Aptitude au Professorat de l’Enseignement Secondaire, namely the certificate authorising successful candidates to become secondary-school teachers, is a nation-wide competitive exam. The prerequisite for candidates is to have passed a Licence (a BA) in English studies. For that particular subject, there is an average 5,000 candidates every year, with about 1,000 students who eventually succeed in being awarded the CAPES after having successfully taken first the written part of the exam (which is usually held in March) and the oral part (for which about 2,000 candidates are selected and auditioned in July by a 120-member jury composed of academics and secondary-school teachers, all specialists in English studies). The agrégation is the highest competitive exam for teachers in France. Candidates must have either the CAPES or an MA. In English, there is a yearly average of 2,000 candidates — called agrégatifs — for about 150 tenured positions as agrégé d’anglais. Agrégés usually work in lycées, where they teach their subject to fifth- to upper-sixth form pupils, but a good many of them end up working in universities, while most holders of the CAPES teach in collèges to first- to fourth-form pupils.

2 The written part of the CAPES and the agrégation consists of both a prose composition and an unseen translation, plus a commentary and an essay. The commentary and the essay can be related to one of the literary texts on the syllabus or to the ‘civilisation’ part of the programme, to which News from Nowhere belonged. The candidates preparing the CAPES were liable to deal with News from Nowhere in the written part of their exam only, while those competing for the agrégation could have a commentary or an essay on News from Nowhere both for the written and the oral part of the exam.
3 In ‘civilisation’ – i.e. all that pertains to the social, political, cultural or economic history of the English-speaking world – the subjects on the syllabus are often wide questions such as ‘Organised crime on and off the screen in America in the 1930s’, or ‘British Civilians during the Second World War’, and more rarely texts such as Locke’s *Treaty on Education* or Thomas More’s *Utopia*.


5 Interview with Franck Lessay, 17 February 2006.

6 *BOEN*, 20 May 2004.


18 The precise passage went from p. 157 to p. 160 of the Penguin edition, from ‘He sat silently’ to ‘it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces’.

19 John Buzard, ‘Ethnography as Interruption: News from
Nowhere, Narrative, and the Modern Romance of Authority’, 
20 Edouard Guyot, *L’Idée Socialiste chez William Morris* (Paris: 
Arthur Rousseau, 1905), p. 94; R. Steele and W. R. Lethaby, 
*Quarterly Review* (October 1899). Both quotes appear in 
Paul Meier’s *La Pensée Utopique chez William Morris*.
21 NjN, p. 94.
22 NjN, p. 176.
23 NjN, p. 67.