

NEWS FROM NOWHERE: UTOPIA, ARCADIA, OR ELYSIUM?

Although the title page explicitly identifies News From Nowhere as a utopian romance, we know from Morris's letters that he wrote it in 1890 as a virtual refutation of Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward (1888), a utopian romance celebrating the future triumph of what has come to be known as 'American know-how.' Bellamy set his work in a high-technology environment that Morris dismissed as "a Cockney paradise."¹ It has become commonplace to speak of News From Nowhere as pastoral rather than utopian romance, since utopias tend to be dominated by urban patterns produced by conscious design in which reason prevails over nature to bring forth carefully articulated schemes of government, law and education. The proponents of this point of view are quick to point out that Morris's London is more a garden than a city, and his visionary England, from which the industrial city of Manchester has disappeared altogether, is a recreation of the legendary Golden Age where government, law and education are not only unnecessary but quite useless. His 'romance', instead of projecting a functional future society, merely evokes a vanished pastoral paradise and may therefore be classified with other examples of escapist Victorian nostalgia. One version of this judgment belittles Morris's Socialism as sentimental rather than scientific, offering the literary convention of the Golden Age in substitution for the economic and political construct of the classless society foreseen by Marx.²

Whatever the opinions of Morris's comrades in Socialism may be concerning his orthodoxy,³ I wish to focus attention in this study on the question of literary genre. "Nowhere" is English for Utopia, which, as coined from the Greek by Thomas More, means both eu-topos, 'good place', and ou-topos, 'no place'. It is noteworthy that in 1893, two years after he published News From Nowhere in book form, Morris brought out a Kelmscott Press edition of More's Utopia with an introduction by himself that challenged what Morris called the "modern" view of it as "nothing more serious than a charming literary exercise."⁴ As a genre, romance was taken more seriously by Morris than by other English writers of comparable stature in the nineteenth century, excepting Scott. His News From Nowhere title-page phrase, "Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance," draws attention to the fragmentary, discontinuous element sometimes found in romance, particularly when the conventions of the dream-vision are employed, as they obviously are throughout this book, recalling the practice of Morris's favorite poet, Chaucer.⁵

The first part of the subtitle, "An Epoch of Rest," may indicate that, in fact, the most important genre in this complex work of art is the idyll. As defined by Friedrich Schiller (On Naive and Sentimental