

THE PLEASURES OF WILLIAM MORRIS'S TWENTY-SECOND CENTURY

"...and of the discussion itself there remained no trace, save a vague hope, that was now become a pleasure, for days of peace and rest, and cleanness and smiling goodwill."

It is, it has always been, a pleasure to read William Morris's utopian romance News From Nowhere. For although it is, first of all, a political statement, it also provides an escape from the poverty, ugliness, and sexual repression characteristic of its historical context. The contemplation of its alternatives to those unpleasant facts partially alleviated the stresses caused by a less than perfect everyday life. The text itself, one might say, is the imaginary equivalent of a revolution of desire. This utopian function of News From Nowhere works through mechanisms analogous to those of dreams and is structured through two cultural forms also patterned on dreams: the adventure and the literary type of the allegorical vision. Our entrance to this complex of significations will be through the concept of the adventure, an ideal-type, a functional category. This, rather than the more traditional literary generic classification of the quest, allows an analysis which considers the literary text as an active component of the lives of its author and its readers, which sees the text as a continuing action in the world, rather than simply as an instance of an aesthetic category. Morris's utopian world may not be as exclusively a matter of Socialist propaganda as some would have it, but, on the other hand, it is not to be restricted to the realm of fantasy or romance as others would. Thus our move from the aesthetic to the functional is an enabling strategy, one meant to remove the text from behind the glass doors of the library, dust it off, and consider it as part of the world of action without entirely sacrificing it to the political.

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He heard one o'clock strike, then two and then three; after which he fell asleep again. Our friend says that from that sleep he awoke once more, and afterwards went through such surprising adventures that he thinks that they should be told to our comrades, and indeed the public in general, and therefore proposes to tell them now.¹

We hardly speak of adventures any more and never at all of