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ALIENATION AND ITS OBLITERATION BY ART IN W. MORRIS'S *NEWS FROM NOWHERE*

Hamdi Ali SERDAR*

Abstract

Situated in a distant future as a small and simple garden-like utopian city, and completely freed from industrial mechanization of any kind, London in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* easily stands out against its Victorian doppelgänger. The exclusion of machinery as a modern technique of industrial production from Morris's *Nowhere* and the consequential replacement of it with art, only obtainable in return for a high price paid out by the oppressed working classes when they rose up against the oppressing upper classes, are all part of what can be considered as an attempt to create a classless society with equality lying at its heart. Owing to the fact that Morris's *News from Nowhere* came out shortly after Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* was first published in German in 1867, and subsequently in English twenty years later, Morris's portrayal of communal simplicity in his *Nowhere* as peacefully shared among individuals seems to be intended as a replica of human existence in mediaeval times. Morris's preference for an oxymoronic return to the distant past in a future land, where his narrator William Guest suffers from a sense of alienation throughout his journey despite the fact that in his dream he finds himself in his homeland again but not elsewhere, can best be encapsulated in *entfremdung*, Marx's theory of alienation, which fundamentally results from exposure to the division of society into classes, especially when it is backed up by the capitalist mode of production. This paper is written, therefore, with substantial evidence from both Morris's own work, *News from Nowhere*, and some external sources to make a reading of the kind hinted at above possible.

Keywords: Art, Alienation, Machinery, Utopia.

1. INTRODUCTION

A product of the 19th century libertarian socialist utopian thought, *News from Nowhere* was written by the leading English socialist William Morris in response to the kind of state socialism as epitomised in his American counterpart Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887), and it first appeared as a serial from January 11 to October 4, 1890 on Morris's own journal *Commonweal* and was subsequently published in book form the same year.

William the author, aged 56 when he wrote *News from Nowhere*, narrates the story of William the guest, also aged 56, in the first person from the point of view of a dreamer in his dreamland – the largely agrarian city of London as existing in its new, perfectly classless communist condition almost two centuries after the working classes' revolt of 1952 against the upper classes – where the communal life is introduced to him as being "simple, stateless, unpolluted, peaceful, [and] complete" – terms that have drawn us a completely different picture of the class-stricken and corrupt state of the industrial England of his own time (Fellman, 1990: 9). He feels weird because he feels estranged from his hometown. He does not feel that he is at home despite the fact that he awakens in his dream to find himself in his hometown – London. He is also taken aback as he comes to realize that the communal life in this utopian dreamland is largely organized around the absence of the following elements from its societal structure: private property, large and crowded cities, a governmental authority, a particular fiscal system, courts, prisons and, more importantly, classes.

William the guest as the late nineteenth-century traveller is welcomed friendly and hosted in the same manner throughout his sojourn in *Nowhere*, although he is taken without the least hesitation by anyone he comes across for someone coming from another planet. In addition to being given a continuous tour around this dreamland from the start of the novel up until its ending, William the guest is specifically informed by Old Hammond, the 107-year-old historian, in Chapter XVII, entitled "How the Change Came," about a series of harsh stages the lower classes had had to go through to grow capable over time, succeed in overthrowing the bourgeois capitalist system for good and eventually creating a new state of affairs where an entirely classless society of equal persons, based on the principle of pure communism, and unburdened of its technological constraints, as it was then idealized in the mind of William Morris, is rendered matchless. In this respect, this particular chapter will also serve as our focal point for the next couple of paragraphs.†

* Res. Asst., Pamukkale University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature

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2. ARGUMENTATION

2.1. The Bloody Sunday in 1887 and Morris's Account of It in 1952

Much of the narrated events in this chapter bear historical resemblance to what had happened on November 13, 1887, commonly known as "Bloody Sunday," when the police took violent action against the protestors propelled by harsh, unbearable conditions of living to meet in Trafalgar Square (Fellman, 1990: 10). What seems to lie underneath Morris's argumentation for the failure of Bloody Sunday is the absence of a harmoniously organized uprising against the upper-class authority, confirmed both by Morris's (1993) description of the working classes as being "ill-organized" in the novel (136) and by one of his articles entitled "London in a State of Siege" that "I could see that numbers were of no avail unless led by a band of men acting in concert and each knowing his own part" (Morris, quoted in Felmann, 1990: 11). In his novel, however, Morris cautiously places the revolution historically in 1952, not in 1887, because, as Fellman (1990) argues, the workers would have had to have at least half a century "to build an educated and well-organized revolutionary party", and he thus leaves out the possibility of workers staging a loosely organized, if not disorganized at all, revolt against their masters (12).

In spite of a common awareness which had prevailed among the working class people that a transition from slavery to a permanent state of freedom and equality had to be ensured without delay and failure, there did not exist unanimous agreement on how to do it. Some had already become quite exasperated to think that, as Morris has Old Hammond tell his guest, "...if they could by hook or by crook get the machinery of production and the management of property so altered that the 'lower classes (so the horrible word ran) might have their slavery somewhat ameliorated, they would be ready to fit into this machinery, and would use it for bettering their condition still more and still more, until the last result would be a practical equality" (1993: 134). The machinery is here used as a metaphor for State Socialism. Old Hammond does not entirely dismiss it as "unreasonable" – a remark that echoes Morris's objection against Bellamy's staunch defence of "an immense and well-oiled machine, with each stage of life and each stratum of social organization neatly articulated and formed into a grand industrial army" (Fellman, 1990: 13). However, Morris's (1993) reasoning, as reflected in the words that Old Hammond spoke to his guest, makes it clear to us that from *the* practical point of view it was bound to be futile and unsuccessful, because it could only help to ameliorate the situation for the working classes in the form of an improved slavery:

[The] machinery of life for the use of people who didn't know what they wanted of it, and which was known at the time as State Socialism, was partly put in motion, though in a very piecemeal way. But it did not work smoothly; it was, of course, resisted at every turn by the capitalists; and no wonder, for it tended more and more to upset the commercial system I have told you of, without providing anything really effective in its place. The result was growing confusion, great suffering amongst the working classes, and as a consequence great discontent. (135)

It was now clear that without recourse to State Socialism, there would need to be something else for the working classes to make their dreams come true: it was unshaken public resolution, mixed up with the hope and the belief that the great change would definitely come.

2.2. Railways as the Representative of Modern Mechanical Civilization

Railways used to be regarded as the direct signifiers of modern mechanical civilization and linear progress during the Victorian age. Morris, however, completely differed with his Victorian contemporaries in this respect. Morris's glorification of the mediaeval times in *News from Nowhere* can be read as a challenge of the conventional belief that modern civilisation has been the bearer of a linear progress (Latham, 2007: 14). Therefore, he sought ways to express in words his oppositional stance – or to be more precisely, his attack – on the Victorian perception of civilization as embodied in railways, and he even went so far as not allow for the existence of railways in his utopian dreamland.

Right in the beginning chapter of his book, Morris describes railway carriage as something "stinking" (1993: 44) and forced upon us by the civilization itself; and he then goes on to define the existence of humanity in a railway carriage as "hurried and discontent" (1993: 43). Towards the end of his book, in Chapter XXX, entitled "The Journey's End," posed by Ellen, a girl in her early twenties whose chief ambition is to learn as much truth as possible about the past of her country, Morris has William the guest respond to her question about how the Thames River was taken care of in the days that she believed her guest to have had a record of:

"They *mismanaged* it," quoth I. "Up to the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was still more or less of a highway for the country people, some care was taken of the river and its banks; and though I don't suppose anyone troubled himself about its aspect, yet it was trim and beautiful. But when the railways—of which no doubt you have heard—came into power, they would not allow the people of the country to use either the natural or artificial waterways, of which the latter there were a great many. I suppose when we get higher up we shall see one of these; a very important one, which one of these railways entirely closed to the public, so that they might force people to send their goods by their private road, and to tax them as heavily as they could." (1993: 215)

The 'mis-', as emphasised in italics in the quotation above, can also be read metaphorically as emanating from a mistaken perception of technology prevalent among the nineteenth-century upper classes, as the old antiquarian Henry Morsom in *Nowhere* remarks. Along with the Victorian glorification of technology and its variants came the idea that, Morris argues in *News from Nowhere*, the pursuit of knowledge as a higher form of exercise of intelligence would be freely available to "the more intelligent part of mankind" whereas others of low intelligence would naturally have to be disqualified from it at any rate (1993: 200). To be more precise, as Morris chose to express it in the words of Morsom, "complete equality" as the source of happiness for the whole of the human race would then have had to be sacrificed, since it would resemble an education system that benefits bright children at the expense of those who are slower to learn (1993: 200).

2.3. "How the Change Came"

Morris's representation of a series of events leading up to the working-class revolution in "How the Change Came" culminates in the destruction of commercialism as well as industrialization in the next chapter, entitled "The Beginning of The New Life," where Old Hammond declares the upshot of it all to be the second birth of the world (1993: 158). It should also be noted at this point that during the second half of the 18th century, England earned a reputation as the birthplace of the industrial revolution, which rendered the working classes defenceless and vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation that might come from the upper classes. In this respect, Morris's illustration of the revolution as it was brought about by the working classes in his *News from Nowhere* can be read against a background of rising industrialization, since he tends to view it as the source of all evil around the humankind.

Industrialization had created its own class system, which was clearly an anathema to Morris. As he put it in Old Hammond's phraseology, "the ownership of the machinery of production and the management of property" would naturally entitle some to the position of masters, and others to slavery (1993: 134). Some would be the employers, others the employees. Simply shifting the control of the machinery of production from one class to another would not help to eradicate the class-based system; it would, as Morris argues through the mouth of Old Hammond, deteriorate the class distinction further:

If those classes had really been incapable of being touched by that instinct which produced the passion for freedom and equality aforesaid, what would have happened, I think, would have been this: that a certain part of the working classes would have been so far improved in condition that they would have approached the condition of the middling rich men; but below them would have been a great class of most miserable slaves, whose slavery would have been far more hopeless than the older class-slavery had been. (1993: 135)

In the ideological world of William Morris, the result of a revolution had to be faithful to its cause. With industrial production still existing in a post-revolutionary country like *Nowhere*, it could not have been possible to achieve freedom and equality as the two basic premises of the revolution, because some would still continue to be forced willy-nilly to work in the service of others. Therefore, industrial production had to be exterminated right from the very beginning of the revolution in Morris's *Nowhere*.

However, not content with the eradication of industrial production in *Nowhere*, Morris even explicitly expresses his longing for a medieval lifestyle, stretching from architecture to clothing, as it used to exist in the 14th century. To this effect, for instance, Morris feels the need to stress the word *modern* by placing quotation marks around it when William the guest describes the houses and the clothes of the people that he comes across while he resumes his journey along the road to Hammersmith in Chapter IV:

There were houses about, some on the road, some amongst the fields with pleasant lanes leading down to them, and each surrounded by a teeming garden. They were all pretty in design, and as solid as might be, but countryfied in appearance, like yeomen's dwellings; some of them of red brick like those by the river, but more of timber and plaster, which were by the necessity of their construction so like mediaeval houses of the same materials that I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century; a sensation helped out by the costume of the people that we met or passed, in whose dress there was nothing "modern." (1993: 61)

Central to Morris's portrayal of communal life in his utopian dreamland is, as David Latham (1990) points out, "the capitalist principles of competition are replaced by the socialist principles of cooperation" (11). With such a revolutionary replacement having taken place in Nowhere after a long and fierce struggle, it now becomes imperative for Morris to find something and advocate it as *the* alternative to the machinery-based capitalist mode of industrial production and its side effects.

2.4. Marx's Theory of Alienation

Before we make an attempt to reveal Morris's alternative and its effect on Nowhereans, we should bear in mind that he was a contemporary of the German philosopher Karl Marx (1818 – 1883), a fact which implies that he was heavily influenced by Marx's thoughts as articulated in his *Das Capital*. And with William Guest awakening to find himself as a stranger in temporally distant London, where he has been living for years already in his real life, Morris seems to hint at Marx's theory of alienation, *entfremdung* in German, which can be summed up as a side effect of work within a socially divided class system.

We might take here a brief pause and look at how Marx's theory of alienation works. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx (2007) discusses the notion of estranged labour along with the concept of private property. According to Marx, at the root of alienation lies the notion of labour and its externality. He defines labour as "the estranging practical human activity" (73) and stresses that labour has the estranging effect on the worker because "labour is *external* to the worker" (72).

Melvin Seeman (1959) lists five alternative meanings of alienation in the following manner: a) Powerlessness, b) Meaninglessness, c) Normlessness, d) Isolation, e) Self-estrangement. It is powerlessness that forms the Marx's theory of alienation. The Marxist thought views the worker as being "alienated to the extent that the prerogative and means of decision are expropriated by the ruling entrepreneurs" (784). On the other hand, Gajo Petrovic (1963) provides an outline of how Marx structures his theory of alienation into four levels (421):

- i. The alienation of the results of man's labour.
- ii. The alienation of production itself.
- iii. The alienation of man from himself, or self-alienation.
- iv. The alienation of man from man.

The first type of alienation also includes the relation, in Marx's words (2007), of the worker "to the sensuous object world, to the objects of nature as an alien world antagonistically opposed to him" (73). The second type of alienation is concerned with the relation of the worker "to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him" (73). The third type of alienation is actually a different version of the second type of alienation, which Marx summarizes as the self-estrangement.

Petrovic tends to place the alienation of man from himself at the centre. He comments that all other four types of alienation are derived from man's self-alienation. With these four types of alienation outlined above, Petrovic afterwards puts forward the Marxist concept of "originally non-alienated man" who will eventually return to himself after he suffers a sense of alienation for a while in history (1963: 424). Petrovic first refers to Engels for a description of originally non-alienated man as follows, which bears a close resemblance to Morris's Nowhere:

And this gentile constitution is wonderful in all its childlike simplicity! Everything runs smoothly without soldiers, gendarmes or police; without nobles, kings, governors, prefects or judges; without prisons; without trials. All quarrels and disputes are settled by the whole body of those concerned – the gens or the tribe or the individual gentes among themselves . . . Those concerned decide, and in most cases century-old custom has already regulated everything. There can be no poor and needy – the communistic household and the gens know their obligations towards the aged, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are free and equal – including the women. There is as yet no room for slaves, nor, as a rule, for the subjugation of alien tribes . . . (Engels, qtd. in Petrovic, 1963: 424)

Petrovic then refers to Marx for his faith in communism as a society where man will accomplish his future return from such institutions as religion, the family, the state, and the like to "his *human*, i.e., *social* life (existence)" (1963: 425).

It should not come as a surprise to notice so many similarities between the society as it appears in Morris's Nowhere and the Marxist conception of non-alienated origins of humanity. Just as Marx tends to base his concept of alienation upon the way the society is organized around the industrial capitalism (Bloch, 1970: 122), Morris also fiercely attacks all institutions that benefit from the capitalist relations of production and in turn benefit them as well. That is why Nowhere has no courts, no armed forces, and far more importantly, no kinds of technology in particular. Morris's attack on technology in particular is partly

grounded in the fact that it has no relation whatsoever, as Bloch argues, either to man or his natural environment (1970: 123).

2.5. Technology vs. Art

Mindful that his obliteration of industrial production in Nowhere has left a gap between the work and the worker, Morris felt the need for it to be bridged by something that would meet with little, if not at all, public resistance. It was essentially art:

The art or work-pleasure, as one ought to call it, of which I am now speaking, sprung up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible over-work, to do the best they could with the work in hand – to make it excellent of its kind; and when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men's minds, and they began rudely and awkwardly to ornament the wares which they made; and when they had once set to work at that, it soon began to grow. All this was much helped by the abolition of the squalor which our immediate ancestors put up with so coolly; and by the leisurely, but not stupid, country-life which now grew (as I told you before) to be common amongst us. Thus at last and by slow degrees we got pleasure into our work; then we became conscious of that pleasure, and cultivated it, and took care that we had our fill of it; and then all was gained, and we were happy. So may it be for ages and ages! (1993: 160)

Even part of the reason why machinery completely disappeared from Nowhere is, as Henry Morsom tells William Guest, that "machines could not produce works of art" (1993: 201).

In a similar vein, as Latham points out, Morris elaborates his argument for art as the linkage between joy and labour in one of his lectures, entitled "How I Became a Socialist." He there defines the goal of art as setting "the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him [the workman], a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary as his daily bread" after he portrays the workman reduced by the capitalist system to "a skinny and pitiful existence" (1993: 383).

Throughout the novel, William Guest refrains from disclosing his identity as someone coming from the past to anybody, with the exception of Ellen. He only reveals to Ellen that he has been part of the "ugly past" (1993: 208). In his decision to reveal his true self to Ellen alone may lie the fact that as representative of the artistic beauty in particular, Ellen appears exceptionally strange to him:

...Of all the persons I had seen in that world renewed, she was the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of. Clara, for instance, beautiful and bright as she was, was not unlike a very pleasant and unaffected young lady; and the other girls also seemed nothing more than specimens of very much improved types which I had known in other times. But this girl was not only beautiful with a beauty quite different from that of "a young lady," but was in all ways so strangely interesting... (1993: 203)

William Guest's choice of Ellen as his confidante marks a point of climax in the novel where his sense of alienation starts to fade away as he finds in her the true artistic expression of beauty – something he has trouble in naming accurately, though.

3. CONCLUSION

Marx argues that mechanical labour reduces the worker to the status of a commodity: "The worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities" (2007: 67). The commodification of the worker results from the objectification of labour, a term Marx uses to refer to the state in which "the worker is related to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien object*" (70). When the worker is organically cut off from his labour, when he feels that the product of his labour does not belong to him, when he realizes that his labour is not his own, the link between labour and the product is also cut off. In his article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin (2007) points it out in terms of a dialogue between originality and authenticity: "The presence of the original is the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity" (1234). Mechanical labour is, however, the labour stripped of its authenticity and originality. It no longer belongs authentically to the worker. According to Marx, at the root of all this commodification and alienation lies the notion of private property: "*Private property* is [...] the product, the result, the necessary consequence, of *alienated labour*, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself" (80). Morris's choice of works of art over works of mechanical production is actually intended to prevent the commodification of the worker, his labour and the product of his labour. Like Marx, Morris considers private property as the enemy of his utopian society and proposes art as representative of "the emancipation of [his] society [...] from servitude [to private property]" (Marx, 2007: 81-82).

Including the modes of production, ways in which human beings used to relate themselves to the nature in the remote past have undergone a huge transformation over the last few centuries. With the

advance of technological inventions such as engines, aeroplanes, railways and telephone, the human beings have also changed their ways of comporting themselves to their environment. Since the industrial revolution, the amount of time being spent in nature, among trees and animals, has critically diminished. Life without automobiles, telephones, computers, planes and the like has become inconceivable. Besides the development of technological devices, the world has witnessed a rapid growth in global population, and it has resulted in an unprecedented increase in urbanization. Therefore, what used to be a rural area twenty years ago may now have become a highly populated busy city. Rapid urbanization of this kind has led to the growth of a sense of alienation in terms of both space and time. Most people living in densely populated cities which once used to be small both in size and population now suffer a sense of estrangement from their childhood landscapes. A time span of twenty years can be sufficient to create unbridgeable gaps in the human memory between then and now.

Morris dreamt that an intact society in an intact place which he chose to call 'nowhere' could exist in the future. He sought ways to express a desire in words to return to the past ages when the human existence was at its primitive stage. In the disguise of an irresistible yearning for a return to the primeval state of affairs in Nowhere seems to be hidden a strong impulse of the humankind as a whole to emerge as equal and free—free from the anxieties as well as constraints of seemingly civilised modern capitalist system of industrial production. Art, and its reflection as aesthetic beauty in a piece of work, provided the main impetus for the birth of a new understanding amongst the Nowhereans of labour as a source of pleasure. It was no longer the machinery that displaced handcraft; it was now completely the other way around. The rise of art in Nowhere helped to recover a sense of self, once wrested by mechanical force from their possessors. It was now in the safe hands of their own.

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