UTOPIA OR THE IDEAL STATE – THE CASE OF *NEWS FROM NOWHERE*

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Abstract: Fully functioning multicultural states are sometimes termed utopian. However, utopia is actually a denial of multiculturalism due to the fact that uniformity is essential to its functioning. The very isolation of utopia and its rejection of influence and change are some of its key features, easily bordering on the dystopian. William Morris' utopian romance, News from Nowhere (1890), is a special type of utopia, a "rosy utopia" as Alexandru Ciorănescu calls it, one of the few in which it would actually be pleasant to live, at least for a while. The present paper analyses the solutions forwarded in Morris' utopia in an attempt to explain its relevance for the twenty-first century as well as its failures. William Morris entreats us to imagine what it would be like to live in an idealised society which nonetheless acknowledges conflict and difference. The world of Nowhere is not uniform: in a society which has a cult for work there are characters who go against the general trend, who choose not to work, or who refuse to join the common work programme. The characters with an interest in the past are seen as eccentrics, but their eccentricity is not only tolerated, it makes Nowhere a more interesting place. Surprisingly or not, not everybody in Nowhere is happy. People are only happier than their Victorian counterparts.

Keywords: utopia, earthly Paradise, unreliable narrator, romance, education of desire

Initially, "Utopia" was a name coined by Thomas More in order to designate the island in the book of the same title published in 1516. By adding a Latin ending (*ia*) to a combination of a Greek adverb for "not" (*ou*) and a noun for "place" (*topos*), More managed to create a word for "nowhere" which also suggested a "happy" or "fortunate" (*eu*) place. Subsequently, utopia became a literary genre and then the name given to several attempts to transform these islands of bliss into reality. Derived from this fact, utopia began to signify any impossible project made by humans. Ruth Levitas gives a broad definition of utopia, based on its essential features: "utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living" (2005: 5) Most utopias are situated on islands, being isolated from exterior influences and therefore uncorrupted.

Thomas More is the one who set the conventions for utopia as a literary genre; however, descriptions of ideal states appeared long before the 16th century. Popular culture knows many hypostases of "good places," such as the Land of Cokaygne. A.L. Morton discusses the precursors of Utopia in popular imagination, some of these types of good places being reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. The Land of Cockaygne is "an earthly and earthy paradise, an island of magical abundance, of eternal summer, of joy, fellowship and peace." (Morton, 1969: 17) As opposed to the Garden of Eden situated in the East, Cockaygne is a Western island. It is the place where all wishes come true, the dream of hard-working serfs, a land of plenty in which no effort is needed for the production of goods. In this land, abundance is the key to material happiness – it is a paradise for the belly. What is more, it is

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"a land of peace, happiness and social justice" (ibid.: 24) Flourishing in the Middle Ages, this myth contained the seed of revolt, even though toned down and mellowed, and its popular manifestation were street carnivals. Condemned by the middle class who believed in the importance of work and despised the slothful, Cokaygne was a much more attractive place than Paradise for simple people.

It is in the 19th century, as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, that utopia knows a remarkable popularity. *News from Nowhere*, William Morris' utopian romance, was written in response to Edward Bellamy's de-humanised society in *Looking Backward: 2000 – 1887*, and to his vision of Boston where everyone is drafted to serve in an "industrial army". Despite some definitely positive innovations, there is no place for art or individuality in this highly mechanised society and every aspect of people's lives is pre-determined by the state. In a review of Bellamy's work, Morris declared that he would not care to live in such a Cockney paradise and that if somebody forced him to work he would only lay on his back and kick. In the same review he began to frame the central threads of his own utopia, advancing his own solutions: reducing the pain of labour and replacing it with pleasure in work, variety of life combined with equality, and art envisioned as "the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness" (Morris, 1889). As he believed that utopias are best interpreted as an expression of their author's temperament, in 1890 he decides to provide his own version of the story. *News from Nowhere* was thus written for the readers of his journal, *The Commonweal*, in the space of less than six months, being published in serial form. It was offered as an alternative to Bellamy's dream, a depiction of a society which contrasts with every aspect of Bellamy's Boston.

William Morris (1834-1896) is little known in Romania and even his home country remembers him for his artistic endeavours rather than for his literary activity. There has been an attempt to recuperate his literary works by linking him to C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and naming him one of the founding fathers of the heroic fantasy. His first volume of poems is sometimes appreciated for its intense visions but the majority of his other works have fallen into disrepute. However, in his own time William Morris was considered to be a major Victorian poet, author of prose romances, pioneering designer, and leader of the early British socialist movement. He was also a cofounder of the firm for interior decoration Morris and Co., founder of the Kelmscott Press and of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and writer of many essays on social issues, book design, and the decorative arts. His work was a source of inspiration for the Arts and Crafts movement, the activity of ecologists, preservationists and fantasy writers. What is most impressive about Morris's work is the wide range of domains he approached and especially the honesty and zeal with which he invested his efforts in a utopian attempt to make the world a better place.

If Bellamy's utopia was translated into Romanian a few months after it was published in America, *News from Nowhere* was considerably less popular. Morris advocated for a return to nature, for simplicity but never for austerity. He was a rich man and he enjoyed good food and tasty wine as well as beautiful houses. He inherited his fortune from his father who had made a successful investment in copper mining and it was this fortune which allowed him to pursue his dreams. He was acutely aware that it was only his good luck of being born in a respectable family that ensured his good start in life. However, he was not exempt of money

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concerns and his business had to be successful in order to ensure a good standard of living for his family. Morris was never idle – he was rather a workaholic.

In Morris's *News from Nowhere, or, An Epoch of Rest: Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, the narrator makes a voyage to Nowhere, or more precisely to England in the 21st century. It is after this visit that he will return home filled with a new hope. He will spread the word about the wonderful society he discovered there, bringing people a new type of "good news". After wishing intensely to see what a developed socialist society would look like, this desire being presented from the first page of the book, the narrator travels to Nowhere in his dream. The new Edenic world is born out of childhood memories and fascination with the Middle Ages. Little is invented, such as a new type of energy used for transportation and industry, much is recycled or reshaped. This is what makes Morris' utopia seem tangible and easy to achieve. The central image of the utopia, the house protected by a beautiful lush garden, represents Morris' own Heaven, the place of rest found in reality, namely Kelmscott Manor. The heart of Paradise is a self-sufficient house, well-protected, surrounded by a garden, but never a fortress – Morris' ideal house opens its windows to the world, welcoming visitors.

The narrator of the utopian romance tells the story of his friend, William Guest, who falls asleep after returning from a meeting at the Socialist League which made him long to see a day of the future society. When he wakes up, he discovers that the world is truly changed. The first person he meets, Dick, is both a waterman and a gentleman wearing refined clothes. Guest sees a bridge which was built in 2003, notices that the landscape is completely transformed, and that money seems to have no value. People dress in rich clothes, and the dustman wears the most pompous costume made almost entirely of gold. If in More's utopia gold is used for making chamber pots and the chains of slaves, in the world of Nowhere sumptuous clothes are appreciated for their beauty and they bear no other significance.

Constantly surprised at the beauty of the architecture and of the people he meets, transported to a London where there is no pollution, no traffic congestion, and where people can fish for salmon in the Thames, William Guest does not understand how the world became so much transformed. Therefore, his guide to the new world, Dick, offers to take him to his great-grandfather, the only one who can give him satisfactory answers. There are few technical innovations in Nowhere and the means of transport on land is the horse-drawn carriage. People's houses and clothing are inspired from the 14th century. There are markets in the middle of London with fresh products brought from the countryside by carts. Guest learns that there is no official system of education, as people place less emphasis on what is learned from books and they try to develop all the sides of their personality instead, that the goods which are displayed in shops and markets are all of the best quality and given for free, and that the only punishment for crimes, which are now non-intentional, is the remorse of the wrongdoer. Idleness is considered to be a disease which has luckily been cured. People are encouraged all their lives to read about what interests them and children learn foreign languages, especially French and German, by means of direct contact with foreign visitors, and Welsh and Irish as these are frequently spoken in the British Isles: "our guests from over sea often bring their children with them, and the little ones get together, and rub their speech into one another." (Morris, 1992: 57)

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At the British Museum, Guest meets old Hammond who informs Guest about the change which occurred in morality and about the disappearance of formal relationships and divorce. Hammond proceeds to discuss the present state of London and of other English cities, towns and villages. The slums have been replaced with meadows, the industrial cities have disappeared and the difference between cities and the countryside has considerably diminished. England is compared to a well-tended garden in which people thrive. Concerning the administration, the Parliament is formed by all the people. There is no political activity and the administration of people was replaced with an administration of goods. There are no rich or poor people, no criminal classes and the only rule which guides people's behaviour is to find pleasure in work. Moreover, their only fear is that work might become scarce. All decisions which affect the community are taken in gatherings called motes, organized on democratic principles. For example, if a large majority favours a proposal, it is adopted; if the majority is narrow, the decision is postponed.

Centralisation is discouraged and smaller communities in which everybody should feel responsible for their deeds are preferred. London is still some kind of centre, with some crowded areas, but it is rather an intellectual centre. The success of the great change, which came slowly and painfully, was made possible by the migration from cities to the countryside. The British are said to have also populated other countries "where we were wanted and were called for" (ibid.: 58). It seems, however, that the British utopianism has spread all over the world and equality between men has eliminated rivalry between countries. When William Guest is concerned that this made the world a duller and more uniform place, Hammond tells him that if he crosses the ocean there is plenty of variety in landscape, architecture, diet, amusements, looks and habits of thought which are "far more various than in the commercial period" (idem). The sage believes that nations and especially the rivalry between them are artificial constructs: "How should it add to the variety or dispel the dulness, to coerce certain families or tribes, often heterogeneous and jarring with one another, into certain artificial and mechanical groups, and call them nations, and stimulate their patriotism—*i.e.*, their foolish and envious prejudices?" (idem)

Hammond explains that the reward of labour is life and the realization of this truth is the basis of all the changes which occurred in Nowhere. His criticism of the 19th century extends to the production of poor-quality wares which served the appetite of the World Market, transforming civilization into organized misery. The great change was produced gradually after a violent revolution followed by a civil war which caused so much destruction that the world had to be built anew. Little by little, people discover the goods they truly need, and they find pleasure in work which becomes art. Thus, true equality is established and even though people are free to do whatever they want, they always choose to do what is good. The solution to the problems of industrialized England is found in the past, in the rural Middle Ages, when people lived in small towns and practiced a variety of crafts.

William Guest's guide offers to take him to the hay-harvesting feast and they begin thus a voyage by boat on the Thames. This fascination with agriculture is not the enthusiasm of peasants but the re-discovery of nature by people whose ancestors used to be estranged from it. Harvesting becomes a feast and there is true pleasure in physical work in which the sting of necessity is removed. At Runnymede they meet an old man, a grumbler, the first person who is completely dissatisfied with the new society, preferring the competitive edge of

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the past. His granddaughter, Ellen, arouses Guest's admiration due to her beauty and intelligence. At Basildon, the party visit a construction site, where people are so much absorbed by their work that they refuse to participate at the feast of gathering the hay. Beneath the general atmosphere of calm and peacefulness there is an undercurrent of untamed passions which becomes more and more evident. These passions and the perversity of human nature menace the world of Nowhere, but not enough to represent a real danger. The new society is one of abundance and well-being and there is no difficulty to do good things. There are few open enmities and people love each other because everybody is worthy of being loved. People's enthusiasm and wide ranging interests as well as the combination of physical and intellectual work are the secret of their success. The Nowherian is a new type of man – he has been released from fear and is full of happiness and goodwill.

The party finally reach their destination and they are welcomed by Dick's friends. After rejoicing at Kelmscott Manor's organic unity with the surrounding country, Guest is saddened by his memories of the past and he begins to fear that he will have to leave the beautiful world he discovered. During a feast which takes place in the old church Guest is enveloped in a black cloud, like in a childish nightmare, and he wakes up to find himself in his bed at Hammersmith. In spite of his disappointment, he does not lose hope and he is confident that Ellen's last look encouraged him to go back and tell the others what he had seen, inspiring them to transform the vision into reality.

In *News from Nowhere* the main story is embedded in another story, like a Russian doll. The artifice introduced by Morris is meant to mingle the plans. It is also a part of the convention, as in utopias narrators often tell the story of a meeting with a person who visited a distant utopian society. The novelty is the fact that the entire adventure takes place in a dream. The reader realizes this only at the end of the book, as the narrator mentions the fact that his friend woke up *before* going through a surprising adventure. Dream and reality are thus mingled and the illusion is maintained throughout the book. The narrator's friend, William Guest, dreams of a strange world which is gifted with a certain internal coherence, and he seems to prefer it to the ugly incoherent reality. Morris refuses the supernatural in order to suggest the possibility of turning his vision into reality.

The main narrator, William Guest, is a man imbued with all the prejudices of the 19th century, thus sceptical and prudent towards the innovations he discovers. He is neither an omniscient narrator, nor an objective observer of the new world. He is only a *guest*, an unreliable narrator. Moreover, several other characters will become narrators, and more than one are projections of the narrator/ Morris himself. Because of the conventions of utopia, everything is presented through the eyes of an outsider who is surprised at everything he discovers. There is one thing to visit Nowhere, and another to live there permanently. By means of his voyage in time, William Guest becomes a stranger in his own country. He is given a warm welcome and he is treated like a guest of honour who should be introduced to the best of what the new world has to offer. However, he himself is looked at or rather stared at with considerable interest because he represents a source of information from past, a link with the outside or simply a means of amusement.

Old Hammond is another narrator of significant importance as he is among the few who know how the change came. It is not a simple coincidence that he might be the narrator's nephew. The presence of this character was called for by the use of the first person narration

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made by someone who is not familiar with the new society. By means of this artifice, we discover little by little the new world together with the narrator. This procedure ensures the reader's involvement and sympathy. As we travel along, we sometimes know less, sometimes more; very often we see through the narrator's pretended ignorance. Old Hammond has to tell the readers what the guest could not possibly know; his role ends with his story and he leaves the scene soon afterwards. Ellen is another self of the narrator, becoming very often only an echo of his thoughts. At the same time, she is an embodiment of the beauty in Nowhere – a part of the new world and its epitome. The author makes Ellen an important voice in the novel because she is more credible, and more charming: she can easily obtain the reader's sympathy. She is a woman, because Guest had to admire and to love her, and she is at the same time a symbol of the better world.

The use of narrators which resemble each other and their author proves the fact that the entire novel is imbued with Morris's dissimulated image. The fact that William Guest and William Morris have many things in common cannot be questioned. However, it would be a mistake to place the sign equal between the two. The optimistic ending is meant to inspire people with hope. However, the book never returns to the initial frame, and the second narrator, the one who offers to tell the adventures of his friend using a first person narration, never recovers his own voice. This enhances the ambiguity of the ending, which apparently is a return to reality but in effects only prolongs the vision of a world of peace and rest. The last sentence is the moral of the book, an incitation meant to stimulate readers to start building a better world.

The utopian romance abounds in depictions of the beauty of nature. Morris builds these scenes through progressive accumulation of details which suggest the wealth of the scenery. In relation to the key words of the utopian romance, a study of the lexis reveals the fact that the epitome of the new world is the garden. According to Hammond, all England "is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt" (Morris, 1992: 61). This is a proof of the fact that Nowhere is a return to the garden of Paradise, but this time a Paradise on earth without any suggestion of something beyond. The pages of the book are a glorification of the present, the happiness of the moment, and few of the characters think about the future, being "assured of peace and continuous plenty" (ibid.: 45) and living life to the full. A great emphasis is placed on the pleasure of the senses, and many depictions address not only the sight but also the smell, the hearing, the touch. The word "pleasure" appears seventy-seven times throughout the book, and in association with a smaller number of occurrences of words such as happiness, happy, to enjoy, exultation, exhilarated and merriment, they depict a world which is set in contrast with the unhappiness and the drudgery of the past. The world to which William Guest is introduced is experiencing an age of plenty, in which people enjoy their "peace and plenty and happiness" (ibid.: 77), which is reminiscent of the land of Cokaygne without its gross exaggerations. Everything is shown in its best light, during the beautiful days of midsummer.

In the new world discovered by the narrator people live in harmony with each other and with nature, or rather as suggested by Hammond "in reasonable strife with nature"(ibid.: 48). This means that people have learned to enjoy what they have, without demanding the impossible and without being self-centred. Their activities no longer harm the environment; on the contrary, people tend the whole country-garden with a feeling of respect and love for

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its beauties. The organic relationship is expressed by the verb "to grow"; accordingly, buildings grow out of the soil, and it is the narrator himself who draws attention to the appropriateness of the verb, while people rejoice when they think of "how glorious life is grown" (ibid.: 56).

Modern readers respond well to Morris's concern for the environment, his love of nature and his rejection of any coercive system; these aspects reveal the actuality of the book. Many readers are charmed by the atmosphere of peace and rest in the book and acknowledge the fact that Morris's ideas are very interesting and relevant for the 21st century. David Latham believes that "The subtext of Morris's narrative romance is not so much whether or not a heavenly utopia could ever become a reality; rather what horrifies Morris is that we no longer even wish for it to happen." (2007: 9) This statement explains the cynicism of people who are unable to imagine an alternative. The utopian romance is constructed on the opposition between the Victorian 19th century and the world of Nowhere. Alternatively, one of the two worlds becomes more real than the other, which is seen in terms of dream, phantasmagoria, or nightmare. In an inaugural speech at the University of Bristol, Ruth Levitas quotes the social theorist Slavoj Zizek's opinion: for some people, "what *is* sometimes feels less real than what *should have been*." (2005: 9)

In his utopian romance Morris does not offer any programme, any direct appeal or recipe for his revolution. He only provides a visionary image of a new society, which enchants the reader through the atmosphere of peace and rest. His work was named by Miguel Abensour "education of desire", and this makes it universal. At the centre of Morris' utopia lies the human being, freed from all the ills of modern society, who has learned to live life to the full. *News from Nowhere* is an attempt to eliminate all contradictions; however, the new society is functional without being perfect. There are many disruptive elements and quaint characters and William Guest himself would never fit in the new society. If the main source of unhappiness in Nowhere is unrequited love, the greatest danger is the lack of knowledge of the past.

Morris's utopia is discussed in Alexandru Ciorănescu's *Viitorul trecutului – Utopie şi literatură,* ["The Future of the Past. Utopia and Literature"], a study which focuses on utopia as a literary genre, with few references to politics. Originally written in French, this brilliant book is considered to be a work of reference for utopian studies. Ciorănescu underlines the fact that Morris's utopian romance was meant as a response to Bellamy's unconvincing utopia, to which he opposes his own ideal society. He agrees with Morris in condemning the solutions offered in *Looking Backwards*, with its perfect society for an American bourgeoisie (Ciorănescu 1996: 194), or as Morris calls it a "cockney paradise". Ciorănescu's presentation of the utopian romance is imbued with irony and witticism. However, his conclusion is that Morris is the first and only writer who created the "rosy utopia" (ibid: 201). As Ciorănescu says, utopia should be by definition optimistic, painting the picture of a happy world, but in reality utopias are painted mostly in greys. Morris is the only one to escape this rule. His vision of the future is eloquent rather than coherent, imbued with nostalgia fed from the memory of a past turned into myth. The critic admits the fact that Morris surprises due to his kindness, his youth, and his smile that we prefer although we cannot take it into serious.

However, in reading the entire book, it is easy to notice that *News from Nowhere* does not conform to the classic pattern of a utopia. In the introduction to the last chapter dedicated

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to dystopias, Ciorănescu says that the utopian writer is a preacher who leads us to Paradise by means of threats rather than by tempting us with its beauty. The utopian presents only dull, mediocre perspectives, deprived of imagination. He denies people the liberty to sin; although he believes that humans are good, he does not trust them. (ibid.: 202) However, Morris prefers to seduce the reader. His world is painted in bright vivid colours and its beauty and vitality do not fail to enchant us. The Nowherians are completely free, and they do sin. In Nowhere, there is a place even for those who hate utopias and are nostalgic for the past.

At its time, the utopian romance it suggested a different direction: a return to the land, to nature, the opposite of the "modern" civilization Morris hated so much. Although the book is firmly tied to its specific historical moment, being important for us as a document of the past, it speaks forcefully to issues still alive today. Morris entreats us to imagine what it would be like to live in a society similar to the one he depicted; it questions conventions, and it asserts the possibility of a difference. *News from Nowhere* was a means of reconciling all the contradictions in Morris' own life and in society in general, a glorification of the fusion between work and art, and an expression of his love of nature. It represents both a continuity and a break with the tradition of utopias. When reading the book carefully, one discovers that this is a special kind of utopia: a utopia which depicts a happy and appealing society which nonetheless acknowledges conflict and difference.

Morris declared that "The only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author." (1889) His own utopian romance, *News from Nowhere*, contains many different threads in his life, tightly interwoven to form the substance of an engaged literary work. Moreover, it is a book incredibly rich in substance. It is a vision, as its author declares, of a different kind of existence. In spite of our more detached and pessimistic visions of the future and of the growing cynicism of our modern world, we still need utopias. In an industrialized society which does not know where it is heading, this message might be more appealing than ever.

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