WILLIAM MORRIS

and so shall it be for long. Hereof belike we shall talk no more, thou and I. For as the days wear, the dealings between us shall be that thou shalt but get thee away from my life, and I shall be nought to thee but the name of a kinswoman. Thus should it be even wert thou to strive to make it otherwise; and thou shalt not strive. So let all this be; for this is not the word I had to say to thee. But hearken! now we are sundered, and it irketh me beyond measure that folk know it not, and are kind, and rejoice in our love, and deem it a happy thing for the folk: and this burden I may bear no longer. So I shall declare unto men that I will not wed thee.'

The attitude of the speaker is unlike that of Dido, and yet there is a certain reminiscence of the fourth *Æneid* throughout the passage. Another resemblance, most probably entirely accidental, is curiously close:—"Thy voice," says Iron-face to Sunbeam, 'is as sweet as the voice of the songbirds singing in the dawn of early summer soundeth to him who hath been sick unto death."

NEWS FROM NOWHERE

1891

61. Lionel Johnson, review, Academy

23 May 1891, xxxix, 483-4

Lionel Johnson (1867–1902), one of the poets contemporary with Yeats and associated with the nineties, produced a good deal of literary journalism.

Not long past, there was published a book, of an ugliness so gross and a vulgarity so pestilent, that it deserved the bonfire and the hangman, the fate of no worse books in a bygone age. The book has been bought by tens of thousands, and by hundreds of thousands, in England and America; clubs and societies have been called after its author's name. That book is Looking Backward. It purported to give us an insight into the perfected society of the future; and what we saw was a nightmare spectacle of machinery dominating the world. Yet, despite the ugly and the vulgar features of Mr. Bellamy's dream, it was easy to sympathise with his intention: that modern society is far from perfect, that competition can be most cruel, that our conditions of life are restless and mean, few will deny. Whether the preaching of Socialism or of Communism be a happier solution of our difficulties, than a strong faith in the virtues of patience, of courage, and of time, is another question. We are all agreed, that the existing state of the world is not overpleasant.

But among all the Utopian or ideal pictures of a reformed world, drawn for our contemplation by enthusiasts, this book by Mr. William Morris has a singular charm. It cannot, indeed, rank with the great schemes of Plato, More, and Bacon: it has far less perfection of workmanship, less completeness of design, less dignity of tone. But these

'Chapters from a Utopian Romance' do not pretend to completeness; they aim at one thing only, the description of an 'Epoch of Rest.' Life to-day is restless, busy, and troubled; full of sordid cares, and wasted by laborious trifles: we hurry and scramble round the world, pushing and hindering one another, losing all the peace and joy of life. Mr. Morris here shows us, what sort of life he would like to live, what is his conception of the mens sana in corpore sano.1 And from that point of view we will dwell upon the book, with only one remark about the preliminary politics, or the historical origin, of the happy state which it depicts. Mr. Morris draws a vivid, and upon the whole, a convincing sketch of the social revolution in its last stages of open conflict, and a no less vivid sketch of its ultimate outcome; he does not tell us the details, nor even sketch outlines, of the most important period, the period of transition. He gives us a dim notion, just a vague glimpse; but so far as his book be meant for more than a beautiful dream, it is here that he is weak. No man, however inclined to fight side by side with Mr. Morris, could risk the terrors and the horrors of civil war, unless he had a greater certainty than this book could give him, that all the misery and the blood-shed would end in peace and happiness; not in some English version of the French Republic, or even

of the American Commonwealth. But we are not bound to take News from Nowhere as a socialist guide book: let us consider it as a vision of the Promised Land. The two chief tenets of this new faith are these: pleasure in work is the secret ot art and of content; delight in physical life upon earth is the natural state of man. Whatever interferes with that pleasure, and with that delight, is wrong; work that cannot be done with pleasure, ideas that fill men with despair and gloom, stand self-condemned. We must have no grinding and tyrannous machines of labour; no poisonous and blighting influences of thought. If your factory life makes of you a sickly shadow, or a sullen brute; if your subtil introspection turns you into a barren dreamer, or a moping pessimist: then, says Mr. Morris, and surely we all say so too, then away with those manufactures and with those metaphysics! Life has become endlessly complicated by all sorts of interests and of wants, that do not make life happier; we must simplify ourselves, and return to 'the primal sanities' of nature. That fine phrase of Mr. Whitman describes the spirit of this book: we are sophisticated, let us go home to the early 'primal' sources of simplicity and joy; we are perplexed, let us go back to the sources of 'sanity' and

strength. Upon the relations of art and work, no one is any longer doubtful, where the truth lies. Although little advance be made towards the perfect conditions of beautiful workmanship, in theory we are all agreed. But the second point is less firmly recognised. What Browning called 'the mere joy of the living' becomes less valued every day. Nowadays people seem to pride themselves upon having headaches of body and soul; to relish the sensitiveness of their nerves, thier delicate and diseased condition. Effeminate persons give us sonnets upon nature, full of fantastic sentiments, and of refined phrases; but a twenty miles' walk or a sleep under the stars would be to them a painfully athletic pleasure. Nor have they that loving and personal regard for the very earth itself, which Mr. Morris so rightly prizes: that sense for the motherhood of the earth, which makes a man love the smell of the fields after rain, or the look of running water. These things, to the modern poet, are so much material for rhyme and metaphor: 'rain' and 'pain,' 'stream' and 'dream.' We have fallen in love with a way of torturing nature into complicity with our vague emotions: we should do well to gain the Homeric simplicity and grandeur of mind, the Lucretian sense of majesty and power, the Virgilian sense of rapture and of glory, in the presence of the natural earth. Mr. Morris, from his earliest poems up to this book, has always shown this rightness of mind, this healthy delight in physical existence, because the world is so exhilarating and so lovely. Man has been distinguished from the other animals in many ways; not the least distinction is this: that man alone takes a double pleasure in his life upon earth, a pleasure of the mind and of the senses.

Mr. Morris, in his account of the reformed world, reminds us of many various authors. Much of his homely affection for the seasonable works of agriculture recalls those 'homespun Georgics,' as Southey called them, of Tusser,¹ redolent of the farm and field, full of honest country mirth and manners. Then, again, many phrases in the old man's description of this new Arcady remind us of Athenian writers and ideas: 'We live amongst beauty without any fear of becoming effeminate, we have plenty to do, and on the whole enjoy doing it. What more can we ask of life?' It is like Pericles' great speech: Athens, he said, is very admirable, φιλοκαλούμεν γὰρ μετ' εὐτελείας καὶ φιλοσοφοῦμεν ἄνευ μαλακίας.² Only we cannot help having a general

¹ Thomas Tusser (1524-80) wrote on farming topics.

^{2 &#}x27;Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of things of the

impression that Mr. Morris's Utopia or Arcadia, for all its beauty and its energy, would be a little stupid. Perhaps, in his laudable dislike of everything affected or merely academic, Mr. Morris represents his ideal folk as underrating slightly the very joy and pleasure of books and learning. Upon the whole, his conception of man, as he should be, has much in common with Aristotle's: not, of course, in the practical ideas of citizenship and of politics, but in the moral ideas of man's character and business. 'A long life of virtuous activity, according to your own nature, and as developed by exercise.' Mr. Morris would accept that definition of a good life. But it includes the full development of all the faculties; one faculty cannot do duty for another. One man is good at harvest, and another over painting, and a third in literature; now Mr. Morris at times is inclined to say, that if you are serviceable in the fields, it will do instead of improving your mind with books. It is merely an excess of zeal, in defence of despised and neglected employments, that so makes Mr. Morris unjust to those which have been exalted with exaggeration. There are too many books in the world; we judge too much by a literary standard; we ignore the culture of mind and body in other ways; but good books remain the best things in the world, after the hills and the fields.

The picture of London, embowered in orchards and set with gardens, is very inviting; but there is one thing which in conscience we cannot pass by. Mr. Morris classes together as 'silly old buildings' and as 'poorish buildings' St. Paul's and the British Museum; and he speaks of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields and of the National Gallery in one breath as 'an ugly church' and a 'nondescript ugly cupolaed building.' That any man, and far more that Mr. Morris, should couple together the splendid works of Wren and of Gibbs with the absurd productions of such as Wilkins, is deplorable. There are many men-and I am not ashamed to be one-who, while enjoying and reverencing to the full the medieval masterpieces, would give up a dozen other cathedral churches, could that save St. Paul's from destruction. It is bad enough to have Wren's design spoiled by such an abomination as the present reredos; but that is removeable. The attack of Mr. Morris will remain. Is it that Vitruvian design in architecture is to him very much what 'frigid classicality' is in literature? Let me quote the wise words of Mr. Selwyn Image:1

mind does not make us soft.' From Pericles' funeral speech in Thucydides Book 2, ch. 4. Rex Warner's translation (London, 1954).

Do not go demanding everywhere your own idols. In many shrines learn to worship the Divinity, which is revealed entirely at none. For sensitiveness, for flexibility, for an inexhaustible capacity of appreciation, send up your perpetual prayers.

But there is so much beauty, so much strength, so much sanity in this short book, that our chief thoughts of it must be thoughts of gratitude. Its readers will turn, again and again, to these virile and pleasant pages, and especially to those which tell of England's natural beauty, of the sylvan Thames, and of the Oxfordshire meadows. Like that other Oxford poet, who loved 'the shy Thames shore,' Mr. Morris consoles and heartens us. We see, our eyes clear of city smoke,

Bathed in the sacred dews of morn,
The wide aerial landscape spread—
The world which was ere I was born,
The world which lasts when I am dead;
Which never was the friend of one,
Nor promised love it could not give,
But lit for all its generous sun,
And lived itself, and made us live.¹

62. Maurice Hewlett, review, National Review

August 1891, xvii, 818-27

This thorough discussion, entitled 'A Materialist's Paradise', is by the novelist and essayist M. H. Hewlett (1861-1923).

Once upon a time a philosopher, using Pope as a spring-board, uttered the uncompromising paradox that 'an honest God's the noblest work of man.' It is a proposition which will go far too far, for present occasions. It points, however, to a corollary which no one can reasonably refuse: namely, that the interest of paper paradises is mainly

¹ Selwyn Image (1849-1930) was an artist, poet and essayist.

¹ Matthew Arnold, 'A Wish', stanzas 9 and 10.