

## Medieval Reverie versus Behaviorist's Experiment: The Utopias of William Morris and B. F. Skinner

A distaste for big cities, the belief that all members of a society should work and that the work should be meaningful and pleasant, a conviction that the existing system must be replaced with something better, and a driving concern for the form a communal life would take – these are some of the commonalities found in the two very different views of ideal society presented in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*.

While other similarities emerge, such as a vision of good health and a disdain for the lessons history teaches us, the two systems are worlds apart beginning with their very origins; Morris's Utopia comes about only through the chaos and destruction of an industrialized world brought on by a Socialist/Communist Revolution, while Skinner's is born of a rational exploration of human psychology and a scientific application of this to the management of people's behavior. The result is, in Morris's scheme, a world in retreat to an idyllic Middle Ages where beautifully wrought items are fashioned both for their use and for the pleasure they give in their making and where an ethic of simplicity and ingenuousness inform a daily life of unhurried work, youthful good health and little concern with the intellect. Skinner's world, while equally placid, is a modern but completely controlled environment where the conditions which promote the desired end are established and observed, measured and monitored. On the surface both worlds are initially appealing. It is in a deeper exploration of their approach to knowledge that misgivings arise. In this essay, I will look at how history, science and education are viewed in *Nowhere* and *Walden Two*, and analyze Morris's and Skinner's attitudes about knowledge in general.

The philosopher Georges Santayana's dictum that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it would fall on deaf ears in both *Nowhere* and *Walden Two*, but for different reasons. In the former, history, far from being actively disliked, is simply of little interest to most people. Since history seems to be of importance only in periods of turmoil and strife, it figures little in the placid atmosphere of *Nowhere*. Recent history is enough for them; as Old Hammond explains, "The last harvest, the last baby, the last knot of carving in the market-place, is history enough for them" (Morris 102). And of the great progression of recorded time, only the Middle Ages seems of any interest to them. Like children, the denizens of *Nowhere* live in an unruffled present, and when talk of past miseries and unhappiness disturbs Clara, Hammond tells her to "go and live in the present, and you will soon shake it off" (Morris 178). Morris puts it succinctly when, through Guest, he equates the feeling in *Nowhere* to that of a happy child on a sunny holiday who has everything he could wish for. That little children grow up and become dissatisfied with their ignorance is hinted at through the character of Clara, but each time she approaches a natural inquisitiveness, like a child she too is hushed and told not to trouble her mind with it.

Where history simply languishes in a general disinterest in *Nowhere*, it is actively discouraged in *Walden Two*. While anyone is free to study it if he wishes, the prevailing opinion is that, at best, it is simply not important and at worst, it is dangerous. The preoccupation history has with great personal triumphs, in its "use of head and heart where science fails," is seen as hero worship, something that leads to an unwise choice of

goals on the part of the young. Frazier sums it up when he says that ‘Hitlers are the men who use history to advantage.’ Moreover, his assertion that “We can make no real use of history as a current guide” rests on his conviction that no perspective is ever gained from a sense of history and that any single historical event is too complex to be known by anyone. The conventional wisdom that history repeats itself is soundly rejected; indeed Frazier insists that a sense of history only confuses an evaluation of the present.

As in *Nowhere*, the present is the thing in *Walden Two*, but not because it is the temporal equivalent of a sunny day. As Frazier explains it, “It’s the only thing that we can deal with, anyway, in a scientific way” (Skinner 225). What matters in the modern Utopia is “a grasp of the *current forces* which a culture must deal with” and not the false and emotive uses to which history is put.

As with history so with science in *Nowhere*. Finding its ideal in a pastoral past (one that would look like a Pre-Raphaelite painting,) and informed by its author’s confirmed and unwavering Socialism, Morris’s Utopia is defined by a summary rejection of the modern world and science with it. If science had once had something to offer, as Morris suggests it might have in the age of the Greeks, tied as it is in the nineteenth century to the commercial system and to the police of that system, it is seen as perverted and corrupt. Moreover it is unnecessary in a world where the “great change” has swept the bitter misery away. Only good as a relief to the unhappiness of the people and “limited and cowardly” at that, science can be dispensed with in a world where people do not fall ill, war with each other, or presumably clean with anything other than lemon and vinegar.

As for anything smacking of technology or machines, Dick sums it up when he says, “You see, guest, this is not an age of inventions” (Morris 210). A predilection for wood and stone and a supreme importance placed on beauty determine which of those “inventions they find handy of a previous age” will remain, as exemplified by the description of the locks on the River Thames and the various stone bridges that have replaced the monstrosities of iron constructed in the nineteenth century. This rejection of the great discoveries of science puts a darker aspect on Morris’s Utopia and aptly recalls another name for his beloved Middle Ages – the Dark Ages.

Where science, along with technology, is demonized in Morris’s Utopia, it is the application of science, especially the social sciences and the industrialization of services that make possible the society of order and harmony in *Walden Two*. Unlike *Nowhere*, there is no return to primitive modes of farming and industry. Instead, there is a looking forward for a better version; every habit and custom is viewed with an eye for improvement.

The role applied science plays in this scheme is evident everywhere, from the introduction of labor-saving practices in food operations, laundry, and other services to controlled environments free from the tyranny of weather to the design and mass production of items for daily use, all with a consideration of functionality and efficiency. Everything is subject to experimentation and observation along scientific principles.

This scientific approach carries over to the social sciences as well, manifesting itself in behavioral engineering and the psychological management of all aspects of communal living. Negative aspects of human behavior, such as jealousy or anger are eliminated through the socially engineered control of conditions and stimuli. Long-time denizens of the community simply do not learn these behaviors and, since child-rearing

is, at any rate, a communal endeavor, even if they did they would not pass them on to their offspring.

This leads us to the manner of learning and teaching in *Walden Two* and *Nowhere*. Education follows the pattern we have seen up to now in each of the systems, that is, spontaneous and naturalistic and imitative of a medieval apprentice system in Morris's world, and highly engineered towards pre-determined ends in Skinner's. While the two systems share a disdain for traditional schooling with its agricultural calendar, age groupings and disregard for individual abilities, the similarity ends there.

In *Nowhere* the attitude towards education can be summed up in one word – imitation. The sense of the word “school” as it pertains to a system of teaching has been lost and children learn, mostly practical skills, through watching their elders and imitating them. Physical work is more highly valued than mental, and all people learn to mow, thatch, keep shop and do minor carpentry.

As for their mental education, in sharp contrast to the extreme emphasis placed on “early education” in today's preschools, the inhabitants of *Walden Two* are left to their own pace. Hammond claims that most independently learn to read by the age of four and as for writing, if acquired too early, it is thought to lead to “ugly scrawling.” Subjects such as foreign languages are learned through association with the “guests from over sea” while other academic subjects can be studied by anyone who wishes but are not mandatory.

Despite Morris's own considerable intellectual capacity, he argues in *News from Nowhere* against what he sees as a conventional course of learning which ignores the fact of growth, both bodily and mental, and which disregards the “varying faculties and dispositions” of the young. He also disdains the use to which higher education has been put and the way it is tied in to control of the masses by an educated but not very wise elite. Perhaps most importantly, and probably in evidence of his own weariness with the conventional world he inhabited, Morris abandons books with the wistful and melancholy claim that “after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much” (Morris 172).

Perhaps the distinction between Morris and Skinner in their overall attitudes towards knowledge rests on the issue of progress. For Morris progress has proven to be a poor substitute for what Hammond refers to as “real learning, knowledge cultivated for its own sake – the art of knowledge in short.” Hence the looking back to an idealized Middle Ages and a willingness to throw the baby out with the Victorian bathwater with its values of industry, commerce and expansion. Skinner, on the other hand accepts progress especially that made in the science of behavior. For him the successful culture of *Walden Two* is only a minimal achievement of behavioral technology, one that humans must push forward from. While he recognizes the discrepancy between man's technical power and the wisdom with which he uses it, there is no question that science must go on.

*Nowhere* and *Walden Two* leave us with a choice then between, on the one hand, a retreat from the very possibility of our future evolution as a species to, on the other hand, an inexorable and controlled advance towards the evolution of human intelligence. At one extreme the picturesque village suspended in time – a long sunny afternoon by the river - awaits, and on the other absorption into the “Superorganism” and its promise of salvation from human misery through psychological, social and cultural design. Both are compelling. Both are frightening. In fact it is the common element in both that makes

them so, and that element is order. In both *Nowhere* and *Walden Two* individuality, freedom, diversity and conflict have been eliminated, leaving a structured and homogenous way of being. Though order brings harmony, peace and happiness, we must ask, "At what cost?" We may just decide that the cost is indeed acceptable, but then we will need to redefine our notions of individuality, freedom and real self-determination.

#### Works Cited

Morris, William. *News From Nowhere*. Ed. Stephen Arata. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2003.

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