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MARXIAN REFLECTIONS IN NEWS FROM NOWHERE BY WILLIAM MORRIS

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In this paper I will provide an analysis of William Morris's News from Nowhere, which is usually considered to be a utopian fantasy, and I will especially try to show how wide and deep William Morris's knowledge of Marx's and Engels's thought was. News from Nowhere is, first of all, a 'political act', but it can also be seen, on the one hand, as a strong criticism of the Victorian Age, and, on the other, as a Tendenzroman, since it prefigures, although with some inconsistency and naivety and perhaps with too much optimism, what should be the new Communist society.

Keywords: aesthetic enjoyment, alienation, art, capitalism, commodity, reification.

Introduction. My analysis will try to show how wide and deep William Morris's knowledge of Marx's and Engels's thought¹ was, and it will try to prove the close relationship between *News from Nowhere* [2; from now on *NFN* – L.V.] and the works of the founders of Marxism. Such a knowledge does not only concern *Das Kapital* – and especially the first volume – but also includes the “*Enleitung*” zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (“*Preface*” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*), and *Die deutsche Ideologie* (*The German Ideology*). Moreover, if besides *NFN* we take into account also Morris's short article “Useful Work versus Useless Toil”, published in 1893 [3], we are struck by some remarks by Morris that Marx had developed in his *Ökonomisch-philosophischen Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844* (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*), which Morris could not know at all, since these *Manuscripts* were discovered and published only in the thirties of the twentieth-century.

Without any doubt, *NFN* is not just a utopian fantasy that goes beyond E. Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. *NFN* is a real ‘political act’ [4, p. 602] falling within both the debates of the Socialist League and the clash with the Anarchists. *NFN* can also be seen from two points of view. On the one hand, it is a strong criticism of the Victorian Age, when – as Beaumont puts it – «the perceptual problem of the present is at some level the result of the reifying effects of commodity culture under capitalism» [5, p. 37]. On the other hand, *NFN* can be considered almost as a *Tendenzroman* (or ‘novel of purpose’), given that – pace Thompson [6, p. 806] – it prefigures, although with some inconsistency and naivety and perhaps with too much optimism, what should be the new Communist society. Let's see, then, the relationships between *NFN* and Marx's and Engels's thought. These relationships will be brought out through an aseptic investigation which will compare *NFN* with some of Marx's and Engels's works.

Main part. In *Die deutsche Ideologie* Marx and Engels maintain: “And finally, the division of labour offers us the first example of how, as long as man remains in natural society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic”² [8].

¹ This is proven, as well as by Morris's large number of articles and discourses: *Art and Labour* (1884), *Art and Socialism* (1884), *Socialism: The Ends and the Means* (1886), *What Socialists Want* (1887), especially by *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, written together with E. Belfort Bax [1].

² “Und endlich bietet uns die Teilung der Arbeit gleich das erste Beispiel davon dar, daß, solange die Menschen sich in der naturwüchsigen Gesellschaft befinden, solange also die Spaltung zwischen dem besondern und gemeinsamen Interesse existiert, solange die Tätigkeit also nicht freiwillig, sondern naturwüchsig geteilt ist, die eigne Tat des Menschen ihm zu einer fremden, gegenüberstehenden Macht wird, die ihn unterjocht, statt daß er sie beherrscht. Sowie nämlich die Arbeit verteilt zu werden anfängt, hat Jeder einen bestimmten ausschließlichen Kreis der Tätigkeit, der ihm aufgedrängt wird, aus dem er nicht heraus kann; er ist Jäger, Fischer oder Hirt oder kritischer Kritiker und muß es bleiben, wenn er nicht die Mittel zum Leben verlieren will – während in der kommunistischen Gesellschaft, wo Jeder nicht einen ausschließlichen Kreis der Tätigkeit hat, sondern sich in jedem beliebigen Zweige ausbilden kann, die Gesellschaft die allgemeine Produktion regelt und mir eben dadurch möglich

Morris, in turn, writes: “You must remember,” said the old antiquary, “that the handicraft was not the result of what used to be called material necessity: on the contrary, by that time the machines had been so much improved that almost all necessary work might have been done by them: and indeed many people at that time, and before it, used to think that machinery would entirely supersede handicraft; which certainly, on the face of it, seemed more than likely. But there was another opinion, far less logical, prevalent amongst the rich people before the days of freedom, which did not die out at once after that epoch had begun. This opinion, which from all I can learn seemed as natural then, as it seems absurd now, was, that while the ordinary daily work of the world would be done entirely by automatic machinery, the energies of the more intelligent part of mankind would be set free to follow the higher forms of the arts, as well as science and the study of history. It was strange, was it not, that they should thus ignore that aspiration after complete equality which we now recognise as the bond of all happy human society?”

I did not answer, but thought the more. Dick looked thoughtful, and said:

– ‘Strange, neighbour? Well, I don’t know. I have often heard my old kinsman say the one aim of all people before our time was to avoid work, or at least they thought it was; so of course the work which their daily life forced them to do, seemed more like work than that which they seemed to choose for themselves’ [2, p. 153–154].

In other words, on the one hand Morris assumes an anti-luddite attitude, for he doesn’t oppose the use of machines, and, on the other hand, he claims that everyone has got the right to carry out what he likes more, which doesn’t necessarily mean to produce goods or wares [9, S. 47–164]. Indeed, at the beginning of *NFN* we read: “[...] Dick didn’t seem to notice my bad manners, but said:

– ‘Well, I don’t know; it is a pretty thing, and since nobody need make such things unless they like, I don’t see why they shouldn’t make them, if they like’ [2, p. 39].

But much more remarkable are the relations occurring between *NFN* and Marx’s *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (written in 1857). Here is the well-known passage on the aesthetic enjoyment of ancient art: “Greek art presupposes Greek mythology, in other words that natural and social phenomena are already assimilated in an unintentionally artistic manner by the imagination of the people. This is the material of Greek art [...]

[...] is Achilles possible when powder and shot have been invented? And is the Iliad possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press the singing and the telling and the muse cease, that is the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?

The difficulty we are confronted with is not, however, that of understanding how Greek art and epic poetry are associated with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still give us aesthetic pleasure and are in certain respects regarded as a standard and unattainable ideal.

An adult cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does the naiveté of the child not give him pleasure, and does not he himself endeavour to reproduce the child’s veracity on a higher level? Does not the child in every epoch represent the character of the period in its natural veracity? Why should not the historical childhood of humanity, where it attained its most beautiful form, exert an eternal charm because it is a stage that will never recur?”³ [11].

Morris writes: “Old Hammond smiled. ‘It always was so, and I suppose always will be,’ said he, ‘however it may be explained. It is true that in the nineteenth century, when there was so little art and so much talk about it, there was a theory that art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but they never did so; for, if there was any pretence of it, the author always took care [...] to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealise, and in some way or another make it strange; so that, for all the verisimilitude there was, he might just as well have dealt with the times of the Pharaohs.’

macht, heute dies, morgen jenes zu tun, morgens zu jagen, nachmittags zu fischen, abends Viehzucht zu treiben, nach dem Essen zu kritisieren, wie ich gerade Lust habe, ohne je Jäger, Fischer, Hirt oder Kritiker zu werden” [7, S. 33].

³ “Die griechische Kunst setzt die griechische Mythologie voraus, d.h. die Natur und die gesellschaftlichen Formen selbst schon in einer unbewußt künstlerischen Weise verarbeitet durch die Volksphantasie. Das ist ihr Material. [...]

[...] Ist Achilles möglich mit Pulver und Blei? Oder überhaupt die "Iliade" mit der Druckerpresse oder gar Druckmaschine? Hört das Singen und Sagen und die Muse mit dem Preßbengel nicht notwendig auf [...], also verschwinden nicht notwendige Bedingungen der epischen Poesie?

Aber die Schwierigkeit liegt nicht darin, zu verstehn, daß griechische Kunst und Epos an gewisse gesellschaftliche Entwicklungsformen geknüpft sind. Die Schwierigkeit ist, daß sie für uns noch Kunstgenuß gewähren und in gewisser Beziehung als Norm und unerreichbare Muster gelten.

Ein Mann kann nicht wieder zum Kinde werden, oder er wird kindisch. Aber freut ihn die Naivetät des Kindes nicht, und muß er nicht selbst wieder auf einer höhern Stufe streben, seine Wahrheit zu reproduzieren? Lebt in der Kindernatur nicht in jeder Epoche ihr eigener Charakter in seiner Naturwahrheit auf? Warum sollte die geschichtliche Kindheit der Menschheit, wo sie am schönsten entfaltet, als eine nie wiederkehrende Stufe nicht ewigen Reiz ausüben? Es gibt ungezogene Kinder und altkluge Kinder. Viele der alten Völker gehören in diese Kategorie. Normale Kinder waren die Griechen. Der Reiz ihrer Kunst für uns steht nicht im Widerspruch zu der unentwickelten Gesellschaftsstufe, worauf sie wuchs. Ist vielmehr ihr Resultat und hängt vielmehr unzertrennlich damit zusammen, daß die unreifen gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen, unter denen sie entstand und allein entstehn konnte, nie wiederkehren können” [10, S. 641–642].

‘Well,’ said Dick, ‘surely it is but natural to like these things strange; just as when we were children, as I said just now, we used to pretend to be so-and-so in such-and-such a place. That’s what these pictures and poems do; and why shouldn’t they?’

‘Thou hast hit it, Dick,’ quoth old Hammond; ‘it is the child-like part of us that produces works of imagination. When we are children time passes so slow with us that we seem to have time for everything.’

He sighed, and then smiled and said: ‘At least let us rejoice that we have got back our childhood again. I drink to the days that are!’ [2, p. 88].

Even more trenchant is what Morris tersely writes in “Useful Work versus Useless Toil”: «[...] the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful – all things which serve the pleasure of people, free, manly and uncorrupted. This is wealth” [2, p. 7].

So there is no doubt that Morris was well conscious of the inhumanity of capitalism (as Marx showed in the first volume of *Das Kapital*), of the way capital springs and comes into being (i.e. accumulation of unpaid labour), and eventually of the negative effects of the worldwide development of capitalism. Last but not least, Morris shows that he is well conscious of the difference between ‘alienation’ (*Entfremdung*) and ‘reification’ (*Versachlichung*), which are too often considered as synonymous. It is possible to deduce this from the passage of the “Song of the Shirt”: “[...] it is a curious and touching sight to see some beautiful girl, daintily clad, [...] standing among the happy people [and] to hear the terrible words of threatening and lamentation coming from her sweet and beautiful lips, and she unconscious of their real meaning: to hear her, for instance, singing Hood’s Song of the Shirt, and to think that all the time she does not understand what it is all about – a tragedy grown inconceivable to her and her listeners” [2, p. 57]. Hildebrand rightly points out: “Ideally, Hammond tells Guest, the song is sung by a young woman whose voice enhances its aesthetic value but who has no conscious awareness of the events the song describes” [12, p. 10].

Marx writes in his *Manuscripts* (and this time pace Hammond): “[...] the object that labor produces, it[s] product, stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labor is labor embodied and made material in an object, it is the *objectification* of labor. The realization of labor is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy, this realization of labor appears as a *loss of reality* for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as *alienation*”⁴ [14].

To put it more clearly: if commodity consists of a use value (*Gebrauchswert*) and of an exchange value (*Tauschwert*), and if its value depends on the amount of labour that is socially necessary for its production, then we can say that the aesthetic product, the work of art – even if it is just a folksong or the Sirens’ song – escapes from reification and alienation in order to assert the aesthetic beauty and the aesthetic pleasure *an sich und für sich* (in and of itself): the work of art can be commercialized or can turn into a commodity, but if it is a true work of art, it is market-free, it comes into being as a non-commodity, since its use value does not change into exchange value; thus the work of art does not meet the logic of profit but that of pleasure thanks to a form of enjoyment that goes beyond time limits. *From nowhere* we can’t receive *news* either, for *nowhere* is the place of silence and death, of non-communication, of infinite productivity. Therefore from this inhuman, reified, alienated world, where only exploitation, slavery, imperialism, and colonialism reign, the work of art, the aesthetic product throws itself into a future in which phenomenon and essence will reunite beyond any form of alienation and reification on behalf of humanity and freedom. In conclusion, according to Morris, «la rivoluzione – Marroni says – potrà dirsi completa solamente quando tutti sentiranno il bisogno del nutrimento estetico» [15, p. 222].

Conclusion. This is also the direction Morris’s language goes. The language of *NFN* is difficult, uncommon, sometimes even abstruse. It is a language that aims at getting out of the habits, the behaviours, the conventions of a society – the Victorian one – that was moralistic, puritan, hypocrite, and repressive. Morris’s use of language can be seen, perhaps, as a precursor of the Russian formalist *ostranenie* or “defamiliarization”. *Now from here* what was a political act becomes a linguistic, literary and aesthetic revolt.

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⁴ “Der Gegenstand, den die Arbeit produziert, ihr Produkt, tritt ihn als ein *fremdes Wesen*, als eine von dem Produzenten *unabhängige Macht* gegenüber. Das Produkt der Arbeit ist die Arbeit, die sich in einem Gegenstand fixiert, sachlich gemacht hat, es ist die *Vergegenständlichung* der Arbeit. Die Verwirklichung der Arbeit ist ihre Vergegenständlichung. Diese Verwirklichung der Arbeit erscheint in dem nationalökonomischen Zustand als *Entwirklichung* des Arbeiters, die Vergegenständlichung als *Verlust und Knechtschaft des Gegenstandes*, die Aneignung als *Entfremdung*, als *Entäußerung*” [13, S. 511–512].

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МАРКСИСТСКАЯ МЫСЛЬ В РОМАНЕ УИЛЬЯМА МОРРИСА «ВЕСТИ НИОТКУДА»

Л. ВИТОКОЛОННА

В статье анализируется роман Уильяма Морриса «Вести ниоткуда», который традиционно рассматривается как утопическая фантазия. Вопреки этому мнению, демонстрируется глубокое и обширное знание английским писателем работ К. Маркса и Ф. Энгельса. Роман «Вести ниоткуда» прежде всего является «политическим действием». Но он также может быть рассмотрен, с одной стороны, как резкая критика викторианской эпохи, а с другой стороны, как пропагандистский роман, поскольку в произведении выстраивается, пусть не вполне последовательно и достаточно наивно, с избыточным оптимизмом, представление о том, каким должно быть новое коммунистическое общество.

Ключевые слова: эстетическое наслаждение, отчуждение, искусство, капитализм, товар, овеществление.