

Erik Fabián, *Visual Utopianism in Victorian England: William Morris and His “Teachers”*

MA thesis

Opponent's Review

The presented thesis deals with William Morris's well-known utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890), which is analysed from the point of view of Romantic and Victorian concepts of visibility. Though the analysis is detailed and includes many aspects of Morris's text, trying to find relevant contexts for its reading, the student's arguments, unfortunately, seem not to be free from problematic moments, which I feel obliged to point to in this review.

The principal argument is based on the presumption that Morris's conception of *News from Nowhere* draws upon the Romantic and Ruskin/Carlyle Victorian ideas of visibility. This category is, however, presented in a somewhat confusing and inaccurate way. Fabián includes terms such as “sensual perception”, “imagination”, “vision”, or even “ekphrasis”, not distinguishing adequately that they operate on very different levels (physiological, psychological, theological and aesthetic). Moreover, when it comes to his reading of Morris's novel, he puts a lot of emphasis on the picturesque, which is neither a Romantic nor a Victorian category but a term introduced and developed in the second half of the eighteenth century. This makes the assumed question of legacy much problematic as the picturesque refers principally to formal matters of composition, stemming from F. Hutcheson's concept of “uniformity amidst variety”, while Romantic imagination is connected with the expressive role of art rather than its formal properties. In other words, the picturesque pleases the senses (sight), while imagination involves the whole soul of man, to echo Coleridge.

There is an obvious difficulty for the student to harmonize a social vision, which is the core of the novel, with the category of visibility. In this he sees, quite rightly, Morris's inspiration by Ruskin's famous passage from *The Stones of Venice* known as “The Nature of Gothic”. The problem is that this text in fact does not address the issue of the visual but the issue of creative freedom dependent on specific historical conditions of the late Middle Ages (as opposed to those of antiquity and the Renaissance, and also, implicitly, the Victorian present). On the other hand, Ruskin discusses the issue of the visual amply in *Modern Painters* where he famously pleads for the “innocent eye”, in his polemic with the conventions taught at the Royal Academy of Arts and the aesthetic ideas of Sir Joshua Reynolds – this fact is, strangely enough, excluded from the thesis.

Fabián's further assertion that the world of *Nowhere* is based on its inhabitants' ability to see properly, being freed from the pressures of capitalism, is rather thin, too. This is due mainly to the confusion of two terms, the visual and the beautiful (or aesthetically pleasing). The *Nowherians* indeed take pleasure from beautiful things they produce, but it is not exclusively visual pleasure. Other senses are included as well as Guest witnesses (he himself takes much pleasure of the tobacco he smokes, the food he eats or the songs he hears). The novel does not seem to foreground the sense of seeing, as the central value of this utopian society, but what Peter Kivy calls “the seventh sense”, i.e. the sense of beauty. This has hardly anything to do with sight only – one should be able to see pleasant scenes of pastoral nature as well as the squalor of industrial cities and yet it does not mean this refines one's taste or creativity.

To conclude: Fabián's thesis excels in research but is fairly unconvincing in the way the researched facts are employed to support the author's theoretical presumption. I recommend

the thesis for defence with a preliminary suggestion for its evaluation to be very good (velmi dobře).

PhDr. Zdeněk Beran, Ph.D.

Prague, 30 August 2017