

POINTS OF COMPARISON AND CONTRAST BETWEEN MORRIS'S *NEWS FROM NOWHERE* AND BELLAMY'S *LOOKING BACKWARD*¹

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William Morris (1834-1896, English) and Edward Bellamy (1850-1898, American) wrote their books in a century which was closely connected with the creation of the socialist movement. This meant that some of the nineteenth century writers tried to create a society that had got rid of all the injustice present in their time. However, the solutions given by these two writers, Morris and Bellamy, differ in most of the themes that they deal with, since Morris is a revolutionary socialist whereas Bellamy is an evolutionary socialist.

Thus, *Looking Backward (LB)*, which was published as a book in 1888, is based, broadly speaking, upon the belief that technical progress under a state socialism brings happiness to man whereas *News from Nowhere (NN)*, published in 1891, presents a society based on an idealized image of the Middle Ages. It seems, then, that Morris wrote his book to make the reader aware of the fact that the solution offered by Bellamy was not the right one (see Introduction to *NN*, p. XXXVII)².

LB and *NN* are going to be compared from the point of view of form and content although content is what really offers us the possibility of a contrastive analysis between them because it embodies the writers' ideas about the perfect society.

We find in both works a narrator who is telling his experiences in a future society where he lived for some days.

1 I am indebted to Dra. J. Hurlley for suggesting this theme in her classes.

2 All the quotes from: Bellamy, E.: *Looking Backward*. 1888. Penguin, 1982. Morris, W.: *News from Nowhere*. 1981. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, (8th ed., 1981).

However, Morris dissociates himself from the narrator's ideas since we have somebody telling what somebody else told him about a friend. In *LB*, on the other hand, we come across the narrator in that future society: "I first saw the light in the city of Boston in the year 1857. "What!" you say. "Eighteen fifty-seven? that is an odd slip. He means nineteen fifty-seven of course". I beg your pardon, but there is no mistake." (*LB*, p. 37).

This quotation brings about two important aspects concerning the structures of both books. In the first place, we see that Julian West has moved forward to the year 2.000 whereas William Guest is placed around the year 2.102, so what both books have in common is that the time-dimension and not a space-dimension is made use of. The second important difference that the quotation reveals is that whereas *NN* ends with the narrator back in 19th century England, *LB* allows West to stay in the Boston of the year 2.000 where he came after a long trance and thanks to Doctor Leete who "set on foot a systematic attempt at resuscitation" (*LB*, p. 54).

Therefore, Doctor Leete will be responsible for showing this society to Julian. His method is, however, answering Julian's questions and explaining all the doubts he may have, and it is only after he learns about certain things that he happens to see some of them; Julian, then, is told about things before experiencing them. On the other hand, William undergoes the opposite process: he and, consequently, the reader are introduced into the new society by being shown, although some issues such as the Revolution only allow an explanation.

As far as the ideas upon which these future societies are based, it is important to start with the way in which all the changes that the narrators observe were brought about. This is one of the most striking differences between *LB* and *NN* but it is, however, what we should expect from such different ideologies. Bellamy, as it has already been pointed out, believed in evolution, that is, as he states at the very beginning of his book: "In the latter part of the nineteenth century the civilization of today, or anything like it, did not exist, although the *elements* which were to *develop* it were already *in ferment*". (*LB*, p. 37)³ and more explicitly on page 61: "The solution came as the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise. All that society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become

3 My underlining.

unmistakable". "Industrial evolution" is a key idea in Bellamy's *LB* because it shows, in the first place, that the process undergone before this new society came to light was based on industry and, secondly, that it was peaceful, since the term "evolution" has this connotation. On the contrary, revolution, and not evolution, is what brought about the change and what made possible such a society as that pictured in *NN*: the process was a bloody one: a two-year civil war broke out. The Committee of Public Safety played an important role in the organization of the Revolution; we see, therefore, that events are forced towards a change and so they do not follow their natural course as Bellamy suggests happened in America.

The first two immediate changes that the evolution/revolution caused a different conception of government and politics and a different organization of work. As far as government and politics are concerned, it is worth stating that *LB* and *NN* differ completely. In the society portrayed in *NN* government has become unnecessary because decisions are taken by individuals when dealing with personal matters and by the commune when the issue is of public interest. Therefore, they have no politics; it is the state of pure communism, which is not taken into consideration in *LB*. In Boston, according to the 19th century idea of government, it is true that there is no government because there are no public enemies nowadays and the mission of the government was precisely to defend people against these enemies. But, according to the principles on which this society is based, there is government because they have somebody whose task is "the headship of the industrial army" (*LB*, p. 143): he is the President of the United States. Legislation, however, is useless in both societies, since no crimes take place because, from the point of view of *LB*, they were caused by inequality in the amount of possession, which does not exist now, and, from the point of view of *NN*, from private property, which has been abolished now. Similarly, prisons are unnecessary.

The other immediate change brought about by evolution/revolution was a different organization of work. This is a central subject in *LB* and essential to the society it portrays because this society is based on the following principle: "When the nation became the sole employer, all the citizens, by virtue of their citizenship, became employees, to be distributed according to the needs of industry." (*LB*, p. 69). It is the duty of every citizen to work for the support of the nation and everybody does it for twenty-four years which is called "period of industrial service"

(*LB*, p. 70). They are free to choose, though, the kind of work that they think they are best suited for and even to change it, which seldom happens; in *NN*, however, changing your occupation is something usual. People in *LB* work because of patriotism and in the case that someone does not want to work, he is taken to prison and stays there until he gives up his attitude.

We see nothing of this sort in *NN* where the communities are basically agricultural and people see work as a pleasure: "All work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable habit, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists." (*NN*, p. 78). As artists, then all the things they do are beautiful whereas in *LB* we do not see this love that the individual may project on the object he is making, since all the products are the result of mass-production, and machines, according to Morris, cannot produce works of art. As artists, too, "the reward of labour is life... the reward of creation" (*NN*, p. 77). No wages, then, appear in this society. This is also true of *LB*; as far as money is concerned, both societies coincide. If money does not exist, the logical consequence is the disappearance of buying and selling. In *NN*, people acquire the things they need without any money at all, whereas in *LB*, people buy with a credit, which is the same one for every worker, and, besides, the methods for buying are very sophisticated. Technical progress, therefore, is one of the characteristics of the society in this book and it is believed that the progress that industrialization brings about makes people feel happy. Some of these inventions are the possibility of listening to music and sermons over the telephone, of being awakened by music and, finally, "continuous water-proof covering" (*LB*, p. 122). None of them are present in *NN*; theirs is a simpler way of living, a more primitive one because Morris tries to go back to the past in his book.

All these changes that evolution/revolution brought about modified, on the one hand, the external appearance of both city and country, and, on the other, people's habits and way of living; ultimately, people themselves are different if we compare them with people in the 19th century. In this respect, the basic difference between *LB* and *NN* is that there is an emphasis on life indoors in the first, although we also have some glimpses of what

Boston as a city is like. In *NN*, the emphasis is on outdoor life and nature. This is proved by the journey that W. Guest makes and by the constant descriptions of natural environments such as that of Runnymede. Industrial cities of the 19th century have disappeared but the small towns have been preserved. Nevertheless, there is something that both Boston and London share: pollution has disappeared from the atmosphere.

This may be one of the factors, among many others, that has contributed to the presence of such beautiful people who, besides, live for many years in *NN*. In both books all the people are described as pleasant, kind and beautiful. Free love may be responsible for beautiful off-spring, too, since "Pleasure begets pleasure" (*NN*, p. 53). This idea is different in *LB* where marriage is something legal. As regards the position of women in marriage, Bellamy's point of view seems more advanced than Morris's. Women work and "only when maternity fills a woman's mind with new interests does she withdraw from the world for a time. Afterward, and at any time, she may return to her place among her comrades, nor need she ever lose touch with them." (*LB*, p. 187). Marriage, then, does not interfere with their careers and, besides, housework is not a problem any more for women. They are more respected, however, if they are both wives and mothers. This idea of maternity is also present in *NN* but in a different light: "the natural and necessary pains which the mother must go through form a bond of union between man and woman, an extra stimulus to love and affection between them..." (*NN*, p. 52). Moreover, women like housework very much in the society portrayed.

The inhabitants of both societies, apart from being beautiful, are educated, although the systems are different. In *LB*, the schools are national institutions and education is compulsory until the age of twenty-one. In *NN*, anybody may learn when he wants to: "the information lies ready to each one's hand when his own inclinations impel him to seek it. In this as in other matters we have become wealthy: we can afford to give ourselves time to grow." (*NN*, p. 54). Education, then, is both for young and old people.

Finally, religion is something different in both societies, too. *LB* is a Christian world, whereas God is not mentioned in *NN* because Nature, and man as part of it, is their god. This fact is responsible, without any doubt, for the different ways of seeing life in these societies.

Once the differences and similarities on both form and content between *LB* and *NN* have been pointed out we may conclude that, although both works are totally utopian, *LB* seems to be nearer to our age, maybe because of the division of work and some devices that people use there. But, precisely, since the society portrayed in this book is based on industry, we feel more free after reading *NN* because everybody does what he really feels like doing. Anyhow, both books offer alternatives to 19th century life and, at the same time, give us, readers, the opportunity to admire two opposite ways of living.